



Monster Girls
MAYHEM 2

LOGAN JACOBS



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Chapter 1

“You know,” my mutated friend, Ray, sighed from the back of the van. “They really didn’t design this thing to be comfortable. We’ve only been driving for an hour, and my back is killing me.”

“That is why I choose to lay on the floor,” the orange-haired cat-woman, Mei, chuckled. “Now that I’m human, I can’t just curl up in the seat of the chair like I used to.”

When I looked back at the woman in the van’s rearview mirror, I saw that she was quite literally attempting to lay in a ball like a sleeping housecat, though her humanoid arms and legs gave her a bit of trouble. Mei’s knees were bent up into her chest as her arms sprawled out above her head, and her tail flicked back and forth happily as she grinned from ear to ear.

“You’re all just a bunch of whiners,” Charlotte the spider-woman grumbled.

“Easy for you to say,” Ray scoffed. “You can make your own bed whenever you want, with the sticky hands and all that.”

When I glanced back at Charlotte, I saw that she had taken up residence in the back corner of the van, where the walls met the roof. She had two of her arms pressed up against the ceiling in opposite directions, while two more of them held her in place against the walls. Charlotte's third pair of arms were crossed across her body, while her feet ragdolled as they hung in the air.

"It's not my fault my mutation was more useful than yours." She shrugged. "What were you before you got exposed to the serum, anyway? A wild boar? A chimp?"

"First off, ouch..." Ray huffed. "Secondly, I was a human, thank you very much."

"A human?" Charlotte chortled. "You mean, you started off as a regular man like Doug, and you ended up like this?"

"You say it like it's a bad thing," my long-time friend replied. "I'm more jacked than Arnold during his Mister Universe days, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"But you look..." The spider-woman paused while she tried to come up with an appropriate word.

"I wouldn't be throwing stones in a glass house, Miss Six Arms," Ray chuckled. "You don't exactly look 'normal',

either.”

“What are you talking about?” Mei gasped as she looked between the other two mutants. “You both look amazing, in your own way.”

“Is that code for ‘you guys are hideous, but I just wanna be nice?’” Ray asked. “Because I got plenty of that shit in High School.”

“I think she means it,” I said back to my friends. “You know Mei. Ever the optimist.”

“She’s a cat, dude,” Ray said. “I think she’s just kissing up so you’ll get her a can of tuna.”

“I am not kissing anybody,” Mei huffed.

“It’s an expression, dudette,” Ray said.

“I believe he’s saying you are trying to stay on Ray’s good side in exchange for food,” Charlotte mumbled. “Or that you have a one-track mind.”

“One-track mind?” Mei asked. “My mind can think of more things than one at the same time.”

“Again, expression,” Ray laughed. “We really gotta start teaching her about metamorphosis, Doug.”

“Metamorphosis?” I raised an eyebrow as I looked back at Ray in the mirror.

“Metastasis,” he said with a shrug. “You know, those sentences where you say one thing but really mean another.”

“Metaphors,” I said. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘metaphor.’”

“Yeah, that one,” he replied and nodded.

“Ugh,” Charlotte grumbled. “How much longer are we going to be in this van together?”

“I thought spiders like small, dark spaces?” I asked coyly.

“We like small, dark places because they’re quiet,” she purred in response. “The inside of this van is anything but that.”

Saucy, mysterious, and deadly.

Which was exactly why I was happy to have Charlotte on our side now. When we’d first met the spider-woman, she had melted the face off some poor body shop employee with her acid venom and then tried to kill Ray, Mei, and me. But once we freed Charlotte of Lyfetechnology’s mind control, she had agreed to join us in a quest for revenge against the biotech

company and its founder, the asshole known to the world as Dr. Lyfe, though to say our alliance was rocky would be an understatement. The mutant spider-woman's personality was a tad no-nonsense and prickly, which was a bit of an issue when our team included a goofball like Ray and an innocent, bubbly cat-woman like Mei.

Still, I was sure she'd come around eventually.

"Uh, Doug?" Ray's voice cut through my thoughts.

"Shouldn't you be, like, watching the road?"

"Oh, shit," I mumbled to myself as I looked away from the rearview mirror. "My bad... I was just completely enamored with your banter, that's all."

"That's a lotta big words, my man," my mutated friend snorted. "I don't understand most of 'em."

"I was distracted by the way you're making fun of each other," I said slowly.

"Wait, Charlotte's making fun of me?" Ray gasped with wide eyes.

"Seriously?" Charlotte chuckled. "Please don't tell me you're that dense."

“I’m not dense,” Ray said. “I’m squishy. Haven’t you seen my belly?”

“This is your best friend?” the spider-woman sighed.

“He wasn’t always like that,” I said. “The serum might have made him strong and buff, but it kinda fried his brain like an egg.”

“Oh!” Mei cheered. “Like the kind you used to make in the morning? The yellow globs of yummy deliciousness that you tossed to me every now and then?”

“Not quite scrambled,” I said with a smirk. “I think I’d call Ray’s mind more of an ‘over easy’ if anything.”

“There ain’t nothing easy about me, Dougie-boy,” Ray said proudly. “Well... Except for when it comes to the ladies. Then I was as easy as Sunday morning.”

“What’s so easy about Sunday morning?” Mei asked.

“It’s a song,” I explained. “Ray thinks he’s being clever.”

“I know I’m being clever,” he replied.

“I’m not sure Ray and ‘clever’ belong in the same sentence,” Charlotte muttered.

“Don’t be mean,” Mei said with a slight hiss in her tone.

“Ray is very clever.”

“Yeah!” Ray said.

“Maybe not as clever as Doug,” Mei added a moment later.

“Wait, what are you say—” Ray started to protest.

“And certainly not as clever as Doctor Lyfe or the man we’re driving to see right now.” The cat-woman nodded to show how sure she was of that statement.

“Thanks, Mei,” Ray chuckled. “You can stop now—”

“And he might not even be as clever as some of the men who have tried to kill us, but—” the cat-woman continued, oblivious to Ray’s discomfort.

“Okay, okay,” Ray blurted. “I think she gets it.”

“I kind of want her to finish,” Charlotte said in a sly tone.

“Don’t make me turn this van around, kids,” I teased.

“You’re not really gonna do that, are you?” Ray gulped. “Because if we turn around, we’d go right back toward Doctor Lyfe and his goons.”

“It’s a joke, Ray,” I said. “The sooner we find Terry Haggart, the sooner he can bring down Lyfe and put all this horrible shit behind us.”

“Do you really think this man will have something on Lyfe?” Charlotte asked. “From everything I overheard in the lab, Lyfe is like a god among men.”

“He wishes,” I snorted. “He’s just a regular ol’ guy, just like me or Ray. It’s just that he’s got a fuckton of money and has been able to sink his claws into every politician, CEO, and scientist in America so they’ll look past all the shady shit he does.”

“You know what they say,” Ray said. “Money is power.”

“It’s also the root of all evil,” I pointed out.

“Money is power?” Charlotte scoffed. “Are you speaking of those green rectangles that you humans give each other all the time?”

“That’d be it, spider-lady,” Ray said.

“How can a small rectangle of paper have any sort of power?” she asked.

“You might wanna strap in,” I said as I glanced back at Charlotte in the mirror. “Because if you really want to know how a capitalistic system works, it’s gonna take a looooong time to explain.”

“I don’t have anything better to do,” she said. “I might as well learn something about the way humans function.”

I spent the next hour or so explaining how money worked for humans, as well as how it could buy you all sorts of cool stuff, property, vehicles, fancy homes, and even people, in some cases. I also explained just how filthy-rich Doctor Lyfe was, and how he’d been able to build an empire over the course of the last few decades that had its hand in every major industry under the sun.

The whole time I talked, Mei just sat there in silence, though she looked extremely intrigued whenever I looked back at her in the mirror. Meanwhile, Ray chimed in every now and again with a message pushing back against ‘the man’ and talking about how he’d probably be rich right now if he hadn’t made some bad investments.

Apparently, investing his life savings into the stock of HD-DVD producers wasn’t the brightest idea.

“This is how you humans live?” Charlotte asked. “You allow small rectangles and made-up symbols to dictate your life?”

“I think it is strange, as well,” Mei chuckled. “All I ever needed was a lap to sleep on and a fresh can of food every day, and I felt like the queen of the world.”

“And how do you think I always got you that food?” I said as I playfully rubbed my fingers together.

“I’m not judging.” Mei said. “I just think it’s strange.”

“I’m judging,” Charlotte laughed. “In my world, power is power.”

“I think Charlotte just turned into a fortune cookie,” Ray said and then whistled. “What the shit does that even mean?”

“I have power because all creatures fear me,” the spider-woman replied. “And if they do not... I make them fear me.”

Charlotte needed to be careful, because whether she knew it or not she was dangerously close to cutting herself on all this edge.

“That’s pretty much what Doctor Lyfe does,” I said.

“With green paper rectangles?” she scoffed.

“Among other things,” I sighed. “Lyfe’s version of fear is more psychological. He won’t physically harm you himself, but he’ll buy out your company, destroy your livelihood, turn everybody in your field against you, and shit like that.”

“And if all that doesn’t work,” Ray chuckled. “He just pays somebody to beat the shit out of you!”

“Or has his scientists create mutant killing machines,” I said. “Which is exactly what he was trying to do with you, Charlotte.”

“I am well aware,” the spider-woman said with a somber tone. “I do appreciate you freeing me, even if it was embarrassing to be defeated by such inferior creatures.”

“We love you, too, Charlotte,” Ray said with a hint of snark.

We drove along in relative silence for another thirty minutes before I felt a quick, aching pain deep in the depths of my stomach. The gurgle of my stomach acid echoed through the van’s cabin as it growled hungrily, and I knew if we didn’t stop somewhere soon, I was gonna get really hangry.

“Hey, guys?” I asked. “I dunno about you, but I’m starving.”

“Do you think it’s safe to stop?” Mei asked. “Surely, Doctor Lyfe still has men out here looking for us.”

“I haven’t noticed anybody tailing us,” I said with a shrug. “And the mechanic definitely took the tracker off the van.”

“Before you melted his face,” Ray mumbled to Charlotte.

“I was not myself,” the spider-woman sighed.

“The point is, I think we’re safe to pull off for a little while,” I said. “Just to get some grub, then we’ll hop right back on the road and keep going until we reach Haggart’s doorstep.”

“I could certainly eat,” Mei said.

“Dude, you know me...” Ray said. “I’ll never turn down grub.”

“And I am along for the ride,” Charlotte sighed. “I suppose I could find something suitable.”

Then it was settled. As we approached the next exit on the highway, I saw a large, white sign that stretched up above the road that read *Cindy’s Truckstop* in simple red letters.

“Ohhhhh, man,” I said as I felt my lips twist into a smile. “You two girls are in for a treat.”

I pulled off the exit, turned right onto a side road, and drove until the actual Cindy’s Truckstop appeared on the left. It was a simple one-story building made out of brown bricks with a black shingled roof. There was a single line of gas pumps in front of the place, underneath a metal canopy that was partially rusted out. The brown crumbling steel didn’t look like it could keep the flat sheet of metal up much longer, but I didn’t care as long as it held on until we were well away from the place.

“What’s the big deal?” Charlotte asked. “It just looks like a gas station to me.”

“That’s where you’d be wrong, my dear,” Ray said as he smacked his lips. “Truck stop food is the greatest thing on this fucking planet.”

“Gas stations are where you get good food?” Mei asked.

“Not gas stations,” Ray said with a shudder. “Gas station food is some of the nastiest shit out there. You gotta find a place with a legitimate truck stop if you want the good stuff.”

“You’ll see,” I said as I pulled into a parking spot and killed the engine. “And then you’ll thank me.”

The four of us exited the vehicle, and Charlotte instantly tossed on her black leather jacket so that she could cover up her four extra arms. We headed to the door, which opened with a slight ding before I held it open for the others, then we ended up inside what could only be described as the most stereotypical truck stop I’d ever seen.

Half of the establishment was your typical gas station, with all its candy bars and walls of drinks and random technology accessories, and the other half was made to look like a restaurant. The floor of the restaurant section was a dated beige color with a pattern that looked like it’d been worn down from decade after decade of foot traffic.

The tables were the same light brown color and were sandwiched between two booths with light blue seats that marked the boundaries of the restaurant. There were a handful of single, gruff-looking men who sat on stools at the counter or at one of the many small tables. The drivers looked like they hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in days, and each one had a cup of coffee on the table in front of them that I figured was their lifeblood right about now. Meanwhile, a single

elderly waitress wandered around in her pink dress and white apron with a pot of coffee that she used to diligently refill the cups of her patrons.

Our quartet headed for one of the booths, and I felt the cushion underneath me give as I plopped down.

“Duuuuuude,” Ray gasped. “The table feels sticky. You know what that means, right?”

“The food is gonna be fucking amazing,” I said.

“I don’t understand these two at all,” Charlotte sighed, then she looked over at Mei. “Do you?”

“Most of the time, no,” the orange-haired woman giggled. “But they’re quite amusing.”

“Good afternoon, darlings,” the waitress’ gruff voice interrupted our conversation. “Welcome to Cindy’s. What can I get for ya?”

Now that I was closer to the lady, I could smell the mixture of cheap lavender perfume and cigarettes that radiated off her body. Her gray hair was pulled back into a ponytail behind her head, which itself was covered with an old-school pink paper hat. The waitresses’ eyebrows were pencil-thin and obviously drawn-on, and her face was covered with so many

wrinkles that I almost didn't notice the hairy mole that was on her chin.

Almost.

"Do you have tuna?" Mei asked as her yellow eyes grew big with excitement. "I would love some tuna, please!"

"We got a tuna melt, doll," the waitress said. "That alright?"

"Yes, please!" Mei said.

"What about the rest of ya?" the woman asked as she pulled out a pad and pen.

We took another minute to look over the menu before I decided that I would try the country-fried steak plate with mashed potatoes and corn on the side. Ray ended up ordering an All-American burger and fries, while Charlotte decided she wanted the same thing as Ray. The waitress scribbled down our orders and then walked away, and Ray instantly turned to Charlotte.

"I didn't take you as a burger girl," Ray chuckled.

"I've never had one before," the spider-woman said and shrugged. "But I didn't see flies or beetles on the menu, so I went with what looked popular."

“I’m telling you,” I said. “You can’t go wrong with any food at a place like this.”

The four of us engaged in casual chit-chat for a bit while we waited for our food, though eventually the conversation turned more serious.

“Something has been bothering me, Doug,” Charlotte said with a frown. “You’re obviously the leader around here.”

“Hey!” Ray scoffed, but Charlotte didn’t even acknowledge his annoyance.

“You’re the leader of this group, yet you didn’t drink the serum yourself,” she continued. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t know what it would do to me,” I said. “I mean, shit, after seeing what it’s done to Ray, I’m really glad I didn’t take it. Plus, there was only one vial of serum, and Ray drank it before I even had a chance to suggest such a crazy plan.”

“Early bird gets the worm, my friend.” Ray smiled.

“Maybe this is another weird human thing,” Charlotte said. “But it sounds like you’re going up against the most powerful being on the planet, who is also a man that has deadly monsters at his command.”

“Andddd your point is?” I asked.

“You’re just a regular human,” she pointed out. “You’d be much safer if you were a mutant like Ray or Mei or me, yet you haven’t taken the serum.”

“Maybe I will,” I admitted. “After I try to perfect the formula, that is. Because I only get one shot at this, and if I fuck it up, I’m gonna end up with an inside-out body or eyeballs that are too big for my skull and weigh down my whole head. And that won’t be good for anybody.”

“I know you can do it, Doug,” Mei said with a smile. “You are one of the most talented people I’ve ever met.”

“To be fair,” Ray snorted. “You’ve only met like, five or six different people considering you were an inside cat.”

“It’s still true!” Mei purred. “I know that Doug will be able to perfect the serum, then he can use it to make us all stronger!”

“I don’t doubt your chemistry abilities or anything,” Charlotte sighed as her yellow eyes flitted in my direction. “But the guys in the lab claimed to be some of the best scientists in the world. Forgive me if I don’t think you’d be able to figure out something they could not.”

“Hey, everybody thought the Wright brothers were crazy, too.” I shrugged. “Until their crazy inventions actually worked.”

“Yeah,” Ray added. “They totally revolutionized the action genre with *The Matrix* .”

“Dude...” I chuckled. “Those are the Wachowski brothers.”

“Oh,” Ray said and frowned. “Were the Wright brothers the ones who fought demons?”

“That would be the Winchesters,” I sighed. “Just forget it, dude. The point is, I’m gonna keep trying, even if the odds are against me.”

“Goodness, hun,” the waitress chuckled as she sauntered up to the table. “It sounds like you’ve got a passion stronger than the coffee we brew each morning.”

“Doug is very passionate about his work,” Mei said with a smile. “It’s why we love him.”

“Speaking of love...” Ray said as his mouth hung open more than usual. “Is that our food?”

A slow line of drool began to drip out the left side of Ray’s mouth as he stared at the tray our waitress carried, and I

honestly couldn't blame him. As the woman began to place our dishes in front of us, the air was filled with the most delicious aromas of sharp cheeses, perfectly-cooked tuna, smoky gravy, and other scents that made my mouth water with excitement.

Everything must have been fresh and scratch-made, because I could feel the warmth radiating from each item as the steam billowed up into the air and then wafted into my nostrils. It took everything in my power to keep from moaning like a weirdo when I caught a whiff of my country-fried steak and potatoes and corn, and I could tell from their expressions that Charlotte and Ray had the same line of thought.

Mei, though, had not a care in the world.

The orange-haired cat-woman licked her lips happily and then let out a loud purring noise as she scooped up the tuna melt in her hands and inspected it. Mei sniffed the sandwich at an uncomfortably close distance, then she stuck out her tongue and lightly licked a bit of the tuna that was oozing out from between the slices of bread.

“Ohhhhhh, my!” Mei gasped as her eyes went wide. “This is much better than the cans you always fed me, Doug, and I always thought those were gourmet!”

“That’s because that stuff is cooked and smothered with cheese, and the stuff you normally got came straight from the can,” Ray said.

The waitress raised an eyebrow as she looked between Mei and me, and then she chuckled uncomfortably.

“You gave your girlfriend a can of cold tuna as a treat?” the waitress asked with a frown.

“It’s complicated,” I said with an awkward chuckle of my own.

“I’m not one to judge, sweetie...,” the woman replied, though she still looked suspicious. “Even if it’s a little unusual. Enjoy your food, and if you need anything else just give me a holler, okay?”

“Will do.” I nodded.

The elderly woman walked away, and we were all left alone with the deliciousness that now sat before us. Mei wasted no time digging into her food as she opened her mouth wide and took a massive bite out of the tuna melt with her cat-like canines. A line of gooey yellow cheese stretched out of Mei’s mouth as she pulled her head back, and her eyes rolled back in her head as she gobbled down the tasty morsel. When

she was done, the cat-woman licked her lips, then she tilted her head and stared at the bit of stringy cheese that hung down.

“Mei...” I chuckled the second I knew where this was going. “Don’t—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Mei’s pupils shrank into pinpricks, and she became laser-focused on the string. She lifted up her left hand and began to playfully bat at the dangling bit of cheese, then she lurched forward and took it in her mouth. We all watched in amusement as the cat-woman nibbled on the cheese a few times, then started to gulp it down.

But the scent of my steak called to me, so I looked away from the entertainment, picked up a spoon, and scooped up a bit of my corn. The yellow kernels were so fresh, I could almost taste the soil, and my tastebuds felt like they were having an orgasm. Every bite was warm and tender, and I could taste the butter on the corn as it melted against my tongue. I detected a bit of black pepper and garlic seasoning as I swallowed, and I let out a happy sound.

If that was the side dish, I really wanted to know what the main course tasted like.

As I grabbed the knife and went to cut my country-fried steak, Ray and Charlotte both dug into their meals. Ray

literally picked up a whole handful of french fries and then shoved them directly into his mouth like a feral animal, then he let out a slight yelp as he spat them out onto the plate.

“Fucking hell, those are hot!” he howled before he snatched up his glass of water and chugged.

Meanwhile, Charlotte took a much different approach to her dining.

The spider-woman picked up a single french fry, held it up to her mouth, and then sunk her fangs into it horizontally. Her mouth made a slurping sound as the fry began to basically shrivel up against her lips, until it was little more than a dry husk of starch that she released from her grip and tossed to the side. Charlotte repeated the process with a few more fries, then she snatched up her burger.

“What am I supposed to do with this, exactly?” she asked. “The meat will have juice I can suck out, but what about the bread and the green leaf?”

“You don’t need to suck the juices out of these things,” I chuckled. “They aren’t bugs.”

“How am I supposed to get nutrients if I cannot liquify its insides?”

“Just eat it like Ray,” I said as I nodded at my friend.
“Show her how it’s done, dude.”

“With pleasure,” Ray said as he grabbed the burger from his plate.

Ray squeezed down on the buns from both sides, which caused a bit of clear juice to dribble down out of the burger and onto the plate. There was a satisfying crunch as Ray took a large bite out of the burger, and when he pulled away the corners of his mouth were messy with a few splotches of ketchup, mustard, and hamburger juice. Ray gulped down everything in his mouth without really chewing, then he went in for a second bite.

“Okay, maybe not just like Ray,” I said. “Maybe a little bit slower, and with smaller bites?”

Charlotte raised the burger in her hand to her mouth, then she cautiously opened her lips slightly and took a tiny nibble from the edge. The spider-woman chewed the bit of burger for nearly thirty seconds before she swallowed it down, and when she did her yellow eyes widened with shock.

“Oh, wow,” she gasped.

Charlotte's lips twisted into a smile as she opened up and took an even bigger bite, which she promptly followed up with a satisfied 'yum' noise.

"See?" I chuckled. "That's much better than sucking the nonexistent guts out of everything you eat, isn't it?"

"Much." Charlotte nodded. "Though I will admit, I have always had a fondness for grasshopper guts..."

I tried to ignore that disgusting mental image as I cut apart my country-fried steak into bite-sized pieces, skewered one with my fork, and then lifted it to my mouth. The second the morsel touched my lips, I experienced nirvana. The steak's breading crunched against my teeth, and the greasy, spicy breading mixed together with the gravy to create a perfect blend of greasy and savory flavors.

I gobbled down a couple more bites before I turned my attention to my potatoes, which were just as good as the rest of my food. My fork cut through them like a hot knife through butter, and the prongs left a perfect imprint in the pillowy, cloud-like mountain as they dragged through. When I placed the potatoes in my mouth, they just about dissolved against my tongue, and I was overwhelmed with a strong taste of butter and cream.

“My God...” I whispered to myself as I gulped down the potatoes.

This was some of the best fucking food I’d ever eaten in my life, and it was at a random truck stop right near the border between North Carolina and South Carolina. I gobbled down the rest of my corn and potatoes before I went back to my steak, though I did register that the rest of my crew had pretty much cleaned their plates by then.

Ray’s gullet was stuffed full of french fries, to the point where bits of fried potato were spilling out the stroked-out side of his mouth. Meanwhile, Charlotte had devoured all of her burger and was now proceeding to suck the “insides” out of more fries.

Mei, on the other hand, was literally licking her plate clean. She had eaten her entire sandwich and was now leaned over the ceramic plate with her tongue out of her mouth as she lapped up every bit of tuna and cheese that was left.

People were giving us some weird stares, but I didn’t really give a fuck. At that point, I was enjoying myself so much, not even an appearance by Doctor Lyfe himself would have been enough to ruin the moment.

The four of us finished off our food in a matter of minutes, and when the last crumb had been scraped from the plates, we leaned back in our chairs and stared up at the ceiling in a near-comatose state.

“I feel like I’m pregnant, dude,” Ray sighed.

“If that is how humans eat,” Charlotte said with a slight grin. “Then I have truly been missing out all these years.”

“I told you truck stops have the best food,” I said to my friends as I patted my bloated belly. “I haven’t been wrong yet.”

“How was everything, darlings?” the waitress asked as she appeared out of nowhere.

“Fan-freaking-tastic,” I said. “Compliments to the chef.”

“I’ll let Barney know you kids liked it,” she smiled.

I paid our bill and left the old woman a very generous tip, then we all waddled out of the restaurant and back to the van. Ray, Mei, and Charlotte hopped into the back while I jumped into the driver’s seat. I started the engine once I was buckled in and pulled back onto the highway toward the south. We drove onward for a few more miles before it started to get

dark, and I could feel my eyes growing heavy as they stared out into the abyss of the night.

“Hey guys?” I said to the crew. “I think I’m gonna need to pull over here soon. I don’t wanna fall asleep at the wheel and swerve off the road and kill us all.”

“Definitely a good call,” Ray laughed.

“Let me just find a rest stop somewhere and we can—”

“Nooooooo, sir,” my friend clicked his tongue. “No rest stops. Not for sleeping, anyway.”

“Why not?” I asked and then yawned wide enough to crack my jaw.

“Because it’s illegal, dude.” Ray rolled his eyes like this was common knowledge.

“No it’s not,” I said and shook my head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ray.”

“I shit you not, dude,” my friend insisted. “There’s a hefty fine for people who sleep in their cars in the state of South Carolina, and the fuzz use rest stops as their freaking hunting grounds.”

“No shit?” I pressed.

“Cross my heart and hope to die, Doug.” He made the sign of the cross and held up his fingers in a Boy Scout salute.

“Okay, fine,” I sighed. “No rest stops. Where the fuck are we gonna camp out for the night, then?”

“Why don’t we actually camp?” he suggested. “Like in the woods?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said as I looked around at the endless rows of trees.

The cops would have less of a chance of finding us if we were off the beaten path, and Doctor Lyfe’s goons would probably stick to the main roads if they thought we were still on the move. And as we’d already discovered, they could track us down if we made the mistake of staying at a hotel.

“Hold onto your butts, guys,” I announced. “We’re going offroading.”

I pulled the van off the highway at the next exit and then took a few turns off the side roads until we were deep into the South Carolina woods. Once I felt we were far enough away from the main roads, I pulled my vehicle off into a small clearing in the treeline, drove for another minute or two into the dirt and grass, and then killed the lights and the engine. My

exhaustion was now practically overwhelming, and I let out a big yawn as I stood up from the driver's seat, stretched, and then headed to the back part of the van.

I plunked down on the ground and sprawled out on my back as I placed my hands behind my head and looked up at the ceiling. When I checked on the rest of my friends, I saw they were all getting snuggled into sleeping positions, as well.

Charlotte was in the top right corner of the van again, though this time her body looked completely relaxed as she hung there by four of her six arms. Meanwhile Mei was curled up into a ball, and Ray was stretched out on the ground like he was doing a horizontal jumping jack.

“Nighty-night, friendos,” Ray said through a yawn.

“Good night, everyone!” Mei purred.

“Yeah, yeah,” Charlotte sighed. “Try not to sleep too heavily. I don't want us getting murdered in our sleep.”

I leaned my head back against my hands once more as I felt my eyelids continue to droop. It didn't take long for me to drift off into dreamland, and before I knew it, I was out cold.

The next thing I remembered hearing was a loud, powerful thumping noise that sounded like it was off in the

distance. When I cracked my eyes open, I realized that the noise was getting closer and closer to our position by the second, and I sat straight up as my heart raced a thousand beats per minute.

Charlotte and Mei were both up already, and Mei's orange ears were both up at full attention.

"Do you hear that?" Mei whispered.

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "What the fuck is that?"

"It sounds like footsteps," Charlotte growled.

"No way," I said. "There's nothing in South Carolina that's big enough to make that kinda noise when they walk."

"Nothing natural, you mean," Charlotte replied.

Son of a bitch. She was right.

Whatever was coming our way probably wasn't natural, which meant it was probably something that had been created in a lab and had Lyfatch's fingerprints all over it.

My friends and I all exchanged horrified looks as realization started to set in.

Doctor Lyfe had found us, and apparently so had two more of his mutated killing machines.

Chapter 2

“How did Lyfe find us?” Mei asked with a horrified tone. “I thought that man took the tracker out of this van?”

“Maybe he lied?” Charlotte grumbled. “Good thing I melted his face so he can’t rip anyone else off.”

“I don’t think it was a digital tracker,” I said as I dashed up to the driver’s seat of the van. “It sounds like whatever mutants he just sent after us were able to track us down the old-fashioned way.”

What the fuck had Doctor Lyfe’s cronies whipped up with their latest batch of experiments with their serum? A goddamn mutant bloodhound that was able to track our scent from miles away?

I slid the keys into the ignition, twisted a little too hard, and brought the engine sputtering to life.

“Douggggg...” Mei said as her voice turned into an angry hiss. “They’re getting closer.”

“Then we need to put some distance between us and them,” I said.

I slammed my foot down on the accelerator and heard the tires spin against the soft ground for a moment before the entire vehicle lurched forward. However, we only got a few feet before I heard a loud bang, and we were stopped dead in our tracks. I slammed on the gas once more as I looked in the rearview mirror, but much to my horror, I saw two sets of massive claws had pierced the side of the van and were holding us in place.

“They’ve got us!” Mei screamed.

“Then we’ve gotta make them ‘un-got’ us,” Ray said as he cracked his knuckles. “It’s time for a little bit of Ray Smash!”

I watched as Ray charged toward the back of the van, lifted his right foot, and kicked the door at full speed. It moved about half a foot before it hit something solid and froze in its tracks.

“Whatever’s out there must be giant,” Mei gulped.

Then, I heard a deep, angry roar from outside. It was a bit gurgled and distorted, but I’d had enough deep woods encounters while hiking and had watched enough nature documentaries to recognize the sound.

It was a bear.

I guessed that's why its name was *Project Smokey* .

Suddenly, the entire back of the van began to lift up off the ground, and I quickly fastened my seatbelt so I didn't fall face-first into the windshield.

"Fuuuuuuuckk!" Ray yelled, and when I looked in the mirror, I saw that he was now tumbling toward the front of the van like a ragdoll.

Mei had dug her claws into one of the built-in consoles and hung on for dear life, while Charlotte nonchalantly held onto the sides of the van with her sticky spider arms. Ray slammed into the back of the passenger seat, bounced off, and then flipped around so that he was awkwardly positioned in the front cabin next to me.

Then, we saw the second mutant.

Its flesh was bright red, which made it stick out like a sore thumb as it lumbered into the headlights of our vehicle. The creature was nearly seven feet tall and as wide as our fucking van, with an oval-shaped body that glistened in the light. It also had six spiny legs that stuck out from underneath its massive form, but no head whatsoever. Instead the red,

beady orbs it had for eyes and its horizontal, egg-shaped mouth hole were plunked flat against the top of its torso. It had four weird, slender appendages that jutted out from the inside of its mouth and moved independently, which were covered with the same shiny red flesh as the rest of its body.

The damn thing gave me some major *Predator* vibes, for sure.

All around the outer edges of the creature's body were sharp spikes that jutted out in all directions, with no rhyme or reason to their pattern, and though the monster's body was oval, it was an oval that looked like it'd been drawn by somebody who'd just drank ten cups of coffee and had the major jitters. There were uneven humps, lumps, and hunks of shell that stuck out randomly, including a deformed lump on its left shoulder that caused it to hunch over slightly.

The dead giveaway of the mutant's original identity, though, were its arms. Both of its arms were bent upward similar to a T-Rex, and at their ends were five fingers that each were long, curved, and came to a deadly point at the end. As the creature approached, it clicked its fingertips together angrily, and I knew what we were dealing with.

“A freaking mutant crab,” I sighed. “Project Crustacean.”

The crab started to scuttle forward, and I had a bad feeling that its spiny fingers would be able to peel this van open like the world’s most gnarly can opener.

“I’ve got this shit, dude,” Ray said as he craned his neck for a better view. “Just sit tight, and I’ll take care of Mister Crabs.”

Ray opened up the van’s passenger door, hopped out, and then let out a battle cry as he charged toward the mutant crab-man. All I could do was watch as Ray attempted to shoulder-tackle his opponent, slammed into him hard, and then yelped as he fell back against the ground. Ray’s blow hadn’t moved the crab-mutant so much as an inch, and the crab barely seemed to register the blow.

The giant crab turned and looked at Ray as my long-time friend struggled to stand up again, then it seemed to roll its eyes at the mutant before it turned back to the van.

Fuck. That shell must have been way stronger than it looked.

“Doug?” Charlotte said from behind me. “Be ready to hit the gas.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing this whole time?”

“Just be ready for my signal, okay?” Charlotte grumbled. “Mei, hold on tight.”

“What exactly are you gonna do?”

I glanced back in the mirror as Charlotte began to scuttle up toward the doors of the vehicle, then she stopped right at the crack where Ray had kicked it open. She then bent forward and spat a glob of her deadly venom straight through the slit. There was a loud sizzling noise, followed by the sound of a pained roar, then a few lumbering footsteps in the opposite direction.

The mutant bear’s claws retracted, and the back of the van slammed into the ground hard.

“Go!” the spider-woman hissed, and she didn’t have to tell me twice.

I slammed my foot down on the gas, and we shot forward like a bat outta Hell.

“Hold tight!” I screamed as I twisted the wheel the left as hard as I could and banked the van around the crab-mutant.

“Alley-oop!” I heard Ray cackle from outside.

Our friend landed atop the van with a dull thud, but I didn't even slow down as we sped away. Tree branches and shrubs slammed against the sides of our vehicle as we plowed through the countryside, and the van bounced across the uneven terrain hard enough to rattle my teeth.

“I really hope that mechanic gave the shocks on this thing a tune-up,” I sighed. “Because I really don't think it was meant for off-roading.”

“That's right, dumbasses!” Ray yelled from atop the vehicle. “We got a car, and you don't. Try to catch us now!”

I heard the crack of a rifle from afar, and Ray let out a yelp.

“Shit, Ray!” I said as I rolled down the window. “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” he said. “It just gently grazed my shoulder.”

“Maybe go prone?” I suggested. “You're kinda a big target.”

“Beg your pardon?” he asked.

“Prone!” I yelled. “Like, lie down!”

“Oh, right,” he grunted.

I continued to swerve through the tangle of trees as I tried to steer us in the direction of the road we'd come in on. Soon enough, I saw the path in the distance, so I gunned it, twisted my steering wheel to the right, and practically drifted out onto the road. The second I got there, I slammed down on the gas once more and heard the tires squeal against the pavement for a moment, and then we shot down the street back toward the highway.

That's when I saw the headlights behind us. I counted ten of them in total, all of which had single lights that indicated they were motorcycles of some sort. Their engines roared to life like a chorus of angry bees as they started to advance on our position.

“Motherfucker,” I grumbled. “It looks like Lyfetechn sent some of their goons, too.”

“Good,” Charlotte smirked. “I haven't killed anything in a few hours, and I could use the release.”

Without another word the spider-woman crawled to the back of the van, tossed open the door, and then flipped up onto the roof of the van.

“Hey!” Ray gasped. “Doug said to go prone.”

“I don’t do that,” Charlotte’s smooth voice chuckled.

“When I face an enemy, I choose to truly face my enemy.”

“What do we do, Doug?” Mei asked.

“I think between Ray and Charlotte, we’ve got things covered,” I said. “You just hang tight, and if anybody makes it past those two, take them out.”

I looked back in the mirror and saw Mei give me a nod of confirmation before she turned to face the open door. Her orange tail flicked back and forth behind her nervously, and the cat-woman crouched down as she prepared to attack.

Thankfully, at this time of night, there was practically nobody on the roads, and I was able to swerve, turn, and speed as much as I wanted. Even though I was going nearly thirty over the speed limit, the motorcycles were gaining on us quickly, and I didn’t know how much longer I could hold them off.

Before long, the motorcycles were within ten feet of us, and I could clearly see that the closest rider had on a sleek black skinsuit and a black reflective helmet that would make them nearly invisible to the naked eye in the darkness.

And they were armed with fucking submachine guns.

I saw the muzzle flare as the first round of shots rang out, and I swerved to the right as I tried to keep from getting peppered with bullets. As I righted my trajectory, I saw the cyclists split up into two groups as they sped up and tried to flank us.

Now it was time to go on the offensive.

I watched in the side mirror and waited for the closest bastard to pull up, then I jerked the wheel to the left and tried to run him off the road. He swerved along with me, avoided the attack, and then began to fire at me directly.

“Shitshitshit...” I gasped as I ducked down amid a hailstorm of bullets that blasted through the windshield in front of me.

I glanced into the side mirror just in time to see a massively thick tree branch swing down like a bat and slam into the head of the cyclist. His visor shattered into oblivion as the fucker went flying off his motorcycle, slammed into a nearby tree with a sickly thud, and then went limp.

“And the crowd goes wild!” Ray laughed victoriously.

A few more gunshots rang out, and I heard Ray yelp in pain.

“On your right, Doug!” Mei shouted.

Sure enough, two more cyclists came around from the right side and raised their guns. I swerved in their direction and caused them to go off the road, though they quickly righted their course and got right back on our tail.

Up ahead, though, was the exit that would put us back onto the main road, and I got a devilish idea. The ramp was only meant to be taken at twenty or thirty miles per hour, and I thought that it was time to remind these fuckers about the rules of the road. I swerved back and forth a few times to keep our chasers from being able to get a clear shot, then I saw Charlotte’s head lean out over the right side of the van.

“Hello, darlings,” she purred.

Charlotte spat her deadly venom onto one of the cyclists’ heads, and he screamed as his helmet began to sizzle. A moment later, he began to swerve out of control as he pawed at his head. His teammate zipped around him and fired off a few rounds at Charlotte, though she disappeared again, so I assumed she was all good.

I used the opportunity to twist my wheel and go at the two bastards on my right, and this time I actually got one of the fuckers. There was a dull thud as the side of the van slammed into the Lyfeteck goon with the melted helmet, and he screamed as he and his motorcycle were thrown to the ground and went rolling across the pavement.

Just as I was about to hit the curved, sloped exit ramp, Ray slammed the giant branch down onto the second goon's head and completely caved in his helmet as he pulled near us. The fucker and his motorcycle went down and skidded across the road, and the man slid right into the path of our rear wheels. There was a wet pop as we ran the fucker over, and then we were on the ramp.

A few more rounds of gunfire rang out, though none of the bullets seemed to find their mark. There were still seven cyclists behind me, and I prepared to thin their ranks.

“Ray, Charlotte, hold onto something!” I yelled.

I got about halfway up the ramp before I slammed on my brakes, grabbed the wheel with a death grip, and skidded to a stop.

The cyclists behind me went into a full panic as they tried to avoid a full-on collision, but there was no road for

them to drive on. I watched as three of the fuckers lost control of their vehicles completely and were launched from their motorcycles like fucking ragdolls.

I didn't want to give the other cyclists a chance to regroup, though, so I immediately hit the gas and resumed our trip up the ramp. The remaining four gunmen opened fire just as we got moving, and I had to duck down again to avoid getting turned into human Swiss cheese. I pulled us up onto the main highway with the cyclists still in hot pursuit, and that's when one of the bastards caught us.

In one swift motion, he pulled around behind the open door, jumped from his motorcycle, and landed inside of the van. I watched in the mirror as he rolled up into a combat position with his gun at the ready, but thankfully, Mei was more than prepared.

The cat-woman let out a hiss as she backhanded the barrel of the man's gun away, just as a swarm of bullets erupted from its end. The bullets shot harmlessly through the side of the van as Mei then lunged forward, stabbed her claws into the man's helmet, and pulled it off his head with a simple yank. The man reached down for something in his belt, but it was already too late.

Mei used the bastard's own helmet as a bludgeoning weapon as she slugged him repeatedly across his face. There was a wet crack after a couple of blows and blood sprayed from his mouth. He went down on one knee just as Mei came back around and slashed the claws of her left hand across his throat. He let out a surprised gasp as a crimson geyser erupted from his severed jugular, then his eyes went wide as he began to gurgle and hold pressure to the wound. Mei raised her right foot, kicked the fucker in the chest, and sent him tumbling out the back of the moving van into a heap.

“Nice job, Mei,” I chuckled. “I knew you'd watch my back.”

“Swing batta batta, swing!” Ray cackled from above, and I glanced out my left side window to see him take a crack at a nearby Lyfeteck goon.

Ray missed, though the attack disoriented our pursuer enough that he couldn't use his gun. Meanwhile, on the other side of the van, Charlotte continued to spray venom at the remaining two cyclists, who were forced to swerve away from the attacks.

“Mei?” I asked. “You see that little cabinet back there? The one that has all the tiny vials and metal bottles in it?”

“What about it?” she asked.

“See if there’s anything in there with a little skull and crossbones symbol inside of a red triangle,” I said.

“Uhhhh... Let’s see,” Mei said as she pawed through the samples. “Aha! There’s this one in a metal can. It says... Ka-yan-gen?”

“Cyanogen. Lyfe, you sick motherfucker,” I chuckled to myself. “Be really careful with that, Mei.”

“What do you want me to do with it?” she asked

“I want you to do exactly what we learned not to do with it in college,” I replied. “I want you to wait until we have enemies behind us, then open the canister and release all of that shit straight into their faces. Can you do that?”

“I will do my best,” she promised.

We’d learned in school that Phosgene essentially acted like Mustard Gas when it entered the lungs of a human, and we were not to create it or mess around with it for any reason. Of course, it did have a few non-warfare uses in various industries, which meant it wasn’t illegal to produce or distribute, but it was carefully controlled.

Thankfully, Doctor Lyfe was one of the sketchy motherfuckers that thought he needed the shit.

“Ray? Charlotte?” I called up to my friends. “Try to get these bastards behind us.”

“Easier said than done, my dude,” Ray said as he took a swing at his target.

Fuck it. I was about to see how fast this puppy could actually go. I pressed down on the gas pedal even further and watched the speedometer rise all the way to its max, and the steering wheel trembled in my hands as I tried to keep us in a straight line. Sure enough, we were able to speed up just enough to get all three of the cyclists behind us, if only for a moment.

“Do it now, Mei!” I yelled back at the cat-woman.

I watched in the mirror as Mei twisted the lid on the canister, which responded with a loud hiss. She instantly chucked the metal container out the back of the van, and we watched as it slammed into the pavement hard just before it erupted into a cloud of gas.

But the motorcyclists drove through the deadly haze as if nothing had even happened, and then they raised their guns

and took aim.

Suddenly, the tree branch that Ray had been holding shot forward like a javelin, hit the closest cyclist in the chest, and stabbed clean through the fucker. His body went limp as his motorcycle fell to the ground, and the pair tumbled across the highway.

The other two goons took a couple of potshots at us from behind, and I was forced to swerve to keep our asses safe.

“I thought that was supposed to kill them?” Mei asked.

“It takes a second or two,” I said as I tried to remember the details. “If we can just hold them off for another minute we should—”

“Look out!” Mei screamed.

I looked forward just as a flatbed truck whipped in front of us, and I twisted the wheel to just narrowly avoid impact. The van fishtailed for a second and nearly went up on two wheels, though I was able to get it back under control and keep moving forward.

When I looked back in my rearview mirror I saw the last two cyclists collapse to the ground and roll across the

pavement, where they then landed in a crumpled heap. Their bodies convulsed violently, and I smirked at the fact they were choking on their own blood-filled lungs at the moment.

However, we weren't out of the woods quite yet.

There was now a white flatbed truck that was hot on our trail, and on the bed of the vehicle were the two mutants that had woken us up. Now that I could see the bear-mutant in its full glory, I felt like I was gonna be sick.

It was a humanoid bear, alright, though it was massively deformed and was covered in flesh that looked like it was decomposing by the second. The bear-mutant had gray eyes that looked like a human's, which was actually far from the freakiest thing on its body. The monster must have been a grizzly at some point, because the fur that it did have was a thick, brown coat that the word patchy didn't even begin to describe. Every few inches there would be a spot where its fur was completely gone, and underneath was black skin that looked like it was rotting and covered in disgusting yellow boils.

To go along with the zombie look, the bear-mutant had an elongated snout with a large, black nose at the end and two rows of deadly, razor-sharp teeth inside its maw. The

creature's ears were furry bear ears, though their placement on the side of its head was more like a primate. Like a bear, the creature was a fucking hulking beast of pure muscle, though its right leg was slightly shorter than its left which made it lean to the side as it stood.

But it also had the same strange, deformed lumps all over its body and limbs like the crab. These strange cysts were bent at awkward angles, though I was sure that didn't mean jack shit in terms of its killing efficiency, especially since the end of each limb was a paw the size of my fucking head, each with claws that were their own miniature sickles.

That was one ugly motherfucker.

"What do you want us to do about dumb and dumber?" Ray asked from the roof.

"Can't we outrun them?" Mei asked. "I do not know how vehicles work, but they have a lot more weight and are in a much larger vehicle than we are."

"Maybe," I said. "But even if we outrun them, they'll just find us again."

"How did they even find us the first time, dude?" Ray asked.

I thought it over for a second, then the realization started to set in.

“The bear-mutant,” I sighed.

“What about it?” Charlotte asked.

“Bears have a really fucking good sense of smell, right?” I said. “So it’d make sense that a mutant bear would have an even better sense of smell. I bet they’ve been using that thing’s schnoz to track us from miles and miles away.”

“Then I know just what to do,” the spider-woman said over the sound of the passing wind. “Get me close.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Ray gasped. “That thing ain’t Winnie the Pooh. It’ll tear us apart.”

“I can make it so he’ll never track us again,” Charlotte insisted. “Just get me close, Doug.”

Even though we’d only known each other for a matter of hours, I trusted that Charlotte knew what she was doing. She might have been a bit cold and humorless, but she was also a stone-cold killer.

So, I was gonna let her do what she did best.

I started to slow down, and instantly, the flatbed closed the gap between us. Without warning, the mutant crab

launched itself off the truck, soared through the sky, and landed on top of the van with a powerful thunk.

“Holy shit!” I yelled in a high-pitched voice.

“Hang tight, darling,” Charlotte said. “I’ll be right back.”

I heard the sounds of Ray and the crab-mutant struggling against each other from above as I watched Charlotte leap off the van and onto the back of the flatbed. From my left side mirror, I saw the bear-mutant take a few swipes at the spider-woman, though she was way too agile for him. Each swing was powerful and deadly, but they were also slow as molasses and easy to dodge.

Charlotte ducked under one of the bear’s swings before she jumped up into the air and grabbed his snout with two of her hands. In one swift motion she pulled herself close to his nose and then sprayed her deadly venom straight into his nostrils.

The bear screamed in pain as the venom burnt his flesh, and he started to shake his head violently in an attempt to dislodge the sticky substance. The motion was hard enough to send Charlotte flying off the back of the truck, so I turned the steering wheel and swerved over so that the van was

underneath the falling spider-woman. She slammed into the roof hard, but she managed to hang on.

The same couldn't be said for the crab-mutant, though.

“Auf Wiedersehen, bitch!” Ray yelled from above.

I saw the crab-mutant fall from the back of the van, and then he slammed into the ground so hard that he left a small crater in the pavement. I wasn't about to stick around to check on the bastard, so I hit the gas and started to speed away from the scene of the battle. As we drove away, I saw the flatbed skid to a stop, and I could still hear the sounds of the bear-mutant roaring in pain even as we pulled further away. But after another minute or two of driving, both the sight of the truck and sound of the mutant had faded into oblivion, and I let out a huge sigh of relief.

Ray hopped down into the back of the truck with Charlotte in his arms, then he carefully shut the van's back door before he sat her down on the ground. She groaned in pain as she sat up at the waist, though three of her six arms were held against her side as she winced.

“Are you alright?” Mei asked as she crouched down to help her friend.

“I’m fine,” Charlotte chuckled, and her yellow eyes looked directly at me as she smiled through the rearview mirror. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that big, bad bear tracking us anymore, that’s for sure.”

“Uhhhh... I’m not exactly worried about Paddington right now,” Ray gulped as he pointed out the back of the van. “That, though? I’m totally worried about that.”

As I glanced in the rearview mirror, I saw what my friend was referring to. It was hard to make it out against the night sky at first, though as it drew closer I could just barely see the silhouette.

It was a goddamn helicopter.

“How did that thing sneak up on us?” I gasped.

“I told you before, dude,” Ray said through a pained grunt. “Lyfotech’s got those badass stealth helicopters. You don’t even hear ‘em until they’re right up on your ass!”

The chopper was painted a dark shade of blackish-blue that helped it blend in with the nighttime sky, so it just looked like a gliding triangle with an appendage above that I assumed was its rotor.

“How can they see us in the darkness?” Charlotte asked.

“Night vision,” I said. “Or heat vision. Or radar. I don’t really know, but if the technology exists, then I’m sure Lyfetech has it.”

“They’re not the only ones who have night vision!” Mei proclaimed. “Little does that strange metal bird know that I can see it perfectly right now.”

Well, that was gonna come in handy.

“Can you describe it to me, Mei?” I asked.

“I can try...” the cat-woman trailed off. “It appears to be made of some sort of metal, with what looks like black glass on the front. There’s a giant thing up above that’s spinning in a circle.”

My blood ran cold when I heard that last bit of information.

The damn thing was armed.

“Mei?” I gulped. “This next part is really important, alright? If those wheels on the underside of the helicopter start to spin, tell me immediately. It could be the difference between life and death.”

“To the right or the left?” Mei asked.

“Either, why?” I asked.

“Because they just started doing that.”

“Hold onto something!” I yelled.

I twisted the steering wheel to the right, and as I did so, I saw an eruption of muzzle flare from the sky. Seconds later, I heard the angry swarm of bullets as they slammed into the highway behind us and sent bits of pavement up into the air like it was fucking shattered plaster. The glowing line of bullets moved across the spot where we’d just been driving, and I realized that if I’d been a half-second slower we’d all just be bloody, mangled heaps right about now.

“How are we supposed to fight that thing?” Charlotte growled. “It’s too high for me to reach.”

“Should we use the shotgun, dude?” Ray asked.

“At this range?” I said. “It wouldn’t do jack shit. Besides, if that thing’s as high-tech as I think it is, there’s no way simple bullets will do any damage.”

“Then whattya want us to do?” the musclebound mutant gulped.

“It’s spinning again!” Mei screamed.

I twisted the steering wheel back in the opposite direction, and more chunks of pavement exploded to our left

as we swerved to safety. I slammed my foot down on the accelerator as the van's RPM needle maxed out, and we zipped down the highway as fast as the little bucket of bolts could take us.

“Oh, I've got it,” Ray said proudly. “Maybe you can use your awesome driving skills to trick them into accidentally flying into an overpass or a building or something?”

“This isn't a *Looney Tunes* cartoon, dude,” I sighed. “I can't just paint a giant fake tunnel on the side of a bridge and expect them to fly straight into it.”

“Can we outrun them?” Mei asked.

“No way,” I replied. “We're out in the open on the highway, and they're up in the air... It doesn't matter how long we avoid their gunfire or how far we lead them on this wild goose chase, because until we can get to a place with cover, they have the advantage.”

That's when I heard a sound like a rocket engine taking flight, and I saw a single blast of flame from the underside of the helicopter.

A goddamn missile.

“Incoming!” Mei yelled.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck...” I grumbled to myself as I began to swerve back and forth on the road.

“Throw something at it,” Ray said, then he ran over to the bench in the mobile lab. “That’s how you always get ‘em to blow up in video games.”

The musclebound mutant snatched one of the desk-mounted microscopes off the table, ran back to the door, twisted around, and pulled his arm back like he was winding up a pitch.

“Ray, I don’t think that’ll—” I started to protest.

“Trust me, dude!” Ray declared. “If it works for John Mclane, it’ll work for me. Yippie-kah-yay, motherfucker!”

The sound of the missile as it whistled toward us was now nearly deafening, and I knew it was gonna be on us in a matter of seconds. Then, I heard a dull metallic “thud,” and the projectile’s nose jerked downward. The missile slammed into the ground just behind us, and there was a deafening kaboom as the night lit up with the massive fireball that it created. The shockwave of the explosion lifted the back end of the van into the air, and all I could do was hold the wheel tight and scream as our vehicle started to fishtail and then spun around one

hundred and eighty degrees. We skidded to a stop, and I let out a sigh of relief.

We were alive.

My ears were ringing, and my head felt like it'd just been trapped in a vise, but we were alive.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I chuckled. “It did work.”

“I told you I knew what I was doing, dude,” Ray replied

“Don’t celebrate yet,” Charlotte hissed. “That flying thing is still headed our way.”

I slammed down on the accelerator and heard the tires spin out for a moment before we lurched forward toward the smoke. I twisted the wheel so hard that I nearly put us on two tires as I tried to get us pointed in the right direction again, and then we peeled out down the highway once again.

“That was pretty good aim, Ray,” I said to my friend.

“Where the fuck did you learn how to do that? Baseball?”

“Me? An athlete?” Ray scoffed. “Nah... I did all that thanks to a whooolle lotta *Wii Sports* back in the day, dude.”

“Good enough for me,” I said. “How far do you think you can—”

“Spinning!” Mei interjected.

This time I slammed on my brakes just as the gunfire began, and we skidded to a stop as the road right in front of us erupted violently into several sprays of debris.

“How far do you think you can throw shit, Ray?” I asked.

“I dunno,” he mused. “Why don’t we find out?”

As I slammed down on the gas pedal, Ray scrambled over to the mini lab, sorted through the options, and finally picked up a small glass vial. He took a few swaying steps toward the back of the van and hurled the vial out into the sky. The musclebound mutant let out an impressed whistle as he watched the projectile disappear into the night sky, then he clicked his tongue.

“Pretty far, apparently,” Charlotte said with a sigh.

“Then we’re gonna hit these fuckers with a Barking Dog,” I chuckled.

“What the fuck, dude?” Ray gasped. “I’m not throwing a live dog at the helicopter! That’s fucked up.”

“It’s not a real dog,” I replied. “It’s slang for a chemical reaction we used to prank each other with all the time back in

school. Just find a large vial and then any carbon disulfide and nitrous oxide that Lyfetechn has in the cabinets.”

“Are you sure they have those ingredients?” Charlotte asked.

“Those are pretty standard lab chemicals,” I said. “I’d be surprised if they didn’t have them.”

While Charlotte and Ray started to pick over the contents of the cabinet, I zigzagged along the interstate while Mei shouted warnings. It was easily the most bizarre road trip I’d ever taken, and I just hoped I lived to tell the tale.

“Spinning!” Mei yelled.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Don’t let any of those chemicals fall out, guys!”

I twisted the wheel again, and I heard both Charlotte and Ray let out gasps as we began to swerve violently. We somehow avoided the gunfire once more, and when I got back on the straight and narrow, I glanced back to see Charlotte literally had about ten different vials in her six hands.

“These are all labeled as dangerous,” the spider-woman huffed. “You’re welcome.”

“Here’s the nitrogen monoxide clean,” Ray said. “The container’s empty, though.”

“It’s a gas,” I explained. “It’s all fine. What about the carbon disulfide?”

“Right here,” Charlotte said. “Now what?”

“Mix them together in that container, but be careful not to let all the nitrous oxide out when you do it.”

The helicopter was still right on our tail, and I could see its silhouette growing closer by the minute. I feared that the next time it had a clear shot at us, it would be curtains for Doug Roth and his friends.

“Okay, we’ve got it mixed,” Charlotte said.

“Ray?” I pressed. “I’m sure you know what a molotov cocktail is, right?”

“Of course I do, dude,” my friend huffed like I’d offended him just by asking.

“Well, that’s what you’re gonna make,” I said. “Get some sort of fabric, stick it into the bottle so that it just pokes out of the top, then light it up and throw it at our tail.”

“What’s it gonna do, exactly?” Ray asked as he started to go through some of the desk drawers.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Just do it, and I’ll explain later.”

“Spinning!” Mei screamed.

I knew that the helicopter was close enough now that I couldn’t just serpentine or outrun its bullets, so I needed to take drastic measures. In one swift motion, I turned the steering wheel as hard as I could to the right, and I felt the g-forces against my body as the vehicle twisted at a nearly ninety-degree angle on the road. The second I was parallel to the highway, I slammed down the gas pedal and launched us forward, just milliseconds before a hailstorm of bullets rained down on our previous position.

I twisted the wheel back so that I was now facing the direction of the helicopter’s cockpit, and I sped forward so that we’d at least have a few seconds before it had the chance to fire on us again.

When I glanced back in the mirror, I saw Ray stuffing an old laboratory rag into the bottle he was holding, then he looked around with a bit of confusion on his face.

“The bunsen burner,” I said. “There’s one built in on the lab table.”

Ray dashed over to the burner and twisted the knob. There was a slight hiss, and then a moment later, the flame leaped to life.

“Are we ready?” he asked. “Because once I light this thing, I’m only gonna have a few seconds to get rid of it.”

“Do it,” I said. “Just make sure you throw it at the cockpit.”

Ray held the fabric over the burner, and the second it caught fire, I pressed down on the gas pedal and sent us forward.

“It’s coming around to our left, Doug,” Mei said as she looked out the side window of the van.

I took off in a straight line and prayed these bastards were gonna try to come around behind us again. However, I was dead wrong. Instead of giving chase, the fuckers banked around in front of us and flew forward in a head-on attack.

This time when the guns started to spin, I didn’t need Mei to point it out. I could see it clear as day, now that the damn things were right in front of us.

“Dude?” Ray yelled. “What the fuck do I do, dude?”

“When I give the signal, throw it straight up in the air,”
I commanded.

I straightened the wheel and launched us forward right as the bullets began to erupt out of the copter’s mounted machine guns. The muzzle flares lit up the night sky as the road behind us was chewed into oblivion, but I was just inches ahead of the attack’s trajectory. Finally the gunfire stopped, and we were about thirty feet away from the chopper.

“Doug?” Mei whimpered.

“Now!” I yelled.

Ray leaned out the back of the van, then he hurled the large vial of chemicals straight up into the sky. I held my breath as we continued to zip forward and passed underneath the helicopter, then I saw exactly what I wanted to see in my rearview mirror.

There was an intense, blinding flash of blue light in the sky, followed by the sound that reminded me of a high-pitched bark. The reaction happened in a matter of seconds, but it had done what it needed to do.

And if my calculations were right, we might have just been home free.

“They’re spinning out of control!” Mei declared with a cackle.

I watched in the rearview mirror as the triangular silhouette swayed back and forth a few times, and then it veered downward. There was a loud, metallic crash as the chopper smashed into the interstate and then slid across the pavement, until it broke through the concrete barrier on the side of the road and tumbled down into a nearby ravine.

“Dude...” Ray sputtered. “What in the Walter White did we just do?”

“Barking Dog,” I chuckled. “When you mix those two chemicals and then ignite it, the reaction causes a brief, intense flash of blue light. The chopper didn’t seem to have any lights on it since, well, you know... stealth and all. Which meant the crew probably saw everything with infrared or night vision lenses. And what happens when you introduce a bright flash of light to night vision or infrared?”

“They short-circuit?” Ray asked hopefully.

“No,” I sighed. “It blinds them. And when you’re flying blind, bad shit happens.”

“See?” Mei giggled. “I knew Doug was a genius.”

“It’s simple chemistry,” I said with a wave of my hand.
“Anyone who took a high school chemistry course would know how to do that.”

“Well, you’re the only one in here that’s actually completed a high school chemistry course,” Ray chuckled.
“Soooo...”

“I just hope we bought ourselves enough time to get Lyfotech off our trail,” Charlotte sighed. “Surely they won’t give up that easily, even if their mutants have been defeated and their goons have been killed.”

Charlotte was right. It was now clear that Lyfotech knew the direction in which we were headed, and they were determined to make sure we didn’t get there. The bear and crab-mutants may have been defeated for now, and they might not be able to accurately track us anymore, but I was sure that wasn’t the last we’d see of them.

Not by a long shot.

Chapter 3

After we sped away from the scene of the battle, we kept going straight down Interstate Ninety-Five for a few more miles before I decided to turn off and jump onto one of the smaller highways that would still take us south, but that was far enough away from the main road that Lyfe's men would have a harder time finding us.

"Do you think we lost them?" Ray asked. "Because I really, really gotta tinkle, dude."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" I asked. "We've been in the clear for, like, twenty minutes now."

"Why didn't you just go out the window?" Mei asked. "You are a man, so you can do that, right?"

"Is that what you want me to do?" Ray said as he stomped up to the driver's seat and reached for his fly. "Because if you don't wanna stop I can totally—"

"Please don't piss out the window, Ray," I chuckled and held up a hand. "I was thinking about stopping and getting a little more rest before the last leg of our journey, anyway."

“Alright.” My friend shrugged. “But I totally would have done it if you thought it’d save us time.”

“I appreciate the offer,” I said. “But we’ll find someplace to pull over.”

Eventually we found a little gas station that was off one of the state roads, so we pulled around to the back and parked in one of the more secluded spots. Before I’d even put the van in park, Ray tossed open the door, jumped out, and ran toward the entrance.

“Gottago, gottago, gottago!” he said to himself as he dashed away.

Mei giggled like a schoolgirl at our friend’s antics, while Charlotte simply chuckled softly and shook her head. Meanwhile, I stood up from my seat, stretched out to crack my back, and headed back to be with the ladies. This had been the first time I’d gotten out of my seat since the chase had begun back in the woods, and I was just now feeling the crash as my adrenaline came down.

“Do you think somebody can repair that windshield?” Charlotte asked as she pointed at the drafty spot where glass had once been.

“And these holes?” Mei tapped the few spots where the mutant bear had torn into the sides with his claws.

“We’re really gonna have to try and reinforce this van,” I sighed. “Because I really don’t wanna be spending a fortune on repairing it every time we get into a battle.”

“You could use that sticky gray stuff that you always used on things at home,” the orange-haired woman suggested. “The stuff you wrapped around the faucet and some of the doors to hold it together?”

“I mean yeah, I guess I could patch some of this up with duct tape... The holes in the side, at least. I’m gonna need somebody professional for the windshield. Until then, we’re just gonna have to live with a little bit of a draft.”

It was now about six in the morning, the point where I was still a little bit drowsy, though technically most of the world was now starting to wake up and start their day. I didn’t know if Doctor Lyfe and his goons were more likely to search for us now that it was in broad daylight, or if they’d want to keep a low profile until it got to be later in the evening. Either way, I was exhausted both physically and mentally, and I needed a break before we finished the last leg of the journey.

I checked my phone and saw that we were now about two hours away from where Haggart was currently employed. However, this whole time, we'd just been aiming in a general direction, since we weren't one hundred percent sure where Terry Haggart was located or where he would want to meet.

Now, I felt it was time to firm up the logistics.

I went to LinkedIn, found the message thread in which I'd been talking to Haggart, and then began to compose a new message.

"Hi again, Terry," I said aloud as I typed. "We just crossed the NC/SC border a bit ago, so we should be in your area fairly soon. Do you have a place that you'd want to meet so we can sit down and talk? Preferably someplace public?"

"Should you tell him about the mutants following us?" Charlotte asked. "I believe that is something I'd want to know about if I was sitting down for a meeting with a random stranger."

"I dunno," I admitted. "You're totally right... He should know Lyfe is following us and might pose a potential threat to him as well, but I also don't want to scare him away. This may be the one chance we get to actually sit down and talk to Terry

Haggart face to face, and the last thing we need to do is lose that opportunity.”

“We will lose the opportunity if Lyfetechn has him killed.” Charlotte shrugged.

“I think if Doctor Lyfe wanted Haggart dead, he’d have done it by now,” I said. “He’s had several years to take his old business partner out of the equation, but maybe he’s just too sentimental to do it.”

“Lyfe? Sentimental?” Charlotte scoffed. “Impossible. Do you have any idea what he and his scientists did to me, Doug? I’ve met some horrible people in my years, and I can promise you, there’s not a shred of anything good in that man’s body.”

“Then why would he leave the man who’s potentially his biggest threat alive for so long?” I asked.

“Simple,” the spider-woman said with a dark tone. “He hasn’t caused any problems yet, so there’s been no need to kill him. The second he talks to us, though, that may no longer be the case.”

“Let’s hope not,” I sighed. “For now I’ll just keep it all very vague, and hopefully, we won’t run into a problem.”

I finished typing up the message to Terry Haggart, then I pressed the send button in LinkedIn Messenger. The little box of text appeared on the right side of the messenger in blue, though the little circle that indicated whether or not Haggart himself had seen the message remained blank.

Maybe he wasn't one of those morning people I'd just been thinking about. I slid my phone back into my pocket before I plunked down on the built-in stool in the back of the van, laid my head down against the workbench, and sighed.

Just then, the side door of the vehicle popped open, and Ray slid into the passenger seat.

"I feel much better," Ray chuckled. "I think I've been holding it since before we went to bed last night."

"Why didn't you just go then?" I asked without looking up. "We didn't get ambushed until, like, the wee hours of the morning..."

"Piss in the woods?" he scoffed. "Like an animal?"

"You were literally just talking about pissing out the side of the van," I pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but that's onto a manmade road," he said like it was obvious. "I ain't gonna ruin the serene beauty of

nature with my homemade lemonade, dude.”

“Please, for the love of all things holy, never refer to it with those words again,” I shuddered.

“Sheesh,” Ray said. “What were you guys just talking about? Doug looks super bummed.”

“He just sent another message to Terry Haggart,” Mei said.

“Oh, no,” my friend said, and I felt his hand against my shoulder. “Did you get ghosted? It happens to the best of us, man.”

“I’m just tired,” I sighed. “I thought maybe we’d all get a good night’s sleep last night, but Lyfe had other plans.”

“Did you just make a pun?” Ray asked with a giggle.

“Shit, I did,” I chuckled as I looked up from the desk. “Totally not on purpose, though.”

“There’s that smile we all love!” Mei said happily.

“It only took an unintentional Dad joke to bring it back,” I said with a smirk.

“Seriously, though, Doug, what’s got you down?” Ray asked.

“Honestly?” I said and looked around at my strange band of friends. “I felt pretty helpless back there against the bear and the crab-dude.”

“What?” Mei said as she jumped to her feet and placed her hands on her hips. “You were the driver! I certainly couldn’t have done that.”

“That’s because up until a few days ago you were a cat,” I chuckled. “You didn’t even know what a car was.”

“Of course I knew what cars were,” she said. “Why do you think I sat and watched out the window all day when you were at work? Well, I mean, besides the birds. And that one squirrel who was always taunting me...”

As Mei spoke about the squirrel, her ears flattened against her head and her face twisted into a frown. There was a slight growl to her voice as she trailed off and went silent, and Ray and I exchanged amused glances.

“You really don’t like that squirrel, do you?” I asked.

“Not at all,” she huffed. “It’s like he knew I was trapped behind a glass barrier and couldn’t get to him, so he did everything he could to mock me.”

“Look, dude,” Ray said as he changed the subject back to the topic at hand. “If it wasn’t for your getaway driving, those Lyfotech goons would have caught up to us easily, and we’d probably all be worm food right about now.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “But what happens if we run into those two mutants again? I don’t wanna just be the guy who sits in the van and waits for everyone to retreat.”

“Isn’t that why you’ve got the shotgun?” Ray asked, then he mimicked pumping a fake shotgun and taking aim. “You’re freaking lethal with that thing, dude.”

“And you think a shotgun is gonna do much good against those two?” I chuckled. “That bear looks like he could take a freight train to the chest and walk it off like it was a pebble, and don’t even get me started on how strong that crab-mutant’s shell actually is.”

“Then we get you a stronger weapon,” Charlotte said with a six-shoulder shrug. “Our two newest enemies might be strong, but they are not invincible.”

“Like what, a bazooka?” I scoffed. “I’m not sure anything short of that could do damage to that thing’s shell.”

“I was thinkin’ more like a giant nutcracker,” Ray said as he gently slapped me on the back. “Or maybe those little hammer things they give you at restaurants. If Red Lobster can figure out how to break through those things, then we sure as fuck can, too!”

“I like your gusto,” I said. “But I was thinking maybe something a little more... organic.”

“What do you mean?” he asked with a frown.

“Like, something that would allow me to hold my own against mutated creatures without actually having to resort to military-grade weaponry,” I said.

Ray and Mei both looked at me with confused expressions, though Charlotte’s yellow eyes widened as a devilish grin twisted up her lips.

“Are you saying what I think you are saying, Doug?” Charlotte asked.

“You heard what he said,” Ray said. “He doesn’t want to have to use military-grade weapons to fight the mutant bear and mutant crab. I mean I don’t really blame him, but I’m not sure how else he could make that work. No offense, Doug, but

if that bear-mutant got hold of you, I don't think there'd be anything left to even bury."

"Thanks," I said with a sarcastic snort.

"That's not what he's saying," Charlotte said.

"Maybe you need to fill me in then, spider-lady," Ray sighed. "Because that's what I heard. Mei? Isn't that what he said?"

"That is what Doug said," Mei said with a shake of her head.

"But that's not what he meant," Charlotte chuckled. "He wants to take the serum for himself."

"What?" Mei gasped. "Doug, if you take the serum as it is, you'll end up like Ray."

"First off, ouch," Ray frowned. "But yeah, I'll admit it... I may be all strong and buff now, but I ain't the tall drink of water I used to be."

"And he's certainly not as intelligent, either," I added.

"Now wait a minute—" Ray began, but Mei cut him off.

"Ray was actually pretty clever back when he was a normal human," Mei said. "It was mostly related to things like

his video game strategies and knowledge of TV shows he really enjoyed, but he was fairly bright.”

“As opposed to now?” Ray frowned.

“Hey now, guys,” I chuckled, then I stood up and patted Ray’s right arm. “Ray’s still a brilliant guy, it just takes him a little bit longer to figure out what he needs to do. I think it’s just because all the blood that used to run to his brain is now taking the long route around all these muscles he’s got.”

“Yeah!” Ray smiled. “I’m not stupid, it’s just that my blood is taking longer to get to my brain. Wait... There’s blood in my brain?”

“What do you think keeps it going?” Charlotte asked with a tilt of her head.

“The neutrons,” he replied. “Isn’t that what it’s made of?”

“Neurons,” I chuckled. “You’re thinking of neurons, which still need blood to keep them alive.”

“Huh,” he muttered. “You learn something new every day.”

“Doug, this may be out of line for me to say, but... I don’t want you to take the serum,” Mei said. “We need you to

be at your best, or else I'm afraid we won't survive Doctor Lyfe's attacks."

"Awwww, Mei," I smirked. "Are you saying I'm a good leader?"

"You are," the cat-woman nodded. "And I wouldn't want you to throw that away just so you can be stronger."

"I won't do that." I shook my head. "If I do take the serum, it'll be a version without any side effects."

"That doesn't exist, my man," Ray said. "Why do you think Lyfe wants to cut Mei open and experiment on her? The stuff I swiped was the only perfect version of the serum he had."

"Then I'll just have to create more," I said with a firm nod. "Once I figure out the correct formula, I can drink it up and become a mutant like you guys. Hopefully, I'll be more of an *X-Men* type of mutant than a *Toxic Avenger* one, though."

"Maybe you just need to figure out what sort of serum Charlotte had," Ray suggested. "She seems pretty badass, even without a perfected version of the formula."

"I will warn you, Doug," Charlotte frowned. "Being a mutant is not all sunshine and rainbows like it has been for

your two friends here, especially if you somehow end up getting captured by Lyfetechnology.”

“Then we just have to make sure we don’t get captured by Lyfe and his goons then, don’t we?” Ray snorted.

“I’m serious!” the dark-haired woman hissed, and Ray instantly shut up. “I will kill myself before I ever go back to one of Lyfetechnology’s labs, and that is a promise, not a threat.”

“What did they do to you, Charlotte?” Mei asked.

“You don’t want to know, darling,” the spider-woman said as she turned her head away and closed her eyes.

“Horrible, horrible things. If you could see the scars on my body, they would tell the stories far better than I could.”

“I want to know,” I said as I stepped over and placed my hand on the woman’s shoulder.

“You do?” Charlotte asked as she turned her head to face me. “Why?”

“Because you’re right, turning myself into a mutant isn’t something to take lightly,” I replied. “I want to know the risks, down to every nitty-gritty detail.”

What I had said to Charlotte was certainly true, but I also had an ulterior motive for asking her to elaborate further. I

wanted to know exactly what that fucker Doctor Lyfe had done to this woman to make her so cold and hard around the edges.

More importantly, I wanted to know exactly what I needed to do to Lyfe to make him feel the same way he made her feel.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Because my story is not for the faint of heart.”

“Tell us,” I insisted.

“Okay...” she said and then paused for a moment.

“Well, for starters, I... I had eight arms when I was created.”

“What do you mean?” Ray asked as he gestured at the woman’s feet. “You’ve got eight limbs now.”

“Not limbs,” she corrected. “Arms.”

Charlotte’s expression remained stoic, though I swore I noticed her bottom lip trembling as she reached up with two of her arms and grabbed the very top of her shirt. She pulled the garment down around her shoulders and then slightly down her body, though she stopped before she exposed her perky breasts. There, between the arms attached to her shoulders and the second pair, were two massive scars.

Scars where her fourth pair of arms had been located, surely.

“What the fuck?” I growled. “Why would they do that? Don’t more arms mean better agility and fighting ability?”

“No.” Charlotte’s eyes watered around the edges, though she was able to keep back any tears. “It means you’re ‘a freak’ according to Lyfe and his scientists. I was supposed to be a perfect blend of human and spider, yet I had ten limbs? That wasn’t ‘right’ according to Doctor Lyfe, so he ‘corrected’ my biology.”

“Fucking hell...” I frowned. “I-I’m so sorry, Charlotte.”

“That’s just the beginning,” she warned as she slid her shirt back over her shoulders. “Are you sure you want to hear more?”

“I do,” I said. “And I don’t want you to sugarcoat anything, either.”

“As you wish.” The dark-haired woman nodded. “The removal of my extra limbs was nothing compared to what happened next. One of the first things they did was to jam a huge needle into my throat so that they could extract my venom and see if they could replicate it for military use. They

stuck me with that thing six different times before they gave up and decided it'd be better to just cut me open and dig around to see what was in there.”

“They... they cut you open?” Mei asked with a horrified tone.

“They drugged me first,” Charlotte frowned. “Though I was not unconscious. I may not have felt it, but I remember hearing and seeing everything those bastards did.”

“That’s horrible,” the cat-woman said as tears welled up in her eyes.

“It’s not even the worst thing,” Charlotte scoffed. “They ran all sorts of ‘durability tests’ on me.”

Just the phrasing alone gave me the creeps, and I felt a chill go down my spine as my mind raced with all the horrific possibilities of what they did to this poor woman.

“They hurt you, didn’t they?” I asked. “That was how they tested your durability?”

“It went beyond just hurting, I’m afraid,” she said. “They put me in a tank of water, let me drown, and then pulled me out and brought me back before I could actually die. They did the exact same thing with a bunch of poisons, though in

that case they pumped my stomach immediately after they saw the reaction I had to it. I was not asleep for that, and I remember it vividly... Then there were the tests where they would actually test my physical durability by attaching me to horrible devices and then breaking my bones and tearing at my flesh to see how quickly I'd heal.”

Charlotte walked the three of us through all these different experiments that Doctor Lyfe had run on her before he'd sent her out to be his mind-controlled assassin, and the more she talked, the more my blood fucking boiled.

I wanted nothing more than to turn this van around, drive straight up to Lyfetechnology HQ, and beat the shit out of Doctor Lyfe before I burned his entire company to the ground. However, I had to let my more calm side prevail, because there were a million reasons I couldn't get my revenge just yet. For one thing, Lyfetechnology HQ would be swarming with goons as well as mutants that were equally as bad as the two we'd just fought, or even worse. Not to mention, it was probably filled with all sorts of high-tech, top secret traps that would be next to impossible to counter.

If I wanted to hit Lyfe where it hurt, I needed to do a bit more digging, which meant I needed to talk to Terry Haggart.

As much as I wanted to do the whole “an eye for an eye” thing, it didn’t really work when the person you were trying to seek vengeance on was one of the most powerful men in the entire world.

“Damn,” Ray said somberly after Charlotte was done telling her story. “I’m sorry you had to go through that shit.”

“I am, too,” Mei whispered and then frowned.

“That’s why I say you shouldn’t take this idea lightly, Doug,” the spider-woman said as her yellow eyes glared at me. “Right now, Lyfetechnology just wants to kill you. If you become a mutant, they’ll want to do to you exactly what they did to me. Actually, if you truly perfect the formula, they’ll probably do much, much worse.”

“I understand the risks.” I nodded. “And I appreciate you being so open with your story. But I can’t just keep hiding behind a shotgun and playing getaway driver while you three risk your asses to keep us alive. Besides, if fate does decide to take a shit on us and we get caught, I don’t want to be the only non-mutant in the group. Like you said, Charlotte, Lyfe would just kill me and then take the rest of you away to torture and experiment on... If that were the situation, I wouldn’t want to take the coward’s way out while you all suffered.”

“Uhhhh, thanks? I think?” Ray chuckled.

“That is very brave of you, Doug.” Charlotte nodded, and I saw a hint of a smile at the left corner of her mouth.

“Though you don’t have to be noble for our sake.”

“I’m not just trying to be noble,” I explained. “The four of us are in this together. Whatever your fate is, it will be mine, too.”

“I think you might be getting ahead of yourself, no?” the spider-woman replied. “You don’t even know what’s in Lyfotech’s serum currently, so how would you even begin to try and perfect it?”

“I can find out,” I said with a nod, and then I pointed over to all the equipment that was in the portable lab that was the van. “With just a few samples.”

“How so?” Charlotte asked. “Lyfotech had access to all the same machines and samples.”

“But I’ve got three people with the serum in their blood standing right here in the van with me,” I said. “All with varying degrees of successful mutations.”

“Ohhhhh, no.” Ray shook his head. “Didn’t you say Lyfe was gonna cut Mei open to get the serum out of her? I

ain't doing it, man."

"I'm not going to cut any of you open." I rolled my eyes. "That'd be ridiculous. What I can do, though, is to take a blood sample from each one of you and then analyze it to find commonalities. Then, once I've established which parts of your DNA are consistent with each other and stable, I can run a few experiments with different batches of the serum that I cook up."

"You know, I only understood a couple of those words." Ray sighed.

"There's no point in trying to explain all the technical shit," I said. "The fact of the matter is, I can fuck around with the chemical composition of the serums just by looking at your blood samples."

"Then I'll be the first to offer mine," Charlotte said.
"What do I need to do?"

I went over to the small metal cabinet that was built into the van wall right next to the main desk, then I popped it open and started to rummage around inside. The top cabinet was full of nothing but random chemicals, while the bottom one had random scientific equipment like gloves, goggles, microscopes, empty vials, pipettes, and even a small

laboratory centrifuge. After a minute or two of searching, I finally found what I was looking for, a small package of clean microscope slides. I pulled out three of the little clear squares, placed them on the table, and then pointed to them.

“That would be it,” I said. “I just need you to put a little drop of blood onto the slide, then I’ll label them and check them out.”

Charlotte gave me a nod, then she stepped over to the table. The spider-woman lifted her second right hand up to her mouth, opened up, and pressed her thumb against one of her pointed fangs. Charlotte pressed the flesh of her finger against her fang just hard enough to draw a little bit of blood, and then she placed her thumb against the slide and left a tiny bit of crimson.

“That doesn’t seem so bad,” Mei said and bit her own finger.

After Mei put her blood on the microscope slide, Ray lifted his right thumb up and shoved it into his mouth. We all watched as the man pressed against his canines, but when that didn’t work, he began to drag his finger back and forth across it like he was trying to cut a rope against a sword. After a few

seconds Ray let out an annoyed huff, lowered his hand, and looked at us with a frown.

“My teeth aren’t sharp enough,” he said. “What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

“That’s why we have needles and knives, dude,” I chuckled.

I reached back into the bottom cabinet and pulled out a scalpel encased in plastic, which I opened up and then handed to my friend.

“I thought you said you weren’t cutting us open?” Ray gasped.

“Dude, just prick your finger with it.”

“Oh,” he mumbled. “Right.”

Ray closed one eye and stuck out his tongue as he raised the scalpel over to his left thumb, and after a brief hesitation, he carefully slid the blade across his finger horizontally. The mutant winced as he cut open his flesh, but he quickly placed his thumb over the clean slide and let a couple of drops fall onto the thin glass.

“Thank you kindly,” I smirked as I placed the top part of the slides onto each one. “Now I just need a few minutes to

analyze these...”

I pulled out the portable lab equipment and got to work. I spent the next two hours hunched over the table as I studied the blood samples underneath a microscope as well as running several tests on the samples using the chemicals and the equipment I had available. After the second hour had elapsed and most of the initial tests had been done, I started to recognize some patterns with each mutant’s blood.

“Any breakthroughs, Einstein?” Ray asked. “You’ve been at this forever.”

“It’s been two hours,” I chuckled. “In the grand scheme of science, that’s nothing.”

“Still, have you found anything of interest?” Charlotte asked.

“Actually, yeah, I have,” I said. “Do you want me to describe it in scientific terms, or layman’s terms?”

“What the fuck is a layman?” Ray asked. “Is that what they call male prostitutes nowadays?”

“Do you want me to use big words or small words?” I chuckled.

“Small words, dude,” Ray said quickly. “Allllwaaays small words.”

“Okay then,” I replied. “Here’s the situation... Each of your blood samples is unstable, but in different ways. Ray, your DNA is pretty much holding on by a metaphorical thread.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Ray gulped.

“I’m trying to think of how to put this nicely...” I said and tapped my chin. “If the base pairs in your DNA had been mutated any further, you’d probably be a fleshy puddle on the ground right now.”

“Huh,” he said and scratched his head. “I guess I got lucky then, didn’t I?”

“I’ll say,” I said and shook my head. “As for Mei, you’ve got a strange little thing going on with your DNA where it can’t fully decide if you’re human or cat, so it just has both.”

“What do you mean it has both?” Mei asked as her ears twitched.

“I mean, you’ve literally got two strands of DNA where most animals have one. One of them is human DNA, and the

other is feline. I've never seen anything like it, and I doubt anyone else has, either."

"And that's a good thing?" she asked in a confused voice.

"Who am I to say?" I chuckled. "The fact of the matter is, the serum you took seems to be the most stable of the group, so it's the one that I probably want to replicate."

"What about mine?" Charlotte asked. "How is my DNA abnormal?"

"Yours is fascinating," I said with a smirk. "The proteins in your cells are in a constant state of breaking down and rebuilding themselves way, way faster than a normal person, which is probably why you have that extra ability to spit venom that can melt things."

"I get why you're not copying mine," Ray said. "But why not Charlotte's?"

"Because the very characteristics that give her that ability would probably cause very different reactions in other specimens," I replied. "I'm sure those experiments found that you were immune to most poisons, right?"

“The natural ones,” Charlotte frowned. “Man-made ones still sent me to the brink of death.”

“Precisely.” I nodded. “Since you were originally a black widow and could produce natural venom, that means you’re immune to the toxicity that is coursing through your body this very second. If me or Ray had the same sort of mutation, the venom would be eating through our bodies from the inside out.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t want to risk that,” Charlotte chuckled.

“Okay, okay,” Ray said. “So you found that all of our mutant DNA is pretty fucked, but did you find anything that is gonna help you figure out how to make it right?”

“There was one thing that I noticed in all of your blood samples,” I said. “And that was the presence of a compound we always called Dollblood, which is essentially a combination of pyridine and benzene. You normally have one present as a base and not the other, but these serums seem to have found a way to combine them into something that spurred along the mutation process.”

“Why do you call it that?” Charlotte asked. “That seems like a pretty ominous name.”

“It’s because Benzene is normally used in plastics and rubbers and things you normally would find in a manufactured synthetic compound, while Pyridine is used as a base for many medicines,” I explained. “To combine them basically creates something synthetic that can enter the human body without harming them. Plastic blood. Doll’s blood.”

“What does that all mean, though?” Ray asked. “I’m getting some serious flashbacks to Miss Valltrum’s sophomore chemistry class, dude, and I flunked outta that one because I never had any idea what the fuck was going on.”

“It means something in the serum has bonded those two chemicals together, and probably is the catalyst for your mutations,” I said. “So if I can figure out what this chemical actually is, then maybe I can replicate the serum.”

“I wonder if it had anything to do with those little metal boxes that they brought in during the early hours of the morning?” Ray pondered aloud. “You know, the ones that they always snuck into the back room and kept out of sight from everyone who toured the place?”

“And you’re just telling me about this right now?” I asked with a frown. “Do you remember what it was called?”

“Oh, man...,” he said and shook his head. “That was so long ago, and I never really paid that much attention when I was cleaning. It was something that started with an A, though. Aspartame? Acetaminophen? Asinine?”

No. There was no possible way Ray was trying to say what I think he was trying to say.

“Astatine?” I asked. “Is that what you’re thinking of?”

Ray clapped his hands together and pointed at me as a massive grin spread across his face.

“That’s the one!” he declared.

“Impossible.” I shook my head. “No way. No fucking way does Lyfeteck just have astatine laying around.”

“Why not?” Mei asked. “Is it rare?”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” I chuckled. “It’s literally the rarest material known to man. There’s only about one gram, a single gram, of the stuff that occurs naturally in the Earth’s crust, which makes it nearly impossible to harvest. They’ve made variants of the element in a lab setting before, but it only has a half-life of eight hours. It’s super expensive and difficult to make, and it’s pretty much worthless after only a few hours of sitting around. Plus, there’s

not really much you can do with it, chemically... There's been experiments done with it for, like, cancer treatments and stuff, but otherwise it's pretty useless and mainly just created to study."

"Dude," Ray said as he shook his head. "I might not understand most of the shit you're saying, but it sounds like exactly something Lyfotech would do. Rare element? Check. Used in an unethical way? Check. Something that the world wouldn't know about, and that they'd want to keep secret? Check."

He was right. The idea that Lyfotech could synthetically create Astatine in large quantities without the rest of the scientific community knowing, and then use it to experiment on living subjects and create supersoldiers was right up their alley.

Still, that put me into a major bind, because I wasn't Lyfotech, so I couldn't just throw together a bunch of random chemicals and create the rarest element on Earth.

"Shit," I sighed as I rubbed my temples. "I need to think this all over. My fucking head hurts."

"Oh!" Mei said as she bounced up and down. "Could we perhaps go and get some breakfast? My tummy is

grumbling.”

“Sure,” I said with a nod. “But first I think I want to find a truck stop with a shower. I haven’t been able to take one since this whole adventure started.”

“You don’t gotta tell us, dude,” Ray laughed as he pinched his nose. “We can tell you need one.”

“Don’t be coy, Ray,” I smirked. “Now that you’re a mutant, I’m sure there are parts of your body that you didn’t even know needed a washing.”

“I could use a nice shower,” the man nodded. “I know I don’t smell the greatest, either.”

“Is that... is that something that I need to worry about?” Mei asked. “I’ve noticed that ever since I’ve become more human, my normal method of cleaning myself doesn’t really work. My tongue isn’t hooked like it used to be, and human flesh doesn’t seem to hold my salvia like my fur used to.”

“You’ll have to take a shower like a human, then,” I said with a nod. “It’s not that bad, honestly.”

“I’ll take your word on that,” the cat-woman replied with a frown.

I headed up to the front seat of the van, plunked down into the seat, and then turned on the engine. I punched in “truck stop showers near me” into my GPS and saw that there was one about a mile down the road. So, I put the van in gear, pulled out of the gas station’s parking lot, and headed to the south.

After a few minutes of driving, we came to a large convenience store that had several pumps outside and a vibrant, yellow-and-white aesthetic throughout the building. I parked us in the back just in case any of Lyfe’s goons were passing by, then the four of us exited the van and headed for the entrance.

The inside of the building was pretty much what I’d expected, which was just a simple space with a dark faux hardwood floor and several shelves of candy, drinks, snacks, and travel supplies as far as the eye could see. There was a Subway built into one side of the building, and on the other side I could see a sign that clearly read *showers* .

“Is that where we need to go?” Charlotte asked.

“That’s it.” I nodded. “But I need to go pay and get tickets first.”

“Tickets?” Ray asked. “Is this freaking Six Flags amusement park, dude?”

“That’s how it works.” I shrugged. “I’ve met plenty of truckers through the years, and they all say you gotta go buy a ticket and then wait until it’s your turn.”

So, I led the group up to the main counter, purchased four showers for twelve dollars a pop, and then got our tickets.

“Fresh towels are in each room,” the cashier said with a happy smile. “Soap and shampoo are in dispensers mounted inside the stalls.”

“Thanks,” I said with a nod.

The four of us headed back to the little waiting area, where we promptly plunked down on uncomfortable wooden chairs and watched the other people who roamed around the building. Ray’s name got called first, and he let out a Homer Simpson-esque “woohoo!” before he darted back into the hallway.

Charlotte’s number was next, and she strode away with confidence plastered all over her face. After another minute or so my number was called, and as I stood up, I felt Mei’s hand on my shoulder.

“Wait, Doug,” she said with a frown.

“What’s up?”

“This is going to sound stupid,” Mei sighed. “But I... I don’t even know where to start with this whole human shower thing.”

“It’s not that hard,” I promised. “All you have to do is take some soap, get it nice and lathery, and then rub it all over your body. Then you do the same thing with shampoo, only for your hair. Then you wash it all off, hop out, and dry off with a towel.”

“This all sounds like a lot of information,” Mei sighed. “I’m not going to remember it all... Could you show me?”

Instantly, I felt all the blood in my body rush down to my loins, and I gulped as I thought about the beautiful orange-haired woman, naked in the shower with me. Sure, she had probably suggested this as an innocent, ignorant gesture, but a part of me also wondered if she had thought more and more about our last lovemaking session and was now hungry for more.

I guess there was only gonna be one way to find out.

“Sure, Mei,” I said to the cat-woman with a smile. “I’ll help you out.”

I held out my arm, and Mei stood up and linked hers with mine. We headed over to the showers, scanned the keycode, opened up the door, and stepped inside together.

Now, the real fun could begin.

Chapter 4

“This is the way you humans clean yourselves?” Mei gasped as she looked around at the interior of the travel station shower. “No wonder you are so clean all the time.”

“Mei, you’ve seen the shower I normally use,” I chuckled. “This is way bigger and way fancier than anything I’ve had in my entire life.”

“Ah, yes, I do remember...” the orange-haired woman trailed off. “You tossed me in there and turned on the water, that time I knocked the syrup container off the counter and rolled around in it.”

“Uhg, don’t remind me.” I made a face as the details flooded back to me. “I was finding bits of your fur stuck to things for weeks, even after I cleaned you up. Not to mention all the freaking scratches you left on my arms from trying to escape during the bath.”

“Perhaps showering will not be so scary now that I’m partially human,” Mei said. “It also helps that you are here with me, too... I know you can show me exactly what to do to make myself comfortable.”

I felt my cock twitch to attention at the purring, seductive way Mei spoke, though for now, I kept things strictly professional.

The inside of this place was about as simple as you could get, with a combination bathroom-shower whose floor was made up of gray square tiles that were about two inches long by two inches wide and covered the entire floor. The walls were made up of slightly larger, rectangular tiles that were tan and placed horizontally. There was no differentiation between the part of the room that contained the toilet, sink, bench, and towel holder and the part that was supposed to be the shower, and the only indicator that they were supposed to be two separate spaces was a small plastic curtain that was attached to the curtain rod and that could be pulled closed.

The shower section itself was fairly straightforward and featured a single, cheaply-made silver shower head that jutted out of the ceiling. The head looked like it was removable, which made me wonder if they were indeed removed after the store closed, and there was also a single lever that controlled water flow and temperature. There were a few shelves that were built directly into the wall that I assumed were used for the storage of soap, shampoo, and anything else people

brought into these showers. There were also two plastic squares on the wall with a small button at the bottom labeled body wash and shampoo.

“First thing’s first, Mei,” I said as I turn to the door. “We gotta make sure nobody else accidentally walks in. You don’t want strangers just strolling in while you’re naked.”

I strolled over to the door, twisted the lock, and then looked back over my shoulder at Mei.

“Okay,” she said. “Then what?”

“Well,” I said with a nervous chuckle as my heart began to beat rapidly. “Now we gotta get undressed. You don’t want to shower in your clothes, or you’ll be stuck in wet clothes all day. And trust me when I say walking around in wet clothes is the absolute worst thing you want to be doing at this time of the year.”

“You want me to get undressed first?” Mei asked as a slight blush crept into her face.

“We can get undressed together,” I smirked. “Here... We can even help each other.”

I walked over to the orange-haired beauty, placed my left arm around her body on the small of her back, and then

pulled her up against me. I smiled as she let out a happy squeal when her body touched mine, then her face fell into a look of pure carnal joy as she stared into my eyes. The next thing I knew, her hands were around the bottom of my shirt, and I stepped back slightly as she pulled it up over my head and then tossed it onto the bench.

I returned the favor.

Mei was wearing an adorable, thigh-high sundress, so I let my fingers trace down to the garment's very bottom. I carefully pulled the dress up over Mei's head, and her gorgeous little breasts bounced free of their fabric prison. Their tiny pink nipples were erect with arousal, and when I pressed the woman's body back against me, they dug into my bare chest like daggers.

At that point, my cock was at full mast and threatened to tear through my pants, and Mei let out a slight gasp when she felt it press against her outer thigh.

"Doug!" she giggled. "I thought we were supposed to just be showering."

"Sorry," I said with a shrug. "You're just really beautiful, Mei, so I get excited when I see you naked."

“I’m not naked yet,” Mei said as she pointed down to the tights on her legs. “But I can fix that.”

The cat-woman reached down, slid her thumbs underneath the waistband of her tights, and then playfully pulled them down as she waggled her hips back and forth. Her tail happily danced from side to side as she moved, and within seconds, Mei’s precious, swollen womanhood was exposed. Her delicate flower was slightly wet already, which told me she was probably more aroused than she was letting on. A tiny little tuft of orange hair sat at the top of her tender slit, and I licked my lips as the thought of dragging my tongue around every inch of her pussy flitted through my mind.

Mei shot me a seductive look as she threw her tights to the side and then placed her hands on her hips. The cat-woman glanced down at my lower half before she cleared her throat loudly, and I got the hint.

“Oh? You want me to take mine off, too?” I asked as I waggled my eyebrows.

“Take them off, or I’m going to tear them off,” the woman purred.

I slid my shoes off my feet, threw them over by the bench, and then slowly started to unfasten the button on my

jeans. I intentionally moved at a snail's pace as I unbuttoned the little loop, then I unzipped my pants and carefully pulled them down to my ankles. I was still in my boxers after I removed the jeans, and Mei just looked at me with an unamused expression.

“The boxers, too?” I asked playfully.

Mei's eyes narrowed, then she teasingly bared her teeth and hissed in my direction.

Message received.

I grabbed the waistband of my boxers and yanked them off with a single pull that let my manhood spring to attention.

“You really are excited about this, aren't you?” Mei moaned as she looked down at my throbbing member. “I thought we were supposed to be getting clean, not dirty?”

“Why can't we do both?” I growled as I pulled her in close.

I pressed my lips against Mei's as we started to kiss passionately, and at the same time I reached around and took a handful of her tight ass. She mirrored my gesture as we made out, and I felt her squeeze my butt with one hand while she traced my abs with the other. After a minute or so of the

intense makeout session, Mei finally pulled away, then she pointed over at the shower.

“We should at least try to clean ourselves off,” she giggled.

“Fine, fineeeeeee,” I sighed and hung my head.

I took Mei by the hand and led her over to the part of the room that was covered by the showerhead. We didn't even bother closing the curtain, but I did gesture for Mei to take a few steps back toward the other side of the shower.

“Why do I need to stand over here?” the cat-woman frowned. “I want to be with you, Doug.”

“Because this water's probably gonna be cold as fuck when it first comes out,” I chuckled. “I'm just trying to save you the pain of having freezing water on your bare flesh.”

“See? I told Charlotte you were one of the kindest men I'd ever met,” she purred.

I twisted the lever on the wall and, sure enough, a shower of cold water poured down onto my body. I let out an amused laugh as I jumped away from the frigid geyser and felt every goosebump on my body raise up, then I shivered and looked over at Mei.

“Y-you’re welcome,” I said through chattering teeth.

I stepped out of the water and let it run for a few seconds before I carefully placed my hand back underneath to test it out. The second time, it was a nice, warm temperature that was somewhere between lukewarm and searing hot, which made me think it was perfect. I gestured for Mei to come back over, and she cautiously stepped to the edge of the water.

“Is this going to hurt my fur?” she asked with a frown, and her ears went flat on her head. “When you bathed me before, it felt like my fur was dried out for days afterwards.”

“That’s because I didn’t use the right shampoo last time,” I explained. “Just water. This time I’ll make sure everything is exactly the way it needs to be...”

Mei pursed her lips as her tail flicked back and forth nervously, then she let out a big sigh. The orange-haired bombshell stepped underneath the showerhead and let the water splash down over her body, and the fur on her ears and tail instantly slicked down against her flesh. Mei closed her eyes as she let out a happy squeal, then she shook her head like a dog trying to dry itself off.

“This is such a strange sensation!” Mei said with a mixture of terror and amusement in her voice.

Meanwhile, I was mesmerized by the sight of her gorgeous, glistening-wet breasts as the water poured down their curves and then dribbled down onto her tummy. I felt my dick start to rise, and Mei purred happily when she saw I was awake.

“Sorry,” I chuckled coyly. “Involuntary reaction.”

“It’s okay...” the cat-woman said. “I like it when it comes out to play.”

“We’re supposed to be showering, Mei,” I reminded her. “Or at least, I’m supposed to be teaching you how to shower like a regular human would.”

“Then show me, Doug,” Mei purred. “What do I need to do?”

“Well, first you gotta take one of these,” I said as I snagged a washcloth off a nearby shelf and then placed it under the soap dispenser. “Then you put a little bit of this liquid onto it and get it all nice and sudsy.”

I squirted a little bit of yellow-colored body wash onto the cloth and was instantly met with a neutral scent that sort of reminded me of that clear hand soap that was popular all through the nineties. Once I had enough of it on the cloth, I

stuck it underneath the water and proceeded to rub it between my fingers until it got nice and foamy. Then, I handed it over to Mei, who just looked down at it with a confused expression.

“I rub this on my body and it gets clean?” she asked.

“Mmmhmmm.” I nodded. “Let me show you...”

I placed the washcloth up against Mei’s shoulder and then proceeded to sensually run it down her arm all the way down to her wrist, and then back up again slowly. Next I moved onto her other shoulder, and then down to her chest, where I made sure to run my cloth-covered hand along every curve of her perky breasts and then around her tummy.

“Aren’t I supposed to be doing this?” Mei giggled.

“Hmm?” I asked, then realization kicked in. “Oh, yeah. Oops.”

“I’m sure it was torture for you.” The cat-woman winked as she took the washcloth. “Is it really that simple? I just rub the white foam all over my body, then I’m all clean?”

“You gotta make sure you wash it off,” I explained.

“Oh, and definitely don’t get it in your eyes, unless you want it to burn like Hell.”

Mei began to clean herself with the washcloth, so I picked up another one and got to work on myself. After a minute or two, however, I felt Mei's washcloth touch my bare back.

"I thought you might want some assistance," she said bashfully. "I cannot reach my own back, so I thought I would help you with yours."

"Thanks, Mei," I replied.

The orange-haired bombshell washed off my back, and when she was all done, I turned around and washed hers. The entire time I scrubbed Mei's back, though, my eyes were focused on her perfect, tight ass and the soap that ran down her shapely figure. My cock was now at full mast, and I didn't know how much longer I was gonna be able to keep my hands off this gorgeous woman.

"There," Mei said with a happy sigh. "I think I got all the soap off me."

"You still gotta shampoo," I chuckled and pointed to the other dispenser on the wall. "It's pretty much the same principle, only you can just use your hands instead of a washcloth. It really helps with the rubbing it in and all that."

I squirted a bit of shampoo into my left hand, rubbed both my palms together, and then lathered it into my hair. I watched with amusement as Mei tried to mirror my actions, though her cat ears didn't respond well to the soap and tried to flatten against her head to avoid it. Eventually, we both had a head full of soapy hair, and we stared at each other for a second before we burst out laughing.

"This is quite fun!" Mei giggled. "Are all human showers like this?"

"I'm afraid not." I shook my head. "Most of the time we humans just stare off into space while we're washing ourselves, or we have imaginary arguments in our heads."

"Imaginary arguments?" she said and cocked her head. "Why would you do that?"

"The fuck if I know," I snorted. "It's either imaginary arguments, or we belt out our favorite tune since we know nobody can hear us."

"But Doug..." Mei said with a sly grin. "I heard you singing in the shower all the time. You have a... decent voice."

"Wooooowww," I teased. "Just decent?"

“Well, yes,” she sighed. “But what you lack in a pleasant singing voice, you make up for in other areas.”

I lifted an eyebrow and gave Mei an amused glare, and her cheeks instantly turned a deep shade of red when she realized what she’d implied.

“Come on,” I said as I pointed to the shower. “We need to wash all this shampoo off so we can finish up, or all the hot water’s gonna be gone before we’re done.”

“That can happen?” she asked.

“It can, and it does,” I said and shook my head. “When I used to live at my old place with an actual roommate, he always used up the hot water. Dude took freaking hour-long showers, for crying out loud! I always figured he fell asleep in there or was wanking one out or something, but still.”

I closed my eyes and stuck my head underneath the cascade of water, which washed the shampoo out of my hair in a flash. When I stepped away from the showerhead, I saw that Mei looked hesitant to go under the water again, though she eventually took a deep breath and then stepped into its path. My heart raced as I watched Mei whip her head back and let the water run down her perfect body. Time seemed to stand still in the best way as the woman ran her fingers through her

orange hair gently while she kept her back arched the entire time.

Sadly, Mei eventually got all the soap out, so she stepped away from the faucet and began to shake off like a dog.

“You don’t need to do that,” I said quickly. “That’s what the towels are for.”

“So... It’s over?” Mei frowned. “We dry ourselves off, then we go back out to see our friends and get back on the road?”

“Well, yeah, we’re all done freshening up,” I agreed. “Unless you were thinking about doing something else?”

I felt my heart skip a beat at the mere suggestion that I had just made, then I waited patiently for Mei to answer. The orange-haired woman bit her bottom lip and smiled as she looked me up and down, and her eyes lingered on my manhood for a fraction of a second longer than the rest of my body.

“What were you thinking?” she purred.

“I dunno.” I shrugged. “I mean we’re both standing here, naked as Jaybirds, and we’re looking for something to

do...”

“Are you suggesting we do that thing we did back at the hotel?” she asked.

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Is that what you want me to suggest?”

“I- I did have a great time back then,” Mei cooed. “Do you think you could make me feel that way again?”

“What? Get you to orgasm?” I chuckled. “Mei, I promise that if that’s what you want, I won’t let either of us leave this room until I’ve given you one of those. The janitor could be banging on the door pleading that our time is up, and I wouldn’t stop.”

“Then don’t...” Mei trailed off as her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t what?” I asked softly.

“Don’t stop once you’ve started,” she whispered.

All the blood seemed to rush from my brain down to my loins, so I couldn’t even come up with a clever response to her comment. Instead, I just took a step forward, wrapped my arms around the beautiful woman’s waist, and pulled her up against me. My rock-hard cock pressed up against her swollen pussy lips, and she let out a soft gasp when she felt me at her

entrance. I pushed my mouth up against Mei's as we began to make out passionately, and at the same time, I reached up and began to trace my thumb around her right nipple.

Mei moaned as I rubbed her erect, pink nub in a circular motion, then I gave her breast a playful squeeze before I traced my fingertips down the side of her body. When I pulled away and started to nibble on Mei's neck, though, she seemed to melt into my arms with a long, happy sigh. Her right hand clasped my bare ass as her left grabbed a fistful of my hair, and the cat-woman took a few trembling breaths as I kissed up and down her supple skin.

"You want me to do exactly what I did to you last time?" I whispered before I gave her earlobe a delicate bite.

"Y-yesssss," Mei groaned. "I want you to send me to the moon and back, Doug."

Her wish was my command.

I took a half-step away from the orange-haired beauty and slowly dropped down onto my knees so that I was staring directly at her soft, velvet flower. In one swift motion, I slid my arms in between Mei's thighs, hooked around her legs, and then lifted her up slightly. I moved her back about a foot so

that her back was flush with the tile wall of the shower, then I held her in place as I moved in for the festivities.

I gently sucked on Mei's inner thigh, which made her whimper with excitement. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the woman's delicious juices oozing out of her velvet entry, and I licked my lips as I anticipated the taste of her sweetness on my tongue. I kissed my way up Mei's left thigh, then I passed over her trembling womanhood and went to the right one. The orange-haired beauty let out an annoyed gasp when I sucked on her other thigh, though that gasp quickly turned into a pleasure-filled moan the more I kissed her soft flesh.

Then, I moved to the main event.

I traced my tongue around Mei's soft pussy lips as I lapped up the juices that glistened against them, and it tasted as sweet as lavender.

"Fuck, you taste good," I groaned as I continued to trace her vulva with my tongue.

After two more times around, I moved my mouth up to the top of Mei's tender slit, where her swollen clit stood erect and just begged to be sucked. I flattened my tongue as I moved

it up the length of her womanhood, then when I got to the top I started to make a counterclockwise pattern with my tongue.

“Ohhhhh, Doug!” Mei gasped as she grabbed the back of my head. “That feels so wonderful.”

I kept the counterclockwise motion going for a bit before I switched things up and started to trace random patterns over her clit in every direction I could think of. As I did so, the woman’s entire body started to tremble, and she let out a few quick gasps of excitement as she headed for the peak of the mountain. After a few more random patterns, I moved my tongue downward, slid it in between her sopping wet lips, and then started to move it back and forth in a zigzag pattern up and down the length of her slit.

Mei’s grip on the back of my head turned into a fucking death grip as her body tensed up, and she let out a moan so loud that it echoed through the entire room.

“Shhhhh,” I warned teasingly. “We don’t need other people to hear us...”

I shoved my face back into her tender mound as I lapped up all of her delicious juices and teased her labia with my mouth, until her pussy lips eventually were filled with a soft red blush. Mei’s body was practically jello in my arms as

she tensed up and began to whimper, then she seemed to freeze in place. As I dragged my tongue across her clit vertically, Mei hit her climax.

“D-Doug!” she gasped. “I think I’m gonna... That thing that happens... I- I don’t know what you call it, but I’m almost- almost... Ohhhhhhhhh!”

Mei’s legs wrapped around my neck and pushed me deeper against her womanhood, and I could feel her pussy tremble on my tongue as it began to spasm with pure carnal glee. I lapped up what seemed to be a freaking gallon of her warm, tasty juices as Mei whimpered, moaned, and groaned happily, then the cat-woman went limp against the wall.

I licked up the last few bits of her arousal before I pulled away and looked up at her gorgeous body. Mei’s perky breasts heaved with each hurried breath she took, and her face was completely flush with red as her mouth hung open and she gasped for breath.

“How was that?” I asked with a wink.

“A-amazing,” she stuttered. “I don’t know where you learned to do that with your tongue, but... Wow.”

“You sure you can stand?” I chuckled as I gently set her feet back down on the ground.

“I think so,” Mei giggled. “Though I figured I might be bending over for this next part...”

The cat-woman let out a happy purr as her eyes looked down at my rock-hard dick, then she licked her lips and smiled.

I didn't need any more of an invitation than that.

“Alright,” I growled. “I'm gonna take you from behind, and I'm gonna make you cum again.”

I grabbed Mei's hips, then I leaned in and gave her a passionate kiss. She reached down and gingerly stroked my cock as we made out for a few more minutes, and I could feel the warm coil in my abdomen start to build as she tugged and teased me.

Then, I pulled away, dug my fingers into her hips, and twisted her around so that she was facing the opposite direction. I placed my hand on Mei's bare back, gently pushed it forward so that it was up against the wall, and then stared down at her perfect, curvy ass. Her tail flicked back and forth with anticipation as I kept one hand on her back, then I

grabbed my own cock with my other hand and guided it so that it was right up against her entrance.

Both of us let out a moan in unison, and I felt her womanhood tremble against the head of my dick. I took one final deep breath, and then I carefully pushed my hips forward and felt her velvet tunnel engulf me. My eyes rolled back in my head as I felt every ridge and valley of her pussy squeeze around my erection, and I got about halfway into her before I stopped.

“Is it... is it all the way in?” Mei asked as she looked back at me and bit her bottom lip.

“Not even close,” I said with a smirk. “Are you ready for it?”

“Yes!” She whimpered. “I want you inside me, Doug.”

I wanted nothing more than to be inside her, too, but I knew I needed to get her a little warmed up before I tried to get her to a second orgasm. I pulled my cock out of her pussy slowly, then I slid it back in about halfway. I continued this motion in soft, gentle thrusts, and each time I entered the woman it felt like she got even more wet.

Both of Mei's hands were flat against the shower wall, though she was curling her fingers like she was trying to dig in for the ride.

I kept on like this for a minute or two before I decided it was time to kick it into overdrive. I grabbed Mei's waist, held on for dear life, and then carefully pushed myself all the way inside of her trembling flower. I felt the head of my cock bottom out against Mei's cervix, and her velvet tunnel gripped me like a fucking glove as she let out a happy moan. I pulled my cock all the way out of her once more, before I thrust it back in until my pelvis was all the way up against her perfect ass.

Mei's tail went rigid as she whimpered and groaned, then I began to pound her from behind with a simple, intense rhythmic motion. As I thrust into the beautiful woman, her pussy trembled, and I felt even more of her wonderful juices as they dripped down against my balls. Her curvy butt bounced with each thrust that I made, and the sight of her jiggling ass made the coil in my stomach tighten up to new levels of tension.

"God, you're so fucking wet," I whispered.

“It’s because I’m loving this so much,” Mei said into the wall. “I love feeling your big, hard cock split me in half.”

I continued to pound Mei from behind for several more minutes, until my balls got so tight I thought they were up inside my body. I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to keep myself from going over the mountaintop for much longer, and I needed to give Mei a second climax before I got there.

I reached around with my left hand and took Mei’s breast between my fingers, then I gently squeezed and tweaked her nipple with my index finger and thumb. At the same time I gave her ass a playful smack, which caused it to jiggle even more intensely as I kept fucking her from the back.

Soon, Mei’s moans grew more hurried and got more and more close together, and I knew she was just about at the end of her rope, as well. I pulled my cock out so that just the tip was inside of her, then I held it there for a few seconds. Mei looked back at me with a sharp frown, and I just shot her a wink.

“Maybe I’m tired?” I teased. “Or maybe I just want to savor this moment...”

As I said the last part of my sentence I ever-so-slowly began to push my dick back into Mei’s womanhood, and that

was it for her. The woman's mouth fell agape as her eyes rolled back in her head, then she turned away and rested it against the shower wall. When my cock touched her cervix she went completely tense, and her velvet tunnel started to spasm out of control.

“Doug I'm about to...” she panted. “Ohhhh, Douuuuuugggggg!”

Mei screamed as she went over the mountaintop, and her wonderful juices gushed out of her like a fucking geyser and ran down my leg as she came. Her pussy squeezed me like a tube of toothpaste as her moans continued for a solid thirty seconds, and her claws dug into the shower wall so tightly that she left a few small marks.

The sight of Mei's beautiful naked body, combined with the sounds of her climax, finally sent me over the edge. The warm coil in my abdomen snapped, and the world started to spin as I pushed myself as deep into Mei as I could go.

“Fuuuuuuuckkkk!” I moaned as my balls began to pulsate.

I felt a blast of cum spray out of my cock, and I painted the walls of Mei's womb with my precious seed. My vision tunneled as I felt myself get a little bit lightheaded, though I

had a death grip on Mei's waist so that I wouldn't collapse. My legs trembled in unison with the woman's tight tunnel, and her cervix seemed to take every drop of my semen in stride. Our moans of pure joy blended together into a chorus of ecstasy, and we came together for what felt like an eternity.

A blissful, wonderful eternity.

Eventually we came down from our high, and I pulled my dick out of Mei slowly. A few bits of my seed mixed together with her clear juices and dribbled down onto her leg, and she stayed up against the wall for a few more seconds as her pussy lips visibly trembled and throbbed.

"Oh, wow," Mei said with a pant. "That was even better than the first time."

"Tell me about it," I said through a deep breath. "You know, maybe this is just the optimist in me speaking, but I think it might get better and better every time we do it."

"Really?" Mei's eyes lit up as she spoke. "Then we'd better do it several more times to test that thought out!"

"For science." I winked.

I helped Mei up off the wall, and the cat-woman let out a slight giggle as she bit her lip and looked down at my cock

once more.

“What about right now?” she asked.

“What?” I gasped, and my manhood began to throb gently. “You’re all ready to go again right now?”

“I’ve ‘cum’ twice now,” Mei purred. “You’ve only cum once. That doesn’t seem very fair to me...”

“Fuck,” I said with a smirk. “I’m not sure if my legs can handle another round of sex standing up.”

“Then why must we stand?” she asked. “Don’t tell me there aren’t other positions that you humans use when you make love.”

My mind raced with all the different ways I could think of fucking the beautiful orange-haired woman, and as the mental images began to pass through my mind my dick grew back to half-mast.

Mei let out a happy coo as she placed one hand against my chest and the other around my semi-chub, then she began to stroke it softly. Every few strokes she’d let her hands drift down to caress my balls, and I could feel the blood rushing back to my manhood as I prepared for another round.

I took a handful of Mei's perky right breast in my hand and fondled her nipples softly as I pressed my lips against hers. Our tongues intertwined as we stood there and lapped up the sensation of our post-coital snogging, until finally my dick rose back to full attention.

"Well, well," I chuckled as I pulled away. "It looks like I'm able to 'rise' to the challenge again after all."

"I knew you could," Mei said as she bit her bottom lip. "Now, how do you want to do this? What are some other ways humans make love?"

"Well, we could do it from behind," I suggested. "Where you bend over and I slide into you that way. Of course, that might be hard to do right now, since our legs are pretty tired."

"What is another one?" she asked. "I want to know how I can pleasure you the same way you just pleased me, Doug."

I felt a mild splurt of precum ooze out the tip of my dick at the mere thought of all the ways Mei could pleasure me, and there was a soft, warm sensation in my abdomen once more.

“You could ride me,” I growled. “Yeah... That’d be fucking amazing.”

“Ride you?” Mei asked as her eyes lit up. “How does that work?”

“Just like it sounds,” I replied. “I lay down on my back, and you get on top of me and slide me inside of you. Actually, we can do that sitting down, too.”

“Yes!” the cat-woman moaned. “Please let me ride you, Doug. That sounds soooo fun.”

I wasn’t about to say no to that.

Without another word Mei began to kiss me passionately, and we explored each other’s bodies with our hands for several more minutes before we finally got into position.

I carefully sat down on the floor of the shower, then I sprawled out onto my back and let my dick stand straight up into the air.

“See?” I winked. “It’s pretty self-explanatory.”

Mei’s eyes were full of hunger as she got down onto her knees, then she crawled over so that her face was right in front of mine. She kissed me one more time for good measure

before she sat back up, then she positioned her delicate flower just above my erection.

The orange-haired beauty slowly moved her body downward, and I felt the head of my cock press up against her swollen, wet labia. A split second later her velvet tunnel started to surround me, and I threw back my head and moaned as she gripped me like a fucking vise. Mei went about a quarter of the way down before she stopped, then her mouth fell open and her eyes rolled back in her head.

“I- I don’t know if I can get this all the way inside me,” she moaned. “It’s so big...”

“You’ve done it before.” I nodded. “Just go slow, and ease yourself into it.”

Mei’s bottom lip quivered with ecstasy as she placed her hands against my bare chest, then she slowly continued down onto my erection. Her arms pressed her gorgeous breasts together into a thick line of cleavage, and the sight of the water running down her supple, naked body made me ten times hornier than I already was.

Mei got about three-quarters of the way down my shaft before she let out a happy sigh, then she moved back up a few inches. Her pussy was incredibly wet, so she glided across my

erection with ease. Mei whimpered when she brought herself back down a second time, and her whole body tensed up for a moment before she forced herself all the way down onto me.

I felt the head of my dick bottom out against her cervix, and my eyes rolled back in my head as the warm coil in my stomach tightened up.

Mei moved up and down my dick a couple more times, and each time I felt her ass up against my balls I got closer and closer to the edge.

“Do you like that, Doug?” Mei asked through a moan.

“Fuck yeah, I do,” I growled. “You fit me like a goddamn glove.”

Mei’s face was now flushed red with excitement, and I could feel her juices as they ran down my erection and onto my pelvis. The cat-woman’s eyes narrowed as a smile crept up her face, then she dug her fingers into my chest.

“Are you ready for more?” she purred.

“Is that even a question?” I asked and shook my head.

Mei held her hands against my chest as she began to buck her hips forward and move in double time. She bounced up and down on my dick with the lower-body control of a

gymnast, and each time she moved her perky little breasts jiggled in time with the rest of her body.

I could feel my balls tightening up as they prepared to unload a second batch of my seed, though I wanted this to last for as long as humanly possible. The sight of Mei's gorgeous, wet, naked body riding me cowgirl-style was the hottest thing I'd seen in years, and if I could stay in this moment forever I would have.

I reached up and took Mei's right hand as she continued to ride me, and our fingers interlocked as we started into each other's eyes. I could feel her velvet tunnel spasming around me, and her whimpers and moans were getting more hurried and closer together.

"I- I think you might make it happen again, Doug," Mei gasped.

"Oh, I intend to," I growled. "I wanna hear you scream my name as we cum together again."

"Doug!" Mei whimpered. "I- I want that, too."

"Then make it happen," I teased.

Mei seemed to take my advice to heart, and she started to ride me even harder. Soon her entire body was shaking with

pure ecstasy, and her tight tunnel had me in a fucking death grip. The coil in my abdomen was as tight as it was gonna get, and I knew that we were both close to the edge.

Then, Mei went over.

The orange-haired beauty suddenly stopped, then she tossed her head back as she slowly pushed her hips down onto me completely.

“Doug, I think I’m gonna...” she panted. “I- I... Oh, Dooooouuuuggggg!”

Mei screamed as her womanhood squeezed me tight and her chest filled with a soft red blush. Her mouth fell agape as several more moans echoed through the shower room, and that was finally it for me.

I felt the coil in my stomach snap, so I grabbed onto Mei’s hips and held her in place as I began to orgasm. I moaned with the intensity of a bullhorn as my cum sprayed up into Mei’s womb like a firehose in a cereal bowl, and the world around me started to spin.

However, one thing remained in focus the whole time.

Mei.

The orange-haired cat-woman was simply glowing with radiant beauty as her pussy held me tight and her delicious juices gushed out around my pelvis, until finally she collapsed on top of me.

“Wow,” I said through a huff. “I knew we were going for another round, but damn.”

“That was fun,” Mei purred. “Again?”

“Our shower time is gonna be up soon,” I chuckled. “As much as I’d absolutely love to go again.”

Mei simply rested her head against my chest as we both laid there against the cold tile floor and cuddled. Somehow, the water from the showerhead was still warm, and it was so soothing that I was halfway tempted to just take a quick nap right here and now. However, these showers only had so much time you could use before they kicked you out, and we needed to make sure we actually finished getting clean.

Mei and I spent the next few minutes using the shower water to clean off any evidence of our carnal actions. We continuously kissed each other’s bare flesh and rubbed each other’s arms, legs, and back as we freshened up, until there were no more obvious signs of our intercourse. I reached over and turned off the shower when all I could smell was soap, and

then I strolled out to the bench, picked up both our towels, and tossed one of them to Mei.

“What do we do with this?” she asked as her ears tilted to one side.

“You just rub it all over your body until it’s dry,” I explained. “Like this.”

I took my own towel and ran it through my hair quickly, then I put it behind my back and used it to soak up the liquid on my skin.

“Wow,” Mei chuckled. “That is much better than just letting it dry off on its own.”

Mei imitated my actions with the towel on her own body, and soon, we were both as dry as the Sahara. Once we were done, I handed Mei her clothes and picked up my own, then we both started to get dressed.

“Now you see why we humans prefer showers,” I said as I slid my shirt back on my torso.

“If every shower ends up like that one, it’s not hard to see why,” the cat-woman purred.

“It definitely beats the old way you used to clean yourself, right?” I chuckled. “With the tongue and all?”

“Most certainly,” Mei said. “Actually, I’m surprised you humans don’t give us cats showers more often. It seems much more efficient than trying to lick ourselves while doing yoga.”

“Oh, some of us are dumb enough to try,” I chuckled. “I had to give my parents’ cat a bath way back when I was a child, after it got into a bunch of peanut butter I left out on the table... Let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

“Why not?” the cat-woman asked with a tilt of her head.

“Because poor little Brimley didn’t like the water as much as you do,” I explained. “I went to school the next day looking like I’d just been in a knife fight, and the damn cat still had peanut butter in his fur for weeks!”

Once we had our shoes back on, we collected our personal belongings and opened the door, where we were met with a sly, knowing smirk.

“Did you two get nice and clean in there?” Charlotte asked with a devilish grin.

The spider-woman leaned back against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. I could see underneath her leather jacket that she also had her other two sets of arms folded, and I chuckled at the sight.

“Doug was just showing me how to shower,” Mei said nervously. “Since I’d never done it before.”

“Mmhhh,” Charlotte said with a nod. “Look, I don’t care what you two do in those rooms, but I do find it amusing that you still beat Ray back out here.”

“Ray’s still in his shower?” I gasped. “What the fuck is he doing in there?”

“I do not know.” Charlotte shrugged. “I’ve been waiting here for several minutes, but he hasn’t exited.”

“Are you sure he didn’t get out before you?” I asked. “And you’re just waiting for him to come out when he never will?”

“I looked for him in the rest of this building and didn’t find him,” she spider-woman replied. “I assumed that meant he was still in the shower.”

“Well, you know what they say about assuming, right?” Ray’s voice asked from behind us. “It makes an ass out of you and me!”

“Uh, I think you mean ass, dude,” I whispered.

“Why would I mean ass?” he asked. “It makes you into a venomous snake, man. You know, since you’re as dumb as a

snake?”

“That’s definitely not what that means,” I sighed. “But I’m not gonna argue about it.”

“Did you return to the van after your shower?”

Charlotte asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Nope!” Ray said as he puffed out his chest. “I was just going off and being the bestest best friend in the entire world.”

“Oh, boy,” I said. “What did you do, dude?”

“You’re never going to believe this, Doug,” he said in an excited voice. “But you know that Astatine stuff you were talking about? The stuff you think you need to make the serum better?”

“Of course,” I said slowly.

“Well, I think I know where we can get some,” he said. “Locally.”

My jaw just about hit the floor when I processed Ray’s words.

Astatine? Here in this little podunk town in South Carolina? He had to be pulling my leg.

Then again, Ray looked dead serious, and he had a really shitty poker face. I'd know if he was trying to play a joke on me or if he was trying to stretch the truth, and it didn't look like he was doing either of those things.

Ray truly believed he'd found Astatine, and he wanted to take me to it.

Fuck it.

What did I have to lose at this point?

Chapter 5

“Now is not the time for jokes, Ray,” I chuckled.

“Astatine? You found a supplier of the super-rare element astatine? You know, it’s a real bummer the Lyfeteck goons in the van didn’t have enough on them to give us a supply now.”

“Well, shit, dude,” Ray said with a frown. “If you don’t want it, I can always go back and tell the guy to fuck off.”

“You’re serious?” I asked as my entire demeanor changed. “Honest to God, you’re serious?”

“Yes, Doug,” he said in an exasperated voice. “Why would I joke about that?”

“How is that possible?” I demanded. “How on Earth could you possibly find somebody that had astatine?”

“Well I didn’t exactly find somebody who has it on them,” he replied. “But I met this really cool dude smoking a doobie out in the parking lot who told me he went to Anderson and studied biology. One thing led to another and—”

“He offered to give you some Astatine!” Mei interjected.

“It wasn’t that easy,” Ray chuckled. “He told me where we could get some, though.”

“How in the world did you accomplish that?” Charlotte asked with her mouth agape.

“What do you mean?” my friend asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I want the details,” Charlotte said. “Did you have to pry it out of him with violence? Or perhaps you just used some secret, stored-up wit you’ve been hiding all this time to trick him into revealing his secrets?”

“What? No!” Ray gasped. “I just asked him if he’d ever heard of a thing called Astatine.”

“How the hell did that come up casually in conversation?” I snorted.

“Dude, I just asked him,” Ray said and shrugged. “Cold turkey.”

“I don’t think that’s what cold turkey means, dude,” I said.

“Whatever,” he huffed. “The point is, I just asked him, and he said he’d heard some of his professors were using it in research for cancer treatments or something.”

“Okay... So where is this... Anderson?” Charlotte asked. “We should find him quickly, rob him, and then continue on our mission to locate Terry Haggart.”

“Anderson’s not a ‘him,’” I said. “It’s a university.”

“Ohhhhhh,” Charlotte said and nodded. “That place where all the young humans go and sit in rooms together for hours at a time in between fornicating, playing sports, and sobbing their eyes out? I’ve spent some time on one of those.”

“That pretty much sums up the college experience,” I smirked.

“Fine.” Charlotte sighed. “Then we go to this Anderson University place, steal the thing we need, and kill anyone who gets in our way!”

“We’re not killing anybody,” I said.

“We just slaughtered several Lyfotech henchmen, though,” the spider-woman pointed out.

“They’re the one exception,” I said. “And I really don’t want to commit a B and E to get what we want.”

“If we can’t steal and we can’t kill,” Charlotte said with a frown. “How are we supposed to get the Astatine?”

“I’m working on figuring that part out,” I chuckled, then I pulled out my phone and punched Anderson University into the GPS. “It looks like we’re about half an hour away from the campus, so that gives us plenty of time to formulate a plan on the way. Is everybody ready to go?”

My friends all nodded their heads, and then we headed back out to the parking lot. The four of us hopped into our stolen Lyfeteck van, and I brought the engine to life before I drove out of the lot and back onto the main road.

“Are you sure we can’t steal it?” Charlotte asked again. “That would make life much easier.”

“I think I’m with her on this one,” Ray said and then pointed at Mei. “We literally have the perfect cat burglar in our midst as well as a woman that can climb up walls and stick to ceilings.”

“If this place really does have Astatine in their labs, they sure as fuck aren’t going to just leave it out in the open,” I explained. “It’ll probably be in some vault or a cabinet with a high-security lock, maybe even guarded by cameras and a security system.”

“Then we go full *Mission Impossible*,” Ray said. “Charlotte can shoot some web outta her butt, dangle down

from the ceiling, and snatch it before anyone notices.”

“I highly doubt a college as small as Anderson has that level of security,” I chuckled. “Though I guess I’m not one hundred percent confident in that assumption.”

“Why can’t we just ask the people to give us some of the Astatine?” Mei asked as she cocked her head to one side.

“Oh, Mei...” Ray sighed as he placed his hand on her shoulder. “Sweet, innocent Mei... This stuff is important, so they’re not just gonna give it to us.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because they will want to hoard it for themselves,” Charlotte said. “Weren’t you paying attention earlier to Doug’s explanation of how the human economy works?”

“But maybe if we told them why we need it, they would want to support our cause?” Mei suggested.

“I don’t think that’d be the case,” I chuckled. “We’re literally trying to make an unauthorized copy of a top secret military serum whose proprietor is the most powerful biotech company in the world. They’ll hear the word Lyfetechnology and pretty much shit themselves out of fear.”

“See?” Charlotte sighed. “That’s why it would be better to just kill them and take it for ourselves. It would be far less complicated.”

“And then we’d be wanted murderers,” I said.

“We’re already wanted criminals in the eyes of Lyfetechnology.” Ray shrugged. “I totally get what you’re saying, though. I don’t mind smashing in the heads of Doctor Lyfe’s goons, but I ain’t gonna hurt innocent people.”

As I looked back in the rearview mirror at the two women in the back of the van, my eye caught sight of the lanyard that hung on the wall. The lightbulb turned on in my brain, and I felt my eyes go wide as I let out a slight, victorious chuckle.

“I have an idea, guys!” I declared. “A way we might be able to get the Astatine without stealing it or hurting anyone in the process. Ray, do you still have your badge from when you worked at Lyfetechnology?”

“You worked for Lyfetechnology?” Charlotte said with a sharp hiss.

“Chill out, dudette,” Ray said. “I was just part of their custodial arts team, so I didn’t do any of the evil shit.”

“Ray?” I asked again.

“Yeah, of course I do,” he assured me. “It’s always in my wallet.”

Ray leaned to the left, slid his deformed hand into his back pocket, and came back out with a simple trifold wallet. He opened it up and fumbled through a stack of receipts and membership cards he had inside before he pulled out a small white keycard that had the Lyfotech logo and a small chip on the front.

“You kept it in your wallet?” I chuckled. “The keycard that granted you access to areas that not even some of Lyfotech’s own lower-level employees could get into?”

“Yeah, and?” Ray smirked. “It was good thinking on my part, eh? If I’d left it at home, we wouldn’t have it at all and your plan wouldn’t work, right? What is your plan, anyway?”

“Well...” I said and paused. “Remember how I said the people at Anderson would be scared shitless of Lyfotech?”

“Yeah, man, you literally just said it.” Ray rolled his eyes to show that his memory hadn’t disappeared with some other parts of his brain.

“We’re going to pretend to be Lyfotech employees,” I explained with a smirk. “We go to the chemistry lab or biochem lab or wherever they’re holding the stuff, claim that Lyfotech desperately needs a replenishment of Astatine in a hurry, and that we’ll pay them handsomely for their stock.”

“I knew you’d figure it out, Doug!” Mei said with a happy purr.

“Do you think they’re actually going to fall for that?” Charlotte asked. “That seems like a bit of a stretch.”

“It’s time to put those seventh grade drama class acting skills to the test,” I said as I shot Charlotte a half-smile. “Besides, I’m a biochemist, so I’m sure once they hear me speaking all those big words like cytoskeleton proteins and pyrimidine and monosaccharides they’ll believe the whole ruse.”

“You’ll need me on this one too, dude,” Ray said as he puffed out his chest. “I know big words, too.”

“Didn’t you say earlier you didn’t understand big words?” Charlotte asked.

“I said I didn’t understand the big words Doug was saying, but that don’t mean I don’t know any,” my friend

insisted.

“I think maybe you should sit this one out,” I suggested.
“Just to play it safe.”

“No way.” Ray shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe the crazy shit I’ve overheard at Lyfotech when people thought I wasn’t listening. I know all their secret code words, so you’re gonna need me to throw down my knowledge to make it feel real.”

“I’m sure Lyfotech doesn’t have that complex of a code,” I replied.

“If I tell you to dump the redacted compress into the Lyfeosol, you know what to do?” he asked.

“Uhhhhh, you want me to throw stuff in a pool of some sort?” I guessed.

“No, dude!” Ray huffed. “That’s their code for disposing of chemical waste. I know a bunch more of those codewords, too, and some of the big biochemistry words that they use.”

Even though I wasn’t sure Ray knew enough to pull it off, I realized he had a point. Anderson University was a college that was right near the North Carolina-South Carolina

border, and it had a biochemistry department that was surely in contact with any of the major industry players in the region. That, mixed with the fact they apparently had a stash of rare chemicals at their disposal, gave me the strong indication that they'd probably done dealings with Lyfotech before. If we wanted to be convincing, then we needed Ray's knowledge of the company's inner workings, no matter how minute.

Not to mention, Ray's keycard badge had his name and photo on the back, so if anybody wanted to check his credentials, they'd need to match what was on there.

"Then it looks like you'd better brush up on your acting skills," I smiled at my best friend. "Because we're about to go all *21 Jump Street* up in this bitch."

"I don't understand these jokes, either," Mei whispered to Charlotte. "I normally just smile and go along with them."

"What do you want us to do in the meantime, then?" Charlotte asked. "Should we watch from afar and come charging in if things go wrong?"

"You're really looking for a reason to smash some skulls, aren't you?" I chuckled.

“I’m a black widow.” Charlotte shrugged. “It is in my nature.”

“You guys can stay with the van and keep a lookout,” I said. “The last thing we need is those Lyfotech mutants catching us with our pants down.”

“Why would your pants be down in the lab?” Mei gasped.

“Is that how you plan to convince them to give you the chemical?” Charlotte chuckled. “By making love to them.”

“I mean, if we run into a beautiful woman in there...” Ray said as he trailed off.

“Dude, no.” I laughed. “Just no. What I’m saying is I don’t want those Lyfotech mutants to find us and take us by surprise. If you and Mei are watching our backs, we can’t have any nasty surprises that might be coming our way.”

“So we don’t get to partake in the fun?” Charlotte asked with a slight frown.

“Hopefully there won’t be any fun to be had,” I said. “If things go smoothly, Ray and I can be in and out of there in, like, an hour or so.”

“How will we know if things are going... smoothly?”

Mei asked.

“You can take my cell phone,” Ray said. “Just, uh... Promise you’ll stay out of the folder that’s titled *Homework* okay?”

“Why would I want to look at the work you do at home?” the cat-woman asked.

“That’s the spirit!” Ray chuckled.

The four of us continued to plot and plan for the rest of the journey, until finally we rolled up to a large black sign nestled into a corner, held up by tannish-brown bricks and with gold text that read *Anderson University*. All of the buildings that were within view were made of the exact same reddish-brown bricks with trim and columns that were made to emulate the architecture of the ancient Romans. The campus was very small, which was a far cry from my alma mater.

I drove around for a little bit until I found one of the visitor parking lots, then I pulled us into an empty space and killed the engine.

“Alright, Ray,” I said as I unfastened my seatbelt. “You ready to put on an Oscar-worthy performance?”

“I could do that in my sleep, man,” he said as he opened up the passenger door and slid out of the vehicle.

Ray turned around, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and tossed it back to Mei and Charlotte.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Charlotte asked.

“If there’s any trouble, just click on the little phone picture at the bottom, then find Doug’s name. When you touch it, it’ll call us.”

“I still think it would be simpler to just kill them,” the spider-woman sighed.

“Just hang tight, and keep a lookout for anything out of the ordinary,” I said.

“You two be careful, as well,” Mei said.

As Ray and I started to walk away from the van, I pulled out my phone to do a little bit more research on where we needed to go. Apparently, all of the labs for chemistry, biology, and biochemistry at Anderson were located in the same building, which was easy to find in such a small place. As we walked toward our destination, we passed by a few college students, who looked at Ray with a twinge of fear and confusion before they hustled on by.

“Do you think we should have changed clothes?” I asked as I glanced down at my attire. “Or do Lyfeteck employees often go around in jeans and a t-shirt?”

“They do, actually,” Ray said. “You wouldn’t believe how many top-level people I saw at the company who just wore flannel shirts or sweaters or polos. They said it was so they didn’t feel different than the regular employees or some shit like that.”

I guess when you got to a certain level of rich and powerful, you stopped giving a fuck about looking professional. I wasn’t about to complain, though, since the C-suite’s desire to be just one of the employees would work in our favor, or so I hoped.

We eventually reached the building that housed the labs, and after a quick review of the plan, we walked inside like we knew where we were going. The interior of the building was pretty much what I would expect from a small private college, which meant laminate white floors and walls that were equally as sterile. There were a few pops of color here and there, thanks to the doorways and the decor on the walls, but for the most part, it felt like a giant high school.

At least there was a directory posted on the walls, which told us exactly where we needed to go to find the biochemistry lab. We followed the arrow, and a few minutes later we found the room with the correct number. The door was already open, which was odd, since most lab directors insisted that the doors be kept closed.

Ray and I shared a cautious glance before we took a step through the threshold, where we found ourselves in a laboratory that looked like it'd been ripped straight out of a high school biology classroom. The floors were the same sterile white laminate as the rest of the building, though that was offset by the thick, sleek black tops of the lab stations. Some of them housed a built-in sink, while others simply had microscopes and pipettes and other tools that were scattered across their width.

The lone man in the room wore a white lab coat over top a pair of jeans and black dress shoes. His brown hair had been cut into what looked like a short, military flat-top style, and he had a pair of thick, square glasses on his nose. He was hunched over a microscope, and he must not have liked what he saw, because he wore a scowl that would probably terrify most of his students.

He stood up from his microscope a split second after we entered the room, then he wiped his hands on his lab coat before he adjusted his glasses and directed his frown at us.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

It was showtime.

“I’d certainly hope so,” I said with the fakest smile I could muster. “I’m Daniel Faraday, and this is-”

“Raymond Carson!” Ray said with an over exaggerated nervous chuckle. “See? It says it right here on the badge.”

Ray held out his keycard badge, and the man in the lab coat studied it for a second before all of the color drained from his face.

“Y-you’re with Lyfetechnology?” he asked.

“Obviously,” Ray said as he puffed out his chest and smiled. “We were sent down to grab some aspartame.”

“Astatine,” I said as I cleared my throat. “We were told you’ve been using it in your experiments and that you’re one of the only labs in this part of the state with such an element.”

The man tilted his head to the side as his eyes narrowed.

“Nobody told me you were coming,” he said.

“Listen... I didn't catch your name?” I said with another fake smile.

“Jeff,” the man said cautiously.

“Listen, Jeff...” I waved my hand and sighed at some imaginary boss. “You know how it works. Our higher-ups called your higher-ups and cut some sort of deal, and we're just the poor schmucks that get to carry out the duties we're assigned.”

“I know the woman in charge of this lab,” Jeff said. “She would have told me if we were doing any deals with Lyfotech, especially for Astatine.”

“Do you need to see my credentials again?” Ray asked. “Because I promise you, I'm authorized to transport that stuff. I've carried entire containers of Quadratic Acid before, plus a bunch of Cumingtonite and Draculin at the same time.”

“May I ask what Lyfotech was doing with Cumingtonite and Draculin?” Jeff asked. “That is an unusual pairing of chemicals.”

“Well, you know,” I chuckled as I tried to shift the topic away from Ray's comments. “We could tell you, but then we'd have to kill you, right Ray?”

Ray and I both shared a loud, fake laugh at my joke, but Jeff looked like he'd just seen a ghost. I figured that if Lyfetechn had the same sort of reputation around here that it did back where I was from, this guy would know that we were only partially joking. And based on his reaction, I could tell he knew damn well what Doctor Lyfe's company was capable of doing.

Eventually Jeff regained his composure, then he cleared his throat and clenched his fists.

"Look, I'd love to help you out," he said. "But without authorization from my boss, I'm afraid I can't hand over any of our inventory."

"Jeffffffff," Ray said as he nonchalantly placed his arm over the man's shoulder. "You don't gotta worry about a thing, okay? You're talking to a guy that once transported an entire tank of Dihydrogen Monoxide across state lines, so I think I know how to be discrete."

I just about facepalmed. Dihydrogen Monoxide was plain ol' water.

Jeff must have understood that reference, as well, because he gave Ray the most confused and dirty look I'd seen in years.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend here,” I said. “He’s always been known for his strange sense of humor. The fact of the matter still remains that we need the Astatine.”

“And the fact of the matter still remains that I won’t hand it over without authorization,” Jeff said as he pulled out from Ray’s grasp. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to filling up petri dishes for next week’s lab assignments.”

Jeff went to turn his back to us, but I reached over and grabbed his shoulder to hold him in place. If we couldn’t smooth talk our way out of this, then we would have to go the intimidation route.

“You see who we work for, Jeff,” I said with a stern tone. “We were instructed to come and pick up the Astatine, and we were given clear orders to not come back without it. What do you think is gonna happen to us if we show up empty-handed?”

“Frankly, that’s not my problem,” Jeff huffed.

“Oh, but it is,” I replied. “Because when we get back to our headquarters empty-handed, they’ll ask us why we don’t have the Astatine. And when they ask, what do you think we’re going to tell them?”

“Are you trying to intimidate me?” the instructor huffed. “Because I will not be bullied by Lyfeteck’s goons!”

As much as I wanted to punch the bastard for even suggesting I was a Lyfeteck goon, I had to keep my cool and continue to play the part. Thankfully, Ray was able to step in and diffuse the situation.

“You think we’re the bullies here?” Ray asked as he pointed his thumb into his chest. “Our jobs are on the line, you know. If anything, you’re the one who’s bullying us!”

“Good gravy.” Jeff rolled his eyes and held up his hand. “Good day, gentlemen. If you have any further questions, send them up the ladder to my boss.”

Jeff started to walk away, so I decided to pull out the big guns.

“I guess I’ll just call up Doctor Lyfe and tell him what’s going on, then,” I said.

Jeff froze in his tracks, and his body went completely rigid for a moment before he turned around. The man’s jaw was clenched so tightly I thought he might pull a muscle, and there was a twinge of fear in his dark green eyes. Finally, though, he let out an amused scoff and waved his hand.

“You’re lying,” he said. “Now get out of my lab, or I’ll have security escort you out.”

Fuck it. Time to improvise.

I pulled out my cell phone, then I flipped through my contacts until I found Ray. I pressed the call button underneath his profile picture and then watched as the main phone screen appeared and the line began to ring. All the while, Jeff watched with cautious terror.

“Doug?” Charlotte asked from the other side of the line. “What’s wrong? Do you need us to come in and back you up?”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said in my most professional voice. “I need to talk to Doctor Lyfe.”

“What?” Charlotte asked. “How would you—”

“Just put him on, please,” I cut in. “I think he should be in the north part of the building... Maybe on a conference call?”

There was silence on the other side of the line, and my heart hammered in my chest as I hoped and prayed Charlotte and Mei understood what I wanted them to do. Finally, I heard the spider-woman’s voice.

“I’ll put him on,” she said.

“You’ll put him on?” I repeated. “Fantastic!”

Jeff’s face was now paler than a fucking albino ghost, and his eyes were wide with horror.

“Doctor Lyfe?” I heard Mei say from the background. “Hello? Are you there?”

“Ahhhhhhh, the cat-woman!” Lyfe’s deep, nasally voice answered. “Have you decided to turn yourself over to save your precious boyfriend’s life?”

“I think I’ll let him tell you,” Mei said.

“Alright, you’re on,” Charlotte said.

“Hey there, Doctor Lyfe,” I said as I turned on speaker mode.

“Well, well, well...” my nemesis’ voice crackled through the other side. “I’m surprised you’ve reached out to me. Your situation must be even more dire than I thought.”

“It’s very dire,” I said as I tried to keep my words as vague as possible. “Obviously, I wouldn’t be calling if everything was sunshine and rainbows.”

“Why don’t you tell me where you are, my boy?” Lyfe asked in a sneering tone. “That way, I can send my men right to you, and save you the trouble of making the trip back.”

This couldn't have gone better if I'd planned the whole thing myself.

"That won't be necessary, sir!" Jeff blurted out as he ran over by my side. "I promise you, that won't be necessary."

"Who the fuck are you?" Lyfe asked. "Another fucked-up mutant freak?"

"No sir, I- I'm—" he stammered

Before he could finish his sentence, I ended the call and then clicked my tongue.

"Dang, the call dropped," I said as I shook my head. "But still, Doctor Lyfe sounded quite upset."

"I'll go get the Astatine." Jeff nodded nervously. "Right away."

The man turned and rushed into the other room, and I let out a huge sigh of relief as I looked over at Ray.

"Holy shit, dude!" he whispered under his breath. "You're a genius!"

"I'm just glad Lyfe didn't say anything about our identities," I said. "That's what happens when you've got a snobby douchebag who likes to monologue. It takes him forever to actually get to the point."

Ray and I waited for a few moments, then Jeff reappeared out of the other room with a small box that I instantly recognized as the sterile kind used to hold pure chemical compounds.

“Here,” Jeff said. “We have to keep some for our current experiments, but this box has about seventy-five percent of our Astatine supply.”

“That’ll do,” I said in an ungrateful tone. “Thanks.”

I carefully took the box from Jeff, and then I turned toward the door.

“See you around, dude,” Ray said as he made finger guns at Jeff.

Jeff remained in stunned silence as Ray and I exited the room, and we fast-walked out of the building and back onto the main drag of campus before he had a chance to think about what had just happened. The second we were out in the open, the two of us booked it back toward the parking lot, which meant we ran for nearly ten minutes straight before we were back at the van. When we reached the vehicle, we tossed open the doors and jumped into the two front seats, and then I twisted the key and brought the engine to life.

“There you are,” Mei said. “I was starting to get worried about you.”

“How’d it go?” Charlotte asked. “Did you get the thing you needed?”

“We did.” I nodded. “All thanks to you two.”

“You should have heard Lyfe after you hung up,” Charlotte said with a devilish tone. “He was beyond livid.”

“I just wonder how long it’s gonna take Jeff to realize his fuckup,” I said as I put the van in reverse and pulled out of the parking space.

“Hopefully, after we’re long gone, dude,” Ray chuckled. “Good thing we didn’t use our real names, huh?”

“Uhhhhh, you did use your real name, Ray,” I said. “Remember? So that the ID would match?”

Ray thought about it for a moment before his eyes went wide.

“Fuccccccckkkkk me,” he grumbled, then he shrugged. “Oh well. It’s not like they scanned the photo or anything. There’s plenty of Ray Carsons in this part of the country, anyway.”

“And you don’t look like your ID picture anymore, either,” I reminded the man. “I think we’ll be good.”

As we pulled out of the campus and back onto the main highway, I couldn’t believe how lucky we’d been. Thanks to our team’s ingenuity and ability to think on their feet, we were now in possession of the last ingredient I needed to make a version of Lyfetechn’s serum that was not only stable, but perfected.

Now, I just needed to put a hammer to the stone and get to work.

Chapter 6

“Still nothing from Terry Haggart.” I sighed as I looked at my LinkedIn messenger.

The little blue circle still didn't even feature a checkmark, which told me that Haggart legitimately hadn't seen it and wasn't just blowing me off. However, as I thought about it more, all of the horrible possibilities began to flit through my mind. The most obvious thought was that maybe Terry Haggart hadn't seen my message yet because Lyfetechnology had already gotten to him and he was dead. The other possibility was that Haggart had been lying from the start, and he went straight to Doctor Lyfe with my message to let him know what I was up to.

If that was the case, we could very well be walking into a trap.

Which was all the more reason I needed to finish my version of the serum before we finished this next leg of the journey.

Ray had taken over driving duties for the moment, even though we didn't really know exactly where we were headed.

All we knew was that Terry Haggart lived somewhere in the middle of the state, so we drove down Highway 28 and hoped that he'd get back to us before we ended up completely lost.

For the moment I sat in the back of the van and studied the box of Astatine that sat before me. I truly thought this stuff was going to be the key to making Lyfotech's serum stable enough to work the way it was intended, though I still wasn't quite sure how exactly I would go about creating such a serum that didn't permanently mutate me. Sure, I had all the tools I needed right here in this mobile lab, which contained enough safety equipment, pipettes, vials, centrifuges, and bunsen burners to allow me to create the cocktail of superpowers, but the million dollar question was how the stuff would be ingested and if I could make the effects temporary.

Mei and Ray had both taken their serum in liquid form, though I wondered if that was part of the reason it didn't work the way it was supposed to on either of them. Drinking the damn thing meant it had to actually pass through your digestive system and get absorbed into the bloodstream via those channels. That also meant the serum itself would be broken down by the digestive process and would almost certainly lose its potency in the process. If I wanted to get the

full effect of the serum, I needed to put it into my bloodstream, though that presented a few problems of its own.

Was I just gonna pack a syringe instead of a gun and shoot the serum into my veins like a freaking junkie every time I needed to use it? Or I could snort it up my nose, though that somehow felt even worse.

I'd started to dream up ways to safely carry around a syringe when I realized I hadn't considered all my options. There was another way to get the formula into my bloodstream without a needle, and that was through the respiratory system.

I could get the serum into my bloodstream through huffing its vapors. If I could somehow replicate Lyfetechn's beloved formula, I could put it into a tiny container like an inhaler and then spray it as needed.

If it all worked out, it'd basically be like Popeye and spinach, where the more I took, the greater the effect on me. I figured that the reason Ray's transformation was so horrific was because he ingested the serum in a large quantity all at once, so this would allow me to ease my body into it with a few tiny microdoses at a time with a tweaked formula. If that worked, then maybe somewhere down the line I could try and

figure out how to make the mutation more permanent and with the negative effects removed.

The only question now was why the damn serum worked so well on Mei but not Ray or Charlotte. I had the astatine, benzene, and pyridine to create the synthetic Doll's Blood that was so integral to the formula, but I still wasn't sure what made Mei's version of the serum so pure compared to the others. I needed to figure that out if I wanted to get all the positive effects of the serum without any of the horrific, Cronenberg-style body mutations that Ray and Charlotte had suffered.

I set Ray's blood sample underneath the table-mounted microscope and leaned in to take a peek. But just as my eyeball reached the edge of the lens, we hit a massive bump, and I let out a frustrated grunt as my head slammed into the damn thing.

"Sorry, dude," Ray said from the front of the van. "I'm still getting used to driving with these ham hocks I've got for feet now."

"Maybe we should pull over?" Mei suggested.
"Wouldn't that make it easier for Doug to work if we weren't in constant motion?"

“What are you talking about?” Ray asked. “Other than that one little bump we just had, this thing rides as smooth as a baby’s bottom.”

Half a second after his comment, the van lurched to the left, and I had to hold onto the table in a white-knuckle grip to keep from falling out of my chair.

“On second thought,” I chuckled. “That’d probably be wise. I still don’t have anything from Terry Haggart, so we’re driving blind right now anyway.”

“What about Smokey the Meth Head Bear and Red Lobster?” Ray asked. “If we stop, won’t they find us?”

“They didn’t find us during our little sidequest to Anderson University,” I said. “I know they’re still after us, but we’ve made so many detours from our original route that they’ve probably actually overshot us by this point.”

“I can keep watch if we stop,” Charlotte suggested. “We spiders have excellent eyesight, and as I have a clear sightline in all directions, I can see any danger coming from about a mile away.”

“Alright,” Ray said. “I’m just the driver, so it’s your call.”

“Maybe if we can find a parking lot that’s fairly empty,” I said with a nod. “That way Charlotte has a clear line of sight that isn’t blocked by a bunch of trees or semis or anything like that.”

Ray continued driving for a few minutes until he finally let out a triumphant laugh.

“Boom!” he said. “We can totally crash in the parking lot of this Camping World store. It’s got a giant parking lot with barely any cars in it, so it’s the perfect place.”

“It’d also give Charlotte a clear view of the interstate,” I noted. “That’s perfect.”

Ray pulled off the highway and took a left on a side road that led to the superstore’s parking lot. The thing was a massive building with a white and forest-green facade, though a large yellow *Going Out of Business Sale* banner hung just beneath the store’s logo.

Well, that would explain why there weren’t that many people in the lot.

Ray pulled into a spot in the middle of the parking lot, killed the engine, and stood up from his chair. He cracked his

knuckles and then his back before he headed into the rear of the van, all while Charlotte opened up the back doors.

I watched as the spider-woman nonchalantly grabbed the edge of the roof with her top set of hands and then hoisted her leather-clad body up into the air. I saw her curl her feet up into her chest as she swung forward, and then she swung up onto the roof with a soft thud and was out of sight.

“I could totally do that if I wanted to,” Ray chuckled. “So, how’s the cocktail coming along?”

“I’ve got the ingredients to make the damn thing,” I said. “I’ve just got to run some more tests to see why Mei’s serum worked so well compared to yours and Charlotte’s.”

“Maybe I’m just stupid,” Ray said as he scratched his head. “But what’s the difference between hers and mine and Charlotte’s mutation? Like, all of us took the serum, and all of us now have superpowers.”

“I agree,” Mei said with a frown. “I’ve never understood why Lyfotech has this strange obsession with me.”

“You don’t have any deformities, physical or mental,” I explained.

“What’s that supposed to mean, dude?” Ray asked.

“Come on, man,” I sighed. “Do I really have to spell it out for you?”

“I mean yeah, I don’t look as dashing as I used to, but it’s not that bad.” Ray turned in a circle like a supermodel on the runway.

“Dude, you look like Sylvester Stallone and the dude with the messed up face from *Mask* had a baby,” I said. “And you’ve definitely lost some IQ points in the process. I think it’s safe to say that both of those changes were one hundred percent thanks to the unstable serum you took.”

“What about Charlotte, though?” Mei asked. “She doesn’t seem to have any deformities.”

“What do you know about Black Widow spiders?” I asked.

“They’re poisonous and small,” Ray replied and nodded. “See, I still know stuff.”

“I don’t know much about them,” Mei admitted. “I never saw any before, I don’t think.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Even though their bites are terribly deadly, black widows are pretty docile insects. They tend to

run away and stay hidden, and they only really bite things as a last line of defense. Does that sound like Charlotte to you?”

“Definitely not,” Mei chuckled.

“I think the serum she was given, paired with all the horrible, horrible things Lyfotech did to her, made her more aggressive and violent than she was when she was just a spider. It mutated her mentally as well as physically. And I don’t even need to tell you why the serum for that bear-mutant is so fucked up... I’d feel bad for that thing if it wasn’t trying to tear us apart and wear our intestines as a necklace.”

“So what exactly are you looking for, then?” the orange-haired beauty asked. “In terms of differences?”

“I’m not sure yet...” I sighed. “All three of you have the Doll’s Blood for sure, but I’m gonna have to run a few more tests on the samples to see what I’m working with here. Speaking of which... Do you mind if I take a little more?”

“What are you?” Ray chuckled. “A leech?”

I just rolled my eyes, then I went over to the cabinet and pulled out a few more plastic sample vials. My friends all took turns cutting open a finger and then dripping blood down into the plastic container, then I sealed them up, shook them to

mix, and then placed a drop of each onto a new microscope slide.

I looked over all three microscope slides again, though I couldn't see any discernible differences visually. So, I decided I needed to move on to a simple blood test similar to the one for a routine physical. Back in school, we'd actually been trained to run these sorts of tests, since a large percentage of graduates in the biochem field went on to work in blood testing labs. I hadn't been all that interested at the time, but now I was glad my professors had insisted that everyone learn how to do one.

It was a fairly simple process, though it took several minutes to run each sample of blood and then for the computer to read off the results. All three of my friends seemed to be good in terms of their cholesterol levels, their cortisol levels, and red blood cell count, but there was one major thing that stuck out to me after the test had been run.

Mei's white blood cell count was much lower than the other two.

I smirked to myself, and Mei must have noticed my change in expression.

"Did you find something?" she asked.

“I did.” I nodded. “Ray and Charlotte both have way higher white blood cell counts than you do, Mei.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Ray said. “Like, that means my body’s gonna be ready if any virus or disease comes a-knockin.”

“It means your body already has a disease or virus,” I chuckled. “Or at least, it thinks it does. Your immune system is trying to fight it off.”

“Shit.” Ray’s face turned white. “Does that mean... Am, am I dying, dude?”

“They’re not that elevated.” I promised. “Just higher than a normal human, while Mei’s is lower than a normal human.”

“What does that mean?” Mei asked.

“It means your body is completely gelling with whatever is in the serum cocktail you drank, while Ray and Charlotte’s bodies are actively rejecting whatever was in theirs,” I said. “That’s why they’ve both got negative mutations and all yours are positive.”

“Sooooooo it means nothing,” Ray sighed. “We already knew Charlotte and me got the shit end of the stick. How does

that help us with making a new serum?”

“It explains why you got the shit end, which also gives me a good idea of where I need to look next to figure out the what of the equation.”

“What will you look at next?” Mei asked with a tilt of her head.

“I’ll need to run the whole basic metabolic panel on you,” I said. “The good ‘ol BMPs as we used to call it back in school.”

“No need, dude,” Ray said as he shook his head back and forth. “I haven’t been with a lady in a loooong time.”

Mei and I both gave our friend a perplexed look as we stared at him in silence, until he finally shrugged.

“BMPs, man,” I said. “That’s like... enzymes and ammonia and CO₂ and shit like that. It’s not testing you for STDs.”

“Ohhhhhh,” he said and nodded. “Right, righhhhhht. My bad. Just... uh, could you maybe forget that last thing I said?”

“I’m not judging you, dude,” I replied.

“It’s just that I got so caught up in my work that I didn’t really have time to date, you know?” he continued. “There were too many custodial arts that needed to be done, and I was the only one with the skills to do ‘em.”

“The work of a custodial artist is never done.” I chuckled.

I gave him a thumbs up to show I would keep his secret, and then I turned to the cabinets on the wall of the van. I rifled around inside them until I found the right chemicals to perform the BMP tests. When I had everything laid out, I went back to work, and for a few minutes, it felt like I was back in my old college lab.

Each one took quite a bit of time to process, and by the time they were complete, I noticed the sun was just starting to head for the horizon. I checked my phone and saw that it was about five-fifteen in the evening and that Terry Haggart still hadn’t responded to my message.

Shit. I hoped I hadn’t scared him off or anything.

With a sigh, I turned my attention back to the test results. I saw the lipoprotein, CO₂, and ammonia tests all came back fairly regular, but when I got to the enzyme markers, I froze.

“What is it?” Mei asked. “You look troubled.”

“Not troubled...” I said as a smile spread up my lips.

“But I think I may have just found something that could crack this whole thing wide open.”

“Well?” Ray said as he tapped the nonexistent watch on his left wrist. “You gonna tell us, or not?”

“The Enzyme Marker test shows that you and Charlotte both have a major excess of Helicase, which is disproportionate to the DNA Polymerase,” I said. “That’s why your mutations didn’t simply improve what you already had, like Mei.”

“Okay, man,” Ray said as he stared at me blankly. “You gotta speak English for me, or I’m gonna be totally lost.”

“Let’s see,” I said as I tried to think of the simplest way to explain the results. “So the Helicase is an enzyme that unravels DNA, right? So like... Picture your DNA as a giant zipper that needs to be unzipped when your cells divide. Helicase is the thing that performs the unzipping. Are you following so far?”

“I think so.” Ray scratched his head and glanced at Mei before he nodded at me to continue.

“Then you’ve got the DNA Polymerase, which are enzymes that synthesize nucleotides from your DNA,” I said.

“What are nucleotides?” Mei asked.

“Let me back up here,” I chuckled.

I spent the next thirty minutes or so giving Ray and Mei a crash course in basic DNA function, which included all the basic stuff about base pairs and the Crick and Watson discovery and the ways DNA gives us our characteristics. Ray looked fairly lost the entire time, but Mei just sat there wide-eyed with a smile on her face as she listened, and her tail flicked back and forth happily.

“Wow,” Mei gasped when I was all done. “You really are smart, Doug!”

“Thanks,” I chuckled. “The point is, the cocktail of serum Charlotte and Ray received must have inflated their Helicase levels, which gave them unstable mutations when it combined with their DNA. Basically, their mutated DNA was unraveling faster than it could replicate itself, but yours didn’t.”

“So what do you do with that?” the cat-woman asked.

“Simple.” I explained. “The excess Helicase was probably caused by a catalyst that was mixed into the serum, and it would have to be one that pertained to DNA. If I can isolate the enzyme catalysts in your blood and find the one that’s not present in either Ray or Charlotte’s, then I’ll know what to add to the cocktail to make it work like yours. In the meantime, though, I’ve got a task for you to do, Ray.”

“Sure thing,” the mutant nodded. “All this science mumbo-jumbo is making my brain hurt.”

“You see that drugstore that’s right across the street?” I asked as I pointed out the back of the van. “I need you to go over there and buy a couple of over-the-counter inhalers. I’m gonna need ‘em to administer my aerosol solution once I’ve got it figured out, and these tests are gonna take a hot minute anyway.”

Ray lumbered to the back of the van, hopped out, and then headed across the parking lot toward the drugstore. There were only a few cars on the road, but they all stopped to let Ray pass.

“So much for remaining undercover,” I chuckled.

Once I was sure Ray had made it across the street, I started to run every single test on the three blood samples that

I could think of. I wanted to find the exact enzyme catalyst that was responsible for Mei's successful transformation, which would be easier now that I knew where to look. I tinkered around with these tests for another hour before Ray jumped back into the van with a simple gray plastic bag that he plopped down on the workbench proudly.

“I bought six of the things for you, Doug,” he said. “They must have thought I was gonna make drugs with ‘em or something, because they could only sell me one at a time.”

“Is that why it took you so long?” Mei chuckled. “You had to go to different places and buy one each?”

“Of course not,” Ray scoffed. “I don't have time for that... I had to disguise myself each time I went back to buy a new one.”

The image of Ray wearing Groucho Marx glasses popped into my head, and I started to giggle like a fool at the mental image.

“How did that work out, exactly?” I asked.

“Well, I got through six times before they finally realized, so I'd say pretty good,” he replied

“But like, did you put on a fake mustache or some shit?” I asked.

“I wish, man,” Ray laughed. “What I did was I’d go buy one, then I went over to the place where they had their clothes and changed. One time I had a tie-dye hoodie over my head, and another time I wore a camouflage hat, and another time I wore these big ugly sunglasses that made me look like a surfer. I’m sure I looked totally ridiculous, but it worked like a freaking charm.”

“Thanks,” I said with a smirk. “Hopefully, I’ll only need one or two of these things, but it’s always better to have too many than not enough. Now, there’s just one more thing I need for you to do. They need to be emptied.”

“Uhhhh, you want me to inhale all that medicine?” Ray gulped. “I know I’m a mutant and all, but I don’t think that’s gonna be healthy for me, dude.”

“You don’t have to inhale it,” I said with a smirk. “Just go outside and spray it into the air until nothing comes out.”

Ray tilted his head to the left like he was checking for ways the task could go wrong, but he finally nodded, snatched up the bag, and headed back outside. A moment later, we

heard the sound of an inhaler, followed by a long string of coughs from Ray.

“I really hope he understands what you told him,” Mei said.

“He’ll figure it out,” I replied.

I ran a few more tests on the blood while Ray emptied the inhalers, and then I sat down and tried to read the results. As my eyes scanned over the numbers, I once again felt like I’d been transported straight back to college, and a hit of warm nostalgia washed over me like a wet blanket. I thought back to all those days spent cramming for exams or messing around in the lab, as well as all the fun lectures I had from my chemistry professors and the dreams and ambitions I’d had back in those days. This was something that I’d always been passionate about, yet I’d decided to chase the money instead.

As I silently reminisced, though, I noticed a pattern in the test results.

“Holy shit,” I gasped. “DERA.”

“What’s that mean?” Mei asked curiously.

“Deoxyribose-phosphate aldolase,” I said. “It’s a thing that’s related to stress in cells, and it seems like the DNA in

your blood is full of the stuff.”

“Isn’t that bad, though?” the cat-woman asked. “Stress is never a good thing.”

“In this case, though, yes, it is,” I said. “You see, the mutation process caused by the serum obviously causes a fuckton of stress on your cells, right? Well, Lyfeteck apparently put some synthetic DERA in your serum, which counterbalanced against all those enzymatic imbalances that were present in Charlotte and Ray’s blood. Basically, they made it so your DNA’s components remained stable, even though they were undergoing severe changes.”

“And you can copy that?” Mei asked. “In your version of the serum?”

“I sure as fuck can.” I nodded. “I just need some Deoxy-d-ribose and some Phosphate aldolase, some pipettes, and then vials and a centrifuge to combine them together.”

I found the chemicals in the large cabinet of assorted liquids that the Lyfeteck van had under lock and key, and then I got to work. As I started to play with the mixture of the chemicals to create the DERA, I heard Charlotte and Ray bantering just outside.

“I- I feel a little lightheaded, Charlotte...” Ray huffed.

“You know, if you sprayed those things away from your face, you’d probably feel much better,” the spider-woman’s voice sighed. “Just a theory.”

“I’m spraying them away from my face,” Ray protested. “I’m pointing them in the other direction.”

“Yeah, but the wind is blowing toward you,” Charlotte said with a sly chuckle.

“And?” Ray asked a moment later.

“And the wind is catching the mist and blowing it right back at your face, so you’re inhaling it,” she explained.

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” he said.

I messed around with my cocktail for a bit longer, until finally I had something that I was ready to put into the centrifuge for the final mixing. As I opened up the machine and slid the vial in, Mei stood over my shoulder with a look of pure awe in her eyes.

“Do you think this will actually work?” she asked.

“I think so,” I gulped. “It just needs to mix for a few minutes. Once that’s done, I can fill the inhalers with it. It’ll be ready to test then.”

“How will you turn it into a spray, though?” Mei asked.
“Won’t it stay as a liquid?”

“So this is actually a really fucking cool thing we used to do back in the day,” I said as I closed the centrifuge lid and pressed the start button. “We had one friend who had to use inhalers all the time and, being the cheap, poor college student that most of us were, he didn’t have much money to buy the damn things. So, we had a professor that showed us how to refill an inhaler by hand using the chemicals we had in the lab, and it always worked like a charm. All you gotta do is take out the metal canister, unfasten a few screws, and then put whatever drug is needed into the thing with a syringe. Then you take some HFA propellant, use the same syringe to put it into the canister, and then seal it all off and reassemble. Boom, cheap, DIY inhaler refill.”

“And that’s what you’re going to do with this serum?” she asked. “Inhale it as a gas?”

“That’s the plan. I really don’t want to drink the entire vial, just in the very off chance I fucked up the serum. Plus, I want the mutations to be temporary for now. I’m not sure I wanna give up being regular Doug just yet.”

“That’s good,” Mei said. “I love regular Doug.”

“H-here,” Ray said as he hopped up into the van. “I emptied all of ‘em.”

Ray was gasping for air as he held out the bag, which I took from him and then reached inside. I pulled out one of the inhalers, popped off the plastic cap at the top, and then carefully removed the metal canister. After I placed it on the table, I went over to the cabinets and started looking for the stuff I needed to make the refill. Syringes were fairly standard for any lab, so I found plenty of those. The gas was a bit trickier, since it apparently wasn’t the type of thing that was kept readily available in a mobile desktop lab.

“Okay,” I muttered as I studied what I did have available.

HFA one-thirty-four-a was a complex chemical to make, but I knew I was up to the task. I gathered up a few containers of Fluoride, some pure Carbon samples, and a bit of hydrogen. I then turned to study the available materials in the Lyfeteck lab, from the tiny Bunsen burners and beakers to the specialized vial funnels and even the chilling freezer they had attached to the walls.

“Can you make it work?” Mei asked.

“I can,” I said as I started to work.

The sun had now set, and I was working by the interior lights that were attached to the inside of the van and nothing more. Still, I was confident I would get this serum cranked out before we had to move on.

That's when Mei's ears suddenly stood up and went rigid. The cat-woman squinted as she turned her head to the right, then she took a few steps toward the open back door of the van.

"Charlotte?" the cat-woman asked softly. "Charlotte! Do you see anything out there?"

"What am I looking for, darling?" Charlotte asked nonchalantly.

"I hear footsteps," Mei said with a panicked tone. "Big, plodding footsteps."

"What?" Charlotte said. "How? I've got superhuman vision, and I don't see anything."

"Look to the east," Mei instructed. "It's coming from the east."

"I don't see anything—" Charlotte muttered. "Oh. Ohhhhh, no."

"What's wrong, Charlotte?" I asked nervously.

Suddenly, the spider-woman's head appeared over the edge of the van roof, and her yellow eyes were wide.

"I don't know how it happened, but they found us," she replied

"Who?" I asked as my heart fell into my stomach because I already knew the answer.

"It's the two mutants," she said. "The ones from before."

Looked like I would have to finish the serum on the go, after all.

Chapter 7

“How far out are they, Charlotte?” I asked as I started to gather all the things I needed to put the finishing touches on the inhalant serum. “Because I’m definitely not ready here.”

“They’re closing fast,” the spider-woman said with a growl. “How much longer do you need?”

“I dunno...” I said. “Maybe another five minutes?”

“Then we’ll give you five minutes, dude,” Ray said as he cracked his knuckles.

“What?” I gasped. “Guys, no. We need to get the fuck outta here now.”

“Why?” Ray asked with a shrug. “You can’t work while we’re driving as we’ve already discovered, so I really doubt you’d be able to do it while we’re driving and getting chased by two giant, powerful mutants at the same time.”

“Is it just the mutants?” I asked Charlotte. “Or are there Lyfeteck goons, too?”

“I only see the crab and the bear,” she answered. “I think we can hold them off until the serum is made.”

“Guys—” I started to protest.

“Less arguing, more chemistry!” Ray said. “Let’s dance, big boys!”

With that, Ray dashed out of the van and disappeared from sight. Mei went to take a step toward the door, but I grabbed her arm and held her in place.

“You can’t possibly think that’s a good idea,” I said. “Those two mutants are gonna tear you apart.”

“Charlotte needs to guard the van,” Mei said. “That means Ray and I will have to try and distract them.”

“Mei, you—” I started to say.

“That just means you need to finish the serum as quickly as you can.” Mei winked, then she pulled away from me and dashed out the door.

Fuck.

I heard the bear-mutant’s roar from afar, and my blood ran cold. I dashed over to the floor compartment where I kept my shotgun, pulled it out, and slung it over my shoulder before I returned to the workbench. The second I was there, I grabbed a small socket wrench and began to twist off the little seal at

the top of the canister, until I heard a slight hiss as the gas was released from inside.

That's when I heard the chaos outside.

“Ohhhhhh, yeah!” Ray cackled. “Taste the fists of fury, bitches.”

I heard a few dull, fleshy thuds, followed by the angry roar of the bear-mutant, and I assumed Ray'd gotten a few hits in. Almost immediately afterwards, I heard Mei let out a hiss, then a soft yowl.

My heart froze in place as I wondered if the woman had been hurt, but I couldn't leave just yet. They were trying to give me all the time I needed to finish my serum, and I wasn't about to throw that opportunity away at the first sign of trouble.

I blocked out the sounds of battle as I dunked a needle into the vial of the serum I'd created and slowly drew out ten milliliters of the clear liquid. I was about to take out a little more, but there was a violent crash against the side of the van, and the whole damn vehicle was pushed to the right before it screeched to a halt.

The sudden motion caused me to lose my balance, and the fucking vial of serum slipped out of my hands. I tried to catch it as it plummeted to the ground, and time seemed to move in slow motion as I reached for the damn thing. However, it was no use, and I watched in horror as the small glass vial shattered against the ground.

Welp. It looked like ten milliliters was all I was gonna get for the time being.

“Get back!” Charlotte snarled from above.

I heard something splatter and hiss, and then I heard the bear-mutant yowl in pain.

“What’s wrong?” Ray’s voice taunted. “If ya can’t take the heat, stay outta the kitchen.”

It was a horrible pun that really didn’t fit into the context of the situation, but it was completely on-brand for Ray. There were a few more fleshy thunks as Ray and the bear-mutant continued to engage with each other, and I tried to get back to work on my serum.

And I still had ten milliliters to work with, so I snatched up the empty inhaler container from the workbench and carefully slid the needle into the teeny-tiny little hole at the top

of the canister. I took one deep breath to steady my nerves, and then I injected the serum into the damn thing. The gas needed to come next, so I ran over and grabbed the chilled canister of HFA that I'd created and began to unfasten it.

There was another violent crash, and I heard Ray yelp as he slammed into the side of the van and sent our ride skidding across the parking lot once more. This time, I couldn't keep my balance, and I fell to the floor hard. The impact of my fall knocked the HFA canister out of my hand, and all I could do was watch helplessly as the damn thing rolled out the back of the vehicle and landed on the ground outside.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled to myself as I jumped to my feet.

I bolted for the back of the van, hopped out, and ran after the HFA canister that was still rolling across the blacktop. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ray, Mei, and Charlotte all engaging with the two mutants, but my focus was on the canister. I breathed a sigh of relief as it hit a small chunk of concrete and finally stopped, and I finally managed to scoop it up.

As I spun around, I heard Mei let out an annoyed hiss, and the cat-woman tumbled across the ground violently. Mei flipped onto her feet gracefully, then she instantly leapt back into the fray with her claws drawn. Meanwhile, Charlotte was flipping around the crab-mutant with the grace of a gymnast as the monster tried his best to snatch her up with his massive claws.

I saw Ray spring backwards seconds before he was eviscerated by the bear-mutant's claws, then he slugged the damn thing in the face. The bear-mutant let out a deep, annoyed huff as he stumbled backwards, though it didn't seem like Ray's punch did much damage.

But I was still a normal human, and if I got caught in the battle, I'd be a goner for sure, so I charged back toward the van with the HFA canister in my hand and leapt inside. I quickly went back over to my workbench, shoved the empty syringe back into the pin-sized hole in the inhaler, and pulled the plunger all the way out.

Next, I cracked open the bottle of HFA, "poured" the invisible gas into the syringe, and finally shoved the plunger back inside before I pushed against the back and injected the chemical into the tiny metal cylinder. Once that was done, I

picked up the tool to tighten the seal on the canister, shoved it around the screw, and then twisted to the right to fasten it closed.

“Doug!” I heard Charlotte warn. “You’ve got incoming.”

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck...” I said to myself as my heart raced a million miles per second.

I grabbed the plastic part of the inhaler, flipped over the metal canister, and shoved it inside. As I shoved the little plastic cap over the top, though, I saw the bear-mutant appear in the doorway.

The creature’s lifeless eyes stared me down, and rabid spittles dripped out of what was left of its acid-melted face as it bared its teeth and then let out an angry chuff. This time, though, I noticed that the monster had a metal collar around its neck with a bright red light, and for a split second, I kinda felt bad for the thing.

That moment of empathy quickly disappeared when it grabbed both sides of the van with its claws, though, and I knew I had to act now or else I was completely fucked.

I pocketed the inhaler, pulled the shotgun from around my shoulder, and pulled it up at the ready. There was already a shell inside, so I simply nestled it onto my shoulder, took aim at the monster's chest, and squeezed the trigger.

The thunderous crack of the shotgun echoed through the van as it fired, and I felt my eardrums ring painfully as the gun kicked back against my shoulder. The deadly swarm of buckshot blasted toward the mutant bear, and a moment later, there was a spray of crimson as part of his chest was torn up by the metal beads.

The blast didn't do as much damage as it would to a regular human, though there was now a raw, bloody gash across the bear's torso, and he roared in pain as he released his hold on the van. The fucker stumbled backwards a few steps, and then I saw Ray appear out of nowhere and tackled the bastard out of sight.

Now was my one and possibly only chance, so I tossed the shotgun back over my shoulder and grabbed the inhaler. I stared at it for a moment as I thought about everything that could possibly go wrong when I ingested the serum. If my calculations were incorrect, I could end up as a low-intelligence, deformed human like Ray. Even worse, if I

messed up the formula of the serum badly enough, there was a chance I could just keel over instantly and die a very horrible, very painful death. There was also the possibility that it simply wouldn't do anything, and I'd be back to square one.

There were very few good outcomes, if I was honest, but I didn't have a choice. If I didn't act, I'd probably be dead soon enough, and I trusted my own skills as a biochemist enough to be confident I wouldn't accidentally kill myself.

“Down the hatch,” I said as I raised the inhaler to my mouth.

I closed my eyes as I pressed down on the very top, and I felt the aerosol mist spray into my mouth as I inhaled. The mist was shockingly cold, and it filled my mouth with a tingling sensation that tasted reminiscent of strawberries. Then, I gave myself another puff before I decided to call it quits. I shoved the inhaler into my pocket and then pulled the shotgun off my shoulder to prepare for whatever came next.

I didn't have to wait for very long.

A wave of sharp pain washed across my entire torso, and it felt like an invisible hand had wrapped around my lungs and was squeezing them tightly. I dropped down onto my knees as I struggled for breath and sucked in a few long,

painful gasps of air as every muscle in my body started to tingle like I'd taken a dip in a pool of menthol rub. At the same time, I could feel my body start to change, and my muscles tensed as they began to throb inside my flesh. The next thing I knew, my biceps started to thicken up before my very eyes, and I felt a strange sensation begin to replace the tingling.

Strength.

In one swift motion, I jumped to my feet, scooped up the shotgun, and headed for the back of the vehicle. When I got about a foot away from the doors, I pressed my feet into the floor and propelled myself forward as hard as I could. I gasped when I soared out over the pavement and flew for a solid twenty feet before gravity took over and I landed with a dull thud.

Yeah, I definitely had some enhancements going on.

I twisted around to see Charlotte as she flipped away from the crab-mutant's pincers just in time. She managed to land on his back, and she quickly spat some of her deadly venom. The crab-man's shell sizzled for a moment, but most of the venom seemed to evaporate into thin air. The crab-

mutant suddenly shook its body to and fro, and Charlotte was tossed off him like a ragdoll.

At the same time, Mei was jumping around the bear-mutant like a spider monkey as she just barely avoided his deadly claws. Every now and then she would get in a blow, though her own finger daggers didn't seem to be doing that much damage. As for Ray, he was behind the bear, and he pummeled the bastard's back with his bare fists like George Foreman.

Now I just needed to decide which of the fuckers I wanted to engage with. I figured that if Ray's fists and Charlotte's deadly venom couldn't do any damage to the crab-mutant, my chances of actually hurting the crab were way lower than if I attacked the bear.

But then my eye caught a flash of red, and I realized my targets weren't limited to the mutants.

Maybe I could test out my newfound strength on those collars around their neck. I dashed over to the crab-mutant, raised my shotgun, and squeezed the trigger. A blast of buckshot fired out the end, but it bounced off the mutant's shell harmlessly like I'd just hurled a handful of pebbles at the fucker.

The crab must have felt the attack, though, because he turned to me, opened his nasty pincers, and made a horrific clicking noise.

“Great,” Charlotte sighed. “I think you just angered him even more.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” I said with a nod. “Come on, big boy...”

The crab-mutant gurgled as he scuttled forward and then lunged at me with his left pincer. At the very last second, I ducked underneath the attack and then sprang upwards. My body felt as light as a feather as I soared into the sky, and in a single jump, I was able to clear the mutant’s entire body. I came down hard on his shell and then grabbed onto the metal collar while he was still trying to figure out where I’d gone.

I slid my fingers underneath the collar, held it tight, and then started to pull in opposite directions. I felt a slight bit of give on the collar when I heard a metal clicking sound, and I knew I could finish the job if I had a few more seconds.

Unfortunately, I didn’t.

The crab-mutant suddenly shoved his spiny feet into the ground and tossed his body backward, and I was forced to

release my grip and jump to safety before he crushed me underneath his gargantuan body.

I landed in a heap on the ground, but I was quick to roll back to my feet and lunge for my shotgun. I snatched up the weapon and twisted around just as the crab-man got back onto his feet.

He didn't stay there for long, though, because Charlotte flipped up into the air like an acrobat and then slammed both her heels into the fucker from behind. The crab let out a surprised gasp as he stumbled forward, and I decided to give him another surprise.

I raised my shotgun, took aim at the bright flashing light on the side of his neck, and squeezed the trigger. I felt the kickback against my shoulder as the thunderous echo of the gun rang out across the parking lot, but a moment later, the buckshot smashed into the collar's light and shattered it into oblivion.

However, the actual metal ring itself remained firmly on his neck.

So I fired a second shot straight at the mutant crab's eyes, but he simply held up his right claw and made a shield in the path of the shot. The dozens of little metal beads bounced

off the fucker's claw, and as the pellets fell to the ground, he lurched forward and took a swing at me with his left hand.

I barely jumped back in time to avoid his deadly pincers, and I instinctively countered by trying to slam the butt of my weapon into his face. The metal slammed against the crab-mutant's shell, but he didn't even react as it ricocheted off his shell harmlessly.

The next thing I knew, the bastard caught me in the right side with a sideswipe, and I felt a wave of pain through my ribs as I was knocked away like a ragdoll.

“Doug!” Charlotte gasped.

I hit the pavement rolling, and I grunted and growled as I tumbled across the parking lot. I felt dozens of tiny cuts against my flesh, and I knew I'd have some ugly bruises in a few hours. When I finally stopped, I had a dull ache all through my torso, but that was it.

I had taken a punch from a mutant at full force and was able to just walk it off like I'd been pushed off the monkey bars on the playground. For all intents and purposes, the serum had been a smashing success.

I didn't have time to soak in my victory for too long, though, as I saw Ray go flying past me as he let out a panicked howl. Ray's momentum was halted by a nearby light post, and he hit it so fucking hard it snapped the damn thing off its base and bent over at ninety degrees. The lamp of the lamppost shattered into oblivion as electricity crackled through the air and sparks flew everywhere, while Ray simply collapsed into a heap and groaned.

When I looked over, I saw Mei backflip out of the path of the bear-mutant's foot, which came down and cratered the asphalt. Bits of debris flew into the air as the bear let out a huff and took another swipe at Mei, but the cat-woman was able to duck under his attack and counter with a quick swipe of her own claws. The feline's claws left a small gash in the bear-mutant's disgusting, deformed flesh, though it wasn't very much damage.

Mei might have been fast, but the bear-mutant was ten times stronger, and all it would take is one good blow from him to put Mei down for the count. I needed to help her, and I needed to help her now.

I jumped back to my feet and lifted my shotgun at the ready as I charged forward. I fired off two haphazard shots in

the direction of the beast, though neither of them made an impact, and I quickly reloaded. Then again, that didn't matter, since I was mainly trying to just draw his attention away from Mei.

That much I did accomplish.

The bear-mutant twisted his head around, saw me approaching, and let out an earth-shaking roar. Bits of white spittle flew in all directions as his hot, disgusting breath seemed to waft into my nostrils from across the parking lot. He dropped down on all fours and began to run at me at full speed, and he moved with the hustle of a goddamn cheetah.

“Son of a bitch,” I gulped as my heart jumped into my throat.

I fired off another shot to try and distract the fucker, and I watched as the buckshot slammed into his right shoulder with a tiny spray of crimson.

He kept right on running.

The bear-mutant was now about twenty feet away from me, and I had to think fast. I leapt forward and felt my body go completely airborne. I saw the bear-mutant pass underneath

my feet as he let out an angry snarl, and then I landed in a crouched position on the ground safely.

“How did you do that?” Mei asked as she ran up to my side.

“The serum,” I said. “It worked.”

The cat-woman’s eyes lit up when she heard the good news, and her ears perked up happily as her tail flitted back and forth behind her. The celebration didn’t last, though, as her ears instantly went down against her head, and she let out an angry hiss as she looked behind me.

I twisted around to see that the bear-mutant was now back on two feet, and he lumbered toward us like Jason Voorhees. His eyes were bloodshot with pure rage, and a rabid drool dripped down out of his mouth as he bared his deadly fangs through rapid, annoyed puffs.

That’s when a giant metal pole stabbed through his stomach from behind. Blood splattered out at the monster’s feet as he roared in agony, and then he stumbled forward as he tried desperately to pull the pole out.

“Easy there, Pooh Bear,” Ray cackled happily, and I saw that he was holding onto the other end of the pole.

Ray's muscles tensed up as he gritted his teeth and lifted up on the pole, and the bear-mutant was raised slightly off his feet. It was only a few inches, and Ray seemed to be straining all the way, but Ray then hurled the pole off to the side with the bear still on it.

The mutant roared as he fell onto his side, and he struggled to get up again once he landed. It was hard to believe the bear wasn't actually dead, but this was our chance to finish the job.

"Come on!" I hissed to Ray and Mei. "Let's put him out of his misery."

"You mean kick him while he's down?" Ray chuckled. "I could totally do that."

"What about Charlotte?" Mei asked as she looked over her shoulder.

When I glanced over to the other side of the battlefield, I saw Charlotte was still spitting acid onto the crab-mutant's shell as she flipped around his body in all directions, though he didn't seem like he was taking any damage.

"Fuck." I grumbled. "Ray? You wanna go help with the oversized king crab over there? I think Mei and I can handle

ol' smokey.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ray sighed. “I bet that shell’s like a Tootsie Pop... It just needs a bit more lickin’.”

Ray let out a battle cry as he dashed over toward Charlotte and the crab-mutant, while Mei and I just exchanged a concerned glance.

“What exactly is your plan here, Doug?” Mei gulped. “Because I think now he’s even angrier than before.”

The bear-mutant was still writhing on the ground as he tried to pull himself off the bloody pole, and he was slowly but surely getting there. He had his paws wrapped around the girth of the pole and was carefully pulling it out of his stomach, though his hands slipped with every few inches he was able to get it out.

“We go for the head,” I said as I loaded a few more shells into my gun. “And the eyes. And the jugular. Any weak spot that could do some major damage, really.”

Mei and I ran forward until we were right in front of the bear-mutant’s head, then she quickly slashed her claws across the bastard’s right eye. As he yowled in pain I raised my weapon, squeezed the trigger, and blasted a spray of buckshot

directly into his fucking skull. There was a spray of crimson as the fucker's head cratered, and bits of bone and flesh went flying into the air. Somehow, he let out a loud snarl of agony.

The dude must have been running on pure adrenaline at that point, because in one swift move, he flipped up onto his feet, sunk his claws into the metal of the pole, and shoved it backwards through his body. There was a massive flesh wound on the side of his head where the buckshot had gotten him, and I swore I could see a small bit of his brain oozing out from the inside. However, he was still on his feet, and he was as rage-filled as ever.

“Get down!” Mei screamed.

The bear-mutant swung the pole around his head like a barbarian with an axe, and we both just barely avoided getting slugged by the damn thing.

As I came back up and raised my shotgun, the bear-mutant lashed out and struck the barrel with the back of his paw. My weapon flew out of my hand and skidded across the pavement, and I didn't even have a second to recuperate before he came at me again. Mei and I jumped in opposite directions and out of the path of the bear's claws, though that meant I was now even further away from my shotgun.

But if I timed it right, maybe I could break the collar, and maybe then the bear would be free of whatever force was keeping it on its feet.

“Mei?” I called over to the cat-woman. “Do you trust me?”

“Oh, no...” Mei gulped, then she rolled out of the way of another swipe from the mutant bear. “When you say that, it usually means you’re thinking of something dangerous.”

“Just answer the question!” I shouted as I ducked beneath an angry swipe.

“Yes!” she replied as she stabbed the bear along one arm.

“Then keep big brown here occupied, I’ve got an idea,” I said.

The bear-mutant started to turn back toward me like it understood what I’d said, but Mei instantly sprang up, let out a shrill hiss, and sunk her claws into the wound in his chest. He roared with pain and instantly came back around swinging, and Mei just barely avoided getting disemboweled.

However, that gave me the opening I needed.

I covered the distance between us in a few long strides, and then I leapt high enough to land on his back. I wrapped my hands around the collar, but he was so blinded by rage that he didn't even notice me as I clung onto the metal ring for dear life. I pressed the heels of my feet into his back as I started to pull with all my might, and my knuckles turned white as I tried to yank the collar in opposite directions, all while the bear-mutant's body twisted and turned as he attempted to take out Mei.

Long, scary seconds passed before I heard the metallic crack of breaking metal, and a moment later, I felt the collar's latch pop loose. Now, I just needed to pull the thing off, and then hopefully, the bear would at least be free from Lyfotech's control.

I gave the collar a second yank, and there was another metallic click. However, this time, it was followed by a loud, shrill beeping sound. The light on the side of the metal band started to flash much quicker and more intensely almost in unison with the beeps, and it kept getting faster and faster by the second.

That's when I realized what it was.

The collar was rigged to explode.

“It’s a fucking bomb!” I yelled as I let go.

I dropped to the ground and looked around for Mei. I saw her jump out of the way of the bear’s claws, and then she glanced in my direction.

“What?” she asked in a panicked voice as she looked at me.

“It’s gonna blow!” I shouted. “Get back to the fucking van!”

Mei dodged another swipe, twisted around, and began to high-tail it back toward our van. The bear-mutant started to give chase, but I’d been expecting that.

I snatched up my shotgun as I started after them, but then my stomach twisted in on itself when I realized what I had to do. If the bear-mutant kept following Mei, the van would get blown to pieces along with ol’ smokey, which meant I needed to get his attention and draw him away.

Of course, that also meant putting me in the path of the explosion, unless I could figure out something else that I could use as a shield. But what the hell could withstand a fucking bomb?

The fucking crab-mutant.

I stopped running long enough to fire a shell's worth of buckshot straight into his hind end and quickly followed that with one to his shoulder. The bear roared, but at least it stopped and turned back to face me.

As soon as I was sure I had its attention, I started to run toward Ray, Charlotte, and the crab-mutant. I was in a dead sprint, and I started with a nice lead, but I could hear his angry huffs getting closer as I tore across the parking lot.

I really, really hoped that the collar had a few more seconds, or else we were both goners.

“Runnnnnn!” I yelled at Ray and Charlotte. “Get to cover, now!”

“These colors don't run, dude,” Ray cackled as he slammed his fist into the crab-mutant's shell. “I'm gonna finish the fight, even if it—”

“The collar's rigged!” I shouted. “They're bombs. Get the fuck out of here!”

“Well, in that case...” my friend replied.

Ray sidestepped the crab-mutant's claws before he twisted around and started back toward the van. Meanwhile, Charlotte did a backflip over the crab, spat venom into the

crab's face, and then followed Ray back to the van. The splash of venom didn't seem to do much damage to the crab himself, though it stunned him for the split-second that was needed for them to escape.

Now it was all up to me.

The crab-mutant turned to face me when it heard me coming, and then it cocked its head to the side as it raised its pincers up to grab me. But the beeping collar behind me was up to ten beeps per second, and by the time I was within striking distance of the crab-mutant, the beeping had doubled. It was the moment of truth, though I was the only one of our little trio who understood that.

Just as the oversized crab lashed out at me, I crouched down, pressed my feet into the pavement, and jumped into the air one more time. I felt my feet touch the crab-mutant's shell as I moved through the air, and I used his body as a secondary springboard to put more distance between me and the chaos that was about to unfold. As I sprang forward, I heard the beeping stop completely, followed a second later by a single, digital chirp.

Then there was a loud, eardrum-shattering boom from behind. The shockwave slammed into my back hard enough to

send me flying through the air like I'd been shot out of a cannon. As I soared over the parking lot, I heard the crab-mutant let out a painful groan, but there was nothing from the bear.

Eventually, gravity took back over, and I fell back to Earth and slammed into the pavement with a harsh thud. The impact was intense enough that it should have killed me, but thanks to the serum that was now in my body, it merely felt like I'd been hit by a heavyweight boxer. Aches and pains echoed through my entire body as I stood up, rubbed my wounds, and groaned.

When I looked back at the battlefield, I saw Mei, Ray, and Charlotte all cautiously emerge from behind the other side of the Lyfeteck van. They looked stunned as they took in the scene of destruction, and I'm sure I did as well.

There wasn't much left of the bear-mutant, since the top half of its body had been obliterated by the explosion. A geyser of blood still gushed out onto the asphalt from the heap of smoking flesh, and one of the back legs still twitched.

The crab-mutant was now halfway across the parking lot, but it was still very much alive. It got back to his feet with a few wobbly steps, shook itself, and then looked around

nervously. Finally, it began to scuttle away toward the main road, and as it moved, I noticed there was a massive black burn mark on its front shell.

For a split second I thought about chasing after the crab, but then I heard the sounds of sirens off in the distance.

“Fuck,” I said to myself. “We gotta get out of here before the cops arrive.”

My head was still ringing from being so close to the explosion, and my body ached all over from all the blows it had received during our fight, but I was still in one piece.

I was alive, and one of Doctor Lyfe’s horrific mutants had been taken off the board.

Now, we just needed Terry Haggart to help us set up the checkmate.

Chapter 8

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” I sighed as I climbed into the driver’s seat of our van. “You shoot off a bunch of shotgun blasts and cause an explosion near an interstate, and somebody’s gonna call the cops.”

“Or more Lyfetechno goons,” Ray said. “Doctor Lyfe’s probably gonna cover up this little mess before the cops actually get here.”

“All the more reason for us to get on the road,” I said. “I dunno about you guys, but I’m in no shape to go another round, even if it would be with a bunch of regular humans.”

My ears were still ringing like mad from the explosion that had taken out the bear-mutant, which probably wasn’t the best condition for driving. Every sound was surrounded by a soft muffled tone, and my eardrums throbbed as my brain pounded in my head. But I twisted the keys and brought the engine to life, and once my friends were all seated, I put it in gear and peeled out of the parking lot.

We headed for one of the side roads that led us back to one of the smaller highways of South Carolina. We were

heading south toward the man I hoped would help us, if we could just get to him. But when I looked back in the rearview mirror, I could see flashing red and blue lights in the distance that were quickly approaching, and for a moment, I wondered if we'd been spotted leaving the scene.

At the very least, Lyfetechn wasn't going to clean up the scene before the police arrived, but who was I kidding? Based on everything I'd experienced so far, the freaking police force was probably in the pocket of Doctor Lyfe and his company, and they might actually be the ones who'd cover it all up.

Either way, I was still pretty satisfied with the end result of our battle. I might have felt like every bone in my body was bruised and like I'd never be able to hear clearly again, but we'd been able to kill one of the powerful mutants that'd been hunting us, and I'd apparently cracked the code on Lyfetechn's serum.

That was an absolute win in my book.

"I suppose I'll be the one to bring up the troubling question," Charlotte said with a sigh. "But how did those mutants find us? My venom surely burned away any enhanced sense of smell that creature might have had, and the last time I checked, crabs were not expert trackers."

“And the van is clean,” I said as I shook my head. “No tracking devices on it whatsoever. Plus, we’ve been intentionally avoiding the main highways so that we don’t attract attention to ourselves, and Lyfotech has no idea where we’re going.”

“As far as we know,” Mei said.

“What?” I raised an eyebrow as I looked back in the mirror. “Do you think Lyfe is still in contact with Terry Haggart, and he sold us out?”

“That wouldn’t make sense,” Ray said. “Haggart didn’t know our exact location, either.”

“Fuck, even I’m not sure of our exact location,” I chuckled. “We’ve kinda taken a huge detour by going to Anderson to get all the ingredients for the serum.”

“Well, they obviously had a way of knowing where we were,” Charlotte said. “I don’t think it was a sheer coincidence that our paths crossed.”

The spider-woman was definitely right, but I couldn’t think of any way Lyfotech could be tracking us. We’d had this van completely stripped of all bugs and trackers, and the chances of them just happening across us by accident were

slim to none. As I glanced back in the rearview mirror of the van and looked at my friends, however, I got a knot in my stomach at the thought of a potential answer.

What if Charlotte was the reason they found us?

She was originally one of Lyfotech's mutant assassins, so it would make sense for Doctor Lyfe to have his scientists put some sort of microchip inside her body so that they could keep track of her at all times. If that was the case, I wasn't sure what we really could do to counteract its effects.

Then again, I might have just been being paranoid.

"Hey, Charlotte?" I asked. "I know this is a touchy subject, but when Lyfotech was experimenting on you, do you remember if they ever... Put anything in your body?"

"They put a lot of things in my body," Charlotte spat. "You'll have to be more specific."

"I think he's trying to ask if they chipped you like a pet dog," Ray interjected in a completely nonchalant manner.

"Seriously, dude?" I grumbled.

"What?" he retorted. "Isn't that what you were asking?"

"Kinda," I admitted. "I was trying to say it a little less bluntly, though."

“Eh, it’s better to just rip off the Band-Aid and get to the point.” My friend shrugged and looked over at Charlotte.

“Sooooo, are you chipped, or not?”

“I am most certainly not,” Charlotte said.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Because knowing Lyfeteck, they might have injected nanobots or some shit into your bloodstream.”

“I did receive several shots...,” the spider-woman mused.

“Though they were usually for the purpose of numbing.”

“Why did you need shots that would numb you?” Mei asked innocently.

“Use your imagination, Mei,” Charlotte said with a sigh.

“I’m trying to,” the cat-woman said. “I still cannot see why they would need to numb your body.”

“You’re too innocent for your own good, you know,” I said with a somber smile.

“The point still remains,” Charlotte huffed. “If there was a microchip in my body, I’d know about it.”

“None of this makes sense,” I said. “There’s gotta be something that they either did to find us, or maybe there was a

fuckup on our end that led them to us. I honestly don't care whose fault it was, just as long as we don't make the same mistake again.”

As I was speaking, I heard my phone ping. I'd left it face-up on the little tray on the dashboard of the van, and when it went off, the screen lit up to show the notification.

It was a LinkedIn notification.

I instantly looked around for anywhere I could pull off the road to check my phone, and I saw a tiny little run-down Mom-and-Pop hardware store just off the highway. It was still pretty late, and I was fairly confident that we were safe from any Lyfotech goons at the moment since they needed to clean up their mess back at the scene of the battle and deal with the cops. Still, I pulled around behind the store to make sure we were out of sight before I put the van in park and reached for my phone.

“What's going on, Doug?” Mei asked.

When I picked up my phone and looked at it closer, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Sure enough, it was a notification from LinkedIn, one that simply said *Terry Haggart has messaged you!*

“Haggart finally replied,” I said with a large grin.

“Took him long enough,” Ray huffed. “I hope he’s got something good to say.”

I unlocked my phone and tapped on the notification bar to open up my LinkedIn app, then I started to read the message that Haggart had sent me aloud. As I read it, though, my happy demeanor melted away.

“Hello, Doug,” I began. “First, let me apologize for the inconvenience I’ve caused you already, as I certainly didn’t expect for you to start making the journey down to me so soon. That said, I am not sure I can help you, as everything I know about my former employer has unfortunately either been forgotten to the dustbin of history or I am forbidden from discussing it due to the NDA I signed when I left the company. That said, I have severed myself completely from that chapter in my life, and I do not wish to revisit it for any reason whatsoever. I apologize again for the inconvenience, and I wish you safe travels back to wherever it is you came from.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, dude?” Ray gasped. “He just said like a day ago that he’d talk to us!”

“If that really is Terry Haggart you’re talking to,” Charlotte noted. “For all we know, Lyfetechn might have

already had him killed, and you're talking to one of their agents. It wouldn't be hard to pretend to be somebody else when you can't see their face."

"Tell me about it," Ray chuckled. "Do you know how many times I've been catfished in my life? At least we know Terry Haggart is a real person, unlike 'Sophia Mercades' or 'Jillian Bigbutte...' I still can't believe I fell for those."

"I dunno," I said as I read over the message again. "This reads similar to the last message that he sent."

"As if Lyfotech couldn't find somebody that could copy his writing style?" Charlotte said.

"Let me try to send something back and see if he answers," I said. "That might tell us who we're dealing with here."

So, I typed up a reply.

I promise we don't need to talk about anything that's behind your NDA, and we would only want a few minutes of your time. You also have my word that Lyfotech won't ever catch wind of the fact you're talking to me, if that's what you're worried about.

This time, the little blue bubble appeared for a split second, then Haggart's profile picture showed up inside of it to indicate that it had been read. Finally, I saw the little ellipses that indicated he was writing back.

"He's answering already," I hissed as I watched the ellipses disappear and reappear.

He must have either been writing me a miniature book, or he kept changing his mind about what he wanted to say and deleting his message, because the ellipses disappeared at least three times before I finally got his next message.

"What'd he say?" Ray asked as he peered over my shoulder.

"Let's see here," I muttered. "He says 'I'm afraid I worked at that place so long ago, I don't think I could remember anything you'd want me to remember. Also, who did you say you were again? You keep talking about Lyfetechnology, but I do not see them listed as an employer on your profile... Are you government? A rival company? Do you need a reference for a job at Lyfetechnology? I do not understand why you've reached out to me other than to ask me questions that I cannot answer.'"

“Something’s totally up with this guy,” Ray said. “I can’t put my finger on it just yet, but I can tell something ain’t right with the way he’s talking to you.”

“Do you think you’re actually talking to a Lyfotech person?” Mei gasped.

“He does seem awfully determined to get me off his case,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s a Lyfotech person,” Charlotte interjected. “He sounds like a man who’s afraid. Trust me, I’ve instilled fear in enough men that I can smell their terror from miles away.”

“You think he’s scared of Lyfotech?” I asked.

“Perhaps.” The spider-woman shrugged. “Or he’s afraid of you.”

I wrote back to Haggart to try and figure out why he was trying so hard to push me away.

I’m not government or a rival, I swear. I’m just a researcher who is interested in your old work, who wants to pick your brain about your time at Lyfotech and the things you worked on. My colleagues and I are working on something

big... Something that might revolutionize the entire world if we get it right.

I hit send and then watched for Haggart's reply, which came fairly quickly.

"So you want Lyfotech company secrets?" I read aloud. "That's not going to happen. I'd be fined millions of dollars in damages if word ever got out. Which it would, no matter how many times you claim Lyfotech won't find out. You obviously don't know Lyfotech."

Trust me, I know Lyfotech all too well, and the last thing I want is for them to find out I'm talking to you. When we meet, everything that is said will be kept off the books, under the table.

Soon, another message back.

"If you don't want Lyfotech knowing that you've been in contact with me, then that ship has already sailed," I read, and my heart fell into my stomach. "I know that Hermann has his IT people tracking the IP address of anyone who reaches out to me... Son of a bitch, that's how they found us!"

"What's an 'IP address?'" Mei asked.

“You don’t know what an IP address is?” Ray asked with a scoff as he crossed his arms. “Who doesn’t know what an IP Address is? I mean, I totally do, but Doug? Do you wanna explain it to Mei here?”

“Uh-huh,” I said with a knowing sigh. “It’s basically a signal your device sends to the internet to connect, which also means it gives off information about your location. It’s not one hundred accurate but in a relatively rural area that’s all they need. I don’t know how he does it exactly, but apparently Doctor Lyfe is monitoring Haggart’s social media, e-mail, and all that shit, and then using that to track the location of anyone who reaches out to him.”

“And you humans are... okay with that?” Charlotte mused.

“It’s technically illegal,” I said. “You can get into biggggg trouble if you track somebody’s personal location using their IP address. Then again, Lyfetechnology never let anything like ‘legality’ get in their way before, so why would they care about this?”

“Should you, like, stop messaging Haggart?” Ray gasped. “I really don’t wanna fight off Big Red again.”

“I’ll just download a VPN app,” I explained as I went to the app store. “That said, I think we should get the fuck out of this area ASAP, since Lyfetechnologies cronies could already be on their way. Ray? Do you mind driving while I sit back here and keep trying to chip away at Haggart?”

“Can do.” My mutated friend nodded.

I got up out of the driver’s seat and jumped over into the passenger’s seat as Ray came up and got behind the wheel. When I saw Ray crack his knuckles and then unsuccessfully try and try again to adjust the seat, I decided it was probably best for me to buckle my seatbelt.

Ray twisted the keys and brought the engine to life, then he put the van in reverse and backed out of the spot we were in. He hit the brake a few times as he tried to get acquainted with driving the van, and we were in a cycle of move three feet, stop, then lurch backward again for about a minute. Finally Ray put it into drive, and we were off.

The VPN app had finished downloading by then, so I opened it up and set it so that it was always on when I was using my phone. Sure, this didn’t completely solve the issue about Lyfe knowing I was talking to Terry Haggart, but now at least when he got the notification, it would say that we were

contacting him from Norway or somewhere halfway across the globe. Once I got that figured out and thought it was safe to continue, I wrote Haggart another message.

Okay, so maybe he already knows I've reached out to you, but now I've got that situation figured out with a VPN, so we're all good. I promise you, I'm not from Lyfetechnology or the government, and I definitely don't want to steal Lyfe's industry secrets. I just want to meet up and talk confidentially.

It took a little bit longer this time since I hadn't answered immediately, but soon I saw the little ellipses once more. When his message appeared, I read it out loud for the group to hear.

"If you want me to trust you whatsoever, I need to know who you are, and what exactly you're looking for with this conversation," I said.

"Damn, dude," Ray grumbled. "This guy really drives a hard bargain."

"I wouldn't do it if I were you," Charlotte said.

"Why not?" Mei asked.

"Because he's asking you to give up your entire plan," the spider-woman pointed out. "Who's to say he won't go

straight to Doctor Lyfe after you tell him?”

“Because like you said, he’s afraid of Lyfe,” I replied. “Plus, everything I’ve read says that he didn’t leave the company on good terms, and he hasn’t been mentioned in any of their press releases or blogs since that day. I’d imagine he has nothing but disdain for Lyfotech, but he’s afraid of what they’ll do to him if he spills the beans.”

“I would be, too,” Mei said. “Doctor Lyfe seems like a very evil man who will do anything to get his way.”

“What do you think, Ray?” I asked. “You’re the only one who hasn’t given me their opinion.”

“Oh, I give out my information over social media all the time,” he said with a wave of his hand. “So that’s no biggie.”

“But what about Haggart? Do you think he can be trusted if I tell him the full story?”

“We’re driving through the middle of nowhere in South Carolina without any sort of clue where we’re actually going,” he said. “I don’t know what you’ve got to lose, dude.”

He had a point. Lyfotech already knew we were headed south, and they knew I’d reached out to Terry Haggart. They’d be smart enough to put two and two together, which meant

there really wasn't anything I could tell Haggart that Lyfetech didn't already know.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “I’ll tell him the story, but not all at once. What’s the worst that can happen? We’ve already pissed off one of the most powerful men in the United States and have an indestructible mutant crab on our asses...”

“He’s not indestructible,” Charlotte said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Really?” Ray asked. “Because I don’t even think a freaking jackhammer could break through that thing’s shell.”

“Anything can be destroyed if you try hard enough. We just haven’t figured out its weakness.”

“I’m not sure that thing has any weaknesses,” Mei frowned. “Even your spit doesn’t seem to do anything against it.”

“I can break him...” Charlotte said with a sly tone. “I can break anybody.”

I hoped so. In the meantime, I typed back a message to Terry Haggart that would hopefully make him more sympathetic to our plight.

I'm just gonna come clean with you, Mister Haggart... My name is Doug Roth, and my friend used to work at Lyfetechnology as a night shift janitor. One night when he was cleaning he found a vial of some strange liquid and brought it home. I don't know why he thought that would be a good idea, but his curiosity got the better of him I guess. The problem is we lost the serum, but Lyfetechnology still wants it back, and we have no idea what to do. That's why I'm reaching out to see if you're able to help us in any way, shape, or form.

I pressed the send button and watched as the message appeared in the chat box, then I saw the ellipses on the other side.

Lyfetechnology is after you? Why do you want my help?

"Fuck," I grumbled. "Maybe this wasn't the best idea."

"Why?" Mei asked. "What's he saying?"

"He's asking if Lyfetechnology is after us."

I typed back another message, though this time I tried to be a bit more vague.

We want your help because we don't know where else to turn... We've tried to talk to Doctor Lyfe himself, but he won't believe us.

Another few seconds, another ping.

“That sounds like Hermann,” I read aloud. “That doesn’t answer my question of what you want from me.”

I thought you two were old friends? Maybe if you talked to him, he’d listen?

This time, there was an extremely long lull before the next message appeared. When it finally showed up in my messenger box, it was a fairly lengthy one.

We are anything but friends, Doug. The less I say about Hermann Lyfe, the better, and the less likely I am to face legal action. If I’m being completely upfront, I still don’t think you are telling me the full story. Why do you need to meet me? If you wanted to talk, you could just ask me what you need to ask through here.

“He’s definitely not buying what I’m saying,” I sighed.

“Then tell him everything,” Charlotte suggested. “After all, he’s just a mere human. If he tries anything stupid, we’ll just march right down to his home, and I’ll melt his face off.”

Mei’s jaw fell agape as she looked over at Charlotte with a horrified expression, but the spider-woman was all smirk.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” I chuckled as I typed up the next message.

Charlotte was right. I needed to just rip the Band-Aid off and tell Haggart the full truth.

We don’t have the serum anymore because my cat drank it, and it mutated her into a human-feline hybrid. Apparently it was the first time this serum has worked the way it’s supposed to, now Lyfotech wants to take her back to the lab to experiment on and dissect her. We’ve been on the run for days, and we’re desperate for any help we can get. We thought that maybe you would be able to offer us some advice or give us information about how we can keep her protected.

I sent the message, and almost immediately another set of ellipses appeared on the screen.

You’re on the run from Lyfotech? And you’re still alive after multiple days? Now I know you’re pulling my leg.

“He still doesn’t believe me,” I sighed, then I went back to typing.

This is the honest truth. Lyfotech has almost gotten us a handful of times, but we’ve been able to slip away each time.

Without your help, though, I don't think we can last too much longer.

“Talk to me, Doug,” Ray said in an overly stern voice.

“I dunno,” I said as I leaned back and rubbed my eyes.

“I don't think he's going for this at all.”

Another ping.

So you want me to call Hermann Lyfe and ask him to back off from the people who stole his property? Or do you want me to offer you refuge? Either way, I value my life too much for that.

So Haggart was well aware of all the shady shit Lyfetechnology was up to, and he knew Lyfe wasn't above getting his hands dirty to keep his secrets. Still, this wasn't helping the situation at all. What we wanted from Haggart was his advice on how to bring down Lyfetechnology via blackmail, weaknesses in their business structure, illegal shit they'd covered up, or shit like that. Hell, at this point I'd even be alright with learning you could blow up their HQ by shooting a torpedo into a small exhaust port.

I just wanted something from Haggart that would give us an advantage over Lyfe and his company.

I'd never ask you to risk your life, which is why I am suggesting we meet somewhere public. Lyfe wouldn't dare try anything out in broad daylight, surrounded by people.

I waited a few seconds and got another response.

You really don't know Hermann Lyfe, do you?

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I asked as I showed my friends the message.

"I think it means Doctor Lyfe would be bold enough to kill you both out in broad daylight, surrounded by people," Charlotte said.

Now I was starting to get a little annoyed.

Aren't you tired of living in Lyfe's shadow? All that hard work you put into building up the company with him, and now he's the most powerful man in the United States while you're a retiree hanging around in South Carolina. I know you signed all those NDAs and are afraid of what Doctor Lyfe can do, but I've seen your research. You're brilliant, Mister Haggart, and I can imagine just how angry you are that your old partner is taking all the credit for what you built. Wouldn't it feel nice to work together and bring down Lyeftech once and

for all? Not only would it be better for both of us, but it'd make the world a better place too.

Time seemed to freeze as I awaited Terry Haggart's response, and eventually it popped up in my messenger.

I believe this conversation is done, Mister Roth. Please do not contact me again.

"Shit!" I hissed. "That didn't work the way I wanted it to."

"Message him back and say you're sorry!" Mei gasped. "And that you'll give him treats and scratch his belly if he forgives you."

"The fuck?" Ray asked.

"It's what Doug always did for me back when I was a cat," she shrugged.

"Don't say you're sorry," Charlotte scoffed. "Message him back and say that he's just made a dangerous enemy, and that when we find him we're going to tear his innards out through his throat."

"Let's maybe not do either of those," I sighed.

Then, I remembered that there was one thing I hadn't mentioned to Haggart yet. I didn't know if it would make a

difference, but at this point I was desperate and willing to try anything. So, I frantically typed my message and prayed that Haggart hadn't shut his app completely at this point.

I've cracked the formula for the superhuman serum.

I pressed the send button, then I held my breath as I waited to see if Haggart would respond. There was a tense silence in the van as we continued to drive, and you could cut the tension with a knife.

Then, my phone pinged, and I saw that Haggart had responded.

I'm listening.

"Yes!" I fist-pumped with glee. "I think I've got him back on the line."

Obviously I'm not going to tell you the secret over LinkedIn... But I know how to make Lyfotech's serum stable. In fact, I tested it out on myself and got great results, and if we meet I can prove it to you.

Never in my life had I been so engrossed with three little dots on my screen, but as they reappeared I sat there and tapped my leg impatiently. Then, the answer appeared.

It was a series of two numbers.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Mei asked.

“They’re coordinates.” I said with a large grin. “He just sent us the coordinates to where he wants to meet.”

A wave of pure relief washed over me as I fell back into my seat and let out a long, happy sigh. I responded to Haggart with a simple “thank you, see you soon,” then I placed my phone on the dashboard and rested my head in my hands.

Though we’d just scored a meeting with Terry Haggart, there was still a lot of shit going on at the moment. I still wasn’t sure if I could fully trust the dude, or if he was just gonna capture us and hand us over to Doctor Lyfe. Or, even worse, maybe he’d capture us and then run a bunch of experiments on us himself.

Still, it was a lead, and that was more than anything we had at the moment.

Next stop? Terry Haggart’s location.

Chapter 9

“So where exactly does Mister Haggart want to meet us?” Mei asked from the backseat of the van as we drove down state highway twenty-five. “I don’t quite understand how a pair of numbers tells us where we need to go.”

“It’s actually pretty simple,” Ray said with a confident smile. “You just punch those numbers into a GPS on your phone and voila. It takes you right there.”

“But how does the phone know where to take you?” Mei pressed.

“Uhhhh... It just does,” Ray said as the confidence in his voice deflated. “I think it’s got something to do with the magnetic fields of the Earth or some shit like that.”

“Not trying to be a know-it-all or anything,” I said from behind the driver’s seat. “But you’re waaaaay off. The numbers actually represent the longitude and latitude of the location on a map. So, like, picture the globe has this giant invisible grid that wraps all the way around it. Latitudes measure north and south and start at ‘zero’ at the equator of

the globe, while the longitude starts in London and goes east and west.”

“What are London and the Equator?” Charlotte asked. “They must be very important places if the entirety of human civilization is willing to build a map around their locations.”

“The fuck if I know why they’re special,” I said. “The equator’s important because it’s the point in the Earth that’s closest to the sun.”

“And London?” Mei asked.

“It’s important because...” I stopped and shrugged. “Well, because the people that came up with the whole system were British, and they wanted to leave their mark on it, I guess.”

There was a long pause from the back of the van, then Charlotte scoffed.

“Humans are strange,” she sighed. “And apparently very vain.”

“No shit they’ve got veins,” Ray said. “That’s what keeps the blood flowing through our bodies and keeps us alive.”

“Not ‘veins,’ dude,” I said. “‘Vain.’ You know, like that Carly Simon song?”

“Ohhhh,” he said. “Of course.”

Ray started to hum *You’re So Vain* to himself as I glanced back in the rearview mirror and tried to continue the conversation with Mei and Charlotte.

“That pretty much sums up the entirety of human history,” I said. “Vanity. And money. And the desire for power.”

“It certainly describes Doctor Lyfe,” Mei harrumphed. “And he is the worst human I’ve ever met.”

“The crazy thing is, there are probably worse humans out there,” I replied. “Believe it or not, Lyfe isn’t even in the top ten most fucked-up people if you look back at all the horrible shit that’s been done over the years. He’s just the money-hungry asshole we gotta deal with right here and now.”

“What about this Terry Haggart?” Charlotte asked. “You all seem to think he can be trusted, but I am fairly skeptical. Where do those ‘latitude and longitude’ numbers actually take us? For all we know, we could be walking straight into a trap.”

“Especially since you’ve told him you’ve got the formula down,” Ray added. “The last thing I want is for you to get captured and then tortured until he gets the formula for the serum out of you... A car battery clamped to your testicles would suck, but it’d get you to talk really fast.”

“I don’t think Haggart has it in him to do something that nefarious,” I chuckled. “If he did, I doubt he would have dipped out of Lyfetechnology in the first place.”

“Maybe.” Ray shrugged. “For all we know, he might have left over money or a power struggle or something. Fuck, dude... What if Haggart and Lyfe were, like, both fighting for the love of the same woman and Lyfe won? Then Haggart left the company because he was so depressed and angry?”

“That’s definitely a possibility,” I said. “Probably the least-likely option out of all of them, but it’s an option nonetheless.”

“Where are the coordinates taking us, Doug?” Charlotte asked again. “An exact location might give us an idea of what Haggart is planning.”

“I checked it out, and it’s a parking garage just outside of Augusta, Georgia, on the South Carolina side of the border.”

“A parking garage?” Ray asked. “Nothing good ever happens in a parking garage, dude. Well, other than that time me and my prom date drove into one and then got frisky in the backseat... But that was just one time! Parking garages are where shady deals go down and all that.”

“I don’t think Haggart’s gonna try anything,” I said. “I think he’s probably just scared shitless and doesn’t want us going anywhere near his house or his work, just in case we’re really secret agents or in case Lyfotech has people tailing us. A neutral, inconspicuous place like a parking garage is perfect for meeting up with people you really don’t think you can trust right away, so I don’t think there’s anything insidious about the situation.”

“And if there is, what exactly is he going to do?” Charlotte added. “He is one man, and we are three... No, four mutated individuals. In the worst-case scenario, I’ll just—”

“Melt his face,” Mei sighed. “We know, Charlotte. You really want to melt somebody’s face.”

The decision was made that we would meet Terry Haggart, and if things went sideways, then we could always put him in his place or fight our way out if it was an ambush. I didn’t think he was that kind of person, but then again, it was

hard to tell from the scant amount of public information I'd found about him. There were a few articles from the early days of his partnership with Doctor Lyfe, and that was it.

There was really only one way to find out who the real Terry Haggart was, and I just hoped the answer wasn't a good friend of Dr. Lyfe.

We drove on for a couple hours more, and we stayed on the smaller state highways the entire time. Now that I had a VPN app that scrambled my location and the bear-mutant was gone, it was going to be difficult for Lyfetech to find us again.

I had zero doubt in my mind that they absolutely could and would find us again at some point, but at least now it wouldn't be easy, and it wouldn't be because of anything the four of us did. I was sure Doctor Lyfe had his cronies scouring the entire state of South Carolina looking for us, and he probably had people watching Haggart's house and work, but they didn't have the slightest clue where we were actually going.

We only stopped a handful of times to get out of the vehicle, stretch our legs, and take a bathroom break, but otherwise we drove just over the speed limit until we reached the coordinates Haggart had sent me in his message. The

skyline of Augusta, Georgia stood tall in the distance just on the other side of the Savannah River, which also acted as the de facto natural border between this part of South Carolina and the Peach State. The signs that led us here referred to this part of the state as North Augusta, which had the appearance of a small town that you'd expect to see just outside the limits of a large city.

Most of the buildings had the same sort of architecture as Anderson, with red bricks and white pillars that were built to be reminiscent of the days of yore. Most of the structures in this part of the state were only three or four stories tall at maximum, which only added to the quaintness of the area. Eventually, we found the parking garage in question, which was right off of Railroad Avenue and next to some ritzy golf club, and I slowed down and pulled into one of the roadside parallel parking spaces for a second.

“This is it,” I said as I pointed across the road to the structure. “I’m gonna send Haggart a message letting him know we’re here, and asking him where exactly he wants to meet so we don’t just aimlessly wander around for another twenty minutes. Is everybody still feeling good about this situation?”

“I don’t know if those are the words I’d use, dude,” Ray chuckled. “But I don’t have goosebumps or bubblegut if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Bubblegut?” Mei asked.

“Yeah, ya know,” Ray said and waved his hand over his stomach. “The gurgling intestines you get when you’re super nervous about something? Or when you drink three-month expired milk from the fridge? It’s the same feeling.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever had that,” Charlotte said with a smirk. “Probably because I do not get nervous.”

“Bulllllshhhiiiiittttt,” Ray scoffed. “You can’t tell me you weren’t even the slightest bit nervous when we defeated you back at that mechanic’s shop. You thought we were gonna kill you, after all.”

“Please.” Charlotte rolled her eyes. “I knew that you wouldn’t kill me. And if you tried—”

“You’d melt our faces off,” Ray said and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, we get it.”

Charlotte shot Ray a look that could peel fresh paint, while Mei just put her hand over her mouth and stifled a giggle.

“What about you, Mei?” I asked as I turned around in my seat. “Cats have a sixth sense about this stuff, right? How are you feeling?”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything strange at the moment,” Mei said, and her tail continued to flick back and forth behind her. “I feel very calm at the moment.”

“Then I guess we’ll proceed.” I nodded.

I pulled up my LinkedIn app, went to the messenger and began to type away. I told Haggart that we had arrived, and that we were confused as to where we were actually supposed to go from here.

Almost instantly the three little ellipses appeared in response, then his message appeared.

Fourth floor. North end of building. I’m currently one of four cars parked here right now.

“What’s it say?” Mei asked.

“He’s on the fourth floor of the building, and he’s waiting for us,” I said.

I took a deep breath before I put the van back into drive and pulled out of the parking space. We headed to the entrance of the garage, took a parking ticket, and then waited for the

little arm to lift up before we drove on through. There were quite a few vehicles on the first floor of the structure, and I felt a wave of paranoia as we drove through.

I didn't see any obvious Lyfotech vehicles as we passed, though I doubted they'd actually have the company logo plastered onto their side even if they were. But there was only one van, parked near the back and bearing the logo of a catering company, and the rest of the cars and SUVs all looked empty. So we continued up onto the second floor, then the third, and each level we went up had fewer and fewer cars.

"Why's he making us go to the fourth floor, and not the very top?" Ray asked. "The rate this is going, there ain't gonna be anybody up there."

"There's also no ceiling up there," I said. "If Haggart is legit, and I think he is, then he's probably paranoid about our meeting getting recorded by a Lyfotech drone or having one of Doctor Lyfe's snipers shooting him from afar."

"So you think he is meeting us in good faith?" Mei asked.

"I do," I said. "But we gotta be prepared either way."

"Awww," Charlotte said with a disappointed tone.

“There will be plenty of faces to melt,” I chuckled. “Just not Haggart’s.”

As we pulled up the ramp and onto the fourth floor, I could see what Terry Haggart was talking about. There were only four vehicles parked in this lot, and they were spread out into different sections. There was a white Tesla Model S hooked up to a charging station on the West side of the building, while a silver Dodge Durango and a black Kia Sportage were parked about three spots apart from each other over on the South side. All the way over on the east side of the lot was a single blue Mustang that looked like it was a newer model, and I was sure they’d chosen to park up here all alone because it posed less of a risk of getting scratched.

Over on the north side of the lot was a red Chevy Camaro that was ripped straight out of the nineties, complete with the blocky headlight compartment and the rear spoiler that was all the rage back in those days.

“That’s what he drives?” Ray whistled. “Man... Lyfe must have really screwed him out of a lot of money, huh?”

“Or he just likes to collect classic cars,” I said. “That’s a pretty common hobby for rich dudes, you know.”

“Classic?” Ray scoffed. “That thing is from the nineties, dude.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off. “The nineties were thirty years ago. Those things are classics now.”

There was a moment of silence, and I could practically hear the sound of Ray’s childhood dying in the passenger seat. When I looked over at my friend, he was just sitting there with a wide-eyed expression on his face and pursed lips, but he didn’t say a word.

I pulled our van up to a spot about four spaces to the left of Haggart’s vehicle, though when I killed the engine I looked over and saw that the Camaro was empty.

Fuck. Was this our worst fears come true? Had Lyfetechn already gotten here before us and taken out Terry, or was the guy a fucking plant all along?

“Uhhhhh, I don’t see anybody here, dude,” Ray said with a gulp.

“Perhaps he is sleeping in his car?” Mei suggested.
“And that is why you cannot see him?”

“Maybe, but why would he be sleeping?” I said. “He just answered me.”

“Do you think this is a trap?” Charlotte asked, and she had a somewhat hopeful tone.

“You sound like you want it to be a trap!” Mei gasped.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” I sighed. “But we need to keep our eyes peeled and be ready for anything.”

I pulled out the inhaler of serum from my pocket, slid it into my mouth, and then gave it two quick puffs. The second I inhaled the second bit of mist, I felt the muscles in my body start to tingle, and my heart rate shot up as the adrenaline in my body went into overdrive.

Next, I slid the inhaler back into my pocket, walked into the back of the van, and grabbed the shotgun out of the compartment underneath the floor. I slung it over my shoulder before I gave all my friends a nod, and then I walked over to the door and gently pushed it open. The four of us exited through the back of the van and cautiously started walking toward the empty Camaro.

Sure enough, when I got up to the window, I saw that Terry Haggart was nowhere to be found. Through the window I could see signs that somebody had been in there recently, from a few notebooks strewn about in the backseat to a couple

of fast food wrappers that had been hastily tossed onto the floor in the back.

“Oh, no...” Charlotte said with a sly grin. “It looks like we’re all alone, looking into this empty vehicle with our backs turned to the rest of the garage...”

“What are you doing?” Mei hissed.

“Making our attackers think we’re completely oblivious to what is going on,” Charlotte whispered.

Mei and Charlotte continued to bicker as I started to look around the rest of the parking garage to see if there were any signs of life, or any clues that could help us figure out what exactly had happened to the driver of the Camaro. From what I could tell, the rest of the vehicles on this fourth floor were empty as well, and I didn’t hear any footsteps or see anybody hanging around in the open space.

“Mei?” I whispered. “Do you think your ears could pick up the sound of anybody else who was up here?”

“Maybe,” she said as one ear twitched. “Let me try...”

The cat-woman stepped forward as her ears perked up on her head, and she frowned as she turned her noggin back and forth like a radar dish as she scanned the area for any signs

of life. After a few seconds, though, Ray let out an annoyed sigh.

“Fuck this,” Ray grumbled. “I gotta better way to figure out if somebody is out here.”

“I don’t hear anybody, though,” Mei said, though Ray was already moving.

Ray cracked his knuckles as he approached the Camaro, and then he cleared his throat loudly.

“Alright,” he spoke in a booming voice. “I guess I’m just gonna smash through the window of this thing, then we can look through it for clues. Actually, I’m not gonna smash the window. I’ll just rip off the door. That’ll be way easier.”

I smiled devilishly as I realized what Ray was doing, and I decided to play along with his facade.

“Great idea, dude,” I said. “We can be long gone before the owner gets back. If he even comes back.”

Ray walked over to the door of the Camaro and grabbed the handle. He gave me a thumbs, drew a deep breath, and took one last look around the garage.

“Alrighty, on three... One... Two...” he started to count down and then up again.

“Wait!” an older, taut voice declared. “That thing is older than my first marriage!”

The four of us all turned toward the direction of the voice and saw a middle-aged man stumble out from behind a nearby pillar with his hands up in the air and a horrified expression on his face. His brown hair was graying, thin, and wiry, and it jutted out like a bird’s nest from the top of his head. His square jaw jutted out as well, though he was so tense I worried his muscles were gonna snap in two.

The man’s eyes were a deep hazel, and were magnified by the rounded glasses he wore over them. He had bags under his eyes the size of Texas, and he had the first faint lines of wrinkles all over his face. His nose was fairly slim, though it widened out into a square shape as it traveled down his face and ended just above the large cleft above his lips.

Since we were in one of the wealthiest parts of the country, the man naturally wore what could only be described as “retired father” attire. He had on a pair of khaki pants that were loosely secured to his waist with a black belt and a simple yellow-and-white long-sleeve shirt with a checkerboard pattern on his torso. The dude had on a pair of simple tan

loafers with gray socks, and when he held up his hands I clearly saw a watch on one hand and a bracelet on the other.

That was definitely Terry Haggart.

“Don’t take another step!” Charlotte hissed. “Unless you want to know what your own skull looks like.”

Haggart let out a gasp as he froze in place.

“Terry Haggart, I presume?” I asked.

“Y-yes. I told you to meet me here, didn’t I?” he asked in a flustered tone.

“You did,” I agreed. “So why were you hiding?”

Haggart let out a little scoff before he shook his head and half-smiled.

“Is that a legitimate question?” he asked. “You seem like a smart man, Doug... Now why would I possibly be skeptical of a person who just randomly messaged me out of the blue and wanted to talk about a part of my life that I thought was far behind me? A time of my life that could potentially land me in legal and or mortal danger?”

“Point taken.” I nodded. “Charlotte, stand down.”

“Fine,” the spider-woman huffed. “But if he tries anything stupid...”

Charlotte made a slight growl as she lunged forward a step, and Haggart let out a yelp as he stumbled backwards and just about lost his footing.

“Don’t mind her,” I chuckled and shook my head. “She hasn’t killed anything in a few hours, so she’s dying to get that itch scratched.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Haggart asked. “Who are these people, Doug? You said you had friends and one of them was a mutant cat-woman, but you’ve also got some sort of deadly assassin woman and... and whatever he’s supposed to be?”

“I’m Ray, thank you very much,” Ray said with a frown.

“You’re a Manta Ray?” Haggart asked with a raised eyebrow. “You don’t look like one of those, though perhaps I can see it through the wideness of your body and the strange, almost fish-like glistening skin.”

“I’m a human, dude!” Ray protested.

“Ray took a version of the serum that wasn’t stable,” I explained. “So he got the super-human strength and reflexes, but it kinda fucked with his IQ and appearance a little bit.”

“And her?” Terry Haggart asked as he pointed at Charlotte. “What’s her story?”

Charlotte and I locked eyes, then I gave her a nod to let her know it was okay. The dark-haired woman reached up, slid her hands underneath the opening of her leather jacket, and then slipped it over her shoulders. As it fell away, her second and third pair of bare arms were put on display, and she crossed them over her body as Haggart’s eyes bugged out of his head.

“I’m guessing you don’t need any explanation on what she used to be,” I said.

“My God...” Haggart sputtered. “So Hermann really did move on to testing the serum on living subjects, even though its chemical composition wasn’t stable yet. I suppose that shouldn’t be a surprise, considering he was always a tad ambitious and impatient.”

“That’s not the way I’d describe him,” Charlotte growled. “He’s a monster.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Haggart huffed. “Why do you think I got out of Lyfetechn when I did?”

“So does that mean you don’t agree with Doctor Lyfe?” Mei asked.

“Of course I don’t,” Haggart replied. “Hermann was always one to bend the rules and push the boundaries of ethicality, but by the end of my tenure he was suggesting things that would make Vlad the Impaler say Jesus Christ.”

“You’ll help us, then?” Mei smiled widely and bounced up and down on her boots.

“Help you?” he sputtered. “Help you do what? Take down Lyfetechn?”

“That’s the idea, man,” Ray said.

Haggart tilted his head to the side as his hazel eyes narrowed, and then he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose like he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

“Wait... Hermann sent you, didn’t he?” he said with an amused scoff. “He wants to see if I’ll turn on him, so he’ll finally have an excuse to take me outta the equation.”

“With all due respect,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “Why the fuck would Hermann Lyfe need an excuse to kill

you? From what I can tell, he just does whatever the fuck he wants and finds a way to cover it up later anyway.”

“Because it was his sister’s dying wish that we get along,” Haggart said. “The sister who also happened to be my late wife, Denise.”

“You were married to Lyfe’s sister?” I asked in surprise. “Because that would actually explain a whole lot.”

“Why else do you think I’m still alive?” he sighed. “Any other business partners that Hermann has had who willingly leave his company either end up dead, or at the very least, financially ruined. Yet, my dear brother-in-law has allowed me to live out my life in relative peace, and even let me get another job after I left his company.”

“So what?” Charlotte scoffed. “You’re trying to tell us Doctor Lyfe is letting you live because of some honor code? He doesn’t have any honor.”

“He does not,” Haggart agreed. “But he had one soft spot, and one soft spot only. His beloved sister. She wanted the two of us to get along after she passed, and this is the best he can do.”

“Not committing murder,” I said with a sarcastic whistle. “What a guy.”

“I’m putting his love for his sister to the test by even meeting with you, Doug Roth,” Haggart said sharply.

“Hermann already knows that you have contacted me, and I am sure he’s got his cronies posted at my home to see if you show up. If he knew I was actually meeting with you here and telling you all of this about him, then I’ve got a bad feeling he would pull the ask forgiveness, not permission card with his sister and silence me for good.”

“Then why did you meet with us?” Mei asked. “From what it sounds like, you’re taking a major risk as well. So what’s in it for you?”

“The serum,” I said with a smirk. “You want to know how I stabilized it.”

“You’re damn right, I do.” Haggart nodded. “Hermann and I worked on that formula for nearly a decade together, and he has apparently been working on it in the decades since. Yet we were never able to come up with anything that was stable enough for testing on live subjects, let alone anything that would actually achieve the desired results without horrific side effects.”

“Well, I did.” I nodded.

“Forgive me for being a bit skeptical, but you look like any other human being to me.” He folded his hands across his chest and pursed his lips as he studied me.

“Well, yeah, that’s kinda the point of the serum, isn’t it?” I replied. “To make superhumans that can blend into the normal world?”

“For all I know, you could be pulling my leg, and you haven’t actually cracked the formula,” he said. “Maybe you want me to do your dirty work for you and help you figure it out. If that’s the case, I’m afraid that I will not be of much use, considering I’ve not been—”

Before Haggart could finish his sentence, I walked over to the back of his Camaro and crouched down. I placed both my hands on the underside of the vehicle, gently stood back up, and began to lift it with all my might. The car lifted with ease, and I just smiled to myself as I took it about four feet off the ground and then softly placed it back onto the pavement. When I turned around, Haggart’s jaw was on the fucking floor.

“Do you believe me now?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“My God...” the brown-haired man sputtered. “You have figured out the formula!”

“That’s because Doug is a genius!” Mei said as she bounced up and down happily.

“Indeed, my dear,” Haggart said as he nodded. “But how? What is your secret?”

“Now comes the part where I get to be skeptical and paranoid,” I said with a frown. “How do I know you’re not the one playing us for fools? How do I know you’re not gonna turn around the second you have the formula, run to Doctor Lyfe, and have us killed?”

“Because I am not a monster,” Haggart declared.

“I’m gonna need a little bit more than that, dude,” I replied.

“Please,” he said and sighed. “I despise Hermann with every fiber of my being. To this day, I still don’t understand how an angel like Denise and that piece of garbage came from the same bloodline.”

“Yet you worked with him for decades,” I said.

“Of course I did!” he snapped. “I may not have enjoyed his company, but he was still my brother-in-law, and he was

still one of the most brilliant scientific minds of the twenty-first century. Only an idiot wouldn't take him up on the offer to help him build his company from the ground up."

"I still don't think that's good enough, my man," Ray said.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked sarcastically. "Publicly denounce Hermann? Because that would be quite literally suicide."

"So is helping us," I said. "But here you are."

Haggart frowned and slumped his shoulders, then he hung his head and sighed.

"It's the scientist in me, my boy," he said. "My curious mind cannot ignore the sheer prospect of a discovery this revolutionary, even if the association would be detrimental to my career and my life."

"So you will help us?" Mei asked again as she looked back and forth between us.

"That depends," he said as he tapped his chin. "I am still not sure what exactly you need me for if you have the formula."

“Two things,” I said. “You know Hermann Lyfe better than anyone else alive today, so if we work together, we stand a better chance at surviving his onslaught of mutants and goons. Also, from the very little I actually could find out about you, it sounds like you’re every bit as brilliant as Doctor Lyfe. I’m a scientist at heart too, Terry, and the prospect of perfecting the serum with you makes me giddy to even think about.”

“I thought you had already perfected the serum?” he said.

“I’ve stabilized it,” I explained. “So I can use it on myself without becoming deformed, but currently, I can only get its effects to work temporarily. There’s still a bit of work to do if I want to create something that is permanent, which would be the scientific invention of the century. Think about it. We could use this serum to cure terminally ill patients, or to help people born with physical deformities become regular humans.”

“It’s funny,” Haggart said with a slight chuckle. “When Hermann and I were working on the serum, he always talked about its commercial uses. He talked about how it would secure Half-Lyfe all sorts of multi-billion dollar government

contracts, or how we could make a fortune selling it on the black market or to athletes who wanted to get a competitive advantage. It was always all about the money with Hermann.”

“Well, it’s not with me,” I said. “I mean, yeah, I totally would like to be a multimillionaire someday, but I also think it’s horrible that Lyfe wants to withhold something this important from people who actually need it.”

“You remind me of a younger version of myself, Doug Roth,” Haggart declared. “Perhaps a bit more handsome and ambitious, but I believe we would have gotten along quite well back in the day.”

“So is that a yes?” I asked.

“Yes.” Haggart nodded. “My brother-in-law be damned, I will work with you to perfect this serum. If we are going to do that, though, you’re going to need a much better lab than what you’ve got in your van.”

“How did you know that was a mobile lab?” Mei gasped.

“I can recognize one of Hermann’s vans from a mile away, even if it has been repainted.” He shrugged and glanced

over his shoulder. “They’re hanging around my house at all times of the day and night, after all.”

“So what do you suggest, then?” I asked. “It’s not like I’ve got a permanent lab that we can go to with better equipment or anything.”

“No... But I do.” he said with a smile. “How would you all like to come back with me and work in my lab?”

“I thought you said Lyfetechn was watching your house?” I asked.

“They are,” Haggart chuckled. “Or, at least, they’re watching the house in Summerville where they think I reside. My actual home and lab are where I go to work every day, and they are none the wiser.”

“Clever.” I smirked.

“I’d like to think so,” he said with a hint of smugness. “Now, shall we? We’ve got a lot of work to do, my boy.”

As Haggart walked over to the door of his Camaro, the rest of my friends looked at me cautiously.

“Do you still trust him?” Charlotte asked.

“He seems genuine,” I said. “I think we should take him up on his offer.”

“And if he’s lying?” the spider-woman asked.

“Then you can melt his face,” I chuckled. “But I don’t think he is.”

“Then let’s go!” Ray said happily. “I’ve always wanted to see the inside of a lab when it’s actually being used, and not in the middle of the night when it’s abandoned and filled with messes beyond your wildest imagination.”

The four of us loaded back into our stolen van, then I jumped behind the wheel and started the engine. At that point, I was pretty sure we could trust Terry Haggart, though I was also a bit nervous about what would happen next.

If all went well, we might finally crack the code on the serum and figure out how to cripple Lyfetechnology in the process.

If things went wrong, though?

I didn’t even want to think about that.

For now, we just needed to get to Haggart’s lab and go from there.

Chapter 10

“I feel lied to, man,” Ray chuckled from the back of the van as we drove down the highway. “Growing up we were always told about Stranger Danger and how we weren’t supposed to trust people we just met, but now we’re totally following this strange dude back to his house.”

“Not his house,” I said with an air of sarcasm. “His secret laboratory that’s off the radar of anyone else but himself. Totally safer.”

“Oh, totally.” I didn’t need to look at my old friend to know that Ray had rolled his eyes as he spoke.

“I’m still not convinced he is to be trusted,” Charlotte said. “His entire life seems to have been based on lies and deception, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he has more lies in that head of his.”

“I’m sure he does,” I said. “Everybody has secrets, Charlotte, but that doesn’t mean you can’t trust him.”

“I don’t think she trusts anybody, Doug,” Mei said.

“I do not.” The spider-woman confirmed. “Which is a whole lot better than your philosophy.”

“Which is?” I asked in a puzzled voice.

“Instantly loving and trusting everyone you meet,” the spider-woman huffed. “That’s a very dangerous way to live your life, you know.”

“How?” Mei asked as her ears moved back against her head. “That is how I ended up meeting Doug and Ray, and I’d say that has been a wonderful development!”

“You got lucky,” Charlotte replied. “For every Doug and Ray, there are two or three people more like Doctor Lyfe, who will do unspeakable things to you just so they can feel big. Or they just don’t give a damn at all about anyone else, and so they’ll trample you into the ground.”

“Man,” Ray leaned over and whispered into my ear. “Who hurt her?”

“Doctor Lyfe and his scientists,” I said. “Haven’t you been paying attention, dude?”

We continued to follow Terry Haggart in his red Camaro for nearly an hour and a half until the dude finally turned on his signal and indicated we were getting off the main road.

“Where the Hell are we, dude?” Ray asked as he looked around. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to this part of South

Carolina before...”

“See?” Charlotte said. “He’s deceiving us!”

“I think he’s taking us to his lab,” I said. “Which is in the middle of a smaller city as a cover. It’s actually pretty smart, if you ask me. Nobody’s going to think there’s a biotech lab in the middle of nowhere.”

Haggart drove along the main street a few more minutes before, finally, we started to pass through a part of the town that looked considerably more run-down than the rest. There was an abandoned train station, dilapidated factories, and industrial buildings that had been turned into canvases for graffiti artists. The area looked like it had been a booming part of the local economy whose time had long since passed. Haggart’s Camaro pulled around behind the abandoned train station, and as we came around the corner after him, we saw him exiting his vehicle.

The car was still on, but Haggart strolled up to one of the massive double doors on the building and opened them one by one. He then hopped back into his vehicle and drove inside, so we followed him. As we pulled into the building, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I was a little disappointed when it looked like an abandoned train station.

The ceiling had several large holes in it that had been patched together by simple plywood as had several parts of the wall. The steel beams that acted as the structural support of the building were rusted to the point where I was shocked they were still standing, while the concrete floors felt crumbled and uneven as we drove over them. The second both vehicles were inside, Haggart killed the engine of his Camaro, jumped out, and dashed back over to pull the doors shut behind us.

I followed suit and shut down the van, and after we all exchanged a quick look, we piled out of the van. Every sound we made echoed around the massive building, so for a moment, no one moved or said anything.

“Holy shit, dude,” Ray whispered with a twinge of fear. “This is how most horror movies start, you know.”

“Welcome to Orangeburg, South Carolina!” Terry Haggart proclaimed as he stuck out his arms. “A beautiful, small city that is home to multiple colleges and several industries, some of which have completely collapsed in this region of the country, including this place you are standing in right now!”

“Your lab is in an abandoned train station?” I asked.

“Technically, this was a place used to load and unload freight from the surrounding factories, but close enough. And yes, it is not the most beautiful or modern building in the world, but it is a place that nobody, including Lyfetechnology, would ever suspect as being my primary place of business.”

“Business?” Ray scoffed. “Are you selling drugs out of this place? Ohhhh, shit... Are you, like, a modern-day Walter White or something?”

“Perhaps ‘business’ isn’t the right word,” Haggart said. “‘Experiments’ might be more appropriate.”

“You run experiments here?” Charlotte growled.

“Is that on the forbidden word list as well?” Haggart chuckled nervously. “Because I can keep going until we find one that you like. I run tests here, I mix things here, I build things here... What do you want to hear?”

“You’ll have to excuse Charlotte,” I whispered to Terry. “She was one of Hermann’s mutants, and his scientists did some really horrible things to her when she was in his lab.”

“Charlotte, is it?” Haggart smiled. “That is quite a pretty name.”

Charlotte looked at the man with a confused expression as if she wasn't sure if she should be insulted or complimented by his comment. For a split second, it looked like she was going to crack a genuine smile, but then the spider-woman's lips turned into a deep frown.

“Doug is the one who gave me the name,” she said nonchalantly. “My true name is one that I cannot speak with a human tongue.”

“Is it that big of a secret?” Haggart asked with the same charm as before.

“No, I literally cannot make the correct sounds with human vocal chords that are needed to say my original name, so I've grown quite fond of Charlotte,” she sniffed. “It is much better than the name ‘Project Arach,’ which is what Lyfetechn always called me.”

“Cold, impersonal, and related to work,” Haggart said as he shook his head somberly. “It reeks of Hermann Lyfe, for sure.”

With that comment, I saw the edge of Charlotte's mouth slightly twitch, but she did not allow herself to smile.

“I guess I gotta be the one to say it,” Ray interjected. “But, like, where’s the lab? All I’m seeing here is a bunch of rusty metal and a building with more holes than Swiss cheese.”

“How rude of me,” the middle-aged man chuckled as he adjusted his glasses. “Let me take you to where the magic occurs.”

Haggart led us to the far end of the building, and as we drew closer to our destination, I started to notice the little touches that I assumed he’d added to make the place feel a bit more livable. The roof in this part of the building looked like it’d been legitimately repaired, and when I touched one of the support beams I let out an amused laugh.

They were new metal, and the rust felt like it had been painted on.

I also noticed some more subtle details, like how there was an air conditioner unit that was covered up with a faux concrete block to make it blend in, as well as a gray bean bag chair that was fashioned with a texture that made it look like it was just another bit of concrete rubble on the ground. There were cloth tarps in varying heights all over the place, and I

could only imagine what kind of goodies Haggart had hiding underneath them.

Terry Haggart grabbed the nearest tarp, pulled it away, and revealed a large metal canister that read N₂ with the two in subscript. He then pulled away another tarp and revealed a long table full of pipettes, vials, bunsen burners, tongs, and other various lab tools. Haggart continued to remove the tarps one by one, and before long, we were standing in the center of a massive makeshift laboratory that rivaled the kind I used in my college days.

“Wow,” I said. “This is impressive, Terry. How the fuck did you build all this without Lyfotech figuring out what you were doing?”

“Slowly and meticulously,” he said with a proud smile. “It took me over a year to secretly acquire and transport everything I needed, but the T.H. Tech Lab has been up and running for several years now.”

“Doesn’t Lyfotech follow you, though?” I asked. “How come they haven’t figured out where you’ve been going all this time?”

“They follow me into Orangeburg, but no further,” he explained. “The first couple months that I had this job they

watched me like a hawk, so I had to pretend I had some cushy job at the local university until they finally backed off. In reality, I simply went into the public library on campus and then read books or slept in one of the private rooms until it was time for me to go home. I had to do that for about seven months before Hermann decided to tell his goons to back off. Now, they simply follow me to make sure I'm going to Orangeburg, then they piss off back to my house in Summersville and wait for me to come home."

"Damn," I said. "That must have been really hard for you."

"Not really." Haggart shrugged. "I was still getting paid the residuals from my time at Half-Lyfe, and let's just say they were enough for me to live well above my means even without the supplemental income of another job."

"So you're just in this for shits and giggles, then?" Ray asked. "You're doing all this for free?"

"I'm doing it because science is my passion, and I refuse to give up on the problems of the world just because it is not profitable," the scientist replied. "Now, are we ready to get to work? Once I have the formula, we can... Hey! Don't touch that!"

We all looked over and saw Mei sitting in front of one of the benches. The cat-woman's eyes were locked onto the small vial of orange liquid that hung just above a bunsen burner and bubbled intensely. Mei let out a small chirp as she gently tapped at the moving bubbles with her fingers, which caused the whole vial to shake with each touch.

“Mei!” I hissed. “We’re guests in Mister Haggart’s lab, so please don’t touch anything that you’re not supposed to.”

Mei tapped the bubbling vial a few more times before her ears perked up, and then she looked back over her shoulder and saw that we were watching her. She instantly gave me an awkward smile, and she chuckled as she stepped away from the bubbling liquid.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s alright, dear,” Haggart said. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. That particular tube holds a very unstable liquid that is highly toxic to humans. I have no idea what would happen if it were to spill all over the lab, nor do I wish to find out.”

“I gotta know, Mister Haggart,” Ray said as he pointed with his thumb to the tank of liquid nitrogen. “Is that shit as

fun to play with as it looks? Like, could you freeze shit and then shatter it, T-1000 style?”

“There is only one way to find out, my boy.” Haggart smirked.

Ray’s eyes widened with wonder, and his voice sounded as giddy as a schoolboy who’d just been told he could take an extra sucker from the reward box.

“Really?” he asked. “You’d let me mess around with the liquid freezing spray?”

“As long as you don’t hurt yourself,” Haggart added.

“And I can freeze whatever I want?” Ray asked as he looked around at all the possibilities.

“Again, as long as you don’t hurt yourself, or destroy any of my equipments or tools,” Haggart repeated and planted himself in front of the nearest table.

“But like, anything is fair game?” Ray asked in a giddy voice. “How do you know if that shit’ll actually work on it or not?”

“I don’t!” Haggart proclaimed. “That’s the joy of science, Ray. You test out anything and everything until you get the results you are satisfied with.”

“You sure?” Ray asked as he turned in a circle.

“Because there’s a whoooole lot of shit I’ll wanna test.”

“Go for it,” the scientist replied. “You simply hold the nozzle up to whatever you want to quick-freeze, then you squeeze the handle and spray it. Have fun and be safe. And remember none of the equipment, please.”

Ray let out a glorious “woohooo” before he dashed off to find shit that he could freeze. Meanwhile, Mei was now standing next to one of the lab benches, and she stared intensely down at the tongs that sat on its top. I instantly recognized the look she had, and I let out an annoyed chuckle.

“Meiiiiii?” I asked. “What are you doing?”

The cat-woman simply pursed her lips and stared at me with her big eyes as she placed her right hand on the side of the tongs.

“Nothing,” she said.

Slowly, the orange-haired beauty began to push the tongs closer to the edge of the table.

“Mei!” I said. “Leave it alone.”

The cat-woman continued to make eye contact with me as she pushed the tongs a bit closer to the edge, and then off

the side with a final little nudge.

“It’s alright, Doug,” Haggart chuckled. “She may be a mutant, but she is still a cat deep down, and there are some instincts that will never go away.”

“I just hope she doesn’t do that with one of your vials,” I sighed. “You have no idea how many drinking glasses she broke by shoving them off the table.”

“It will be alright,” he promised. “But for now, we need to talk about the serum. And Lyfetechnology in general.”

“If you don’t mind,” Charlotte interjected. “I think I’m going to go find a place to relax and build a web.”

“You are more than welcome to use one of my bean bag chairs if you wish to sleep.” Haggart nodded to one of the lumpy gray masses in the middle of the floor.

“Nah... Does this place have any dark corners or piles of wood I could hang out in?” the spider-woman asked.

“There are lots of corners here,” Haggart chuckled. “Go and make yourself at home.”

Charlotte gave us a slight nod before she turned and strutted away. Her large ass jiggled as she sashayed her hips from side to side, and I could see every little ripple through her

tight leather pants as she walked. I felt a soft twinge down in my nether regions, though I quickly pushed the feeling away and tried to get back on subject.

“Okay,” I said as I turned to Terry. “I’m guessing this is gonna be one of those Quid Pro Quo situations, where I give you something you want and then you give me something I want?”

“Not necessarily.” He shrugged. “I think at the end of the day we both have similar goals, so I think it’d be in the best interest of us both to help each other out whether or not we get anything in return. In fact, as a sign of good faith, I’ll share my information first... Hermann’s one major weakness was always my beloved Denise, but there are plenty of other small imperfections within his company that could be exploited given the proper time and resources.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“The big one is the company’s government contracts,” Haggart said.

“What about them?” I shrugged. “I’m sure Lyfotech’s lawyers have looked them over a million times to make sure they’re airtight.”

“Except for the ones that aren’t strictly legal,” he replied. “Or ethical. And there are always hush-hush, under-the-table deals that technically don’t exist.”

“You’re telling me that one of the most powerful and wealthy companies in the world does handshake deals with the U.S. government?” I started to chuckle, but Haggart looked so serious that I just stared in disbelief instead.

“Oh, no.” Haggart shook his head. “These are anything but handshake deals. Both parties always had their lawyers look over the terms for weeks. However, Lyfotech has invested a whole lot of capital into making sure their more unethical deals are never revealed to the public. In fact, there are rumors that they once silenced a journalist that got too close to the truth, and now, most news companies refuse to let any of their employees do a story on Lyfotech without running it by the company first.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Of course Doctor Lyfe controls the fucking news media, too.”

“That’s not to say that if the details about one of those deals were to fall into their hands, they wouldn’t run the story,” Haggart said. “Lyfe might be able to target individual journalists, but even he wouldn’t dare take on the likes of a

massive media corporation. That would be the equivalent of two nuclear powers going to war against each other. It would be messy for all parties involved.”

“Who’s to say they’d actually run the story?” I asked. “If they all fear Lyfotech as much as the rest of the world does, why rock the boat at all?”

“The same reason Lyfe won’t give up on his pursuit of the serum, Doug,” he sighed. “The almighty dollar. Think about it. The news organization that actually lands a blow on the mighty Lyfotech would be the gold standard for media companies for the next hundred years! Everyone would be lining up to run ads during their shows, everyone would want to try to boost their career by working for them... Plus, it would take advantage of Hermann’s one other major weakness.”

“Which is?”

“The way he squirms when he is under the microscope.” Haggart smiled from ear to ear. “The entire reason Lyfotech can get away with the things they do is because they can silence anyone who speaks out against them or threatens to extort the company without much fanfare or anyone noticing. If an organization actually publishes a story about them,

though? Anything Hermann does to retaliate would be exposed for the entire world, for all to see. Imagine the PR nightmare he would have on his hands, Doug. And what happens to a company when it has a PR nightmare?”

“Other organizations don’t want to do business with them,” I replied.

“Precisely!” he declared. “Would all of these smaller biotech companies want to keep selling them materials? Would the U.S. government want their name publicly associated with such a corrupt and evil corporation?”

“Publically?” I chuckled. “No.”

“Lyfetechn loses its business partners and contracts, which means they lose out on quite a bit of money.” Haggart actually cackled at the idea and nodded in agreement with himself.

“But won’t that just make Lyfe retaliate even harder?” I asked.

“The only reason Hermann can get away with any of the things that he does is because he has so many powerful organizations in his pocket,” he explained. “The second he

doesn't have them on his side, the house of cards comes down."

"There's still one problem, though," I sighed. "Where the fuck are we gonna get all this juicy information to give to the press?"

"You have two wonderful sources at your disposal, Doug," he said with a grin. "Myself, and your friend Ray."

"Ray?" I repeated.

"He worked as a janitor for Lyfetechnology, right?" he asked.

"Well, yeah," I agreed.

"So he's probably seen and cleaned a lot of things that he probably shouldn't have, right?" he prodded.

"He did." I nodded as I looked around for my long-time friend.

"Then his stories, paired with my own and the experiences you've had over the last few days, should build upon each other to make a strong case against Hermann and his company," Haggart concluded.

"I get that, but that raises another question," I said. "Why haven't you done this before? If your stories are so

powerful, why haven't you spoken to the media about all the sketchy shit Lyfetechn's been doing?"

"Because there hasn't been anybody else who could back up my story, Doug," he sighed. "That's why I didn't believe you at first when you said Lyfetechn has been after you for days now, and yet, you were still alive. You're the only other survivors of the Lyfetechn machine I've ever met."

I suddenly felt a knot in the pit of my stomach as realization took over my brain.

"I'm not the first person who's contacted you, am I?" I whispered.

"Of course not." Haggart hung his head. "Not in the slightest. You're just the first one to ever live long enough to meet me face to face. Everyone else mysteriously stops messaging me shortly after they reach out, and I never hear from them again."

"Yet you're still alive," I said.

"Only because of Hermann's love for Denise," he replied. "I assure you, if and when he finds out about this meeting, his promise to her will be nullified, and I simply hope that you and your friends will be able to protect me."

“I’m not gonna let anything happen to you,” I said. “If you help us, Terry, you’ll officially be part of our team.”

“I fully intend to help you, Doug.” He nodded. “Though that will require a bit of cooperation from you as well.”

“Then I guess it’s time to buckle down and reveal my own industry secrets,” I said.

So, I spent the next thirty minutes or so talking through my experiments with the serum with Terry. The man took notes furiously the entire time, and he asked about a million questions that I wasn’t really prepared for but tried to answer anyway. When all was said and done, Haggart chuckled to himself and shook his head.

“Synthetic DERA,” he said. “Of course. How could I have been so blind?”

“To be fair, Lyfetechnically figured it out,” I said. “I just was able to figure out what they’d done and replicate it.”

“And you still have the Astatine to create more serum?” he asked hopefully.

“In the van,” I said and pointed to the vehicle.

“Then let’s get to work, my boy!” Haggart smiled. “I’ve already got some ideas on how to make the serum even more stable and long-lasting, though like any good idea, it will take a bit of experimentation to perfect.”

“I’ll go grab the chemicals from the van,” I said with a wide grin.

I dashed back toward the other side of the abandoned loading dock, grabbed all the needed supplies from the back of the van, and then carefully carried them back to the makeshift lab. As I headed back, I took notice of my friends, who were all in various states of wonder inside this place.

Ray cackled as he used the liquid nitrogen on a hunk of wood, which he then slammed into the ground and shattered to oblivion. There were several bits of broken rock, concrete, wood, and metal at the man’s feet, though he looked every bit as excited as he had when he first started.

Meanwhile, Mei was still walking around being an oversized cat. She tilted her head back and forth as she watched a few bubbling vials, until she saw the glint of the sun as it reflected off a small piece of metal and onto the floor. Mei instantly hopped onto all fours and pounced on the beam of

light, then she huffed when she wasn't able to actually catch it in her hands.

Charlotte, on the other hand, wasn't anywhere to be found. I could see her web had been set up in the northeast corner of the building, but the spider-woman herself wasn't present.

I walked over to Haggart, who was already wearing a lab coat and messing around with various pieces of equipment in a frantic manner.

"Here you go," I said as I set the chemicals down on the bench. "What do you need me to do?"

"First and foremost, you need to address your own safety," Haggart said. "There should be an extra lab coat, gloves, and safety goggles in that locker over there, next to the cabinet full of empty vials."

I nodded and walked over to the cabinet. As I reached for the handle to open the locker, though, Charlotte stepped out from around the corner.

"Oh!" I gasped. "I didn't see you there."

"That's the point," she said with a smirk.

“Are you already bored with your web?” I asked.

“Because we could totally use some help with the lab work.”

“Why don’t you ask Mei or Ray to help?” she replied as she glanced at the other members of our team.

“I think you already know,” I chuckled and pointed to the two lost souls that were having the time of their lives playing around in the lab. “I know I can trust you, Charlotte.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Because just a few days ago, I was trying to melt your face off.”

“That was a different version of you,” I said.

“Lyfetechnology’s version.”

Charlotte bit her lip as she mulled over my words, and then I saw the one thing I thought I’d never see again.

She smiled.

It wasn’t a sly, cocky smile either, but a warm one that made me think she actually appreciated what I was saying.

Without another word, Charlotte reached out and took my left hand.

“Come on,” she purred. “There’s something I want to show you.”

“Right now?” I asked. “I think Haggart may need our assistance.”

“I don’t think it can wait,” she said seductively. “Or at least, it won’t wait... You can be part of the fun, or you can miss out. But the fun is happening either way.”

My heart seemed to race a million miles a minute, and I couldn’t even come up with a sexy reply as Charlotte began to lead me in the opposite direction of Haggart’s lab.

I wasn’t sure exactly what type of fun the spider-woman was referring to, but I was dying to find out.

Chapter 11

“So...” I trailed off as I followed right behind the gorgeous spider-woman. “What exactly did you find in a place like this that was so interesting that you just had to show me right now?”

“You’ll see,” Charlotte said with a sly hum to her voice.

“Seriously, though, I don’t wanna leave Haggart alone for too long,” I said. “I’m the one who figured out how to actually crack the code of the serum, and I want to make sure he doesn’t screw it up.”

“You told him what you did, right?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, but it’s not the same,” I insisted.

“I think he’ll be able to figure it out,” she replied. “He seems intelligent enough, even if he is a bit eccentric.”

“That’s an understatement,” I chuckled. “I can only imagine what working in a lab under both him and Lyfe would be like.”

“I think I’d claw my own intestines out and hang myself,” Charlotte grumbled. “The bickering between the two would be something to behold, and not in a good way.”

“In all seriousness, though, can you at least give me a hint of what you found?” I asked. “Is it, like, an old rusty sports car that you think I can repair? Or maybe a family of black widows that you’ve befriended and convinced to help us out?”

“That imagination of yours really does run wild, doesn’t it?” she chuckled.

“What can I say?” I shrugged. “I studied to be a scientist. I need to have an active imagination or I’d just be repeating the experiments that everybody else has done a million times before, and then I’d never have the chance to discover something new.”

“Is that what scientists are supposed to do?” Charlotte frowned, and her entire demeanor grew tense. “Because the scientists at Lyfotech did the exact same experiments on me, over and over and over again.”

At first I wanted to make some comment about how that was just the scientific process epitomized, but I also remembered just how traumatizing Charlotte’s experience with Lyfotech had been and understood that now was probably not the time to play the know-it-all card.

“Those guys were a bunch of asshats,” I said. “Sure, they might have called themselves scientists, but they were nothing but crooks, criminals, and sadists who had no regard for actual science, or the code of ethics behind it.”

“Scientists have a code of ethics?” Charlotte scoffed. “That’s a new one.”

“We’re supposed to.” I nodded. “But much like everything else involving Lyfotech, apparently a steady flow of cash is all it takes to make those ethics and morals go straight into the shitter.”

“I will never understand you humans and your obsession with that green paper...” she muttered. “No matter how many times you try to explain it to me.”

“Sometimes, I don’t really understand it myself,” I sighed. “I just know that for some people, there’s nothing they wouldn’t do for the right price.”

“What a sad way to live your life.” She glanced at me like she was trying to decide what my price would be, and then she quickly looked away.

We kept walking, though neither of us spoke for several minutes. The spider-woman didn’t slow down until we

reached the car and the van, and I was feeling even more confused about what we were doing. Had she found something in the van's lab that I'd somehow missed?

"In here," Charlotte said as she opened the van's rear door.

She hopped inside and then beckoned for me to follow.

"Charlotte," I said. "We practically live in this damn thing. I'm glad you're finally excited about something, but I'm sure whatever it is you're planning to show me is something I've already seen."

"Oh, I doubt that," she replied. "Just come on, Doug."

I walked over to the open van, hopped up inside, and then took a few steps into the vehicle before Charlotte closed the door behind us.

"Hey!" I gasped. "What the fuck are you gonna do? Kidnap me or something?"

"Mmmmmm, I bet you'd like that," the spider-woman purred. "The two of us, all alone with you tied up... I know I'd enjoy myself."

My heart seemed to beat at a rapid pace as my pants grew a bit tighter, and my mind started to race about what

exactly Charlotte planned to show me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I gulped.

“Don’t act like a fool, Doug,” she said. “I’ve seen the way you look at me. You’ve done it ever since we first met back at that mechanic’s shop.”

“When you were trying to kill me?” I replied, though I didn’t deny it.

“Especially when I was trying to kill you,” she purred. “The expression on your face was like nothing I’d ever seen before. Most of the men who I’ve killed before just looked scared when they saw what I really was. You did, too, but you also had a tiny hint of curiosity that was buried just beneath the surface.”

What she was describing was generally called a fear boner, though I wasn’t about to reveal that to Charlotte. Right now I was starting to get a regular ol’ erection, largely because the beautiful dark-haired woman in front of me was talking to me in a tone that simply oozed with sweetness and passion.

“I’m just doing what anybody would do.” I shrugged.

“No, you are not, Doug,” she purred. “I’ve met many people before, but none of them are as passionate and caring

as you. Then there's the fact you are a natural-born killer, which makes me all sorts of hot under the collar."

"Me?" I snorted and pointed at my own chest. "A natural-born killer?"

"You are, no matter how much you deny it," she insisted. "Look at how you charged right into battle to save me and Mei and Ray from the bear and crab-mutants, even though the first time we encountered them you were just a regular human. They both could have popped your head clean off your shoulders with a simple punch, yet you refused to run."

"Of course not," I said. "I had to protect my friends."

"Precisely," Charlotte purred. "You were willing to risk your life to protect the things you loved. How many Lyfetechno goons have you slain in the last few days anyway?"

"I honestly haven't been keeping count," I said as I tried to come up with the number.

"See?" she said. "A true natural-born killer."

"Where are you going with all this, Charlotte?" I asked.

The spider-woman took a step toward me and then raised her middle arms and rested her hands against my chest. She then twirled her short black hair with the fingers of

another hand, while the pair of arms at the bottom of her torso grabbed onto her hips sassily.

“I want you, Doug,” she said matter-of-factly. “And I think you want me, too.”

“Whaaaaaa?” I said with an awkward chuckle.

“Charlotte, we just met.”

“Yet the sexual tension between us is stronger than the webs I create...” she replied.

Hearing the word sexual come out of this gorgeous creature’s mouth made me rock hard, and she must have noticed. Charlotte’s yellow eyes glanced downward, and she smirked as she let out a slight moan and licked her lips. The two hands on the bottom of her torso reached for my waistband, and my heart went into overdrive as I thought of what was about to happen next.

“Charlotte...” I trailed off. “Are you sure about this? We just met.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” she insisted. “Unless you don’t want to do it.”

“Of course I do!” I said. “You’re a beautiful woman, and any man would be lucky to be with you.”

“Good,” she said with a sly grin. “Because I wasn’t going to take ‘no’ for an answer anyway.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but I wasn’t able to say anything before Charlotte’s plump, red lips pressed up against my own. Her kiss tasted as sweet as a Georgia peach, and I wrapped my arms around her waist as I leaned in closer and softly slid my tongue into her mouth. Charlotte and I explored each other’s mouths as we made out, and I trailed my fingers up and down her sides.

At the same time, I had the strange-yet-arousing sensation of six hands touching me all at once. Charlotte’s uppermost set of hands stroked my cheeks, while the middle two went up underneath my shirt and began to gently rub my abs and pecs. Then there was the lowest set, which grabbed onto my waistband and then slowly started to slide them down my body. The second my pants were down my cock sprang to attention, and Charlotte let out a happy giggle.

“My, oh, my...” she cooed. “I figured you’d be big, but wow.”

We went back to making out, and as we did so, I felt one of Charlotte’s hands wrap around my dick and begin to stroke it softly. Her other lower hand rubbed my balls in a

rhythmic, circular motion, and my legs started to tremble as I let out a satisfied groan.

I let my hands wander down to the bottom of Charlotte's leather shirt, then I began to pull it up over her head. All six of her arms lifted up to allow the shirt to come off, and the thin black leather made a suction sound as it pulled away from her flesh. Charlotte's full, round C-cups jiggled as they fell free and bounced against her chest, and her precious red nipples were as thick as erasers as they stood there, erect with arousal.

"Holy fucking shit," I gulped. "I could say the same thing about you."

"The tight leather top does a good job at hiding their true size, doesn't it?"

"Fuck, those are nice..." I murmured.

I reached over and took a handful of Charlotte's left breast with my hand, then I stroked it gently and tweaked her nipple between my fingers. The dark-haired woman let out a soft moan as I teased her, though her sounds of pleasure grew more intense when I started to trace around her areola with my thumb. Charlotte's lower hands went into double time on my

cock, and I felt several dribbles of precum ooze out as it started to load up for the big finish.

Then, Charlotte pulled away.

“Do you really want to see what I can do with these hands?” she asked as she put all six of her hands against her hips and side, then popped her ass out to the left.

“Yes, fucking please!”

Charlotte licked her lips as she looked down at my manhood, then she locked eyes with me and smiled. The spider-woman dropped down to her knees, then I felt two of her hands on either side of my balls as she began to fondle them gently. Two more of Charlotte’s hands grabbed the shaft of my penis and started to tenderly stroke it in a rhythmic fashion, while her last set of hands held onto my bare waist for stability. Her yellow eyes were full of glee as she looked up at me from below, and I felt the warm coil in my stomach start to tighten up as I watched her jerk me like a madwoman.

Then, Charlotte leaned forward and placed her thick, red lips up against the head of my cock. Her tongue flopped out of her mouth, rested atop my shaft, and then began to swirl around it in a clockwise motion. My legs just about turned to

fucking jello as she pleased me on five different fronts, and I wasn't sure just how much longer I was gonna be able to last.

“Mmmmmmm,” the dark-haired beauty moaned as she lapped up a tiny bit of my precum. “I can't wait to taste the real thing.”

“If you keep doing that with your hands and your tongue, you're definitely gonna get it sooner rather than later,” I replied.

“I'd definitely prefer sooner,” she said with a wink.

Charlotte's gorgeous yellow eyes locked onto mine as she swished her tongue around the tip of my dick a few more times, all while stroking my balls and the bottom of my shaft at the same time. She smirked as she opened up her mouth, then she slowly leaned forward and wrapped her lips around my manhood. Her mouth was ridiculously wet, and her tongue continued to make circles around me as she took it all in.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I moaned as I threw my head back and grabbed a fistful of her dark hair. “Your mouth feels amazing.”

Charlotte went about halfway down my shaft until her lips met one set of hands halfway, then she let out a happy moan as she pulled back. The spider-woman then started to

move her mouth and hands in synchronicity as she bobbed forward and stroked me at the same time, while her other set of hands gave my balls a gentle squeeze and her third set slapped my ass playfully.

It was a strange sensation that made it feel like I was making love to three women at the same time, and I was all for it. The warm coil in my stomach grew to new levels of tightness as my balls tensed up into my body, and I didn't know if I was gonna be able to last for much longer.

Charlotte then pulled me completely out of her mouth, held my erection up with her one set of hands, and licked her lips with anticipation.

“My God, you're huge,” she groaned. “How does anyone get this inside their mouth?”

“It's a struggle.” I winked. “But if anybody can do it, I think it'd be you.”

Charlotte's tongue slipped out from between her plump lips, then she placed it against the base of my shaft, just above her hands. The gorgeous woman licked up one side of my dick, flicked her tongue across the tip, and then dragged it down the other.

My entire lower body trembled as I let out a sound of pure carnal bliss, and I gripped her hair even tighter.

The dark-haired woman moved down to my balls and gave them both a gentle suck as she stroked me with her other pair of hands, then she swirled them around with her tongue before she moved back to the main event. Charlotte traced laps around my manhood four more times, and each time I could feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge.

“I lovvvveee it when you make those sounds,” Charlotte purred.

“I just wanna let you know you’re doing a good job,” I whispered. “Because you are. A fucking phenomenal one, in fact.”

Charlotte traced my entire shaft and balls two more times, and there was now a sensation building up in my balls the likes of which I’d never felt before. It felt like they were inside a goddamn pressure cooker, which meant that when I actually hit the mountaintop I was gonna burst like Old fucking Faithful.

Charlotte must have sensed I was now getting close, because she pulled back, looked up at me with a happy grin, and then cradled my cock in four of her six hands. Then she

opened her mouth fairly wide, leaned forward, and engulfed my entire erection into her warm, wet mouth.

My eyes rolled back in my head as she moved down my shaft and released her death grip on my cock before she swallowed me fucking whole. I felt Charlotte's tight throat surround my manhood seconds before my head bottomed out against the back of her throat, and when I looked down I saw that the spider-woman literally had me all the way inside her mouth. She made a slight gagging sound, followed by a happy moan as she pulled herself back off me.

I caressed her hair tenderly as she began to move forward and back on my shaft, then her fingers dug into my asscheeks as she tried to thrust me forward.

I obliged.

I started to pump my hips forward at the same time she bobbed, and my dick somehow went even deeper into her tight throat. My vision was now starting to tunnel around the edges, and the sounds of Charlotte's sloppy sucking mixed with her satisfied moans sent me into overdrive.

"Oh, fuck!" I screamed as I gripped her head tightly. "I think I'm gonna... gonna... Ohhhhhhhh!"

My entire lower half went numb as the warm coil in my abdomen finally snapped, and the van started to spin around me as my body was doused in a pure wave of carnal pleasure. I felt my balls pulsate as they began to spray my warm seed into Charlotte's mouth, and the spider-woman simply moaned as it gushed down her throat. I felt the muscles of her mouth pulsate around me as she swallowed every little bit of my semen, and I had to brace myself against the wall of the van as I unloaded what felt like a gallon of my seed into her.

When Charlotte finally pulled herself away she was nothing but smiles. A little bit of my cum dribbled down her lips, but she quickly lapped it up with her tongue before she made a happy "yum" sound.

"That was tasty," she cooed. "I really hope you have some more for me, Doug."

"That depends," I said with a smirk. "What do you wanna do next?"

"First thing's first... Both of us are still wearing too many clothes."

I instantly reached down and grabbed the bottom of my shirt, then I pulled it over my head and tossed it to the side as Charlotte got back on her feet. The woman's voluptuous

breasts jiggled as she stood up, and I could already feel the blood rushing back down into my cock as I watched them bounce.

Meanwhile, Charlotte reached forward and grabbed the button on the front of her pants. She carefully unbuttoned them before she sashayed her hips from side to side and playfully slid the fabric down over her hips. The woman's ass was massive, so it took her a few tries to actually get the tight leather over her curves, but soon she was able to slide them down to her ankles.

As the fabric fell away from her body I got a perfect glimpse of the spider-woman's delicate flower. It was shaved clean and already glistening with her arousal, and the tender little nub of her clitoris stood erect and was just begging to be touched.

The second Charlotte's pants were off, I moved forward and pressed her naked body up against mine. My left hand wrapped around her waist to hold her in place, while my right hand slowly moved down south until my fingers were right at the entrance of her velvet tunnel. I leaned forward and began to nibble on Charlotte's neck as I teased her clit with my thumb, and the woman let out a satisfied groan in response.

When I slid my index and middle fingers inside of her, though, she practically melted in my arms.

“Mmmmm,” I whispered against her neck. “You’re so fucking wet.”

Charlotte’s tight tunnel trembled around my fingers as I felt her sweet juices drip down onto my palm, which only made me ten times hornier. I started to move my thumb around her clit in a counterclockwise motion as I pumped my fingers into her gently, all while her soft body brushed against mine. The sounds of Charlotte’s moans and the sensation of her pussy against my fingers got me all hot and bothered once more, and my cock slowly started to tick back to full mast. At the same time, two of Charlotte’s hands reached down and grabbed onto my erection and stroked it gently back to attention while her other hands ran all over my torso.

“E-enough with the teasing, Doug,” Charlotte whimpered. “I want you inside me. Now. And make it rough.”

“Then turn around,” I growled. “I’ll show you just how fucking rough I can be.”

The spider-woman’s eyes widened with excitement, then she let out a purr as she started to turn around. The second her back was to me I saw her curvy ass on full display,

and my cock grew even harder. Charlotte definitely had the biggest ass I'd ever seen in person, and I didn't even think most porn stars had proportions like she did. All I could think about was watching that thing bounce against my cock as she rode me or as I fucked her from behind, and I felt something primal take over my body.

I grabbed Charlotte's waist and lifted her into the air. She let out a happy cackle as I moved us both over to the workbench in the van, then I placed her down in front of it and pressed my hand against the small of her back.

"Doug!" she gasped as I bent her over the workbench, and her six arms braced herself by grabbing various parts of the table.

I moved my hips forward so that the head of my dick was pressed right up against her entrance, and I felt her swollen labia spasm against me. Then, I placed one hand on Charlotte's back to hold her in place and held her hips with the other, and I thrust my hips forward slowly.

Both of us let out a long, sensual groan as I entered her pussy from behind and felt every ridge and valley of her womanhood wrap around me. Her velvet tunnel fit me like a

goddamn glove, and it spasmed intensely as I continued to push myself in.

“You’re really fucking tight,” I groaned as the warm coil in my stomach tensed up.

“It’s- it’s only because you’ve got that monster between your legs,” Charlotte whimpered. “You-you’re gonna split me in half!”

That was the idea.

I pushed myself into Charlotte as deep as I could go, until I felt her cervix pressing against the head of my cock. Then, I pulled my erection out of her about halfway before I thrust it back in, and I repeated that motion slowly a few more times. Each time I thrust forward Charlotte’s ass jiggled in response and the woman let out a soft groan, which only turned me on even more. I saw one of the woman’s six arms reach down and touch herself as I pleased her from behind, and after a few more pumps her moans grew more hurried and sharp.

“Somebody’s having a good time,” I growled. “Do you want me to go harder?”

“Yes!” Charlotte whimpered, and her womanhood clenched tightly around me at the mere mention of the thought. “Harder, Doug... I want you to pound me.”

I wasn't about to say no to that.

I grabbed Charlotte's waist on both sides, then I pulled myself all the way out as I got into position. Then, I started to fucking jackhammer the gorgeous woman from behind.

The sound of my pelvis slapping against her ass filled the van as I fucked her intensely, and I could feel my balls tightening to new levels of tension the longer I went. Charlotte's velvet tunnel squeezed me tighter every time I entered her, and her hands were gripping the sides of the table so hard that she had white knuckles.

“You like that?” I asked.

“Ohhhh, Doug...” Charlotte moaned. “Don't stop!”

I kept on pounding Charlotte from behind, and all the while her sounds of ecstasy continued to get closer together and louder. Finally, the spider-woman's entire body tensed up, and she whipped her head back as she looked at me over her shoulder. Charlotte's mouth fell agape, and her eyes rolled

back in her head as she let out a long, guttural scream that was music to my ears.

“Are you cumming?” I growled.

“Yessss!” She groaned. “Ohhhhh Douggggggggg!”

The woman’s velvet tunnel gripped me like a vise as her entire body trembled and what felt like a gallon of her warm juices gushed out around me, and the sensation mixed with the sound of her pleasure and the sight of her bouncing ass formed the perfect storm.

I felt the warm coil in my stomach snap, and I groaned intensely as I came a second time. I shoved my dick as deep into Charlotte as it would go, then I felt my fucking legs give out as I collapsed onto her from behind. My balls spasmed as they sprayed shot after shot of my warm cum into the woman’s tight tunnel, and her fertile womb sucked it all up like a goddamn vacuum cleaner as it gushed into her.

Both of us continued to moan as we came in unison and she took me all in, until finally I could feel my legs again and my vision came back into focus.

“W-wow,” I whispered into her ear from behind. “That was incredible, Charlotte.”

“You were incredible, Doug,” she said through a pant.

I gave the woman a kiss on the neck from behind, then I carefully slid myself out of her and stood back up. My legs were wobbly as I moved, and I stumbled back a foot or two before I caught myself up against the wall of the van. My eyes were still laser-focused on Charlotte’s ass, which was just above her swollen pussy lips that now dropped a few dribbles of my seed out onto her leg. As Charlotte stood back up, though, my eyes caught sight of something that I hadn’t really paid attention to during our lovemaking.

The two fleshy stumps that were just underneath her third set of arms. I stepped over to the spider-woman and placed my hands on the wounds, which caused her to let out a gasp.

“It’s okay,” I promised. “Fuck... I can’t believe they did this to you.”

“They thought a spider should only have eight limbs, not eight arms,” she sighed as she leaned back into me and I rested my chin on her shoulder.

Charlotte scooted her ass back against my cock, and for a second I thought I might get a third wind. However, my mind couldn’t escape the horrific thought of all the shit Doctor

Lyfe and his cronies had put Charlotte through, and how much I wanted to make him pay for what he'd done.

“Nobody’s ever going to hurt you like that again,” I whispered. “Not while I’m around.”

“I know they won’t, Doug,” Charlotte chuckled. “Because I made a promise to myself a long time ago that I wouldn’t let them hurt me like this again, either. Now that there are two of us watching my back, I think Lyfetechnology is screwed.”

“Four of us,” I said. “Ray and Mei have your back, too.”

“Fuck,” Charlotte said with a purr. “We were fairly loud... I hope they didn’t hear us.”

“If they heard us from all the way across the warehouse, we were on some next-level lovemaking,” I laughed.

“I’d say we most certainly were,” she replied in her sultry voice.

I gave the woman another kiss on the nape of her neck, then I held her in my arms for a few more minutes before we decided to go rejoin the rest of the group. The two of us put our clothes back on before we exited through the back of the van, and then we headed for Haggart’s makeshift lab. We

walked arm in arm across the station, but when we got about halfway to the lab, I saw Mei running toward us like a bat outta Hell.

The cat-woman skidded to a stop right in front of Charlotte and me, and her face contorted into a harsh frown.

“What is it, Mei?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Terry just got a notification on his security camera at his house,” Mei said.

“Okay, and?” I asked as I looked around for the scientist. “Most of the time that’s just like a package delivery or something.”

“It’s not a package...” Mei trailed off. “It’s Doctor Lyfe.”

“What?” I gulped.

This had to be a sign that Doctor Lyfe was onto the fact that Haggart and I were talking, and I was willing to bet my new nemesis wanted to talk to his one-time business partner face to face, if only to scare him away from me. However, as with most things that happened around Doctor Lyfe, there were bound to be layers to the story that we weren’t aware of yet.

And I was afraid we were going to find out Doctor
Lyfe's true purpose for the visit whether we wanted to or not.

Chapter 12

“Why is Doctor Lyfe at Haggart’s house?” Charlotte asked as we hurried over to the lab part of the building.

Ray and Terry Haggart were both standing in front of a laptop screen, and they were whispering back and forth in panicked voices as they gestured wildly at whatever they were watching. As we got a little bit closer, I saw that there, on the screen, was a clear-as-day video of Hermann Lyfe with his arms crossed over his chest as he glared at someone’s front door.

The slimy fucker’s hair was slicked back like a true sleazeball, and his pointed nose seemed even more sharp than usual. Lyfe’s beady eyes glanced down at his watch as he let out a long sigh, then he reached forward and pressed the doorbell once more.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I walked up to the scene.
“What the fuck is Lyfe up to?”

“I don’t know,” Haggart said. “I haven’t spoken to Hermann in years, outside of the occasional professional e-mail about residuals or board votes or things of that nature.”

“You don’t think he’s onto us, do you?” Mei asked.

“Maybe.” Haggart nodded. “He almost certainly knows that we’ve been speaking, though it’s peculiar that he’s at my home right now.”

“Not really,” I sighed. “That’s where you’re supposed to be right now, isn’t it? What time do his goons usually see you come back from work?”

“Whenever I damn well feel like it,” Haggart harrumphed. “I’ve never kept a consistent schedule for this exact reason.”

Lyfe’s face fell into a frown as he tapped his foot impatiently, then he reached forward and knocked heartily on the front door.

“Terry?” he called out in his deep, nasally voice. “Are you in there, old friend?”

“Should I talk to him?” Haggart asked. “I’ve got one of those fancy microphone doorbells.”

“That might give us some insight into whatever the fuck he’s planning,” I said with a nod. “Just be careful what you say.”

“Yeah, dude,” Ray said. “Whatever you do, totally don’t let it slip that you’re not at work, and actually in a secret lab where you’re trying to help his enemy replicate his secret government formula.”

“I- I don’t think I could let that slip if I wanted to,” Terry chuckled.

“Terry?” Haggart called again. “Come on, old friend.”

“Uhg,” I spat. “Even when he’s trying to be charming, he sounds slimy.”

Haggart took a deep breath before he lifted his phone up to his mouth, pressed a button on the screen, and began to talk.

“Hermann?” he asked with a mixture of awe and surprise. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I knew you’d have one of these wonderful devices,” Lyfe said as he bent down and inspected the doorbell camera. “You always did have a fascination with all the modern bells and whistles. Not to mention, you can never be too safe these days, can you?”

“You can not,” Haggart agreed. “I wish you would have called or e-mailed first, Hermann... I’m unfortunately not home at the moment.”

“Ohhhhhh, that’s too bad,” Lyfe said as he clicked his tongue. “Late day at the office?”

“The lab,” Haggart said with a cautious tone. “You remember how I was when we worked together. Sometimes I just get so caught up in my work that I lose track of time completely.”

“I do!” Lyfe agreed quickly. “How many days did Denise end up calling me, asking to go into the lab and make sure you were still alive because you hadn’t called?”

The mere mention of Lyfe’s sister caused Haggart to tense up, though he continued with his happy-go-lucky demeanor.

“Too many times,” he sighed. “Far too many times. I do apologize for not being able to be there in person, Hermann.”

“It is no big deal.” Lyfe said with a wave of his hand. “Perhaps another time, when you’re not working late?”

“Hermann,” Haggart said with a sudden shift in his tone to something much more stern. “Why this sudden visit out of the blue? We haven’t spoken in years.”

“Not through any fault of mine,” Lyfe said with a scoff. “It’s like you’re a turtle these days, Terry... All curled up in

your shell, hoping it'll protect you from the outside world. I've tried to reach out several times."

Haggart rolled his eyes before he silently mouthed the words bullshit to the group.

"Why are you here, Hermann?" Haggart demanded.

"Sheesh," Lyfe said and even rolled his eyes. "Can't a guy just swing by and talk to his old friend when he's in the neighborhood?"

"You're in an entirely different state, Hermann," Haggart pointed out. "And if I recall correctly, you didn't think we were very good friends when Half-Lyfe was disbanded. What were your exact words? Something about how Denise was better off now because 'at least if she's dead, she's not married to me?'"

"Terry, Terry, Terry..." Lyfe clucked. "That was so long ago. I was a completely different man back then, and my emotions were running high after the horrible tragedy with Denise. I was hoping that time really did heal all wounds, and that we could forgive and forget?"

"Please stop beating around the bush, Hermann," Haggart replied. "I might not be there in person, but I can

certainly speak with you if that's really what you want.

Technology is wonderful that way.”

“You want to talk to me through a doorbell app?” Lyfe raised an eyebrow. “That seems fairly impersonal, Terry.”

“So did sending all my personal belongings from the office to me in the mail,” Haggart said with an edge that indicated he was clearly still unhappy about the insult.

“Terry, Terry,” Lyfe protested. “That was not my call. That was all HR, you know.”

“Just get to the point, Hermann,” Haggart sighed. “You obviously drove all this way to my home, far away from your headquarters, for a reason. You must think whatever this is to be fairly important.”

“I promise you the reason for my sudden visit is very important,” Lyfe replied in a suddenly business-like tone. “So important, in fact, that I don't think we should speak of this over an unsecured network. Is there a place we could meet? Where do you currently work?”

“Don't play coy with me, Hermann.” Haggart sighed. “You know where I currently work... Your employees follow me every single day.”

“What? Why would I do that?” Lyfe said in a voice that was practically buttery-smooth with lies. “That would be highly illegal, after all. Borderline stalking, I believe.”

“Uh-huh,” Haggart mumbled. “What do you want, Hermann?”

“Are you sure there’s not a place we could meet up and chat?” Lyfe asked. “I would love to buy you a cup of coffee and reminisce about old times for a bit.”

“No, thank you,” Haggart scoffed. “The less I remember about those days, the better off I will be.”

“Come now, Terry,” Lyfe replied with a little laugh. “We had some marvelous times at Half-Lyfe. Think of all the great innovations we made together. Remember how we revolutionized the biotech industry and were practically on the verge of another revolutionary discovery when we went our separate ways? Think of all the great things we could have done had we remained together.”

“I know you’re not used to people talking to you like this, Hermann, but please shut the Hell up,” Haggart snapped. “Your whole smooth-talker act may work on your employees, the media, and your politician friends, but it doesn’t work on me. It never has, which is why you were pretty much ready to

throw the party of the century when I finally told you where to shove your twisted ethics and horrible ideals.”

“Do you really think so little of me?” Lyfe actually sounded distraught for a moment, though the camera caught the glimmer of anger in his eyes.

“Yes,” Haggart said without missing a beat.

Ray, Mei, Charlotte, and I all had to stifle a laugh, but I was fucking loving how Haggart was handling his old business partner without kid gloves.

“What a shame,” Lyfe said with a shrug. “I always respected you, Terry, and I always thought you felt the same way about me.”

Haggart made sure his finger was off the talk button on his phone, then he turned to us and rolled his eyes.

“If there was an Oscar for gaslighting, it would go to Hermann,” he sighed.

“Seriously,” I said. “I’d just tell him to fuck off and come back when you’re actually home.”

“Terry? Are you there?” Doctor Lyfe asked.

“I’m still here,” Haggart grumbled. “Though I’m growing pretty bored of this conversation. It just keeps going

in circles, like every conversation we've ever had. Tell me why you're at my house, Hermann Lyfe, or I'm going to go back to work."

"Sheesh," Lyfe said. "If you really want to know, I'm here to talk to you about a potential security risk. One that might undo all the years of hard work we put into one of our most important projects..."

"And this couldn't have been done over an e-mail?" Haggart snorted. "Don't tell me someone stole something. Or did someone in the press start to wonder why so many people around you drop dead?"

"You don't understand the level of danger this security risk poses, Terry," Lyfe replied.

"Why is this my problem?" Haggart asked. "If Lyfotech is having a security issue, then Lyfotech should handle it on their own. I haven't been involved with the company for years."

"It's about the serum," Lyfe whispered as he leaned closer to the doorbell. "The one that we've been working on our entire careers?"

“I haven’t thought about that serum since Half-Lyfe was dissolved,” Haggart said.

Doctor Lyfe’s thin lips twisted up into an evil smirk, and he shook his head back and forth as he clicked his tongue.

“Now who’s bullshitting, Terry?” Lyfe said with a knowing tone in his voice.

“Hermann,” Haggart sighed. “Actively working on the serum that we were working on together at Half-Lyfe would be a horrific violation of my NDA. I’m not trying to get sued.”

“You really think I would sue my dear brother-in-law?” Lyfe gasped and placed his hand against his chest as if he were hurt. “We’re practically family.”

“We are family,” Haggart mumbled. “By law, at least. Hermann, if you came all this way just to try and get me to admit I broke my NDA, then you’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“If I thought you’d actually egregiously broken the NDA, I would have sent you a cease and desist letter months ago,” Lyfe retorted. “This is much bigger than that, Terry... Were you recently contacted by a man named Doug Roth?”

The sound of my mortal enemy saying my name so nonchalantly sent chills down my spine, though I remained

silent and calm on the outside.

“I’m not sure,” Haggart said coyly. “Should I have heard from such a man?”

“On LinkedIn, perhaps?” Lyfe added.

“I don’t check my LinkedIn that frequently.” Haggart shrugged. “Besides, how would you know who sends me messages on my own private social media accounts, Hermann? Unless you’ve hacked into my account, which I will remind you, is a criminal offense.”

“Just answer the question, Terry,” Lyfe said. “Have you heard from Doug Roth or not?”

“Who’s Doug Roth?” Haggart said as he shot me a wink. “I’ve never met anybody by that name before.”

I could tell by the look on Lyfe’s face that he was not amused by the runaround Terry was giving him. His brow furrowed, and the corners of his fake smile twitched as he stared into the camera with a crazed look in his eyes.

“So you’ve never met Doug Roth before?” Lyfe asked.

“Who is this man you keep referencing, Hermann?” Haggart pressed. “It sounds like he’s quite important to you.”

“He’s not important to me at all,” Lyfe said. “But he stole my formula, and I have reason to believe he’s now trying to reach out to you so that he can figure out how to protect it. He may even be posing as a Lyfetechnology employee to gain your trust, which is highly illegal and could even be grounds for a criminal suit.”

“Well, if that is what this Doug Roth person has decided to do, I can assure you it wouldn’t work,” Haggart said. “I’d never trust a Lyfetechnology employee. Ever.”

“I suppose that’s one good thing to come out of our little collegial spat,” Lyfe mused. “Perhaps you should check your LinkedIn to see what he wants?”

“I hardly use LinkedIn,” Haggart explained. “Why are you so sure he messaged me anyway?”

Obviously Haggart knew exactly how Lyfe knew, and he was just toying with his ex-business partner.

“You don’t really have much of an online presence elsewhere,” Lyfe explained. “It’s really the only way anyone can reach you.”

“So you are stalking me,” Haggart snorted.

“I’d never do such a thing, Terry,” Lyfe said. “But I do like to keep tabs on former coworkers after they sever ties with the company, mainly just to see what they have been up to recently. You, however, are a very difficult man to find. Nothing other than LinkedIn and an e-mail address that we’ve had on file for over a decade.”

“Just the way I prefer it,” Haggart said with a snarky tone. “As I told that strange man who reached out to me, I am a very private person, and I don’t like to be solicited.”

Lyfe’s entire demeanor seemed to relax at Haggart’s words, though there was still something off about his entire vibe. Doctor Lyfe wasn’t exactly the most emotive person in the world, but his hands still remained in fists even though his shoulders and expression were completely carefree and relaxed.

Something was up.

“Are you guys getting the vibe I’m getting right now?” I whispered to Mei, Charlotte, and Ray.

“I am.” Mei nodded. “Something about Lyfe just feels... off right now.”

“So, you did hear from Douglas Roth?” Lyfe asked through the camera on the doorbell. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him the same thing I tell everyone who asks me to break my NDA or talk about my time at Half-Lyfe,” Haggart said in a bored voice. “I told him where he could shove it.”

“That’s good,” Lyfe said as he wiped a bit of fake sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. “Because this man has been quite relentless in the pursuit of our beloved serum, and I was afraid he might have been able to turn you over to his side.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Haggart replied. “The NDA I signed was iron-clad, remember? What kind of a fool would I have to be to think I could break it without suffering the repercussions?”

“I know you’re smart, Terry,” Lyfe said. “But I also know you can be a tad... sentimental when it comes to your projects, and you have a hard time letting go.”

“There’s the Hermann Lyfe I remember,” Haggart scoffed. “Is that really why you came out all this way? To threaten me?”

“I would never threaten my dear brother-in-law, even if he was on the verge of making a career-ending mistake,” Lyfe replied.

“You know, you never were a good liar,” Haggart said. “The little slimy white lies that got people to fund our ideas or join our company? Sure. But the big stuff? The stuff that actually mattered? You always just pushed those through with the sheer power of your influence. Or intimidation. Or worse.”

“Those are some serious accusations you’re putting out there, Terry!” Lyfe gasped with an obviously-fake expression of hurt. “Everything we did at Half-Lyfe was one hundred percent legal, according to our corporate lawyers. I wouldn’t even dream of attempting anything that was against the law.”

“You’re making a good show for the doorbell camera recording, Hermann,” Haggart chuckled. “I can at least give you kudos for that.”

“We’re getting away from the subject,” Lyfe sighed. “What did Doug Roth ask you specifically?”

“If anyone isn’t letting things go, it’s you,” Haggart said.

“I am strictly asking you this on a professional, legal level,” Lyfe replied. “I am currently building a corporate espionage case against him and his janitor friend, which is why I need to know what he told you.”

“Custodial artist,” Ray whispered under his breath.

“You let a mere janitor pull one over on Lyfetechnology?” Haggart snorted with amusement. “If anything, Hermann, it sounds like this was an act of pure incompetence on your company’s part.”

“I don’t think the courts will see it that way,” Lyfe said. “We have video recordings of that janitor stealing Lyfetechnology property from Lyfetechnology premises, and with a few supporting witnesses, I believe it will be an open-and-shut case.”

“He’s really gonna sue us?” Ray whispered.

“Doubtful,” I said in a hushed tone. “He just wants to get us out of hiding so he can silence us once and for all. I bet that’s why he’s telling Haggart all this... So he can relay the message and try to scare us into revealing ourselves.”

“So what you’re saying is I should be suspecting a court summons in the near future?” Haggart asked, then his eyes widened with surprise. “Or is that why you’re in person? It’s

already happened, and you wanted to deliver the letter to me in person.”

With that, Doctor Lyfe slid a large manilla envelope out of the pocket of his suit jacket, which he then held up to the camera for Terry to see.

“Still as observant as ever, Terry,” Lyfe said with a sly grin. “Now that there’s proof you’ve seen this—”

“Seen what?” Haggart asked coyly. “Is there something unusual I should be noticing right now? I still just see your face.”

“Don’t play dumb, now,” Lyfe retorted. “That recording business goes both ways, you know. All it would take is a little favor from the local police department, and they’ll have this footage to show in court by the end of the week.”

“Hermann, I truly don’t know what you’re talking about,” Haggart said.

Doctor Lyfe’s fake, pleasant demeanor finally seemed to snap, and his smile twisted into an angry scowl as he tossed the envelope down onto the porch of Haggart’s house.

“We’ll see how that holds up in court,” Lyfe scoffed. “I’ve given you everything you need to know, and what

happens next is completely up to you.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Hermann,” Haggart chuckled. “I don’t see anything on the screen.”

“Tell me, Terry,” Lyfe growled. “What did Doug Roth offer you? Riches? Fame? Revenge? Because I can assure you, he is not the pathway to any of those things.”

“Typical,” Haggarty sighed. “How amazingly typical.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Lyfe asked.

“There is much more to life than money, fame, and revenge,” Haggart said. “Quite a lot more, Hermann. Denise actually understood—”

“Do not speak her name!” Lyfe bellowed angrily. “I swear to God, Terry, if you ever try to use my sister’s name against me again, it will not be pleasant.”

“There he is...” Haggart trailed off with a sly grin.

“Just tell me what Roth asked you, Terry,” Lyfe demanded.

“The fact this is bothering you so much makes me not want to say anything further,” Haggart said. “Besides, I can assure you it was inconsequential.”

“Final chance, Terry,” Lyfe said with a threatening tone. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. And of course, by hard way I mean in court.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what you mean,” Haggart growled. “Just so you know, I’m not afraid of any of the... repercussions you think you can sic on me, Hermann.”

“Are you sure about that?” Lyfe asked.

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my entire existence,” Haggart replied. “I don’t fear you like so many others do.”

“I’m not the one you need to be afraid of...” Lyfe chuckled. “I suppose we’ll have to wait and see if you still feel that way when you’re sitting in front of somebody much, much more powerful than me. The judge!”

“Good day, Hermann,” Haggart said. “It was just as unpleasant as always.”

“Just remember, Denise...” Lyfe whispered to himself as he turned. “I gave him plenty of chances.”

Lyfe sulked away and out of view of the doorbell camera, and the second he was gone Haggart twirled around with a horrified expression on his face.

“We need to leave,” he said. “Right now.”

“What’s wrong?” Mei asked. “I thought he was just delivering that letter to you?”

“Oh, no, my dear...” Haggart gulped. “I’ve known Hermann Lyfe for some time, and that was as clear as day. He knows where we are, and that was him giving me one final chance to give the four of you up peacefully.”

“You got all that from a conversation about LinkedIn and lawsuits?” Ray asked.

“There is no lawsuit, you fool.” Haggart shook his head. “It’s all a ruse, one that I didn’t fall for. Unfortunately, that means that he’s probably already got his men on their way—”

Before Haggart could finish his sentence, there was a loud crash from a few of the nearby windows, and several smoking canisters landed on the floor as they billowed gray mist into the air.

Smoke grenades.

Lyfe’s men had fucking found us.

Chapter 13

“Son of a bitch!” I hissed as the smoke began to fill the room. “Did you make any progress on replicating the serum, Haggart?”

“I’ve got two vials full of the basic chemicals, but I haven’t put the catalyst in yet,” he said.

“Great.” I nodded. “Everyone? Grab whatever we’ve got of the serum, and protect Terry. We gotta get back to the van and high-tail it the fuck outta here.”

“How will we get through the smoke?” Charlotte asked. “I do not know about the rest of you, but I can’t see anything at the moment.”

“Mei?” I asked the cat-woman. “You’ve got the best senses, so you gotta be our eyes and ears.”

“I- I’ll do my best,” Mei gulped.

“Everybody else keep your eyes peeled, and keep Haggart safe,” I ordered.

“Fuck, dude,” Ray sighed. “I always hated escort missions.”

I pulled my inhaler out of my pocket, popped off the plastic cover, and took two quick puffs of the superhuman serum. The second the mist entered my lungs, I felt every muscle in my body start to tingle, while my heartbeat seemed to go into double time as my breaths grew more rapid and powerful. As I slid my inhaler back into my pocket, I heard the sound of more shattering glass to my right, and Mei twisted around and pointed.

“They have guns!” she gasped. “On our right!”

“Everybody down!” I hissed.

My friends and I all dropped down on all fours as the hailstorm of bullets began, and I heard the sound of shattering glass all around us as the deadly metal hornets pelted the fucking lab.

“No, you morons,” Doctor Lyfe’s voice crackled through a walkie-talkie. “You’ll destroy the serum!”

“What are we supposed to do then, boss?” one of them asked.

As the goons bickered with their boss, I gestured for Charlotte and Terry Haggart to grab whatever remained of the serum. The spider-woman placed her arm over Terry's shoulder, then they quickly darted back over to one of the nearby lab tables.

"I don't pay Silverblade Security the money I do to just have a bunch of idiots who spray and pray," Lyfe growled. "You know how to kill a human being with your bare hands, right? Just do that instead. Aside from the cat-woman. She is the property of Lyfetechnology."

My blood boiled when I heard Mei being referred to as property, but I knew better than to lose my cool and go after the Lyfetechnology goons right then. If I did that, I'd completely blow my cover, which would give up the one advantage I had over these fuckers at the moment.

"Can do, boss," the goon said. "Guns away for now, boys. Daggers, tasers, and nightsticks at the ready."

Just then, Charlotte and Haggart crawled back over to us, and Haggart gave me a brief thumbs up to let me know he'd secured the serum. However, the room was getting smokier and smokier by the second, and my eyes started to

burn intensely. I tried to hold my breath, but the smoke seemed to find a way into every nook and cranny.

Ray, Mei, and Charlotte all looked like they were holding their breaths, too, but poor Terry didn't stand a chance. The dude didn't have superhuman stamina like the rest of us did, so when the gray smoke entered his nostrils he broke out into a violent fit of coughing.

“Over there!” a goon yelled.

“Footsteps,” Mei said and tried not to cough. “They’re coming.”

“Which way to the van?” Haggart whispered.

“It’s on the northwest side of the building,” Charlotte said and pointed in the direction she was talking about. “That way.”

“Then that’s where you gotta take Terry,” I said. “Go, now.”

“What about you?” the spider-woman asked.

“We’ll cover you,” I replied. “Now—”

“Behind you, Doug!” Mei yelled.

I twisted around just as a man dressed in full SWAT-style attire came through the smoke with his nightstick raised high above his head. He tried to bring it down on my head, but I was quick to sidestep, and I watched as it slammed harmlessly into the ground. Without missing a beat, I lashed out at the fucker, slammed my fist into the side of his head, and crumpled his helmet like it was made of aluminum. The goon let out a yelp as he collapsed to the ground, where he landed on all fours and groveled for a few seconds.

A few seconds were all I needed.

In one swift motion, I hauled back with my right foot, brought it forward, and slammed it into the fucker's stomach. There was a wet crack as my boot hit his kevlar vest, and the Lyfeteck goon gagged as he spat a mouthful of dark red blood out onto the ground. He collapsed into a heap on the gravel, face-first, and he rolled around holding his stomach as what seemed like gallons of blood gurgled out of his mouth.

“Go!” I hissed, and this time Charlotte and Haggart didn't hesitate.

I reached down and picked up the dying man's nightstick, then I looked over to Mei and Ray. Two more

Lyfetechn goons appeared through the smoke, and one of them slammed a sparking taser into Ray's side.

“Yeooowww!” Ray yelled as he jumped with surprise.

The second goon came at Ray with a knife, but Mei was quick on the draw.

The orange-haired beauty slammed her shoulder into the second man and knocked him off balance so that his attack missed by a mile. Mei then hissed as she slashed her claws into the goon's chest, ripped them out, and sent a bunch of yellow kevlar fibers into the air.

I saw another shadow appear out of the smoke and charge at Mei, so I moved quickly to intercept. I dashed over to the new enemy, lunged forward, and caught the fucker's wrist in my hand and stopped his dagger firmly in its tracks. I squeezed his wrist as hard as I could until there was a dry pop, and he screamed as he lost his grip on the dagger completely and let it clang to the floor.

The Lyfetechn goon reached down for some other weapon in his belt, but I shut that shit down really quickly. I lashed out at the bastard's hand with my nightstick and caught it with a loud crack, and the man yowled in pain.

“You broke my fucking hand, you bastard!” he screamed.

The man suddenly thrust his head forward in an attempt to headbutt me, but it just felt like I’d been punched by a toddler. His eyes went wide with fear when I didn’t react to the blow, and I just clicked my tongue.

“You shoulda stuck with the guns, dude,” I chuckled.

I jerked my head forward and hit the goon with my full force, and the world went white for a split second as I heard a wet pop. When my vision came back, I saw that the man’s head was bent back at a fucking ninety degree angle, and his spine was jutting up out of his neck as a small geyser of blood sprayed into the air. The goon’s eyes were rolled back in his head, and his tongue flopped out of his mouth as he went limp.

Just as I tossed the dead Lyfotech goon to the side, I saw Ray hurl the body of his attacker off into the smoke like a fastball, and the bastard disappeared into the gray mist.

Meanwhile, Mei was dodging her assailant’s blows with her cat-like reflexes while simultaneously lashing out with her claws. Each attack seemed to leave a gash in the Lyfotech goon’s kevlar, though they weren’t able to get all the way through to his flesh.

I was gonna have to help with that.

I ran over to the cat-woman's opponent, hauled back with the nightstick, and then slammed it into his right leg from behind. I hit the fucker so hard that the damn stick snapped in half and went flying across the room, though the Lyfetechn goon screamed bloody murder as his leg gave out under his weight. As he went to the ground, I tossed the stick aside, then I grabbed both sides of his noggin and pulled it back to expose his throat.

Mei must have got the hint, because she instantly slashed her left set of claws across the goon's throat, which sent a massive splash of crimson out onto the ground as he began to gurgle for breath. The Lyfetechn crony began to spasm as he grasped at the open gash in his neck and tried to apply pressure to the wound, but it was no use. Within seconds, he collapsed into a heap at Mei's feet, and the last few bits of life in his body twitched out of him as the circle of blood around him continued to grow.

"Thanks for the assistance," Mei smirked. "I would have gotten him eventually, though."

Mei's ears perked up atop her head, and her cheery expression turned sour.

“What’s going on, dudette?” Ray asked.

“More footsteps,” the cat-woman frowned. “Those were not the only soldiers Lyfeteck sent.”

“Get to the van,” I said.

As we turned to the northeast side of the garage, Ray held up his index finger and smiled from ear to ear.

“Wait, dude, I’ve got an idea…” he said before he disappeared into the smoke.

“Ray!” I hissed. “Ray! We don’t have time to dick around, man.”

“Dougggggg…” Mei whimpered. “They’re getting closer to our position.”

Fuck. Did I cut and run, which would mean Ray was left all alone with these goons? Or did I wait on my friend to return and potentially get gunned down or overwhelmed with superior numbers in the process?

Thankfully, I didn’t have to wait much longer, since Ray came back through the smog hacking up a lung. My friend now held the large canister of liquid nitrogen like it was a freaking *Ghostbusters* proton pack, and he was nothing but smiles as he stepped to the front of the group.

“Where are they, Mei?” he asked. “This is gonna be fun...”

Mei’s ears seemed to move around independently atop her head like a pair of furry radars, until finally they went rigid.

“Our southeast, Ray!” Mei called out.

Ray twisted around to the northwest and pointed the nozzle toward the smoke.

“Other southeast, dude,” I sighed.

“Oh, right.”

Ray twisted back around to the correct direction just as four more silhouettes appeared, and our friend wasted no time in testing out his new toy. He cackled gleefully as he squeezed the trigger on the nozzle and sent a blast of liquid nitrogen gas straight into one of the goons at point-blank range. The man let out a pained scream, though the noise quickly disappeared as his face turned necrotic and frost-bitten. His mouth opened wide as his eyes seemed to glaze over, and he stopped in his tracks as bits of his flesh were burned clean down to his skull.

Without hesitation, Ray slammed his fist into the bastard’s head and sent it sailing across the room like a fly

ball.

The remaining three goons went on the offensive, but we were more than ready for them.

The first Lyfetechn bastard slammed his taser into Ray's side, and my friend yowled in pain as the whole left side of his body seemed to tense up. The second and third goons both had nightsticks, and they began to whale on Ray with a series of bodyblows in an attempt to bring him down.

Mei's tail flicked around behind her for a moment as she looked for an opening, and then she bared her teeth and snarled as she launched herself forward. The cat-woman hit one of the nightstick-wielding cronies from behind and tackled him to the ground, where she proceeded to tear at his throat with her deadly claws. The man screamed as several small sprays of crimson liquid and mangled flesh were torn from his neck, and he desperately lashed out at Mei with his stick in short, uncoordinated thrashes.

Meanwhile, I set my sights on the other two goons.

I jumped over to the closest man and placed one hand on his upper arm and the other on his forearm before he even had time to register I was there. In one swift motion, I pushed my hands in opposite directions, and there was a wet crack as

the fucker's radial bone tore through his flesh and bent at an awkward angle. The man screamed bloody murder as he released his grip on the taser in his possession, but he still managed to twist around and slam his one free elbow into the side of my head.

I felt the impact of the swing and stumbled a few steps away from the goon out of instinct, but it didn't hurt at all. In fact, if I hadn't seen the guy actually throw his elbow at me, I would have assumed I'd been hit by a falling pebble or a snowball.

"Fuck this," the goon said as he reached for the pistol on his belt. "Lyfe said it was okay to kill you, anyway."

The man had just started to pull the weapon from its holster when I lurched forward and took his wrist in my grasp while also grabbing him around the throat. I crushed every bone in the Lyfeteck goon's hand when I squeezed it, and he screamed bloody murder as he released his grip on the pistol. Without missing a beat, I lifted the armored fuck up into the air, snarled at him angrily, and then started to squeeze the actual life out of the fucker. Even though the goon was wearing thick, mirrored goggles, I could see the panic on his

face as he moved his body back and forth and tried to evade my grip.

It was no use.

He kicked at me with his steel-toed boots, but they were about as useful as rocks against a tank.

“Wait!” he yelled. “I- I’m just trying to make a living!”

“You’re a murderous piece of trash,” I snarled. “How many innocent people have you killed for the sake of ‘a living,’ huh?”

“You’d do it too if you could,” he gasped as he clawed at my hand with his broken fingers.

“I really wouldn’t,” I said as my eyes narrowed.

“No! Don’t—” he protested.

Before the mercenary could finish his sentence, I squeezed my hand even tighter around his throat, and he began to choke and gurgle as his cheeks filled with a dark purple shade. His spasms and kicks grew more panicked and frantic by the second, until I squeezed so hard that there was a sickly crack. I felt the bastard’s windpipe cave in under my grip, and there was more gurgling as blood began to ooze out of his

mouth. I tossed him to the side as he choked and gagged on the last few breaths he had, but I barely registered his demise.

There was only one thing that had my interest just then, and that was the pistol he'd left on the floor.

As I picked it up, I noticed it wasn't anything special, just a simple black Sig Sauer M17 that was standard issue in the military. The dude hadn't even been able to get a single shot off before I'd wrestled the gun out of his hands, so I figured there was a good chance it would still have all seventeen shots locked and loaded. I lifted the pistol, took a shooting stance, and turned to see if I could spot the final goon.

The smoke from the smoke grenade had now begun to dissipate through the broken windows of the lab, which meant I could now at least see the basic outlines of things that were inside. I could see that the final goon was still trying to attack Ray and Mei, and he was a scrappy little fucker.

The man ducked underneath one of Ray's punches and shuffled two quick steps to the side. While my friend tried to reposition himself, the asshole stabbed his dagger into my friend's arm from below. Ray let out a yelp as the weapon actually broke his skin, though when it was pulled away the

damage was little more than a flesh wound. Meanwhile, Mei hissed and spat as she slashed the fucker with her claws, though his kevlar armor appeared to be holding up against her assault.

It was time to see how well it held up to a bullet at point-blank range.

“Hey, asshole!” I yelled.

The man twisted his head around right as I squeezed the trigger, and I felt a slight kickback and saw the muzzle flare as the Sig Sauer launched its deadly projectile. What little of the fog that remained must have fucked up my aim, because the bullet slammed into the goon’s helmet and knocked him off his feet. He let out a yelp of pain as I heard the bullet ricochet away into the distance, and he slammed into the ground hard.

Before he had a chance to move again, Ray jumped forward, lifted his foot, and grinned from ear to ear.

“It’s clobberin’ time!” he cackled.

Ray slammed his massive foot down onto the Lyfetechno goon’s head, and I heard the sound of crunching metal and shattering bone as his boot made impact. The goon’s entire body seemed to jerk as he let out a yelp of surprise, and a

moment later, he was completely limp. When Ray lifted his foot, though, it appeared that the man was still breathing. His helmet had been crumpled in like a tin can, and blood was pooling out around his skull, but he was still alive.

“Shit, dude,” I gagged.

“What?” Ray asked. “I got him, didn’t I?”

“I mean...” I said and waved at the mess. “Kinda? I think he’s just like, paralyzed and in agony right now. Like when you swat a spider and it doesn’t die the first time.”

“Oh, right.” The musclebound mutant nodded. “I guess I should put him outta his misery, then.”

Ray lifted his foot up once more and brought it down hard, and the goon’s body jerked once more as he let out a muffled grunt. More blood squished out onto the ground along with a few bits of gray brain matter.

He was still alive when Ray lifted his foot again.

“Dude!” I said.

“Seriously?” Ray huffed. “This helmet’s tough as a walnut, man.”

Ray stomped on the man once more, and this time there was a wet squelch while the pool of blood spread out even

more. When my friend finally lifted his boot it was covered with bits of gore, and the Lyfetechn goon's skull was completely caved in like an overripe watermelon.

"I guess Lyfe really didn't skimp on the armor," I chuckled.

Just then, I heard the sound of an engine and saw headlights approaching us from a distance through the remnants of the fog. I raised my pistol and prepared to attack, but when it got a little bit closer I could clearly distinguish the outline of our van. The vehicle skidded to a halt right in front of us, and a moment later, Charlotte exited from the passenger side as Haggart exited from the driver's seat.

"I believe that's all of Hermann's men," he said. "At least, until he decides to send more."

"Are you two okay?" Mei asked the spider-woman and the scientist. "Did any of the Lyfetechn men get to you?"

"There was one that was guarding the van," Charlotte smirked. "Emphasis on the was."

"Charlotte made very quick work of him," Haggart said with a stern look and a thousand-yard stare. "I don't think I've ever heard a man scream like that before..."

“Get used to that sorta shit, dude,” Ray chuckled.

“Because it happens waaaaaayyyy too often.”

“We should probably get the fuck outta here,” I said.

“Like you said, I’m sure this was just the first attempt on your lab. Lyfe’s gonna send more cronies, and maybe even more mutants. Hell, I’m surprised the big red crab dude wasn’t here, actually.”

“All the more reason to leave before he gets here,” Mei said.

“Haggart?” I asked as I looked at the scientist. “What do you need to finish your work replicating the serum?”

“I needed that equipment,” Terry sighed as he pointed behind us.

Sure enough, where the chemistry equipment had once stood on the workbenches was now nothing but sparking, bullet-riddled machinery and shattered glass.

“Fuck.” I growled. “Do you think you can finish your work in the mobile lab?”

“Not on the scale you want me to. I could make one or two little canisters of the serum, though that could also take hours.”

“How much of the serum do you have left in your little puffer thing, Doug?” Charlotte asked.

I made sure I had the safety on, then I slid the Sig Sauer into my waistband and reached into my pocket. I fumbled around for a second before I felt the little canister, but when I pulled it out, I felt my heart sink.

It was smashed.

“Goddamnit,” I said. “I think I gotta work on the distribution method, because apparently inhaler tins aren’t strong enough for the kinda shit we do.”

“So you’re out?” Haggart frowned.

“For the moment,” I sighed.

“And how long does this normally last?” he asked.

“I dunno.” I shrugged. “This is literally only the third time I’ve done this, so it’s all experimental right now.”

“Then I know where we need to go next,” Terry said with an ominous tone.

“Uhhhh... Why are you saying it like that?” Ray gulped.

“Because I know a place that will have the equipment I need to do mass replication of your serum,” the scientist replied. “It will also have a plethora of options for the distribution method that would be much, much sturdier.”

“Then why are you hesitating?” Charlotte asked.

“Because, my dear...” Haggart sighed. “It is my home lab.”

“You mean the home where Doctor Lyfe literally just was?” I asked.

“That would be the one.” He nodded and then shrugged.

“No way!” Mei gasped. “We would be walking right into Lyfe’s hands.”

“Probably,” I sighed. “But maybe he knows we’d think it’s a bad idea, so he didn’t put much thought into the security there?”

“That’s not how Hermann works,” Haggart said. “He thinks of every possible contingency plan, which would include the option of us returning to my residential dwelling.”

“So you think he’ll be waiting for us?” I asked, and Terry nodded. “Even though we just saw him leave?”

“All the more reason to go,” Charlotte said as she rubbed her six hands together. “Perhaps we could actually finish Lyfe off once and for all.”

“He won’t be there in person,” Haggart said.

“It’ll probably just be more goons, and maybe Mister Krabs,” I added.

“What are our other options?” Mei asked. “Because I don’t like this one.”

Haggart and I looked at each other, though it became clear pretty quickly that neither of us had a backup plan.

I briefly thought about trying to go to one of the local universities and ask to borrow their lab for a bit, but the logistics on that one would be pretty hard to pull off a second time even on a good day. But by now, there was probably some sort of nation-wide alert from Anderson University about thieves posing as Lyfetechnology employees in order to steal lab supplies.

I didn’t see much of a choice.

“If we truly want to replicate this serum on a massive scale that would be easily-deliverable, I don’t see any other options,” Haggart said. “Doug? How important is this task to

you? Because I'd recommend some sort of risk-benefit analysis of the situation."

"We need it ASAP," I said. "Especially now that I'm out completely. It's the only way I have to fight back against Lyfetechnology, and the more we have, the more of a strategic advantage we have over Lyfe."

"How so?" Ray asked.

"One, we can use it as a bargaining chip so that he won't want to come after Mei," I said. "Two, if we can actually get some samples out there to people, we can corner the market and undercut his research. Think of how much damage we could do to Lyfetechnology just by selling a temporary superhuman serum to people who want it. Not the military or other evil shadow companies, of course, but people like athletes. Or maybe terminally-ill or severely-injured people? It'd revolutionize the world and put a fuckton of pressure on Lyfetechnology to make their product available to the public, which in turn would make them less appealing to the government. And like we said before... No government contracts, no Lyfetechnology."

"Soooooo, we're going to this lab?" Ray sighed. "That's probably a trap?"

“Looks like it,” Mei said as her ears flattened against her head.

“I’m ready for this,” Charlotte smirked. “Let’s go!”

“It’s a little disturbing how excited you get at the idea of killing people,” I said.

“Not just any people,” she corrected me.

“Right,” I sighed.

We started to pile back into the van, but just before I crawled inside, I heard the walkie-talkie on one of the dead goons crackle to life.

“The best paramilitary unit money could buy, eh?” Doctor Lyfe’s voice huffed. “You’d all better be dead, because I haven’t heard from you in several minutes. What’s your status?”

I just smirked to myself and shook my head.

Doctor Lyfe may have planned for every little contingency and had infinite resources, but it was clear his ego would be his downfall.

And I wanted to be the one to do it.

“Everyone in?” I asked as I slid into the driver’s seat.

“All present and accounted for,” Haggart replied.

“What about your car?” Mei asked as the engine came to life.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, my dear,” Haggart sighed, then he pointed off to the right. “Hermann’s men completely totalled it, so it’s not much use to me in its current state.”

“That’s a shame,” I said as we drove by the sports car.

Up close, I could see that the poor Camaro’s tires had been completely slashed to oblivion, and the hood of the vehicle was dented in with what appeared to be a sledgehammer. Every window and both headlights had been shattered as well.

“Why didn’t they take out our van, too?” Ray asked.

“Because Doctor Lyfe is cheap,” I said with a sigh. “This is technically still his property, so he probably wanted them to bring it back after they’d killed us.”

“One of the few times Hermann’s penny-pinching habits has actually worked to my benefit,” Haggart chuckled.

Terry jumped out of the van when I rolled to a stop in front of the double doors, and he scurried across the concrete as he tried to wave away the last of the smoke. It took a couple

of hard tugs, but he finally managed to get the doors moving. The second he saw daylight, he zipped back to the passenger seat of the vehicle and gave me a thumbs up.

I didn't know if Lyfetechn had snipers posted around the perimeter, so I slammed my foot on the pedal and sped out of the warehouse as fast as the van could move. I heard the tires squeal as I took the corner and turned back onto the road, and I didn't slow down until we reached the main road again. I didn't see any cars following us, and no one in kevlar leapt out at us when we stopped at a red light, so I let out a sigh of relief as we swept onto the interstate heading east toward Haggart's home.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, dude?" Ray asked.

"What's the matter, Ray?" I teased. "You spooked?"

"Me? Naaahhhhh," he said with a wave of his hand.

"It's just that I've taken a lot of beatings these last few days, and I'm not sure how much more my body can handle, dude. Like, did you see how that guy's knife actually stabbed through my skin?"

"And you've already healed up," I said as I pointed to the spot on his arm where he'd been stabbed. "Good as new."

“Still hurt, though,” my friend grumbled.

With Haggart’s guidance, we continued down the interstate for nearly an hour before he pointed to an exit, where we pulled off the main highway and onto a back road. Haggart led us down an intricate maze of backroads until we approached a half-mile paved driveway with a large mansion at the very end.

The house was only two stories tall, though what it lacked in height it certainly made up for in width. As we drove closer, I counted at least fifteen distinct rooms, as well as a three-car garage all the way at the east side of the dwelling. It was a typical colonial mansion style home, with sprawling tall white pillars juxtaposed with red and brown bricks and black trim around the edges of the windows. There was a black steel fence around the perimeter of the property, which I estimated had to have been at least ten acres by itself with no neighbors in the vicinity.

“Nice place,” I said to Haggart.

“You should have seen the one I had when I worked at Half-Lyfe,” he said. “It was double this size, and much nicer.”

“What the hell could be nicer than this?” Ray asked.

“Well, for one thing—” Terry began.

“Maybe we can have this discussion later,” I suggested.

“Anyone see any signs of more Lyfeteck goons?”

“It seems empty,” Charlotte replied. “But the one thing they do well is hide.”

“Dude, don’t be such a Debra Downer,” Ray insisted.

“It’s not too late to leave,” Mei gulped.

“We have to get into that lab,” I said. “That’s non-negotiable.”

That’s when we heard a massive crash come from the front of Haggart’s house, and the front door went flying through the air. It spun around like a frisbee for a few seconds before it slammed into the middle of the circular driveway and snapped into several pieces.

Out of the doorway walked the crab-mutant, in all his glory.

“Fuuuuuckkkk, dude,” Ray grumbled.

I couldn’t have agreed more.

If we wanted more of this serum, we were gonna have to go through the crab-mutant first.

Chapter 14

“Terry,” I sighed. “Please don’t tell me there’s only one entrance to your lab.”

“Of course not,” Haggart said from the passenger seat. “What kind of a secret lab would it be if it only had one way in or out?”

“And are any of those entrances in a place where we theoretically wouldn’t have to go through the indestructible crab-mutant to get there?” I asked.

“Plenty,” the scientist assured me. “Though that thing has legs, right? He’ll follow us wherever we go.”

“Only if we all stick together,” I said. “If we split up, he’ll have to decide who to follow.”

“I’m more than happy to punish the crab,” Charlotte replied.

“I know,” I said. “But we have to give Terry enough time to get to his lab and start producing the serum. And that means we’ll need to either kill big red over there, or distract

him long enough for Terry to get done with everything he needs to do. Which might take awhile.”

“I only have one request, Doug,” Charlotte said. “I don’t want to be the one to escort Doctor Haggart this time. I want to be in on the action.”

“Sooooo, I can be his escort, then?” Ray asked hopefully.

“First off, phrasing, dude...” I chuckled. “Second, I was thinking Mei could take him. We’re gonna need our heavy hitters on this one.”

“Are you sure?” my friend asked. “Because Mei’s got like, that awesome super agility shit that I don’t have.”

Before anyone could argue any further, the crab-mutant began to lumber forward and pinch his fingerlike claws together in a display of intimidation. After the first few steps, he began to increase his pace, and my heart hammered in my chest as the adrenaline started to take over.

“We gotta move, now!” I commanded my friends. “Haggart, grab everything you need, and Mei will escort you to the lab. We’ll keep him distracted for as long as you need.”

Without another word, Charlotte kicked open the back door of the van, grabbed onto the edge of the roof with her hands, and flipped up onto the top of the vehicle. Half a second later, we heard her footfalls above us as she dashed toward the front of the van, and then she leapt off, landed on the pavement in a roll, and sprang to her feet without losing any momentum.

I turned off the ignition before I went into the back, grabbed my shotgun, and reloaded the damn thing with as many shells as it could hold. I knew it probably wasn't going to do much damage against the impenetrable shell of the crab-mutant, but I wasn't about to go at him empty-handed. Once I had my weapon in hand, I hopped out the back of the van, held my shotgun at the ready, and went around the side and into the open field.

Off near the house, I could see Charlotte was already engaged with the bastard, and Ray was now out of the van and running full tilt toward the chaos.

Charlotte flipped out of the way of the crab's pincers just in time and landed against one of the columns. She used her sticky feet to attach herself to the damn thing before she tumbled backward, though, and in one swift motion she defied

gravity and flipped backwards up the column while simultaneously shooting venom out of her mouth. The deadly purple liquid splattered against the crab-mutant's shoulder and sizzled hot enough to send smoke into the air, but the crab didn't even react.

Instead, the fucker reached forward, grabbed onto the two sides of the pillar with his claws, and squeezed. The concrete shattered like brittle plaster beneath his grip, and bits of it sprayed everywhere as it was broken away from its base. The top left part of the porch began to sag, and Charlotte sprang away seconds before the damn thing collapsed.

That's when Ray reached the battle. My musclebound mutant friend scooped up one of the bigger hunks of concrete from the pillar and hauled it back over his head with both hands.

“Stop! Hammertime!” Ray cackled.

Ray brought the chunk of concrete forward with all his might and slammed it right into the back of the mutant crab's head. The debris shattered with a powerful crashing sound, and the crab took a few stumbling steps forward from the blow. While the crab tried to find its balance, Ray lowered his

shoulder and slammed into the crab again, and the combined efforts were enough to knock him to the ground.

Charlotte flipped down on the other pillar so that she was just above her enemy's position and then spat her deadly venom onto his back at nearly point-blank range. The purple liquid sizzled against the crab's back, though it didn't seem to do much damage besides a couple of nasty boils.

"That should weaken his shell, even if it's just a tiny bit," Charlotte yelled to Ray.

The musclebound mutant quickly snatched up another chunk of concrete, which he slammed into the weakened spot over and over again. Every time the makeshift weapon made contact with its target, a few bits of debris sprayed off, but even from my spot, it looked like the concrete was taking more damage than the crab.

That's when the crab fucker went on the offensive.

The crab-mutant spun around on his rounded stomach and sunk his claws into Ray's left leg. Ray let out a howl of pain as he was yanked off his feet and onto the ground, and then my friend started to grunt as the crab-mutant leapt to his feet and started to drag him across the pavement. The

crustacean was hit with another spray of purple venom as he started to move, but the crab kept going.

“This way, my dear!” Haggart said from inside the van.

I looked back to see Mei and Terry Haggart both jump out the back of the vehicle, and once they were sure the crab wasn't paying attention to them, the pair started to book it toward the garage end of the house. Mei moved so fast that she had to stop and come back for Haggart, but luckily, the crab hadn't noticed their sprint across the lawn, and the two disappeared around the corner.

Which also meant I was now free to join the chaos of the battle.

As I tried to close the gap, I watched Ray get thrown like a ragdoll back toward the front of the house, and he hit it so hard that he broke through the brick wall like the Kool-Aid Man. Meanwhile, Charlotte continued to try and attack the crab-mutant from afar, though her venom didn't seem to do much when she wasn't right on top of it.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was gonna do, either, but I figured if we could just survive the battle long enough for Haggart to get the new batch of serums completed, then we could get the fuck outta Dodge and find somewhere safer to

recover. Though I had to admit, that was looking like a mighty big if as the crab nearly snapped Charlotte in two.

“Yo, crab-man,” I called out as I raised my weapon. “I’m the one your boss has such a hard-on for, so why don’t you come dance with me?”

The crab-mutant looked at me with a completely blank expression, though his spiny legs began to scuttle as his body turned to face me. The next thing I knew, the fucker was dashing forward, and I had to make a move.

I squeezed the trigger on the shotgun and felt the kickback as a whole load of deadly pellets blasted out of the barrel toward my opponent, and then I instinctively dove to the left. As I rolled to safety, I heard the swarm of pellets smash into the crab-mutant’s shell, though he didn’t make any sound to indicate I’d hurt him. As I came back to my feet, I twisted around and readied my gun again, though I didn’t even have a chance to take aim before he was on me.

The crab-mutant reached out with his right claw and tried to snap it around my head, but I was able to duck down seconds before I was decapitated. Without even thinking, I dove forward underneath the mutant’s legs, and I slid across my stomach as I passed under his body.

I quickly twisted around, raised my gun to my chest, and fired into his back from point-blank range. This time I watched as the pellets smashed into his shell and bounced off harmlessly, and I swore under my breath.

Then I noticed something I hadn't before. There were small chips in the crab-mutant's shell, right where he'd been shot.

Maybe he wasn't so indestructible after all.

"Okay, dude," Ray said groggily in the distance. "Now you've gone and done it..."

A hunk of concrete slammed into the crab-mutant from the side and shattered into a powder, though the mutant was still laser-focused on me. He raised a few of his spindly, pointed legs into the air and then tried to run me through, but I rolled out of the way just as they stabbed into the ground.

While still on my back, I raised the shotgun up against my chest, squeezed the trigger, and blasted it into the mutant's closest set of legs. The crab let out a grunt as he went down to his knees where he'd been shot, which gave me enough time to get back to my feet. I blasted out the fucker's other legs from under him, then I fired into his back where I'd hit him before.

Again, there were a few chips in his armor, but nothing severe.

I began to back up as the crab-mutant slowly got back to his feet, and that's when Ray and Charlotte both appeared at my side.

"I'm doing my best, guys," I chuckled. "But nothing seems to be able to get through that shell of his."

"Never say never, man," Ray said as he cracked his knuckles. "Maybe we just gotta keep chipping away at it until it breaks, or maybe we, like, gotta all attack it at the same time or some shit... All I know is that King Crab here is going down once and for all."

Our enemy lunged for me, but Ray was quick to step into the line of fire. Ray knocked away the crab's claw with a simple backhand, then he slugged the fucker right in the chest hard enough to knock him back a few steps. Without missing a beat, Ray then went full Mike Tyson on the creature with a series of one-two punches that kept his enemy on its toes.

"The legs are obviously a weak spot," I said to Charlotte. "It might not actually do any damage, but it throws him off balance for a few seconds. Maybe if we do it enough

times, we can wear him down, or at least stay alive long enough for Haggart to do what he needs to do.”

“The legs it is, then,” Charlotte said. “Though I had a slightly better idea... One that might pack even more of a punch. Stand back!”

Charlotte twisted around, sprang up, and latched onto a second concrete pillar. The spider-woman then turned around, sucked in a deep breath, and spat some venom onto the crab from behind.

That’s when I understood what she was trying to do. She wanted to bring the entire brick-and-concrete porch onto the fucker.

I could definitely help with that.

“Stand back, Ray,” I said.

“What? Why?” Ray asked without looking away. “I’ve got him on the ropes!”

Just then, the mutant crab did a move that could only be described as a crab walk, and he scuttled out of the way of Ray’s next blow. The oversized crab then backhanded Ray with a left claw, which knocked my friend down onto the ground with an earth-shattering thud.

I instantly fired my shotgun into the mutant's feet, and he made a gurgled grunting noise as he went down. I started to back up toward the closest concrete pillar as I fired two more times, and the crab's blank eyes seemed to narrow as he began to crawl toward me.

"That's it..." I whispered. "Come to papa."

I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins as I watched the massive killing machine headed my way, but I didn't want to move until I was sure he'd hit the pillar instead. Once the bastard was only about ten feet away I dove to the right, and as I moved, I heard a loud crash followed by debris hitting the ground.

When I turned, I saw that Charlotte was crawling around the porch's third pillar spitting venom all around its circumference, while the fourth and final pillar had already been melted away from its base.

Now, I just needed to make sure we took down the last pillar.

The crab-mutant was just getting back to his feet when Ray rejoined the battle, and I watched as my best friend put his hands together like a fleshy club and slammed it down on the crab's head. The sound of the impact was intense, and the

crab-mutant wobbled for a moment as he went down on one knee.

The second he went down I raised my shotgun and took out the other set of legs from under him with a powerful blast of metal pellets.

“Ray!” I yelled. “Take out that pillar and get the fuck outta here!”

My musclebound friend turned around and charged at the busted pillar full-speed, and his momentum carried him clear through the damn thing without stopping. The second Ray busted through the other side of the pillar, the entire porch roof began to creak and groan, and I looked up to see a massive crack forming on the ceiling as bits of it started to sag.

“Got it!” Charlotte said. “Run!”

I looked over to see Charlotte spring off the final pillar, which had been melted away from its base, so I took off to the south as fast as my legs would carry me. When I was far enough away, I glanced back over my shoulder to watch the magic happen.

Ray and Charlotte both were running in opposite directions, though the crab-mutant was still struggling to get to

his feet as he sat underneath the porch's roof. A few small bricks fell loose from the ceiling and slammed into the crab from above, and he grunted angrily as he looked up to see what was going on.

Then, the whole fucking thing gave out.

I watched with glee as the entire porch collapsed onto the crab-mutant, and within seconds, he was buried underneath a massive pile of brick, concrete, wood, and shingles. There was so much debris that our enemy was covered completely with the rubble as it continued to pile on, until finally the world went silent.

“Did- did that actually get him?” Ray asked as he ran up beside me.

“No clue,” I gulped. “But if nothing else, it gives us a second or two to think.”

“Think about what?” Ray asked.

“I dunno,” I said and shrugged. “To regroup and try to figure out what the fuck we do from here.”

“We survive,” Charlotte said with an emotionless tone. “That’s all we can do, and it’s what we’ve been doing pretty well so far.”

I held my breath as I watched the pile of rubble and hoped that we'd actually crushed the asshole, though I also knew I shouldn't get my hopes up too much.

Sure enough, a few bricks began to fall away from the pile, and the whole thing shifted.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled. "He just won't die, will he?"

"I get the feeling Lyfe says the same thing about you, dude," Ray said.

"Okay, what's Plan D?" I asked my friends. "Because we're quickly running out of ideas."

"I still think we shoulda tried to find a giant crab mallet," Ray replied. "Or maybe a hydraulic press or something?"

"We just need some way to get through the shell," Charlotte grumbled in a frustrated voice. "My venom would normally be enough—"

"But this shell is so thick," I said.

"I'm telling you, a giant crab mallet," Ray said.

"Or something even more powerful than Charlotte's venom," I said as I glanced in the direction where Mei and

Haggart had disappeared.

“Like what?” Ray asked.

“What indeed,” Charlotte scoffed.

“Like nitric acid,” I said as my eye fell on the van.

“There was a small tank of it in the van.”

“Acid?” Ray asked. “You wanna get it high?”

“Nitric acid,” I said. “That shit was always the chemical that we were told not to fuck around with under any circumstances, mainly because it would eat through most metals like it was paper given the right conditions. If nitric acid can corrode steel, surely it would do something to this mutant’s shell.”

“Hell, yeah,” Ray replied with a grin.

“You guys hold him off,” I said as I headed for the van.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Just don’t take too long,” Ray called after me.

“I’m coming right back!” I insisted.

I heard the sound of clattering bricks and an inhuman gurgle, and when I glanced back, I saw that the crab-mutant had broken out of his tomb. As I ran toward our van, I noticed

that my muscles were aching like I'd just run a marathon, and I wasn't moving as fast as I had been a few minutes ago.

The fucking serum was wearing off.

And if I didn't have the superhuman durability that it gave me, all it would take was a single blow from big, dumb, and red to put me down for the count. I had to proceed with caution, and I couldn't afford any more mistakes in this fight.

At least the van was still intact, and as soon as I hopped into the back, I dashed over to the cabinet that held all of our more dangerous chemicals. I fumbled around with the lock for a minute before I got it off, then I flung open the cabinet doors and started to look around for the precious, piss-colored liquid.

Sure enough, there was a tank labeled *HNO₃* with a couple of dire-looking warning labels just underneath the chemical composition. I carefully picked it up with my left hand, shut the cabinet door with my elbow, and then exited the vehicle with the glass tank in one hand and my shotgun in the other.

But what I saw when I stepped outside nearly made my heart drop into my knees.

The crab-mutant was no longer engaged with Ray and Charlotte.

Instead, he was headed to the east, in the direction where Mei and Terry Haggart had gone. Ray and Charlotte were right behind the fucker, though he wasn't paying them a lick of attention as he scuttled away on his eight spiny legs.

I ran at full speed to cut off the crab-mutant, and even though I didn't have my enhanced agility anymore, I had the angle on the bastard. I jumped into his pathway about thirty feet ahead of him, dropped my gun, and tossed the jar of nitric acid into my dominant hand. I pulled it back like I was lining up a baseball pitch and stood in place as my heart sprang up into my throat.

I knew that this creature could kill me with a single blow, but I had to try something. If this didn't work, I knew there were about ten different horrific ways I could die, all of which were just as unpleasant as the previous one on my mental list. Still, I had to stand my ground, or Lyfe would kidnap my friends, dissect my cat, and probably go on to build an army of mutant soldiers for the government.

I waited until the crab-mutant was about six feet away, then I launched the jar of nitric acid at the fucker as hard as I

could. I watched as the glass bottle slammed into his chest and broke into a million shards. The dark yellow liquid inside the container splattered against the crab-mutant's chest and began to smoke instantly, so I pulled the pistol out of my waistband and raised it up to take aim.

I fired three shots into the spot where the acid had splattered, and much to my surprise, the bullets actually lodged themselves into the crab's shell.

However, he didn't go down.

"Fuck," I gulped.

I tried to dive out of the way, but the crab's claw-like fingers grabbed my arm and held me in place. The mutant raised me into the air, and then he hauled back to finish me off with the claws on his other hand.

"Get away from him, you bitch!" Ray snarled as he grabbed the crab's hand and held it in place.

At the same time, Charlotte flipped up onto the monster's back, sucked in a deep breath, and then sprayed deadly venom into his eyes. This time the crab-mutant let out a pained squeal, and he released me from his grip.

I fell down into a crouch near my shotgun, so I snatched it up as I scooted away from the crab.

“The nitric acid created a weak spot,” I said. “Try to hit him there.”

As I grabbed my weapon and stood back up, I saw Charlotte grab onto the mutant’s arm. She flipped her body around, threw her feet out in front of her, and kicked the bastard square in the weak spot. The crab-mutant hissed in pain, though his shell remained intact.

Not for long.

I raised my shotgun, waited for Charlotte to get clear, and then blasted a swarm of deadly pellets straight into his chest. The buckshot hit the crab-mutant and stuck into his softened shell, though it didn’t penetrate it.

Fuck.

“Hold on, dude,” Ray said. “I’ll crack this nutcase.”

My friend went in for a quick bodyblow, but the mutant crab was more than ready. I had to jump back as Ray was backhanded hard, and the musclebound mutant yelled as he went flying backwards across the battlefield. He crashed

through the door of Haggart's garage, and that's when I heard a woman scream.

It was Mei.

The crab-mutant heard it, too, and he seemed to become laser-focused on the source of the sound. Charlotte tried to distract him with a splash of venom to the eyes, but he didn't even react. The crab-mutant simply began to scuttle toward the garage, and now he was moving so fast it was hard to track him with my weapon.

I squeezed the trigger and fired, though I missed him by a freaking mile as he continued to run.

"We can't let him get to Mei and Haggart!" I said to Charlotte.

Both of us took off after the fleeing crab, but he disappeared into the garage before we could catch him. When we got to the broken door of the building, I could clearly see where Ray's body had smashed through a nearby tool cabinet, and behind the cabinet was a hidden hallway.

That must have been the entrance to the lab.

I heard Ray yowl in the distance as we hurried toward the passageway, ducked inside, and then followed it toward the

sounds of the chaos. Eventually, the hallway opened up into a large room that looked like a simple laboratory, complete with sterile white floors and walls and equipment as far as the eye could see. It was a fairly basic setup, though it apparently had the tools needed to get the job done.

Haggart had his back to us on the other side of the room, and I assumed he was busy at work replicating the serum.

Meanwhile Ray was sprawled out on the floor like he'd just been TKOed, and Mei stood at the center of the room with her teeth bared and her claws at the ready.

“You aren't getting past me,” the cat-woman snarled. “So don't even try it.”

The crab-mutant took a step toward Mei, who hissed and then ducked out of the way with ease. Mei slashed the monster with her claws as she came back up, then she flipped around behind him and began to stab at his back with a flurry of scratch attacks.

“Haggart?” I called across the room. “You got any nitric acid in this place?”

“Not at the moment!” he said without looking up from his experiments. “I used it all a few months ago and haven’t had a chance to restock.”

“How much longer do you need?” I asked.

“Maybe ten minutes?” he yelled back. “Twenty at the most.”

Twenty fucking minutes? I didn’t know if we were gonna be able to make it another five minutes against this thing, let alone twenty.

There had to be another way to break through that shell. The nitric acid was a good start, but it wasn’t an option at the moment, and I couldn’t think of anything off the top of my head that would have that sort of corrosive effect on a hard material.

Charlotte went over and began to help Mei as I scanned the lab for anything that might come in handy. Most of the equipment was your standard safe lab shit like an emergency shower, some massive centrifuges, and distilling equipment. However, one piece of equipment caught my eye.

There, on the far end of the lab, was a glass door that had a small room on the other side of it.

“Terry?” I asked. “What the fuck is behind that giant glass door over there?”

“That?” Haggart asked without looking up. “A pressure chamber.”

“Why the hell is it so massive?”

“Because I deal with large quantities of chemicals at a time, Doug,” he said in an exasperated voice. “I know it’s not up to code, but I don’t think I need to tell you that I don’t have inspectors coming down here all the time.”

“Does it work?” I asked.

“Of course it works!” he barked.

“It better,” I muttered. “Because it may be the only thing that will save us.”

I watched as Mei, Charlotte, and Ray attacked the bastard from every angle imaginable, while the crab-mutant swung at them wildly with his claws and spiny feet. I couldn’t get a clear shot at the weak spot, and the crab seemed to have figured out that it needed to protect that spot.

So I skirted around the battle and headed over to the pressure chamber. I checked the current settings and then popped it open.

“What are you doing?” Haggart gasped. “That thing is dangerous.”

“Ever cooked crab in a pressure cooker?” I asked.

“I can’t say that I have,” he replied.

“Well, we’re about to,” I said. “Guys! Try to lure Mister Krabs over to me!”

“Can do, dude,” Ray said.

Ray, Mei, and Charlotte all repositioned themselves in front of the crab-monster, and then they started to attack him with everything they had. Charlotte sprayed venom into the creature’s eyes, and while he was temporarily stunned from the effect, Mei and Ray would pummel him and force him back a few steps. They continued this process until the bastard was right in front of the open door.

“Now!” I commanded as I stepped out of the way.

I blasted a spray of shotgun pellets into the crab-mutant’s legs from behind so he would lose his balance for a few seconds. As soon as he started to wobble, Ray lowered his shoulder, jumped forward, and slammed into the beast with his full body weight. The sheer force of the impact knocked the

crab-mutant backwards into the chamber, and as soon as Ray hopped out of the way, I slammed the door shut behind him.

I ran over to the control knobs, pressed pressurize, and then cranked up the knob as high as it would go. The door of the chamber made a hissing sound as it began to seal up airtight, and the crab-mutant looked around with confusion on his face. I watched as the little needle on the pressure gauge started to tick upwards, and the mutant must have finally realized what was going on.

The crab-mutant scuttled over to the door of the pressure chamber and began to pound against the glass with his claws.

“Uhhh, Doug?” Ray gulped. “I don’t think that thing’s made to hold up against mutant crabs.”

I held my breath as I watched a few hairline cracks form on the inner pane of glass, though the pressure needle continued to move upward.

“Dooougggg?” Mei said as more cracks formed on the crab-mutant’s side of the door.

My heart was racing at a thousand miles per hour as I watched the pressure rise and hoped it was enough to actually

break through that thick shell of his.

Then, I heard a wet, gnarly crack that echoed through the entire pressure chamber, and the crab-mutant let out a gurgled wail of pain. Cracks began to form all over his armored body, and the creature started to spasm as he slammed his claws against the door even more frantically.

“Keep going, dude!” Ray yelled. “He’s almost steamed to perfection.”

The cracks on the bastard’s shell continued to spread across his body, until his entire figure looked like it was a freaking mosaic painting. He kept slamming his claws against the glass though, and more fractures appeared. But the damage to the mutant’s shell had already been done, and even if he broke through the glass door, we would be able to finish him off.

The crab-mutant suddenly tossed his entire body against the glass door, and the inner pane shattered. The rapid change in pressure must have caused a catastrophic failure in the pressure chamber, because a red light began to flash and there was a hiss as the pressure was released through the vents in the ceiling. The crab-mutant slammed his body into the glass once more, and this time, the outer pane shattered as he landed on

the lab floor with a dull thud. He was heaving as he started to get back to his feet, and all of us just stared in disbelief.

“How?” Charlotte growled. “How did that not kill him?”

The crustacean fucker took a step forward, but that was as far as he went.

I raised my shotgun up into the crook of my armpit, took aim at his face, and squeezed the trigger. This time, the deadly metal shot hit the crab-mutant’s shell, and there was a dry crack as the pellets tore through his shell like it was made of wet cardboard. Bits of blood, brain, and white crab muscle erupted out the back of the mutant’s body as he stumbled back a few steps, and then I shot him again in the chest. His entire front shell exploded into several shards of red and white as his innards plopped out of his body and onto the floor.

The crab-mutant let out a low, pained moan as he stumbled forward, then collapsed into a heap atop his own guts.

“Did- did that just happen?” Mei gasped.

“I think it did,” I said through a few panicked breaths.

“We killed it. We killed the unkillable crab-mutant.”

Chapter 15

No way had this just happened. Mei, Charlotte, Ray, and I had just defeated a freaking mutant crab-man whose shell was able to withstand chemicals that could melt through steel, half a ton of rubble, and a shotgun blast at point-blank range. Lyfetech had thrown its absolute best at us, and we were still able to kick its ass and come out on top.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about, baby!” Ray said as he fist-pumped into the air. “Fresh crab cakes for weeks.”

“I don’t think you want to eat that,” I said as I inspected the corpse of the mutant.

“Why not?” my friend protested. “He’s basically just a giant crab, and Ray loves himself some delicious seafood.”

“He’s a mutant, dude,” I chuckled. “For all we know, when he was injected with the serum, his muscles were changed to release toxins into his bloodstream when he died or some shit like that. Or maybe it just changed him so that his meat tastes awful. I just know I wouldn’t take my chances.”

“I wouldn’t, either,” Mei said as she stuck out her tongue. “And I’m the furthest thing from a picky eater as there

can be.”

“Seriously,” I said with a smirk. “You used to eat stuff out of the garbage bin if I forgot to close it.”

“It contained the scraps of your delicious human food,” Mei said. “Even the scraps were better than the kibble that I ate most of the time.”

“Hey now,” I said. “I gave you a can of wet food every day.”

“And that still wasn’t as good as the table scraps!” she huffed. “You and your friends always got the delicious food, while I got tuna or liver.”

“Don’t knock tuna and liver,” I said with a half-smile. “That shit’s a delicacy to some people.”

“I don’t know,” Charlotte said as she sniffed the crab. “Maybe it is safe for consumption.”

“See?” Ray said as he gestured to the spider-woman. “At least one mutant is sane around here.”

“Dude, she’s obviously fucking with you,” I said.

“Charlotte?” he gasped. “She’d never.”

“Right,” Charlotte said with a sly grin. “I would never lead anyone astray.”

“Hold it.” Ray said as his face twisted into a frown. “Something’s not right here... You never smile.”

“I told you,” I said. “She’s fucking with you, dude. Don’t eat the dead mutant crab meat. Best-case scenario is you end up on the shitter for the next few days straight, shitting your guts out because the meat is spoiled. Worst case? It’s toxic, and you die.”

“Well, when you put it that way,” Ray gulped. “Maybe I won’t. I’m always gonna be wondering what if, though.”

“He was certainly hard enough to kill,” Charlotte said as she tapped the crab-mutant’s body with her foot. “And he almost got to us even in the very end.”

“Yeah,” Mei said. “I thought we were in big trouble when he broke through the glass.”

“So did I,” I chuckled. “That’s why I just started blasting the second I had a clear shot.”

“Thank fuck you did, dude,” Ray sighed. “Because the Ray machine was totally starting to run out of gas at the end, there.”

“I thought you didn’t get tired, Mister super strong mutant?” Mei giggled.

“Even the most well-designed car is gonna fall apart when you run it nonstop without much of a break,” Ray replied.

“How long do you think we have before Lyfe sends more men?” Charlotte asked.

“Well, considering this dude’s collar light is off, I’d bet Lyfe already knows his creation is dead,” I said. “Which means we maybe have another twenty minutes or so before the place is swarming with goons? Give or take? Terry? How are things going over there?”

“I’m just about done, my boy,” Haggart said as he fumbled with a few more items on the table. “Give me five minutes, and we should be golden.”

What proceeded was the longest five minutes of my fucking life. The four of us stood around as we watched and waited for more Lyfeteck goons to appear and for Haggart to work his magic. We were all hoping that the scientist would finish his work before the next wave of bad guys appeared, but the air in the lab was definitely tense. It felt like forever before

Haggart finally stood back from his workbench and let out a long, happy sigh.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Did it work?”

Haggart turned around with a smug expression on his face as he held up a small set of vials that contained a clear liquid inside.

“I’ve replicated your formula,” Haggart said. “Now, all that’s left is to transfer the serum into the containers that I promised... You have the capabilities for turning this into a vapor in the mobile lab, correct?”

“That’s how I did it before.” I nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“Because for our own safety, we might want to do that part of the process on the road,” he replied. “I don’t think we want to be here when Hermann’s clean-up crew arrives. Honestly, I’m surprised they haven’t appeared already. Your fight was loud enough for the neighbors to hear, that’s for sure.”

“Didn’t you say you had some better containers stashed away in this lab?” I asked.

Haggart pointed to a cabinet on the other side of the room.

“Ray?” the scientist said. “Would you find the box labeled capsules in there and bring those with you.”

“Sure thing, Doc,” Ray chuckled.

The musclebound mutant lumbered over to the cabinet in question, popped it open, and then spent a full minute browsing the shelves while he hummed an old country tune. However, he wasn't able to find the container Haggart was referring to, and he turned to look at Haggart with a puzzled expression.

“It should be on the bottom shelf,” Haggart said. “I've clearly labeled it with a marker.”

“Uhhhhhhh...” Ray mumbled as he turned back to the cabinet.

Charlotte rolled her eyes and shook her head, then she strutted over to the cabinet and crossed her arms over her chest. A few seconds later she reached forward, grabbed a small box, and then turned to hold it up.

“Found it,” the spider-woman said.

“I totally would have found it, too,” Ray said with a huff. “Like I said, the Ray train is starting to lose its diesel.”

“Of course you would have,” Charlotte snickered as she walked back with the box. “Eventually.”

“Hey,” Ray protested as he followed her.

“Yes, that’s it,” Haggart said as he accepted the box Charlotte presented to him.

I noticed that there was a piece of duct tape stuck to the side of the box, and someone had scribbled the word capsules on the tape with a sharpie pen. The handwriting was barely legible, so I could understand why Ray hadn’t found it right away.

“Looks like they’re all here,” Haggart said as he opened the box.

I peered over the Doc’s shoulder and saw that the box was filled with tiny little square capsules that reminded me of oversized Tylenol pills.

“Are you making it ingestible?” I asked. “Because I thought we agreed the vapors would take effect quicker?”

“They do.” Haggart nodded. “Are you familiar with the concept of smelling salts?”

“Kinda,” I said. “Never used them, but I know they used to use them a lot in the Victorian era. I think every book I had to read by Dickens featured smelling salts.”

“I’ll explain on the way to the van,” Haggart said.

As we started to move about and collect the things we needed, we heard the last sound we wanted to hear.

A high-pitched beeping noise.

“What the fuck is that?” Ray asked.

“You’re really starting to get on my last nerve, Mister Roth,” Doctor Lyfe’s disembodied voice said.

I turned around and saw that the bastard was communicating through a small speaker on the collar of the crab-mutant. More concerning, though, was the fact the red light on the collar had begun to blink more rapidly.

My stomach turned over on itself.

“He’s activating the mutant’s bomb-collar!” I yelled.
“Get the fuck out of here, now!”

“See, Terry?” Lyfe chuckled through the speaker. “I always get the last laugh.”

The five of us started to book it out of the lab, and we got about halfway down the secret hallway before the beeping sound stopped. Then, we heard the sound of a loud, earth-shaking explosion behind us.

“Keep going!” I yelled when Haggart and Mei seemed to freeze for a moment.

We got out of the garage seconds before it was consumed by the flames, and the shockwave from the explosion hit us from behind and knocked us flat on our asses.

“The serum!” Terry screamed as the box full of vials went airborne.

Time seemed to slow down as I watched all of our precious work, all of our sacrifice, all of our blood, sweat, and tears, plummet toward the ground where it would shatter into oblivion. My heart seized up in my chest as I frantically crawled to my feet, fought through the aching pains in my body, and ran toward the falling vials.

Then, Charlotte zipped past me from my right. While airborne, the spider-woman grabbed onto the box with one set of hands, and she cradled the top of the box with the other two sets as she flipped forward and landed with a dull thud on the

ground. Charlotte breathed heavily as she held onto the box for dear life, and the rest of us dashed over to see if she was okay.

“Good catch,” I said through gritted teeth. “Did we lose any?”

Charlotte removed her four hands from the top, and I saw that at least a quarter of the vials had been shattered into oblivion. However, that still left at least twenty of the damn things in one piece, which would be plenty to hold me over until we could create more.

“Okay, that’s good,” I said and turned to look for Haggart.

But the scientist wasn’t even looking at us anymore. His mouth hung open as he watched the fire start to spread through his house. There were tears in the man’s eyes, and a look of pure, unadulterated hatred on his face.

“I’m sorry, Terry,” Mei said as she fought back tears. “We didn’t mean for you to lose your house.”

I walked over and placed my hand on Haggart’s shoulder to try and comfort the man. I felt super guilty about the whole situation, since I was the one who initiated contact and pulled him into our mess.

“This is my fault,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you talking about, my boy?” Haggart said with a raised eyebrow.

“If I hadn’t reached out to you, then your house wouldn’t be burning down, and both of your secret labs would still be secret,” I sighed. “I would totally understand if you told us to fuck off and leave you alone.”

“Don’t be sorry, friends,” Haggart said with a bittersweet smile. “Am I upset that everything I’ve worked for has now literally gone up in smoke? Yes. Am I upset that I answered your message and joined up with you? No.”

“But dude...” Ray scratched his head. “It seemed like you had a really sweet gig going here.”

“I was in denial,” Haggart said and shook his head. “Everything I owned, all of the little projects I was creating that I thought were being done in secret? It was all thanks to Hermann, and I’m sure he knew exactly what I was doing.”

“Don’t say that,” I said. “You may have built your company with Lyfe, but—”

“I’m not talking about the company,” he replied. “I’m talking about all this! There was no such thing as a secret lab.

Hermann knew about everything I was doing this entire time, and now that I think back on it, I'm sure he was actually responsible for all the good fortune that I've encountered since leaving Half-Lyfe. The only reason I've been able to live a normal life is because Hermann has let me."

"He pulled a *Truman Show* on you," I nodded.

"I'd wager that not a single detail of my new life wasn't thought out or planned out by Lyfetechnology," he huffed. "Until you all came along, that is. Once you were in the equation, Hermann realized he couldn't control the situation anymore."

"Chaotic good," I smirked. "That's what we aspire to be."

"Frankly, this was going to happen sooner or later," he sighed. "Perhaps he wouldn't have tried to blow me up or burn down my house, but Hermann has always wanted me dead. The man really hates loose ends, and that's all I am to him. But at least now I'm gonna make him work for it."

"That's the spirit," Charlotte said.

"I'm glad you still want to stick it out with us," I said and then glanced toward the road. "But right now, we probably

need to get outta here before the fire department shows up and starts asking questions.”

Haggart’s house was now completely aflame, and the brown-haired man looked on sadly as he watched it burn. But then he took a deep breath, lifted his chin, and nodded to us.

“Let’s go,” he said and waved us to the van.

We trotted across the singed grass, through the growing cloud of black smoke, and hopped into the van. I took my usual spot in the driver’s seat while everyone else made themselves as comfortable as they could.

“You know we’re going to make Doctor Lyfe pay, right?” Charlotte asked Terry as I pulled around the circular driveway. “He’s done horrible things to all of us.”

“Hermann will pay for what he’s done,” Haggart agreed. “One way or another.”

“So does that mean you’ll join our team?” Mei asked with a happy gasp.

Haggart gave the cat-woman a slight nod, and she began to jump up and down as she squealed with pure glee. I saw a smile grace Haggart’s lips, even though his overall demeanor remained somber.

I pulled us out of the driveway and back toward the main road, though I wasn't exactly sure where we were headed next.

“Well, it's not like I really have any other place to go now,” Terry chuckled. “My home has burned down, and all of my laboratories have been destroyed. Oh, and my former business partner and brother-in-law is now hunting me like I'm a wanted criminal. If I don't stick with you, I'm as good as dead. And if I'm being honest, I've grown fond of you all in the short time we've been together.”

“Awwwww,” Charlotte said sarcastically. “We love you too, Terry.”

“I'm gonna be completely honest with you all,” I said as we drove down one of the backroads. “I have no fucking clue where we're going next. I was kinda hoping that partnering up with you was gonna solve all of our problems, and Lyfotech's demise would already be in motion.”

“Oh, it is.” Haggart smiled. “It's just going to take some time.”

“Well, we obviously can't go back to the lab,” Charlotte said.

“And we can’t go back to either of our apartments back in North Carolina,” I said.

“Wherever we go, we will need a more permanent lab than what we have in the back,” Haggart said as he pointed to the mobile lab. “I can make that work for now, but if we ever plan to start mass-producing these serums we will need better facilities.”

“One step at a time,” I said. “Seriously, though, where the Hell can we go that Lyfetechn won’t find us?”

After a few moments of silence, Ray clapped his hands together and did his own version of the happy dance.

“Dude, I know where to go,” the musclebound mutant said happily. “Uncle Abe’s cabin.”

“Uncle Abe?” I laughed. “You gotta be kidding me, right?”

“Who is Uncle Abe?” Mei asked.

“Ohhhhh, boy,” I said. “Ray, do you wanna explain to Mei about your Uncle Abe? I’ve never actually met him before, but I’ve heard plenty of stories.”

“Uncle Abe is my dad’s brother,” Ray said. “And he’s kind of an outcast.”

“In what way?” Charlotte asked.

“Well, he kinda went off the deep end when he got back from his one trip out west,” Ray said.

“He came back raving about how he’d been abducted by aliens and how the government was covering it all up,” I said.

“Dude, once you meet him, you’ll believe him, too,” Ray replied.

“Maybe I’m just being a bit of a stick in the mud here, but I’m not sure it’s the best idea to go to your conspiracy theorist uncle with two bonafide mutants,” I said. “Chances are he’ll wanna cut them open and do experiments on them himself.”

“Do you really think so little of Uncle Abe, dude?” Ray sniffed.

“Isn’t this the man who once bought all the tinfoil in town so that he could cover his entire garage with it?” I asked. “Because yeah, I definitely am gonna think little of him.”

“It’s the perfect option, man.” Ray shrugged. “Think about it. Uncle Abe lives out in the middle of nowhere, completely off the grid. I don’t even think we’d get cell phone

service out there, especially since he's got remote jammers to keep the government from spying on him."

As much as I hated to admit it, Ray had a point. If we really wanted to regroup and plan our next move, we needed to be somewhere far away from Doctor Lyfe's clutches. Lyfotech was one of the most powerful companies in the modern world, which meant the only possible way to escape him was to escape the modern world altogether. If we were out in a cabin in the middle of nowhere in South Carolina, I was sure we'd be completely free of Doctor Lyfe's influence.

Then again, five friends going out to a cabin in the middle of nowhere was literally how dozens of horror movies began, which gave me a few second thoughts.

Still, I couldn't think of anything better at the moment.

"Alright," I sighed. "You win. We'll go stay at your Uncle Abe's until we can figure out our next move. Do you wanna let him know we're coming?"

"With what?" Ray asked. "He doesn't have a cell phone, remember?"

This was already off to a great start.

Ray guided us in the direction of his uncle's place, and while we drove Haggart got to work in the back of the van. The man was able to get the serum vaporized and then injected the gas into the capsules for one-time usage. Afterwards, he used a small heat lamp to seal the plastic shut, which he tested by tossing a couple in the air. When he was satisfied with his work, he slid his head between the driver and passenger seats and held out a packet of pills.

“There,” Terry said. “These should last a bit longer than the puffs of your inhaler, and they should be next to indestructible in terms of accidental damage.”

“So basically, you're huffing the stuff now?” Ray chuckled.

“As crude as that sounds, that's accurate,” Haggart shrugged. “When you wish to use one of these you simply hold it up to your nose, snap it in half, and inhale. The effects should happen in a matter of seconds, if not instantaneously.”

“Okay,” I said. “That does sound like an improvement.”

The van was quiet for a bit after that, but the silence soon started to drag at all of us. We started to chitchat about our lives, though Haggart definitely had the most interesting story. We heard about Haggart's time at Half-Lyfe, as well as

how he'd met Denise Lyfe and fallen in love with her. She sounded like the complete opposite of her asshole brother, and it was easy to see that Terry still loved her. When he described her death at the age of fifty-one from cancer, even Charlotte looked like she'd lost a best friend.

But the one thing that was abundantly clear from Terry's tale was that Hermann Lyfe had always been a greedy, arrogant, and evil bastard, much to his sister's dismay.

Two hours into our journey, the highways and urban sprawl turned into long stretches of farmland and forest, until we eventually ended up in an area where the roads became nothing but gravel and then eventually turned into dirt. Ray led us down a few of these unlabeled dirt roads for a bit longer, before we finally arrived at our destination.

As I rolled to a stop, I saw a small cabin that looked like it was falling apart at the seams. Several beams looked like they were rotted out, and the roof had a visible hole that was nearly three feet wide. There were two rusty old pickup trucks outside the cabin, as well as an ATV that was covered with mud and dirt.

The second I killed the engine, the door of the cabin flew open, and a man stepped out with a shotgun aimed right

at us. The man was clad in a pair of jean overalls with a dirty green-and-blue flannel shirt underneath. He wore a pair of muddy boots on his feet that were apparently falling apart as they were quite literally held together with duct tape. The man had on a camo trucker hat, and he had a long red beard that came down to his chest. His hair was blond and oily, and somehow it was the exact same length as his beard.

“Whooaaaaaa, Uncle Abe!” Ray said as he carefully slipped out of the van. “It’s me, Ray.”

“Ray?” Abe asked. “You don’t look like my nephew. He’s way slimmer and don’t look all fucked-up in the face.”

“Wow, okay,” Ray huffed. “I swear it’s me, Uncle Abe.”

“Prove it,” the man barked as he held the shotgun at the ready.

“Your real name is Cameron, but you changed it so that the government can’t find you,” Ray replied. “Also, when I was six you took me hunting for the first time, and I accidentally shot the window out of your cabin.”

Abe tilted his head to the side, then he lowered his gun and laughed.

“Well, I’ll be damned... What happened to your face, Ray?” he asked.

“Again, ouch,” Ray sighed. “But I’ll explain everything. I brought a couple of my friends along, too. Is it okay if we lay low here for a little while? It’s for a good reason.”

“Which is...?” Uncle Abe asked suspiciously. “You have a stroke or something?”

“Not a stroke, Uncle Abe,” Ray said and took a deep breath. “I’m a mutant now.”

“Raymond,” Abe frowned. “You sure you’re okay? You’re not on them bath salt things, are you? Because my friend Yuri tried some of that shit, and he ended up on the local news. They called him the ‘zombie man’ and everything.”

“I’m not on bath salts...” Ray sighed. “It’s just that a massive corporation is after us because I stole an experimental serum and accidentally mutated my best friend’s cat,” he replied. “Also, there’s a spider-woman, and I’m super strong now.”

Uncle Abe looked at Ray with a confused expression for a solid minute, then he clicked his tongue and began to laugh

heartily.

“No shit!” he bellowed when he could speak. “I told everyone mutants were real, but they didn’t believe me. Just like that shit with the aliens... Anyway, tell your friends to come on inside. I ain’t got much room, but I don’t mind being a little cozy.”

“You heard the man,” I said to everyone.

“This is exactly how *Deliverance* starts, you know,” Haggart sighed.

“I think we’ll be okay,” I replied. “We’ve defeated a bunch of killer mutants and highly-trained assassins, so I think we can handle a conspiracy theorist with a shotgun.”

“I’m not sure about that, Doug,” Terry chuckled. “He did mention bath salts, after all. I don’t think anything you’ve faced so far is quite as scary as bath salts.”

“Touche,” I said. “I think Uncle Abe is safe, though. Maybe he’s a little eccentric, but I don’t think he’s gonna take us out to the backwoods and make us squeal like a pig.”

“Let’s hope not,” Haggart said. “I’ve already been screwed over enough for one day thanks to one Hermann Lyfe.”

“Is this man going to... screw us?” Charlotte asked with a cautious tone as she scowled at Uncle Abe.

“It’s a joke,” I explained. “Once all of this shit with Lyfetechn blows over, I’m gonna sit you and Mei down and make you watch all these movies we’re referencing. It’ll make life way easier.”

The four of us stepped out of the vehicle and were instantly greeted with a bear hug from Ray’s Uncle Abe. As Abe exchanged pleasantries with the rest of the group, my mind was only on one thing, and one thing only.

We needed to plan our next move.

We now had the resources to copy my version of the serum at will, and we also had a new member of the team who understood Doctor Lyfe on a personal level as well as a psychological level.

I wasn’t sure what was going to happen next, but at least we were safe for the moment.

Then again, as I watched Abe ramble on and on about aliens and the Illuminati, I couldn’t help but wonder what the fuck we’d just gotten ourselves into.

END OF BOOK 2

End Notes

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