



DEFENDERS & FRIENDS

SPLASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

ZOE CHANT

Splashing Through the Snow

Protection, Inc: Defenders & Friends, Volume 1

Zoe Chant

Published by Zoe Chant, 2023.

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First edition. December 10, 2023.

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Written by Zoe Chant.

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CHAPTER 1

"I hate holidays," Annabeth muttered.

Luckily, the customer was too fixated on his drink order to hear. Impatiently, he repeated, "I said, I want a large Holiday Hot Mocha but with a triple espresso shot instead of a double, steamed oat milk instead of regular, half the cinnamon syrup, double the peppermint, and extra spearmint sparkles. Got it?"

"Got it!" Annabeth did her best to inject holiday happiness into her voice.

She spun around to grab the oat milk. The abominable elf hat she wore slid forward, covering her eyes. When she shoved it back up, her elbow smacked into the bottle of spearmint sparkles, sending a shower of green and white sugar glitter to the floor.

Before she could decide whether to grab the broom or the espresso, the customer behind Mr. Extra Spearmint Sparkles raised her voice. "I want a small Christmas Cheer, but with one-third almond milk and two-thirds low-fat regular milk, double the nutmeg, one-third cinnamon syrup, and peppermint sparkles instead of spearmint."

"In a moment," Annabeth called, sweeping frantically with one hand while pouring oat milk into the steamer with the other.

"I'm still waiting for my Solstice Snow Flurry," shouted another customer from the back.

"Where's my Hanukkah Challah Latte?" another customer demanded.

"My boys have been waiting for their Kwanzaa Caramel Cocoa for 15 minutes!" exclaimed a frazzled young mother. The instant the mom looked away, one of her twin toddlers boosted the other up to make a grab for a particularly fragile Christmas ornament.

Annabeth hated winter holidays.

As the ravening horde of customers raised their voices to demand double syrup pumps and nut milk and whole milk and double blends and extra foam and no foam and ingredients she wasn't sure even existed and items from the secret menu they didn't actually have, Annabeth shouted louder. "Kwanzaa Caramel Twins mom, your kids are going for the Christmas tree ornament! Riley, I need help with the flurry machine! Hanukkah Latte, you're next! Christmas Cheers, it's coming right up!"

The mom snatched her kid away from the ornament just in time. Riley hurried to help, his antler headband bobbing. Annabeth pumped syrup and steamed milk and frothed foam as fast as she could.

“This would be so much easier if I had eight arms, like an octopus,” she muttered to herself.

“But if you were an octopus, they’d probably make you turn green and red for Christmas,” someone remarked. It was an unfamiliar male voice, with the deep resonance that suggested that the speaker was a big guy.

Annabeth was amused at the comment, as well as surprised that anyone had heard her over all the commotion. She was too busy making Christmas Cheers, Holiday Hot Mochas, Kwanzaa Caramel Cocoas, and Hanukkah Challah Lattes to look up, but she couldn’t resist replying, “Or blue and white for Hanukkah.”

“On the other hand, you’d have jet propulsion,” said the man.

“You mean, on the other tentacle.” She passed over the Hanukkah Challah Latte to the pick-up area and looked up.

And up. And up. Which was unusual for her, as she was very tall for a woman. But the man she’d been talking to towered over the other customers. He wasn’t only tall, he was big all over, with a powerful chest and incredibly broad shoulders. Annabeth’s gaze continued to rise upward, finding a strong chin, a smile that combined cheer and sweetness, and a pair of deep brown eyes.

As soon as their eyes met, the handsome customer gave a start like he’d stuck his finger in an electric socket. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged, and he stared at her like he’d never seen a 6’1” female barista in an elf hat before.

“What can I get you?” she asked, resigning herself to another complicated order. Even if he didn’t have any special requests, the holiday drinks were complex even in their original forms. But she wouldn’t mind whipping up something fancy for a man who made octopus jokes and had a lovely deep voice and brown eyes you could drown in.

He made an odd gulping sound, like a fish out of water, then cleared his throat and said, “A drip coffee, please.”

She waited for a request for syrup, foam, or sprinkles, but he said nothing else. As the silence stretched and he seemed to realize she was waiting for something else from him, he added, “Please. Did I say please? If I didn’t say please, I’m sorry.”

“You said please,” she assured him, charmed by his politeness. What a change from the usual at a time of year when even the nicest customers became frazzled and demanding! “How big? Hot or cold? Room for milk?”

“Big,” he said. His gaze was still absolutely fixed on her. “I mean large. Hot. No milk. I got used to drinking it black in the lab. The only fridge was for specimens, and I don’t like artificial creamer.”

“What lab?” Annabeth asked, intrigued.

He gulped again, looking oddly furtive. “Er. Biology. Marine biology, in my case.”

“No way!” Annabeth exclaimed. “I’m getting a PhD in marine biology.”

The big man’s look seemed almost... adoring. “You are? Of course you are. I mean, it stands to reason that you would be. All things considered.”

Baffled, she asked, “Do I look like a marine biologist?”

“Um.” The big man blinked at her. “Hi. I’m Norris.”

He offered her his hand. She shook it. He had a nice, strong, warm grip, the kind that made the invention of handshakes seem like the world’s best idea.

“I’m Annabeth,” she said.

They gazed into each other’s eyes, their hands still clasped.

A very annoyed female voice broke into their reverie. “For the third time, I want a small Pumpkin Spice Sugar Cookie Frappucino with a scoop of protein powder, nonfat soy milk, extra foam, a pump of hazelnut syrup, and milk chocolate shavings!”

An even more annoyed male voice followed. “I want two large Christmas Cheers, one with no nutmeg, a medium Holiday Hot Mocha with spearmint sparkles, and a small gluten-free Hanukkah Challah Latte!”

The most annoyed voice of all inquired, “How many times do I have to ask for a Solstice Snow Flurry with extra whipped cream and raspberry drizzle?!”

Annabeth fell back to earth with a jolt. She had no idea how long customers had been shouting orders she hadn’t heard, but based on how irritated they looked, it was probably at least a few seconds.

“Sorry,” she said to Norris. “Do you mind a bit of a wait?”

“Of course not,” he assured her. “Take your time. You can make mine when everyone else is done.”

“You’ll be here till I close out,” she pointed out.

“I don’t mind,” he said. He had *such* a sweet smile.

“You didn’t ask *me* if I minded waiting!” shrieked Ms. Solstice Snow Flurry.

“EXCUSE ME.” Norris’s deep voice boomed across the coffee shop, making Annabeth jump. Everyone fell silent and stared at him, even Solstice Snow Flurry. “Everyone is going to get their drinks. There’s no call to yell at a highly skilled and brilliant woman who’s working as hard as she can to make you all happy.”

The somewhat stunned silence that followed was broken by a chorus of embarrassed apologies and assurances that there would be no more yelling. Annabeth, also rather stunned, returned to her drink orders, but her mind was in a whirl. Norris was *amazing*. He was handsome. He had a smile that warmed the whole room. He was funny. He stood up for her. He was even a marine biologist, like her!

Ten minutes ago, she’d been a resentful elf in the middle of her least favorite time of year, run off her feet at work, single and lonely, and dreading the onslaught of holiday parties. But now...

Annabeth smiled to herself as she tossed peppermint sparkles atop a cloud of whipped cream. Now, it looked like her luck just might be changing.

She took extra care with Norris’s plain black coffee, making sure it was from a fresh batch and brewed to perfection. Holding it in both hands, she looked up at last. “Norris...?”

Norris was gone.

CHAPTER 2

Norris couldn't believe his luck. Ten minutes ago, he'd been a lonely single shifter who'd believed that he probably didn't have a mate, and that if he did, the unusual circumstances under which he'd become a shifter would mean he'd be unable to recognize her. And then he'd walked into a busy coffee shop and seen Annabeth.

She was *glorious*.

Tall and strong as a Valkyrie, graceful and quick as a ballet dancer, she'd handled the madness of the holiday coffee season with aplomb. Her curly brown hair flew around her beautiful face as she spun and whirled and never spilled a drop of coffee, milk, oat milk, almond milk, or syrup. Even the too-big elf hat only added to her charm. He'd been struck by her even before they'd spoken, and he'd been delighted by her sense of humor even before their eyes had met.

There are many more winter holidays than Christmas and Hanukkah, his inner Dunkleosteus had remarked when they'd joked about her being an octopus forced to camouflage itself in festive colors. As always, the voice of the enormous prehistoric fish that was his shift form was slow and ponderous and erudite, like a college professor who'd gotten tenure many years ago. And many of them have signature colors. If she was an octopus, she could be green for Eid al-Fitr, and black, red, and green for Kwanzaa. And perhaps light up with bioluminescence for Diwali. Tell her that.

Norris did not tell her that, as the conversation had already moved on. But he tucked it away for the future. He really hoped they'd have one.

Then their eyes met.

If he hadn't been wedged into a crowd of customers, his knees would have buckled and he'd have fallen flat on his face from the sheer shock of it. Her eyes were green-brown as the water of a deep and living lake, rich with algae and fish and all kinds of aquatic and amphibian life. They were eyes he could look into for the rest of his life, and never tire of.

I love her, he thought, astonished. So there really is such a thing as love at first sight.

Then he had to laugh at himself. Of course he loved her. How could he not love a woman who could make tentacle jokes while juggling fifteen drink orders?

A beat behind his own realization, with the slow yet inexorable approach of an enormous prehistoric fish, the voice of his inner Dunkleosteus sounded. *MINE*, it boomed. *She is our mate.*

It only got better from there. Her name was Annabeth. What a beautiful name. She was working on a PhD in marine biology. Of course she was.

Definitionally, one's mate is the person with whom one is perfectly compatible, put in his Dunkleosteus. *It would be more surprising if she was not a marine biologist.*

Giddy with happiness, Norris silently replied, *You never know. She could have been a marine paleontologist, like me.*

True, replied his Dunkleosteus. *Or an oceanographer. Or...*

His inner Dunkleosteus was still listing off ocean-related occupations when Norris had to make the customers stop yelling at his mate.

My mate, he thought. *I have a mate.*

Up till then, the best moment of his life had been becoming a Dunkleosteus shifter. *Sorry, buddy*, he thought. *That's now second-best.*

He waited for his mate (his mate!) to finish everyone else's drink orders. The crush had died down a bit, and he hoped they'd have a few moments to talk when she got him his coffee. That was plenty of time to ask her out. He tried to think of the perfect first date. Dinner and the aquarium? Dinner and beach-combing? Dinner and sailing?

There were so many possibilities, it was making him feel dizzy. The floor seemed to lurch beneath his feet, as if he was standing on a surfboard. He was hot with excitement. *Feverish* with excitement. So excited, he felt like he was about to explode. His body was straining at the seams.

Oh, no, Norris thought.

He'd been so thrilled to meet his mate, he'd failed to recognize the feeling of being cursed into his shift form rather than doing it of his own free will.

I believe we are about to... began his Dunkleosteus.

But Norris was already shoving his way through the rest of the customers. He burst out of the coffeeshop and looked around frantically for a large body of water. Unfortunately, he was in the middle of the city. All he saw were streets, shops, sidewalks, roads, cars, and...

...the park!

He ran as fast as he could, hoping he wouldn't turn into a gigantic armored fish in mid-stride. The last time he'd been cursed into his shift form,

he'd also been stuck in it for days. He could function on dry land for a few minutes, but much more than that and he'd suffocate.

I can't die now, he thought. I've only just found my mate!

The swelling feeling was getting more intense, as was the fever-heat. Either from the curse or from running full-tilt with sweat running into his eyes, his vision had blurred. All he could see were blobs of green surrounding a stretch of blue.

Those 'green blobs' are bushes, said his Dunkleosteus helpfully. They are paeonia suffruticosa (common name tree peony), hibiscus syriacus (common name Rose of Sharon), and—

Norris flung himself behind a particularly bushy *paeonia suffruticosa*. Or possibly *hibiscus syriacus*. Whatever it was, he hoped it hid him from any onlookers. But he had no time to make sure. Trying not to belly-flop and make a giant splash that would attract attention, he flung himself into the lake.

He was just in time. He'd barely submerged himself before he became a Dunkleosteus. In fact, he was pretty sure his left foot had still been above water at the time, shifting into part of his tail-fin. He dove deeper.

Almost immediately, he hit bottom. The park lake wasn't that deep. At least, it wasn't that deep when you were an armored prehistoric fish the size of a van. Norris tried to squish himself into the soft mud at the bottom.

Normally he would have enjoyed being a Dunkleosteus, even if all he could do was sit at the bottom of a lake. It was so fascinating to see through a fish's eyes and breathe with gills instead of lungs. But this time he couldn't help worrying. Had anyone seen him dive in and not come up? Did he have to worry about being spotted by rescue divers? Worse yet, what would Annabeth think if she'd seen him rush pell-mell out of the café without even taking his coffee with him?

Simply tell her your curse unexpectedly reactivated, and you had to find a body of water so you could avoid a sudden and peculiar death, suggested his Dunkleosteus.

Norris heaved a sigh, causing a stream of bubbles to float upward. *I don't think it's that simple. She probably doesn't even know shifters exist. I'll have to shift to prove it to her, and I have to get her alone in a space big enough to fit me to do that, and she doesn't even know me yet. Plus, there's the curse. It's a lot to lay on someone when you haven't even had a first date yet.*

Even to himself, it felt like a lot. What if he turned into a giant extinct fish in the middle of their first date? Why had the curse returned? How could he get it removed?

We got it removed once before, his Dunkleosteus pointed out. *We must return to the witch*. With a mental flap of his fins, the great fish added excitedly, *We can rent the aquarium truck and drive to her!*

That idea cheered Norris up immediately. When he'd been cursed the first time, he'd gotten an elderly, soap opera-loving witch in Iowa, Kerenza Couch (pronounced Coach), to turn him back into a man. His friends from Defenders, the all-shifter bodyguard agency, had rented an aquarium truck to transport him to her, as she was very old and didn't travel much. As the truck had been equipped with special controls to allow him to drive it from the tank, he'd even gotten to do that for the final leg of the journey. It had been enormously fun, though to be fair, his friends in the truck cab hadn't enjoyed it quite as much as he had.

Norris cautiously tipped his head upward, trying to see if any people were standing around the lake. All he could see was the shimmering green shapes of bushes, so he swam upward, heaved himself onto the shore, and tried to shift back.

To his immense relief, he found himself standing on the shore as a man again. Like shifters who could take the form of mythical animals, shifters who became extinct ones were able to take their clothes with them. He was lucky to not have to strip naked or else destroy his clothes every time he shifted. Unfortunately, he'd transformed an instant after he'd jumped into the lake, so his clothes were dripping wet. It was a very cold day, his car was back at the coffee shop, and it was a bit of a long drive back home. Shifters were tougher and more illness-resistant than ordinary humans, but Norris didn't want to risk coming down with a cold. He wouldn't dream of exposing his marvelous mate to germs.

Luckily, the Defenders office was just around the corner. They kept extra clothing for undercover work, and several of the guys who worked there were also on the big-and-burly side. Norris was sure they'd have something that would fit him. Also, they'd have Kerenza Couch's phone number, which he didn't think he'd ever gotten, and the phone number for the aquarium truck rental, which he was certain he hadn't. He'd asked the Defenders for the latter, and they'd put him off or refused outright. But he was sure they

wouldn't withhold it from him once he explained that he needed it to save his life rather than joyride.

Cheered, Norris strode toward the office. He got quite a few curious and concerned glances from passersby as he squelched down the snow-sprinkled sidewalk, and gave them all reassuring smiles plus "I'm fine! Just took a header into the lake!" to anyone who actually slowed down.

He squished up to the elevator and rode it up to the lobby. The doors opened to a scene of charming festivity. He'd received an invitation in the mail for the Defenders holiday party, and it looked like they were getting started on the decorations early. The entire team, plus their mates and magical pets, were busy remaking the office into a winter holiday wonderland.

A huge paper banner was spread out on the floor. Merlin and his mate Dali, the office manager, were painting it. Or rather, Dali was painting it. Merlin was walking across it in his shift form, leaving a festive trail of red-and-green footprints.

Natalie, who had been a circus acrobat before she'd joined the Defenders, was balanced up by the ceiling, standing with perfect ease atop a narrow window frame, hanging glass ornaments on an enormous Christmas tree. At the very top of the tree, just below the ceiling, perched an extremely fluffy black kitten with her wings outstretched and flapping to keep her balance.

Tirzah, who was reaching up from her wheelchair to set a large menorah on a table, glanced up at her magical kitten. "Get off there, Batcat. You'll knock it over."

Batcat violently launched herself from the Christmas tree. The tree rocked, then tipped dangerously. Natalie, whose hands were full of glass ornaments, shouted, "Ransom!"

Her mate Ransom rushed to catch the teetering Christmas tree. He caught it, but the impact dislodged a few pine needles that fell into his red hair.

Batcat circled the ceiling, hissing, then dive-bombed Wally, the teleporting husky pup. Wally gave a yelp and vanished. Batcat hit the floor and skidded, spreading her wings like a pair of tiny, furry sails. She crashed into a tray of sodas someone had left on the floor, and they all tipped over.

Wally reappeared on the floor in front of Pete, Tirzah's mate, as he strode to help Ransom steady the tree. The husky pup caught Pete across the shins, gave another yelp, and vanished again. Pete stumbled into the Christmas tree, sending it tipping again.

Norris jumped forward to steady Pete and catch the tree. This time Wally reappeared in front of *his* shins. Norris managed to stop himself from either kicking the puppy across the room or falling into the Christmas tree, but the effort made him lose his balance. He sat down hard on the floor.

Carter strode into the lobby, his long black coat swirling behind him and his golden dragonette perched on his shoulder. He held a briefcase in one hand and an espresso machine in the other, and demanded to the room at large, “What fresh hell is happening now!?”

He was followed by his mate Fen, her scarlet stiletto heels clicking rapidly across the floor. She had a briefcase in one hand and a stained glass Winter Solstice wall hanging in the other. The clicks stopped abruptly as she glared at the floor.

Norris thought she was inexplicably mad at him, then he realized that he was hidden by the tree and she hadn’t seen him at all. Following her gaze, he saw a trail of blue pawprints running across the floor. They were the footprints of an enormous hound. Or, he realized as he traced them to where they ended in a smear of blue paint, the prints of Merlin’s pet bugbear, Blue.

The hairy blue creature had apparently stepped in one of the open paint pots, then gotten his other paw stuck in another one. Blue was sitting on the floor, his absurdly tiny dragonfly wings buzzing, as he shook his paw, trying to remove the paint pot. Paint splattered everywhere.

“MERLIN!” Carter bellowed.

Merlin shifted back into his human form and rushed to remove the paint pot from Blue’s paw, calling over his shoulder, “It’s fine! It’s non-toxic.”

The Defenders boss, Roland, surveyed the scene glumly. “But is it non-staining?”

“Er.” Merlin tried to read the label on the pot still stuck on Blue’s paw. “It’s either washable or non-washable. Let me rub off this bit of paint...”

Norris got to his feet. “I can help.”

Carter whipped around, clutching the espresso machine protectively to his chest. “You! I might’ve known you’d be here!”

Fen smiled at him. “Hi, Norris. You’re early. The holiday party’s not till next week.”

“I know. I was in the neighborhood and I was hoping you had some dry clothes I could borrow.” He still couldn’t quite believe that he’d actually gotten to be friends with Carter Howe and Fenella Kim, who owned the top

two tech companies in America. Having to escape a swamp together was a great ice-breaker.

“Did you fall in another swamp?” Carter inquired.

“I had to jump in a lake,” Norris explained. “My curse came back and I suddenly turned into a Dunkleosteus. Do you have Kerenza Couch’s number?”

“I am *not* driving you this time,” Carter warned him. “Never again!”

“Maybe we could rent a plane and fly him in,” Fen suggested.

“He’d still need transport from the airport,” said Carter.

“I’d drive him,” Merlin volunteered.

“Pete, can you get Norris something to wear?” Tirzah asked, spinning her wheelchair to nudge her mate. “He must be freezing.”

Pete made a rumbling sound distinctly reminiscent of an annoyed cave bear, but beckoned to Norris. “Come on. I’ll find something to fit you.”

“I think I’m a bit bigger than you,” said Norris. “I was thinking Roland...”

Pete gave an even more bear-like snort. “Let’s try the spare stash first.”

It turned out that as an all-shifter private security agency, the Defenders kept plenty of spare clothing for shifters who were neither mythic nor extinct, and had destroyed their clothes with an unexpected shift. Pete led Norris to the stash, where he was able to find clothes that fit—enough that he could even make a choice between shirts. He left the plain black T-shirt and pulled on the one with a reproduction of a Far Side cartoon of cigarette-smoking dinosaurs, captioned “The real reason dinosaurs went extinct.” It seemed appropriate.

I am not a dinosaur, his Dunkleosteus pointed out. *I belong to the family Dunkleostidae, the sub-order Brachythoraci, the order Arthrodira—*

The class Placodermata, and the phylum Chordata, replied Norris soothingly inside his mind. *It’s just a joke.*

Scientific inaccuracy is no joke, grumbled his Dunkleosteus.

But when Norris returned to the lobby, Merlin looked up from mopping the floor and gave him a thumbs-up. He was wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a T-rex and the caption “I’m too rexy for my shirt,” and said, “Good choice. I picked that one out.”

“Of course you did,” muttered Carter.

“So, does anyone have—” Norris began.

Ransom unfolded himself from the chair where he’d been piecing together an intricate snowflake mobile. The hellhound shifter bodyguard

handed Norris a piece of paper with a phone number and the name KERENZA COUCH.

“Thanks, Ransom.” Norris looked for a safe place to sit down while he made his call. Every piece of furniture was occupied by a person, a magical pet, or a teetering stack of holiday decorations. He cautiously leaned against a wall as he made the call.

The familiar voice of Kerenza Couch answered the phone. “If this is about my car warranty, you’re going to wake up tomorrow morning with eyebrow warts.”

“Er, no,” said Norris.

“Oh,” said Kerenza. “It’s the fish fellow. Young man, you have two minutes to state your business. *The Young and the Restless* is about to start.”

“The curse is back! I started to turn into a Dunkleosteus in a coffee shop, and I had to run to the park and jump in a lake. I need you to take it off again, please, and this time make sure it stays off. I know you don’t like to travel, so I can come to you. I need to get this fixed right away.” Norris spoke so quickly that he realized that he was gabbling, and hastily shut his mouth.

“Anything special happen at the coffee shop before the shift started?” Kerenza inquired.

“Yes! I met my mate.” Dreamily, he went on. “She’s the most beautiful, brilliant—”

“Yes, yes, she’s wonderful and perfect in every way,” said the witch. “Well, that explains everything.”

“It does?”

“Meeting your mate is a world-shaking event,” Kerenza said. “It jars things loose. Inhibitions. Emotions. Curses. Anyway, to get the curse reversed, come to the Defenders holiday party. With your mate.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“But why—”

“Sonny, *The Young and the Restless* is starting. Bring your mate to the party, or it’ll be fish surprise from now on.” Kerenza hung up.

Norris looked up to see an array of grinning faces. Apparently all the Defenders had been listening in. A chorus of congratulations broke out.

“So you recognized your mate at first sight?” Roland asked. The Defenders boss spoke wistfully. He was the only one of the team who had no mate.

Norris nodded. "I'd thought I wouldn't be able to, because none of you could. But I did. I took one look into her eyes—they're the most gorgeous shade of hazel—and I just knew."

I knew, corrected his inner Dunkleosteus. And then I proceeded to inform you.

"Our ability to recognize our mates was deliberately blocked when we were made into shifters," said Ransom. "I expect that wasn't done to you because you became a shifter in exchange for a term of service. You were there voluntarily, so they didn't expect that you finding your mate would make any difference."

"Well, it would have," said Norris. "I can already feel Annabeth inspiring me to become a better person."

"Annabeth?" Natalie asked. "You said you were at a coffee shop. Is that Annabeth the barista? The tall one?"

"Tall and glorious," Norris said dreamily. "You know her?"

"She threw a watermelon frappuccino in my face once," Merlin remarked.

"What did you do to her?" Norris demanded.

"Nothing!" Merlin said. "She mistook me for someone else. It's a long story. You see..."

Pete interrupted, "We retrieved a stolen sofa for her once. So she's already invited to the holiday party—the one for people who don't know about shifters. We sent invitations to all our clients."

Norris was immensely relieved. All his problems had melted away like a thin sheet of ice on a lake in spring. "I'll ask her right now."

"Hey!" Carter snapped his fingers at Norris. "Don't suddenly turn into a Dunkleosteus on the first date."

"My curse is back," Norris pointed out. "I may not be able to avoid it. Hmm. I'd better stay close to a body of water until the holiday party. I think I'll ask her if she'd like to eat on the pier."

Carter flung up his arms and looked up, as if for Heavenly guidance. Since he was in the office rather than outside, what was above him was a ceiling and three flying kittens circling like hawks. "I mean, don't do your usual thing of turning into a Dunkleosteus at the slightest excuse. No one wants to have their romantic dinner interrupted by an armored fish the size of a truck."

"I wouldn't mind," Norris pointed out.

“That’s you,” said Fen kindly. “But Annabeth isn’t a shifter, right? It’s a big surprise to learn that shifters exist. And no one wants big surprises on a first date.”

Pete nodded. “Get to know each other a bit before you spring your big fish on her.”

“But not too long,” said Tirzah, wagging a finger at him. “You don’t want to keep major secrets from her.”

“It’s all in the timing,” advised Roland. “The party’s in a week. Get to know each other in the runup to the party, then bring her to the party to break the curse. By then you should be comfortable enough with each other that you can tell her you’re a shifter.”

“Tell her before you show her,” said Dali. “And make sure you explain to her what a Dunkleosteus is and how big it is first. Merlin turned into a giant velociraptor in front of me, and I nearly threw myself through the wall.”

“She’s your mate, Norris!” Carter warned him. “Don’t mess this up!”

“I’ll be careful,” Norris promised. “I got some warning before I was forced to shift, so I can avoid doing it in front of her by accident. And I promise you all, I won’t do it on purpose until after the party.”

He left with a heart as light as a soap bubble. He couldn’t wait for the holiday party, he couldn’t wait to see Annabeth again, and he couldn’t wait for the whole rest of their life together. He knew the Defenders had all had dramatic times full of complications and difficulties when they’d met their mates, but clearly that wasn’t always the way it went. All he had to do was bring Annabeth to a party she was probably planning to attend anyway.

As a species, the Dunkleosteus is not overly given to drama, pointed out his inner Dunkleosteus. Our appearance is dramatic enough.

Norris mentally patted his inner armored fish. *Right on, buddy. No mate drama for us. We’re skipping all that, and going straight to the happily ever after.*

CHAPTER 3

Annabeth didn't expect Norris to return. She'd met a man who seemed fantastic, and then he disappeared without a word. It was exactly what she should expect to happen during the cursed winter holidays. Just another little holiday gift of dashed hopes and disappointment.

"How about that black coffee?"

It was that resonant voice Annabeth felt like she'd known all her life. She spun around, nearly spilling the Christmas Cheers she held in each hand. Her ridiculous elf hat slithered forward, covering her eyes and blinding her. She couldn't adjust it with drinks in both hands, so she used her knowledge of where the counter was to set down the drinks on it.

"Two Christmas Cheers!" Annabeth called.

She shoved up the elf hat and saw Norris, now wearing a different outfit. She wasn't much of a connoisseur of men's clothing and probably wouldn't have noticed he'd changed, except that both his previous T-shirt (a leaping pod of orcas) and current one (a Far Side cartoon of smoking dinosaurs) had been memorable. His hair was wet and ruffled, as if he'd started to towel dry it and gotten distracted. Strands and locks fell over his forehead, tempting her to touch them.

She began making his coffee again, thinking it was just as well if she kept her hands occupied. Over her shoulder, she asked, "Did you run away, take a shower, and come back?"

He gave her a wry grin. "Sort of. More like a bath. I'm sorry I left so suddenly. I had an emergency. A small emergency. Well, technically it was large, but it's been fixed now. When does your shift get out? Can I take you out to dinner?"

More orders were coming in. Her hands moved automatically, pouring coffee and milk, spraying whipped cream, drizzling cinnamon syrup, and dousing the resulting concoctions with multicolored sprinkles. But inside, her heart was leaping for joy and telling her to say yes, yes, a thousand times yes!

But her mind told her not to move so fast. Her mind told her to be wary of men who disappeared suddenly and then returned with vague excuses—especially during the winter holidays. Her mind suggested that she ask him what that small-I-mean-large-I-mean-never-mind-it's-fixed emergency was, exactly. And possibly follow it up with some kind of proof.

Her common sense chimed in, pointing out that doing so would make her seem nosy and suspicious. They'd only just met. For all she knew, his emergency was something private or embarrassing.

Annabeth opened her mouth, uncertain what she was even going to say. But as she looked into his brown eyes, as deep and irresistible as the ocean, she found herself saying, "I'd love to go out with you. Come back at 6:00 and you'll get to see me de-elfed."

She was rewarded with that dizzying smile of smile of his. "Can't wait. How do you feel about seafood? I was thinking we could eat at the pier."

"Sounds good. I love a view of the ocean."

"Me too." Norris stood looking at her in silence for a moment, as if he wanted to say something else. Or possibly as if he couldn't tear himself away.

He physically pushed himself away from the counter and said, "See you then!"

Norris was long gone by the time she realized that he'd once again paid for a cup of coffee, then forgotten to actually take it.

Annabeth spent the entire rest of her shift thinking about him, serving up drinks with her mind on his eyes, his smile, his broad shoulders, the silky texture of his wet hair, and how much he seemed to genuinely like her. She couldn't wait to see him again.

If, that was, he actually turned up. He seemed in the habit of suddenly disappearing. But as soon as she walked out, she spotted him striding toward her, towering over the rest of the people on the sidewalk the way she towered over most women.

"I see you're still wearing the smoking dinosaurs," she remarked.

"I see you ditched the elf hat," he replied.

Annabeth laughed. "We had a choice between elf hats, Santa hats, and antler headbands, so I went with the least bad choice."

"Not that you looked bad in it," he added hastily. "But it doesn't suit you. It covered your hair, and your hair is gorgeous."

Annabeth gave him a suspicious look. Men didn't normally compliment her hair. "My hair is enormous and frizzy. Especially after working with all those steam machines."

"Your hair is magnificent and curly. Steam might not agree with that, but I bet it's spectacular when you're scuba diving."

"I don't know. When I'm underwater, I'm not looking at my hair." She glanced at Norris. "How did you know I like scuba diving?"

"Oh, well, because. Um." He stopped abruptly. "Well, you're a marine biologist." He walked around to open the passenger door of his car for her. That was another considerate touch. She smiled as she settled into the passenger seat.

As he started the car, she said, "I'm surprised you haven't met many marine biologists who don't like actually getting in water. My school's full of students who'd much rather work on lab specimens or computers. Was everyone more hands-on where you went to school?"

He laughed. "No, they were probably less. I'm not a marine biologist. I'm a marine paleontologist."

She sat up straight. He was even more interesting than she'd realized. "A marine paleontologist, really? I think you're the first one I've ever met. What a fascinating job. Do you have a specialty within marine paleontology, or is that a specialty all by itself?"

"I do, actually. The Devonian period. It's sometimes called the Age of Fishes, because it was a kind of golden age for fishes. Armored fish especially—they were the rulers of the sea!"

Annabeth was delighted by his enthusiasm for his specialty. He sounded like the personal cheerleader for armored fish. "How fascinating. I don't know much about the Devonian period. You'll have to tell me more about it."

"Over dinner," he promised. "What's your specialty?"

She laughed. "This is such a funny coincidence given yours. It's ichthyology."

"A fish scientist," breathed Norris. "Of course you are."

"I'm studying under a professor who's the world authority on clownfish."

"Marvelous. I love them."

She was going on a date with a brown-eyed, broad-shouldered marine paleontologist who loved her hair, Dunkleosteuses, and clownfish. Annabeth wasn't entirely certain she wasn't in some beautiful dream that would dissolve on waking. But if she was, she might as well make the most of it. "Did you know they have a symbiotic relationship with sea anemones?"

"No, I didn't. Tell me about it."

She launched into an explanation of the fascinatingly complex relationship of clownfish and sea anemones. He asked such intelligent questions, she really had to think about the answers. They were speculating on the biological mechanism for why clown fish are immune to sea anemone venom when he pulled into the pier parking lot.

Annabeth stopped with a guilty start. “I’m sorry. Am I boring you with all this fish talk?”

“Absolutely not,” he assured her.

“You’d tell me if I was, wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t imagine you boring me. For one thing, I never get tired of fish talk. But even if you were talking about something I had absolutely no interest in, like... let me think...”

“Fancy coffee drinks?” Annabeth suggested.

“I don’t know, some of the ones people were asking for sounded pretty interesting. Let’s say football. That’s a sport I’ve never cared about. But I bet if you were a fan, you’d make me interested in it.”

“That’s something we’ll never be able to test,” she replied. “I’m bored by pretty much all team sports. Basketball included, which is too bad because people always think I must be good at it. In high school the coach kept trying to get me to try out for the team. She told me if I was even okay, I could probably get a scholarship. But I didn’t want to play a sport where no one cared if I was actually good or not, but only wanted me for my height.”

“I get it,” Norris said. “When I was in high school, everyone wanted me to play football. They told me something pretty similar. They said I didn’t have to love it, I just had to commit to it and do my best. But I didn’t want to run around a field banging into people. It seemed so violent. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, even by accident. I told the coach that, and he looked shocked. I think he’d assumed that just because I was big enough to knock people around, it must be something I wanted to do.”

Annabeth was indignant on teenage Norris’s behalf. “What an awful thing to assume! Anyone who actually talked to you for ten minutes—even for one minute!—would know you’re a big cinnamon roll, not a big bully.”

That sweet smile of his lit up his face, warming her inside like a hearth fire. “Here’s to not making assumptions.”

She’d been so engrossed in their conversation that she’d barely noticed that they’d walked all along the pier and arrived at its row of famous seafood restaurants. Norris stopped at the first one, Grab the Crab. “Got a preference?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never been to any of these. You know what it’s like being a grad student. All your money goes to tuition, and you live on ramen.”

“I remember,” he said with sympathy. “I only got my own PhD a couple years ago. I had so many ramen recipes. You can drop an egg in it and whisk it for egg drop soup...”

“Leave it whole for soup with a poached egg...”

“Or make hard-boiled eggs and marinate them in soy sauce, then put them in the ramen.” Norris licked his lips. “That was my favorite.”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Annabeth. “I like to chop up garlic and onions and put them in the boiling water before I add the ramen.”

“I had a roommate who used to boil the ramen, drain the water, and add cheese. Instant mac-and-cheese!”

“I’ll have to try that,” she said, intrigued.

“But not tonight.” He opened the door of Grab the Crab.

A blast of Christmas music hit her in the face. She recoiled. “Ugh!”

“What’s the matter?” Norris asked, concerned.

Annabeth hesitated. She didn’t want to seem weird and picky on the first date. And if he asked why she didn’t like Christmas music, she’d have to either lie or commit the absolute worst sin of first dates: telling stories about your ex. But she also didn’t want to have her first date with someone as wonderful as Norris accompanied by “Baby It’s Cold Outside.”

“Could we find a place that’s not playing Christmas music?” she asked.

He didn’t interrogate her, look put off, or even look surprised. Instead, he simply said, “Of course. I remember your coffeeshop was blasting it when I came in. You must be so sick of it.”

She seized on his assumption. It wasn’t the real reason, but it wasn’t wrong, either: she *was* sick of the coffeeshop’s winter holiday playlist. “If I have to hear ‘I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus’ one more time, I’ll throw a bottle of gingerbread syrup.”

“Understood,” said Norris. “Let’s find a restaurant that’s swimming against the current.”

They went down the row of restaurants, opening and closing doors. Barracuda was playing “The Christmas Shoes.” Shrimp Shack was playing “Funky, Funky X-Mas.” Why So Salty was playing “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer.”

“I’m starting to understand how you feel,” Norris said as he hurriedly shut the door on Fish Galore and “Please Daddy (Don’t Get Drunk This Christmas).”

“What if we tried a different type of restaurant?” Annabeth suggested. “There’s a couple on the pier that aren’t seafood, right?”

“Good idea.” Norris strode toward a Mexican restaurant. It was playing “Feliz Navidad.”

The Italian restaurant was playing “Dominick the Italian Christmas Donkey,” featuring actual donkey braying.

Norris squared his shoulders in determination. “Wait! Here we go! There’s one that’s guaranteed to not have Christmas music.” He pointed to Auntie Esther’s Deli. “How do you feel about traditional Jewish deli food?”

“I love it,” said Annabeth, relieved. “My dad’s Christian but my mom’s Jewish. We had a family tradition of going out for lox and bagels on Saturday mornings.”

“Perfect.” He opened the door.

“Oy Chanukah, Oy Chanukah” blasted out. Annabeth recoiled. “Ugh!”

He looked puzzled, then sympathetic. “Oh... Your coffeeshop playlist isn’t just Christmas songs, is it?”

Annabeth bit her lip. Once again, Norris was making an assumption; once again, letting him make it wouldn’t technically be lying. “Their playlist has songs associated with every winter holiday. I’m sick of them all.”

And that’s true, she told herself. But it felt distinctly misleading to not tell him the real reason why.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “We can go wherever. It’s fine. I put up with them every day at work, what’s a little more?”

Norris folded his arms across his chest as if he was going to go personally head-to-toe with the entire holiday canon. “This is our first date. I want it to be great! I don’t want it to involve anything you have to put up with.”

His sweetness warmed her heart. “Yeah, but I don’t want to make you wander eternally around the pier, like we’re on some ghost ship doomed to sail the seas for all eternity, forever unable to find land.”

“Unable to find land that isn’t playing annoying music.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “I have a Jewish grandma. Let me talk to Auntie Esther. I think I can get her to lay off the music. Wait here.”

Norris opened the door, releasing a blast of “Hanukkah in Santa Monica,” then closed it again. A few minutes later, he opened it triumphantly. The sound system had switched to Taylor Swift.

Annabeth followed him into a booth, amazed. “How did you do it?”

Leaning across the table, he whispered, “I told her your grandma got run over by a reindeer on Hanukkah.”

“You did not,” she said, laughing. “Seriously, what did you say?”

“I told her the truth,” he confessed. “I said it was our first date and I really wanted it to go well, and you’re a barista and you have to listen to holiday music all day at work and you’re sick of it.”

Looking into his open, honest face, she felt a pang in her chest. He was so kind and considerate and straightforward. She might not have lied, exactly, but she also hadn’t told the whole truth. Maybe she should confess.

At that, every magazine article she’d ever read, not to mention every bit of advice she’d ever gotten from female friends and relatives, rose up in her mind, shouting, *Never talk about your exes on a first date! Never tell stories about your horrible breakup on a first date!*

“You’re the best.” She picked up the menu. “How do you feel about splitting the deluxe smoked fish platter?”

“I feel excellent about that,” he replied.

Once they’d put in their orders, Norris said, “I have a very important getting-to-know-you question that I kept meaning to ask, then getting distracted.”

Annabeth waited to be asked if she had any siblings, or where she’d gone to college, or what her favorite movie was. She hoped it wasn’t going to be about her last relationship... and then she hoped it *would*. If he brought it up first, then she’d know he was okay with talking about it. Warily, she said, “Go on.”

“What’s your favorite fish?”

“Ah!” Now that was an entirely un-fraught subject that she was delighted to talk about. “Of course there’s lots of fish I love—clownfish are amazing, obviously, and of course everyone loves sharks.”

“Not the people who got eaten by them.”

“All non-eaten-by-sharks people love sharks,” Annabeth conceded. “And whales. Who doesn’t love whales?”

“And sea horses,” he said. “Don’t worry, I won’t feel like you’re unoriginal if you say it’s sea horses. They’re hard to resist.”

“I adore sea horses,” she admitted. “Also leafy sea dragons. But my absolute favorite is the *Ogcocephalus darwini*. The—”

“Red-lipped batfish!” Norris exclaimed. “An excellent choice.”

I think I'm in love, thought Annabeth. *He stood up to a roomful of ravening, uncaffeinated customers for me. He walked all over a pier and talked to Auntie Esther of Auntie Esther's Deli for me. And he knows the scientific name of the red-lipped batfish. It's as if we were made for each other.*

Her mind said, *Don't get ahead of yourself. You've only just met.*

Her heart said, *Don't screw this up.*

Her mouth said, "They have bright red, human-looking lips. They have a horn with a glowing tip. They have fins that look like legs and they walk on the ocean floor. They're fish that are bad at swimming. They're like the pugs of the ocean."

"With lips like an old movie star," Norris said.

Annabeth puckered her lips and did her best Gloria Swanson imitation. "I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille."

"I'd love to watch *Sunset Boulevard* with Norma Desmond played by a red-lipped batfish."

"I'd watch that," she said. "What fish should play Max?"

"A sturgeon, I think," said Norris after some thought. "Not the most attractive of fishes, but valuable and impressive."

"A fish with gravitas," she agreed. "What about Joe Gillis?"

"A bluegill?" Norris suggested. "I'm just riffing off the name, though."

He knows his film noir, she thought. *He has a Jewish grandma. What's not to love?*

"What's your favorite fish?" Annabeth asked.

"Living or extinct?"

"I meant extinct, since that's your specialty, but let's start with your favorite living one."

"*Ostracion cubicum*. The yellow boxfish." Norris chuckled. "I could claim it's because they're so biologically fascinating, and they are, but really it's because I love that there's a fish that's bright yellow with black spots and is shaped like a shoebox."

"I can't judge," said Annabeth. "I picked mine because it looks like it just got lip plumpers and put on twelve coats of Chanel Rouge Allure. Okay, what's your favorite extinct fish?"

He beamed at her. "The Dunkleosteus! *Dinichthys terelli*. They're a Devonian period armored fish. They were the size of an SUV and had the

strongest jaws of any fish before or since. Maybe the strongest jaws of anything ever.”

“I didn’t know their jaws might be the strongest ever,” said Annabeth, intrigued. “That’s very impressive. But I do know about them in general. They’re my favorite extinct fish too. They’re just so cool.”

“*You’re* so cool,” he said, then blushed.

Annabeth watched the color rise in his cheeks, and was nearly overcome by the desire to fling herself across the table and kiss him. It would break all the rules of dating, but...

At least I’m not telling him about terrible exes, she thought, and leaned forward.

At the same moment, Norris leaned forward. They almost smacked foreheads rather than kissing, but managed to reorient at the last moment. Their lips met, and she saw stars. Or maybe bioluminescent plankton, given that she felt like she was floating in deep water. She felt absolutely weightless with happiness. Norris put his strong, warm arms around her, and she wished the moment could go on forever.

A series of clinks interrupted them. Annabeth blinked dazedly at the chocolate egg cream, vanilla malted, and enormous platter piled with smoked fish, bagels, and all the trimmings that had just landed on the table in front of them.

The waitress winked at them and said, “Don’t mind me. But you don’t want to let the lox sit around for too long.”

“Er... no,” said Norris.

Annabeth seized a toasted everything bagel and began spreading it with cream cheese. She carefully arranged capers on the cream cheese until Norris whispered, “It’s okay, she’s gone.”

She giggled, feeling as dizzy as if she’d had several cocktails, and took a drink of her vanilla malted. It was so thick, she had to suck hard to get it through the straw. “Marvelous. My coffeeshop ought to make malteds. They make everything else.”

“I didn’t see egg creams,” said Norris, sipping his.

“No, no egg creams. They probably figure people would think they actually have egg in them instead of just soda water and milk and syrup.”

“Their loss. Try mine?” He offered her his egg cream.

She took it and held out her malted. “Switch?”

His fingers brushed against hers as he took her drink, sending shivers down her spine. It was incredible how charged even the briefest touch could be when you really liked someone. His chocolate egg cream was very chocolatey. The tiny bubbles popped against her tongue. She felt like her whole body was fizzing with happiness.

The date seemed to both fly by and last forever. They talked about grad school, her job, his job, their favorite movies, and their favorite marine mammals and crustaceans and mollusks.

Norris had recently gotten a job at the Natural Science Museum, but he was cagey about what he'd been doing between getting his PhD and getting the museum job. But she knew how hard it could be to get a job in the marine sciences. Probably he was avoiding the second-worst date sin, complaining about being unemployed. She thought of telling him not to worry about it. He obviously wasn't a complainer by nature, and she wouldn't mind listening if he did want to complain about complain-worthy things. But she decided against it. Why push? He could tell her in his own time.

Annabeth was startled when Auntie Esther came by their table to tell them the deli was closing. "Already?"

"It's midnight," said Auntie Esther. "We keep late hours for the college students, but once it's morning, that's too late."

"Whoa." Norris took out his cell phone and checked it, like he couldn't believe either Auntie Esther or the clock on the wall. "Time really flew. I'll drive you back to the coffeeshop so you can get your car."

But when they got to the parking lot, they sat in the parked car, continuing their conversation.

"I really hope cloning technology gets good enough to bring back extinct animals within my lifetime," Annabeth said. "Wouldn't it be amazing to have herds of mammoths roaming the plains?"

"And pterodactyls flying through the sky."

"And, of course, the Dunkleosteus ruling the waves," said Annabeth wistfully. "It's so sad to think that we might never get to see what any of them really looked like. Reconstructions have so much guesswork involved."

Norris gave a funny little cough. "Well..." He coughed again.

Annabeth glanced at her purse to see if she had any cough drops, and caught sight of her phone. It was 3:00 AM! They'd been sitting in the parking lot for hours.

"I have to go," she said. "I have work tomorrow."

Norris was also visibly surprised. “Me too. We should go.”
Neither of them moved.

They looked into each other’s eyes, then leaned in and kissed. It was like fireworks, and like diving into crystal-clear water, and like the kisses she’d imagined before she’d ever kissed anyone and had only read about it in books.

When they finally broke apart, she took another look at her phone. It was now 3:29.

“Okay, I really am leaving now.” She flung open the car door before she could have second thoughts, letting in a blast of cold winter air.

“Wait!” He flung out a hand. “Can I ask you out again?”

“Of course.”

“We have some friends in common. The Defenders, from the bodyguard agency.”

“You know them too?” She was surprised this hadn’t come up before.

“Er, yes.” Norris went before she could ask him how he’d met them.

“They’re having a winter holiday party. Can I take you to it?”

“Ugh!” Annabeth recoiled. Then she recovered herself. “Sorry. Nothing against the Defenders, but you know how I feel about winter holiday music? I feel the same way about winter holiday parties, but more so. Ten times more! Sorry to be a grinch. I’d love to go out with you again... to anything but that.”

CHAPTER 4

Norris paced up and down the sidewalk outside of the Defenders office.

This is all very simple, said his inner Dunkleosteus. First, become a Dunkleosteus. That will serve the dual purpose of delighting her and demonstrating the existence of shifters. Then, tell her about the curse and how it must be broken. She will set aside her dislike of winter holidays once she understands the importance of attending the party.

Norris ground his teeth as he silently replied, *You're right, but—*
“Are you all right?” came a familiar voice.

He looked up and saw Fen eyeing him with some concern. He realized that he was clutching his hair in both hands. He dropped his arms. “Yes. I mean no. My mate hates Christmas! And not just Christmas. Hanukkah too!”

Presumably also winter Solstice, added his Dunkleosteus. And Diwali. Eid al-Fitr. Kwanzaa. Hogmaney. Burning of the Clavie. Night of the Radishes. Feast of the Seven Fishes.

Norris burst out, “Now you’re just making things up!”

Fingers snapped in front of his face. He blinked and saw Carter waving his hand in front of Norris’s face. “Focus, Norris. If you’re going to talk out loud to your inner Dunkleosteus—” Carter rolled his eyes. “—you’d better do it inside.”

Fen and Carter hustled him into the elevator as Norris poured out his heart to them. It was such a relief to have a pair of sympathetic listeners who already knew about Annabeth and shifters and the curse and how to break it.

“I don’t want to drag her to a party she’ll hate,” Norris moaned. “Even if it is for a good cause.”

The elevator doors opened, and Fen and Carter stepped out. The Defenders were again busy decorating the lobby, and had made some progress since the day before. Fen’s Winter Solstice stained glass picture had been hung on the wall beside an enormous holly wreath. A silver star decorated the top of the Christmas tree. A beautifully decorated menorah sat on a table draped in blue and white cloth, with several wooden dreidels and a bowl of chocolate coins beside it. Batcat balanced precariously atop the menorah.

Norris took a step forward, then paused in the elevator doorway as a wonderful thought occurred to him. “Hey! I haven’t shifted since I had to

jump in the lake. Maybe the curse reactivating was just a one-time thing, and I don't actually need to bring Annabeth to—"

The floor lurched and wobbled beneath his feet. His body felt like it was swelling up and about to burst into flames.

I believe your hypothesis is about to be proved incorrect, said his Dunkleosteus.

"Help!" Norris gasped. "I'm about to turn into a Dunkleosteus!"

The Defenders sprang into action.

Merlin shouted, "Bucket brigade!" and bolted out of the lobby, the door to the inner offices slamming behind him. Carter, Fen, Natalie, and Ransom followed him.

Roland, who was too far from the door to join the bucket brigade, flung his arms around the Christmas tree. Dali shoved Blue under the front desk. Pete lifted Tirzah out of her wheelchair, shielding her with his body.

"Save the menorah!" Tirzah shouted.

Dali snatched up the candelabra. Batcat clung to it, flapping her wings and hissing. The other flying kittens and Carter's golden dragonette took to the air, while the husky puppies disappeared.

They were just in time. Norris became a Dunkleosteus. His tail filled the elevator, while the rest of him filled the lobby. His side pushed uncomfortably up against Roland's back, though it was probably even more uncomfortable for Roland. Norris tried to pull his fins in to make more room. That turned out to be a bad idea. Various things crashed and shattered.

Apologies, came the ponderous voice of his inner Dunkleosteus.

Not your fault, buddy. Norris tried to shift back. Nothing happened. As a Dunkleosteus, he could hold his breath for several minutes, but much longer than that...

The door to the inner offices was flung open, banging into his head. As he was armored, it didn't hurt. But the door bounced back into someone who was clearly not armored, as Norris heard a yelp and a splash. Merlin edged through the partially blocked door and upended a water cooler over Norris's gills.

Much better, remarked his Dunkleosteus. *Though that is only one breath...*

Merlin was followed by Carter, who dumped a bucket of water over his gills, then Fen with a pair of thermoses. Ransom followed with another

bucket, and Natalie held a sloshing mixing bowl. As soon as each was finished, they ran back into the office to refill their containers.

Norris was relieved that he was in no danger of suffocating, but he hoped he wouldn't be stuck like this for much longer. He tried again to shift back, and succeeded in time for Carter to hurl a bucket of water into his face.

"Oops," said Carter.

Merlin skidded in with a full water cooler.

"Oh, good," said Merlin. "You're back."

Norris surveyed the office. Roland had saved the Christmas tree from getting knocked over, but the star had fallen off and several glass ornaments had broken. The menorah table was overturned, and so was all the office furniture but Dali's big desk. Holiday decorations and bowls of candy were scattered across the flooded floor, and the paper banner Merlin and Dali had been working on was underwater.

"Er," said Norris. "Sorry."

Blue ambled out from under the desk, rolled in the water and paddled his paws in the air, then belly-flopped down in the water. He nosed around curiously, found a miniature Snickers bar, and began delicately unwrapping it with his teeth and claws.

"I can help clean up," Norris volunteered.

Roland gazed out at the wreck of the lobby. "I do appreciate the offer. But I think it's best if you don't come back till the holiday party."

"That's the problem," Norris burst out. "My mate hates holiday parties! She's totally burned out on winter holidays because of her job, and I asked her to come to this one and she refused! She said she'd do anything else, but not that! My Dunkleosteus says I should just turn into a Dunkleosteus—"

The Defenders all exclaimed, "NO!"

Swim against the tide, his Dunkleosteus advised. *If all your friends beached themselves, would you do the same?*

Subdued, Norris said, "I'm sure she'd come to the party if I explained why. I don't want to make her do something she'll hate, but I can't keep suddenly turning into a Dunkleosteus on dry land. It's dangerous."

"Ah!" Merlin exclaimed. "There's a third option, Norris. You can awaken her to the true spirit of Christmas."

"It's not just Christmas she has a problem with," Norris said glumly. "It's also Hanukkah."

“Then awaken her to the true spirit of Hanukkah too,” said Tirzah as she retrieved the menorah from Dali. “So maybe it’s not the most important Jewish holiday. It’s still a nice one. It’s the Festival of Lights. Isn’t that beautiful? You light the eight menorah candles to commemorate the miracle of the oil.”

“What’s the miracle of the oil?” Dali asked.

“In ancient times, they lit the menorah with oil instead of candles. The temple only had enough oil for one day, when it needed eight days’ worth.” Tirzah flung her hands wide and declaimed dramatically, “But lo! The one day worth of oil lasted for eight days! It was a miracle!” She dropped her hands and said in her normal voice, “Or maybe they didn’t know exactly how long a barrel of oil normally lasted, who knows. Anyway, we light the menorah and give kids chocolate coins and make latkes, which are potato pancakes fried in... oil!”

She turned excitedly to Norris. “Hey! I’ll teach you to make them. You can fry some up for Annabeth. No one can stay mad at a holiday based around deep-frying.”

“She’s not just sick of Christmas and Hanukkah,” Norris said. “She’s pretty much done with winter holidays in general.”

“Then try focusing on ‘winter’ instead of ‘holiday,’” Fen suggested. “Take her for a walk in the park. Talk about the beauty of the snow. See if she has any nice childhood memories of winter.”

“Buy her a box of her favorite candy and wrap it in winter-themed paper that isn’t holiday-specific,” put in Natalie. “Like pine cones or snowflakes.”

“I don’t know,” said Norris doubtfully. “I’d love to buy her candy and walk with her in the snow, but I want to do that for its own sake. Not as part of a... a holiday plot.”

Roland splashed through the kiddie pool that the office floor had become and patted him on the shoulder. “Think of it this way, Norris. It can’t be fun for her to have her job ruin the entire holiday season for her. If you can help her find the joy it again, you’ll be doing her a favor.”

“And for God’s sake, don’t turn into a Dunkleosteus on the second date,” said Carter. “Ease into it. Give her another date or two, then tell her about shifters. Have a good long conversation about it, then offer to show her.”

“And tell her exactly what it looks like and how big it is first,” advised Dali.

Norris was offended at the idea that Annabeth didn't know how big a Dunkleosteus was. "I don't need to do that."

"Norris," Carter groaned. "You can't just spring a fish the size of a van on a woman!"

Before Norris could explain, Tirzah suggested, "Do a countdown, so she knows exactly when it's coming. Three... two... one... Dunkleosteus!"

He left feeling better. It *was* too bad that Annabeth's job had burned her out on winter holidays. It *would* be nice for her to have a good experience with them.

That evening he picked her up at the coffeeshop, as they'd agreed to do the night before after she'd declined his invitation to the Defenders holiday party. He gave a sigh of sheer happiness as she came out to his car. She was just as glorious as she'd been the day before, as she'd been the moment he'd first laid eyes on her, as she'd been when they'd kissed. And the smile that lit up her face when she saw him was the most beautiful thing of all.

"How about a walk in the park?" Norris asked. "We could buy some hot chocolate or hot cider. Unless you're sick of that too."

She took his hand. Her fingers curled around his like they had been made for each other. He couldn't help marveling at his luck. His mate was so perfect. Even her hands were perfect.

"Hot cider sounds great," she replied. "As long as we buy it somewhere other than right here. I'm completely done with any drink that has shots or sprinkles or syrup."

"Totally understandable. There's the stalls around the park. We should be able to get something there without all the frills."

As they walked hand-in-hand to the park, holiday music blared out every time someone went in or out of a shop as they passed. Annabeth winced every time. Norris felt terrible for her. The holiday season had to be so hard on her.

"Have you thought of getting a new job?" he asked.

"I would if I could get one in my field. But you know how hard it is to find paying jobs in marine biology, especially when you're still in grad school. Being a barista is a job that's always in demand, has flexible hours, and pays..." She gave a sarcastic shrug. "...okay."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I put myself through graduate school working at a car wash. But..." He frowned and rubbed his hand against his jaw, trying to figure out how to talk about it without seeming pushy.

Before he could figure it out, he was distracted by the row of stalls at the park entrance. In summer they sold ice cream and lemonade and shaved ice, but now they sold hot cider, hot chocolate, and hot roast chestnuts.

"There you go." Norris indicated the nearest hot drink stall.

"I'd like a medium hot cider," said Annabeth.

The stall owner, a stocky man in a puffy coat and a hat with ear flaps, asked, "Would you like cinnamon syrup, cider syrup, apple syrup, streusel sprinkles, whipped cream, toasted dried apple flakes, caramel drizzle, extra cinnamon –"

"Plain, please," said Annabeth.

The stall owner stared at her.

"She's a barista," Norris explained.

"Oh," the stall owner said, nodding. "Got it. And what would you like?"

"Hot chocolate, please," said Norris. "Plain."

Once they got their piping hot drinks, they headed over to the next stall and got a paper bag of hot roast chestnuts with steam rising up from them. But when he took it, he realized that he now had both hands full. He'd meant to hold hands with Annabeth, and now he couldn't.

"Put it in your coat pocket," she suggested. "We can just reach in when we want one."

He stuffed the bag of chestnuts in his coat pocket. They warmed him, but not as much as Annabeth being on the exact same page as him about the relative importance of chestnuts and hand-holding. She reached into his pocket and snagged a roast chestnut. It was a small moment, but such an intimate one. He wanted to have her reaching into his coat pocket for the rest of their lives.

As they walked through the park, he remembered Fen's advice to point out the beauty of the snow. The snow *was* beautiful. But when he was trying to do it for a specific purpose, it made him feel awkward and tongue-tied, like he no longer remembered how to speak English.

Just do it, he told himself. Turn her least favorite season into her most favorite. Or at least an acceptable, non-horrible season.

"Look at the beauty of the snow," he said, feeling like a robot. "It's so... beautiful. And wintery." Was that even a word?

Characteristic of winter, put in his Dunkleosteus.

Humans don't talk like that, said Norris.

"Winter-like," he tried. "Wintresque?"

Annabeth stared at him as if he'd... Well, not as if he'd turned into a Dunkleosteus, because if he had she'd be staring with delight and amazement. She was staring at him as if they'd turned the corner and run into –

They turned the corner and ran into a Santa Claus. He was sitting in a wooden sleigh pulled by life-size plastic reindeer, surrounded by children and their tired-looking parents. Rudolph's light-up nose flickered in a migraine-inducing manner.

In a very bored voice, Santa Claus said, "Ho. Ho. Ho."

Without thinking, Norris whispered to Annabeth, "I have a machine gun."

She burst out laughing. Several parents turned to stare at them. The Santa, who probably thought they were laughing at him, glared so ferociously that the child in his lap shrank back.

Her hand tightened on his. "Run!"

They fled the scene and fetched up by the shore of the lake. They were alone there. Everyone else was probably gathered around Santa, now thankfully out of sight.

Annabeth grinned at him. "Excellent movie reference. *Die Hard* is the one Christmas-related thing I actually still like."

He remembered what he'd meant to suggest before they'd been distracted by hot cider. "You know, Annabeth, I bet you could find a non-barista job. There might even be something at the Natural History museum. I could ask."

Her beautiful green-brown eyes widened. "Oh, Norris, that's so sweet of you. It would be great if you could. But honestly, I don't mind being a barista. It can be a little stressful, but it's really fine. I mean, it's fine anytime of the year but right now."

"But that's the thing," he said earnestly. "It's ruining winter holidays for you. All winter holidays. Are the flexible hours really worth it if it ruins an entire time of year for you—a time of year that ought to be joyful?"

She stared at him for so long that he felt like he must have done something wrong. "Never mind. Forget that I said that. It was pushy."

Annabeth slowly shook her head. "No. It was a natural thing for you to say, but that's because I misled you. I let you think I hate winter holidays because my job burned me out on them. But that's not true."

CHAPTER 5

Annabeth gulped. Her head told her that the second date was also too soon to talk about exes. But her heart said, *Forget the rules. Norris is special. You need to be honest with him.*

She began, "I know you're not supposed to talk about ex-boyfriends on the first date. And probably not on the second date either. But –"

Norris snorted. "Forget the date rules. What's even the point of them? Are we supposed to pretend we've never dated anyone before? Come on! We're both grown-ups. I'm not a virgin either."

She giggled. "I hadn't thought you were. But this particular dating rule is actually about not talking about breakups, so you don't seem bitter or angry." She stopped herself before she could add, *Because no man likes an angry, bitter woman.*

Norris put his hot chocolate on a nearby rock, took her cider and put it beside his, and clasped her hands in his. It made her feel warm and protected and safe. "You can talk to me about anything you want. Any time you want. And if you are angry or bitter, that's okay. I bet you have a really good reason for it."

Annabeth was thunderstruck. Very few people had ever told her it was okay to be angry, and no one had ever told her it was okay to be bitter. But he clearly meant it. And that made her feel even safer than the strong hands that enveloped hers.

"Okay. Let me tell you the real reason I hate the winter holidays." She picked up her hot cider, then remembered that she hadn't offered any to Norris. She held out her cup. "Hot cider?"

He took it and offered his. "Hot chocolate?"

They traded cups and drank.

"I have to start you off with some background," she said. "I'm the youngest in my family. I have three older brothers who are even taller than me. My family nickname is Bug, because they say I'm little and cute as a bug in a rug. It's okay, I like it."

"Aww, that's sweet," Norris said. "How tall are your brothers?"

"Aiden is 6'4", Alex is 6'3", and Andrew is 6'6". Dad is also 6'6". So compared to them..." She swept her hand up her 6'1" body.

Norris chuckled. "What about your mom?"

“5’8”. Not short, but the height comes from my father’s side. Anyway, because Mom’s Jewish and Dad’s Christian, we’ve always celebrated both sets of holidays. Mostly we did them separately, but since things get so hectic in December, we did one celebration for Hanukkah and Christmas, and called it Christmakkah. We had a Christmas tree and lit the candles on a menorah, and we cooked potato latkes and leg of lamb.”

“Sounds like the best of both worlds,” said Norris. “Not to mention delicious.”

“Just you wait,” said Annabeth. “My brother Aiden married an Indian woman, Radhika. They celebrate Diwali around the same time. It’s another festival of lights. I don’t know if you’ve heard of it...”

“I have, actually. One of my roommates in grad school was Indian. He used to Zoom with his grandma in India every week, and she wanted to make sure he was celebrating properly. He put these tiny little candles in clay holders all over the apartment for Diwali, and he walked around with his phone showing them to her. He said they were called... Um...” Norris scratched his head.

“Deepas,” said Annabeth. “They’re really pretty. So for Radhika, we lit clay deepas and put them by the menorah, and we hung strings of electric deepas on the Christmas tree. Radhika made samosas, because latkes weren’t enough deep-fried foods. And from then on, we celebrated Christmakkali. At least, we did until my brother Alex married a witch.”

Norris almost dropped the bag of hot chestnuts, he was so startled. “A witch?! Like a witch who breaks curses?”

She laughed. “Julie calls herself a witch and I think she does cast spells, but not the Harry Potter sort. She’s a pagan.”

“Oh. *That* kind of witch.”

He looked so disappointed. Annabeth was charmed. She loved that he’d been all ready to believe that her sister-in-law could turn people into newts. “Anyway, Julie celebrates the Winter Solstice. So we started celebrating Christmakkalistic.”

Norris propped his chin on his hands. “Please tell me Andrew married into yet another cultural tradition, and you now celebrate Christmakkalisticewanzaah.”

“No, Andrew married a Jewish guy, Mike. So it’s still Christmakkalistic.” She mentally braced herself. Now she was getting into the hard stuff. “I always loved the winter holidays. It was so much fun being

with my family and getting to experience all the different traditions. I even kind of liked the holiday rush at my job. Sure, it was stressful, but I also got a kick out of hearing all the ridiculous drink orders. Until last Christmakkalisticce."

Norris put his arm around her waist. "Oh no."

"Oh no is an understatement. I was dating a guy –well, I *thought* I was dating a guy. Actually, I was dating a cheating toad. A charming cheating toad. He charmed me into letting him move into my apartment. He was supposed to come to Christmakkalisticce, but at the last minute claimed he had to help out a sick friend. He told me I should go ahead and have a lovely Christmakkalisticce with my family."

She took an angry gulp of hot cider. "I'd been there for a couple hours when I realized that I'd left Andrew's Christmakkalisticce present at home. I drove back to get it – I don't live that far away – and you know what I found when I opened my own front door?"

Norris looked outraged on her behalf. "The cheating toad was cheating?"

She'd had a year to get over it, but she was still so angry, she felt like heat waves were radiating out of her head. "The cheating toad was not only cheating, he was cheating on MY bed! Wearing nothing but a Santa hat! With some blonde woman wearing nothing but an antler headband!"

She was pleased to see that Norris also looked as if he was about to spontaneously combust. "How dare he! On YOUR bed! What a horrible Christmas cheater! No wonder you chose the elf hat to wear at work, when your other choices were the cheating toad's Santa hat and the cheating blonde's reindeer antlers!"

Annabeth blinked hard, pushing back tears. It was strange how telling the story didn't make her want to cry, but Norris's empathy and understanding and anger on her behalf did.

She gulped and went on, "It gets worse."

"HOW?!" His face was flushed, his eyes almost incandescent with rage. "How could it possibly get worse?"

"My bed—my cheated-on bed—was the only piece of furniture still left in the apartment! The cheating toad had pulled up a moving van and moved out all the furniture – including a very expensive sofa I'd bought before I met him."

"A THIEVING toad!" Norris exploded. If she didn't know it was impossible, she'd swear that his eyes were literally glowing with righteous

fury. It had to be a trick of the light, but she appreciated it.

"That sofa was the only valuable thing I owned. The rest of the furniture was just grad student junk. I told him he was welcome to it and the cheating blonde reindeer, but he'd better unload my sofa right now!"

"And he refused?"

"Worse," Annabeth said grimly. "He acted all embarrassed and said he would. He got dressed, and the blonde in antlers got dressed, and they went out to the moving van. But instead of opening the back, they both jumped into the cab. You know what came blasting out of the stereo as soon as he turned on the engine? 'I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus!'"

"The worst!"

Annabeth concluded, "The cheating toad stuck his head out the window and yelled, 'Merry Christmakkalistic!' And then he and the blonde laughed like hyenas and drove away."

Norris was seething so hard, he was making sputtering sounds like a boiled-dry tea kettle. His big hands clenched as if he wished he had them around the cheating toad's neck. "Do you know where he lives?"

"I do now. I didn't at the time, or my brothers would have gotten my sofa back. But I got to know the Defenders because they got their coffee at the café I was working at then, and they retrieved my sofa."

"Oh, good," said Norris. "Though I feel like a little more revenge might be in order."

Annabeth loved how mad he was, and she did still want revenge. But she also didn't want Norris to spend the holidays in jail. "I don't want you getting arrested on my behalf. Don't do anything that'll end with you in jail."

"Yeah, jail is not great," he said reluctantly. "All right. I won't if you really don't want me to."

"I don't," she said firmly. "Anyway, it completely ruined winter holidays for me. I have terrible associations with them now. Every time I see a Santa hat, I think of that toad. Naked and cheating. In MY bed! I had to get rid of the bed and get a new one, which I really couldn't afford. Every time I hear holiday music, I think of him laughing at me! Every time I see gifts, I think of picking Andrew's present off that bare floor in an empty apartment. And so forth. To be honest, I'm even dreading spending Christmakkalistic with my family. I hate that he ruined something I used to love, and I hate that I can't just get over it no matter how hard I try."

To her horror, she burst into tears.

Crying on the second date, she thought. *Even worse than telling bitter stories about exes on the second—*

Norris swept her into his arms. He didn't pat her on the back or tell her everything would be fine. He just held her, sharing his warmth and strength and...

...love?

It was too soon for love. Right? But that was sure what it felt like.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and let herself cry without worrying about breaking the rules or being judged. It was a relief and a release, and when she finally wiped her eyes and straightened up, she didn't worry about her eyes being red or her nose running or anything like that. Norris had nothing in his deep brown gaze but sympathy and...

It *did* look like love.

"I'm so, so sorry that happened to you." His voice was low, his breath warm on her throat. "And I'm going to think of some way to get revenge that won't land me in jail, if you don't mind."

Annabeth managed a smile. "Go for it."

"And I'd also like to try to bring you back some holiday happiness."

"Oh, Norris." She ran her fingers through his brown hair, then cupped his cheek in her hand. "You have. You are absolutely the best thing that's happened to me this year. Or ever, actually."

She blurted it out without thinking. Her mind instantly said, *Too soon!* But her heart said, *It's true.*

"You're *definitely* the best thing that's ever happened to me," said Norris. And one look into his deep brown eyes told her he meant it. "And the thing that's now the second-best is very, very hard to top."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows arched. "Swimming with dolphins? Scuba diving at a coral reef?"

"Better than anything you can possibly guess," he said with enormous confidence. "And I think if I show it to you, it'll give you some more good holiday experiences."

Show me? Annabeth thought. "Sure, go for it."

Norris glanced around, and she followed his gaze. No one was there. "Hang on. I have to step back."

He backed away, grinning. And then his grin was suddenly the vast, gape-mouthed, triangle-toothed grin of a Dunkleosteus.

She stared at the enormous bulk of the prehistoric fish that lay on the grass where Norris used to be. The Dunkleosteus flapped its fins, waggled its tail, and opened and closed its jaws in what she couldn't help reading as a wordless "Hi there!"

"Amazing," Annabeth breathed. "Norris... That is you, right?"

The Dunkleosteus gave as much of a nod as it could manage without a neck, then flapped its fins again.

"Wow!" The Dunkleosteus deserved something much more articulate, but Annabeth was unoriginal with awe. "WOW! I can't believe it! You can turn into a Dunkleosteus! Magic is real! I'm getting to see a Dunkleosteus! This is incredible!"

Norris flapped his fins and blinked his enormous eyes and heaved himself around so she could get a better view of more parts of him. She touched his side, marveling. She was actually touching a real, live Dunkleosteus—a Dunkleosteus who was also the greatest guy she'd ever met. Her heart and mind were united at last.

This is great, sang out her heart.

What an opportunity, exulted her mind.

How cool is this, her heart and mind chorused.

There she was, up close and personal with a gigantic armored fish that hadn't existed since the Devonian period. And yet somehow there it—he—was in front of her, radiating enthusiasm and happiness.

Annabeth suddenly remembered that fish couldn't breathe on land, and exclaimed. "Don't suffocate for my sake! Quick, get in the lake!"

Norris used his fins to heave himself into the lake. He submerged in the dark water, then stuck his tail out of the water and waved it around.

Delighted, she waved back, then realized he probably couldn't see her. So she kept waving until the great armored fish stuck his head out of the water again.

"Norris!" Annabeth called. "You are absolutely fantastic, and I want to examine you very closely and hear all about it. But first, get back on land and turn back into a man so I can kiss you!"

CHAPTER 6

Norris heaved himself out of the lake and dragged himself completely free of the water. He couldn't resist doing a few more fin flaps and tail wags and eye blinks and jaw munching movements, just so he could enjoy watching Annabeth literally wriggle and squeal with delight.

Our mate is pleased, said his inner Dunkleosteus with great satisfaction. *Our mating dance has been a great success.*

I did a mating dance? Norris silently inquired.

Indeed, spoke his Dunkleosteus. *In the Devonian period, the males of our species were most adept at the fin flap/tail wag/eye blink/jaw crunch dance of love.*

Norris loved it when his Dunkleosteus told him new facts about Dunkleosteuses. He made a mental note to repeat this to Annabeth, whom he was certain would also want to know.

He shifted back into a man. She flung herself into his arms, and proved to him that his mating dance worked on humans too.

"So this is your second favorite thing!" Annabeth exclaimed. "It's amazing! Incredible! I'm so jealous."

Norris was delighted. He had finally met someone who appreciated his Dunkleosteus as much as he did. "I only wish I could help you turn into a Dunkleosteus too. Or, you know, your extinct marine animal of choice."

"I've always thought plesiosaurs are pretty cool too," Annabeth admitted.

Tiny heads, said his inner Dunkleosteus. *Tinier brains. And that pathetic excuse for a tail!*

Be nice, Norris silently warned his inner armored fish.

"Not to mention megalodons," Annabeth went on. "It's hard to beat a 60' shark!"

Too big, said his inner Dunkleosteus. *Ungainly. Impractical.*

A megalodon could eat you in one bite, Norris teased.

Disdainfully, his inner Dunkleosteus replied, *It could try.*

She concluded, "But now that I've actually seen a Dunkleosteus, I can't imagine anything better."

Our mate is wise, said his inner Dunkleosteus.

Wise? Norris responded. *She's brilliant!*

“You have to tell me all about it,” Annabeth went on excitedly. “Is there a secret society of Dunkleosteus-human hybrids living amongst us?”

Norris took a moment to enjoy the utter success of the second date Dunkleosteus reveal before he said, “No, I’m completely human. At least, when I’m human I’m completely human. When I’m a Dunkleosteus I’m completely Dunkleosteus. And as far as I know, there’s no secret society of Dunkleosteus shifters specifically. I’m the only one I’ve ever heard of. But there is a secret society of shifters – people who can turn into animals – living amongst us.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “You know, my very favorite thing about being a barista is seeing all those people and knowing they all have their own stories. I like to try to guess what they are. Like, is the woman with rainbow dreadlocks who wants caramel syrup in everything an artist or a writer, or is she a manager or accountant who wants to make sure she doesn’t lose sight of her wild side? Is the toddler grabbing for a Christmas tree ornament going to grow up to be an astronaut or a plumber or an Olympic gymnast? Now I’m going to wonder who can secretly turn into a toucan or a wombat or a glyptodon!”

“You won’t have to wonder about all of them.” He paused for dramatic effect. “I’m not the only shifter you already know.”

Annabeth gasped. “Is my cheating ex literally a toad?!”

“Not that I know of. But the Defenders are!” Then, realizing what he had implied, he quickly added, “They’re not toads. They are shifters, but they turn into non-toad animals.”

“No way!” Her hazel eyes shone with delight. “I always figured they had interesting stories—actually, I know Merlin does because he told me—but I had no idea they were *that* interesting! It almost makes me want to go to their holiday party.”

I told you to simply become a Dunkleosteus at the first opportunity, put in his Dunkleosteus. Observe how simply our problem is solved.

She said ‘almost,’ Norris silently replied.

He had to bite his tongue not to grab her arm and say, “YES, GO.” He still didn’t want to make her feel obliged to do something she wouldn’t enjoy – and that went double now that he knew why she felt that way. The last thing he wanted was for her to grit her teeth through the party for his sake, thinking about the cheating toad the whole time. But maybe if she had something else to think about...

“They’d show you their shift forms if you did, now that you already know they’re shifters,” he said. “At least, Merlin would. The others are a bit big to do office demonstrations. And you’d really like Merlin’s.”

“Oooh,” Annabeth gave an excited wriggle, then exclaimed, “Oh! But I don’t have to go to the party to do that, right? Now that I know shifters exist, I can drop by anytime and tell them you told me, and then they can show me what they are!”

She looked and sounded so relieved that Norris had to bite his tongue again, this time to stop himself from saying “*Dammit!*”

She went on cheerfully, “Do they all turn into extinct animals, like you?”

“Two of them do. Three of them turn into magical animals. And one of them...” Norris tried to figure out how to explain Carter. “One of them is kind of a special case. Do you want me to tell you what they all are, or would you rather find out for yourself?”

“Ooh. Hmm.” Annabeth’s brow wrinkled as if she was trying to choose from the world’s most decadent dessert menu. “Let me find out for myself. It’ll be so much fun to anticipate and try to guess, like the way I used to feel about Christmakkalistic presents.”

“*Used to feel*” was such a sad phrase. Norris wished he could make her feel that way again, but given his attempt at calling her attention to the beauty of snow, he didn’t feel encouraged about his chances.

But she didn’t look sad now. Eagerly, she said, “Tell me all about it! Are shifters born that way? If you’re the only Dunkleosteus, what did your parents turn into? Or do you become a shifter somehow? Were you bitten by a radioactive Dunkleosteus? No, wait, you’re the only one and they’re extinct... Did you accidentally stab yourself with a radioactive fossilized Dunkleosteus tooth?”

Norris hadn’t thought past the moment where he turned into a Dunkleosteus and, he hoped, Annabeth was thrilled. Now that he *had* turned into a Dunkleosteus and Annabeth *was* thrilled, he realized that to answer her questions, he had to tell her about some things that were much less fun than prehistoric armored fish.

He’d evaded telling her about some aspects of his past, but it had been because he hadn’t told her about shifters yet. Now it occurred to him that his origin story was less like Spider-Man’s and more like the Green Goblin’s.

I have to tell her I was the villain, he realized. What if that changes how she feels about me?

It was the most horrifying thought he'd ever had. It made his brain freeze up even more than it had when he'd tried to come up with synonyms for winter.

Your mate will not reject you, said his Dunkleosteus. She is your mate. She will understand why you made the choices you did.

I sure hope so, thought Norris.

As he hesitated, he saw her shiver. The park had gotten very cold. He put his arms around her.

"It's kind of a long story," he said. "Let's go somewhere warmer. Want to come over to my place? We could order in, and then we wouldn't have to dodge the holiday music."

Annabeth leaned into him, nuzzling into his neck in a way that made him feel like he was either about to turn into a Dunkleosteus or spontaneously combust. "That sounds great."

A light snow had fallen while they'd been at the lake. As they walked away, their shoes left crisp prints in the snow. The path was lined with pine trees, their green boughs sprinkled with snow, and birches, their slim trunks glimmering pale in the moonlight.

"Gorgeous," said Norris, indicating the trees, then remembered his attempt to discourse on the beauty of the snow. He closed his jaws with a Dunkleosteus-like snap before he could add something like "*Snowy! Snowish! Snowesque!*"

"What's that?" Annabeth pointed ahead of them. The white expanse of the path was marked with a pair of smooth parallel tracks, as if two poles had been dragged across the snow, and a number of hoof prints.

Refuge City had a few horse-drawn carriages in areas where no motor vehicles were allowed, but they were for tourists, not for actual transportation. The horses walked sedately around the square, pulling their carriages full of squealing kids or kissing couples. When the ride was over, the tourists got to pet the horses and feed them carrots. Norris couldn't think what else the strange tracks in the snow could be, but...

"I didn't know horse-drawn carriages were allowed in the park," Annabeth said. "I've never seen one here."

"I'm pretty sure they're not." Norris squatted to examine the tracks. Sje sank down beside him. "These parallel tracks weren't made by wheels. Look how smooth they are. And how straight."

“You’re right. They’re from runners.” She glanced up at him, realization and suspicion dawning on her face. “Could it be a horse-drawn sleigh?”

“You’re right, it must be a sleigh. But horse-drawn?” He examined the hoof prints. “I don’t know that much about land animals, but shouldn’t horses have horse shoes?”

Annabeth also took a closer look at the hoof prints. “I don’t think they were made by horses at all. I used to ride when I was a teenager, and these look too flexible to be made by horses, even unshod ones. Let me try an animal print identification app.”

She took out her phone, downloaded an app, and photographed the prints. Norris peered over her shoulder as they waited for the app to make its identification. He watched in disbelief as the app displayed a photograph of an enormous, antlered...

POSITIVE PRINT IDENTIFICATION: REINDEER (*RANGIFUR TARANDUS*).

“No way!” Norris exclaimed. “I know it’s Christmas time, but...”

Annabeth glared at the app, outraged. “I can’t believe the park would let that awful bored Santa ride in a reindeer-drawn sleigh when they don’t even allow horse-drawn carriages in here!”

But Norris had spotted something further down the path. “Annabeth, come look at this.”

The sleigh tracks and reindeer hoof prints continued down the path for a while. Then the marks of the sleigh runners became deeper toward the rear, and disappeared in the front. The reindeer tracks also stopped. There was nothing beyond them but an unbroken expanse of snow. It looked exactly as if...

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” Annabeth stabbed an accusing finger at the deepest part of the sleigh tracks. “It looks like the reindeer jumped into the air and flew away, taking the sleigh with them!”

“It does.” He scratched his head, trying to come up with some other scenario, but nothing came to mind.

“It gives me physical pain to even ask this question,” said Annabeth, and stopped to grind her teeth. Then, unclenching her jaw, she said in a small voice, “There really isn’t such a thing as Santa Claus... Is there?”

He hastened to reassure her. “Not as far as I know. I’m sure there’s a rational explanation for this. A non-Santa explanation.”

“The only real magic is shifters, right?”

“Um. Well. No. There's also magical animals – animals that are, you know, magical, but don't turn into people. Like flying kittens or dragonettes. The Defenders have some as pets.”

Her alarm at the idea of an actual Santa melted into delight. “Flying kittens, really?”

“Uh-huh. They're really cute. You'll love them.”

“Oh, I cannot *wait* to tell the Defenders I know about shifters!” Then, with a mixture of relief and caution, she asked, “That's it, right? People who turn into animals, and magical animals?”

“Nooooo,” he admitted. “There's also people who can do magic. Like witches. And wizard-scientists.”

Annabeth stared. “Wizard-scientists? Like... wizards who are also scientists?”

“You got it. They sound cool, but they're actually terrible people. They're part of my long story. The witches too. At least, one witch.” He hurried on before he blurted out the rest of it then and there. “But as far as I know, there is no actual Santa Claus.”

She looked back down at the tracks in the snow. “Then what's that?”

“Got me.”

“Wait!” She grabbed his arm in excitement. “You said there's magical animals! Are there flying reindeer? Or people who can turn into flying reindeer?”

“That has got to be it.” Unlike Annabeth, Norris was mildly disappointed that there was probably no Santa Claus. He'd loved the idea when he'd been a little boy, insisting on setting out cookies and milk on Christmas Eve, and had been disappointed to discover that Santa was actually his parents. “I've never heard of them, but there's way more shifters and magical animals in the world than the ones I specifically know about. I bet some flying reindeer shifters decided to have a little Christmas fun and pull a sleigh around.”

Annabeth smiled, then gave a slightly wistful glance down at the tracks. “I bet all the kids in their neighborhood really love Christmas.”

CHAPTER 7

Nobody goes into marine biology or paleontology to get rich, and Annabeth knew perfectly well how much—or rather, how little—new college professors earned. When Norris had stopped by her apartment so she could get a swimming suit, she'd assumed that his apartment complex had a pool. But he'd pulled up in front of an actual house.

“Please tell me your roommates are gone for the holidays,” she said.

He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “No roommates. I've got the house to myself.”

He used a clicker to open the garage and parked his car inside while she was still trying to wrap her head around that. She then had to wrap her head around the electronic garage opener. Her cheap apartment's garage had a rickety door she had to heave up herself, then yank down with a rope pull. Annabeth was even more astonished when he led her to the back yard, saying, “I have to show you the best part.”

“*That's* the swimming pool?!”

“Yep.” Norris beamed as if he'd built it himself.

“That's an *Olympic-size* swimming pool!”

“It's even bigger than that, actually.”

The Olympic-plus swimming pool was beautifully designed, with turquoise tiles and a shape like a gently flowing river. It had a diving board and several large slides, with a hot tub off to one side. Umbrellas, tables, and lounge chairs were scattered over the flagstone patio between the pool and the house. The backyard was surrounded by very high bushes, providing complete privacy.

With a pool like that, Annabeth would have expected the house to be a mansion. But it was modest and somewhat small, sized for a couple with maybe one or two kids. And now that she thought about it, the backyard itself wasn't huge, all things considered. The bushes, the pool, and the narrow patio made up the entire backyard.

All the same, it was an actual house with a backyard and an incredible pool. And Norris had it all to himself.

She waved a hand at the pool. “Please tell me if this is too nosy, but did you write a bestselling book under a pen name? Or are you heir to a diamond mine?”

Norris laughed. “If I ever write a book, it’ll be published by an academic press. My mom’s an elementary school teacher and my dad sells eyeglass frames, so there’s no fortune there.”

“Then how on earth...?”

He patted the nearest lounge chair fondly, as if it was a friendly dog. “I completely lucked out. You know Carter from the Defenders?”

She had to think about that for a moment; she’d only met him once or twice. “He’s the one who does technical stuff, right? Black hair, long black coat, tailored suit?”

Norris nodded. “That’s the one. He helped me find this place. It belongs to a family of shark shifters who are living abroad for a while. Apparently they were very concerned with the pool being maintained by a water-breathing shifter, since it’s not chlorinated and needs more upkeep. They were willing to charge a much lower rent than the place would normally go for as long as I swim in the pool regularly and make sure the water stays fresh.”

“Talk about the benefits of a secret society!” She stooped and touched the water. It felt silky on her fingers, and had no harsh chemical smell.

Norris led her inside. She could immediately tell which furniture belonged to the shark family, and which furniture Norris had brought with him. The shark family was clearly very respectable and middle-class, and they had respectable and middle-class furniture. Norris had only recently been a starving grad student like herself, and his furniture reflected that: bookshelves made from bricks and boards, beanbag chairs, and so forth.

She could also tell which books belonged to Norris and which to the shark family, though the sharks also shared an interest in marine biology. But there was a sharp division between Norris’s academic books and journals, and the shark family’s pop science books and coffee table books with titles like *Shark Portraits* and *Sharks: Face to Face with the Ocean’s Most Magnificent Predator*.

Also, she saw with some amusement, Norris hadn’t finished unpacking. There were stacks of cardboard boxes in the living room with labels like “thesis notes” and “stuff from grad school (first apartment)” and “stuff from grad school (second apartment).”

Indicating the boxes, she said, “I feel so seen.”

“Shall we order pizza?” Norris asked.

“Great idea. But if you're going to order anchovies, I have to tell you that we're getting two different pizzas.”

“My Dunkleosteus loves anchovies. I kind of like them too, to be honest, but they're not essential. Especially not on pizza. How do you feel about shrimp?”

“I'm an old-fashioned girl,” she replied primly. “I believe that fish and cheese do not belong together.”

“Just don't tell me you think pineapple belongs with cheese.”

“The horror!” Then she remembered his odd phrasing. “What you mean, ‘my Dunkleosteus?’ You love anchovies when you're a Dunkleosteus?”

“Well, that's true too. But I called him my Dunkleosteus because when you're a shifter, you get something they call the inner animal. It's a voice in your head that's the voice of the animal you turn into. It's a part of you, really. But it's a part that can know things you don't.”

Fascinated, she said, “What's a Dunkleosteus sound like?”

“Mine talks like some elderly professor emeritus. I guess he's the part of me that's a scientist and a professor. But he's also the most primal part of me. All inner animals are. They're also the part that...” He shot a slightly nervous glance at her, and seemed to choke on his own words.

Suspicious, she demanded, “What? The part that what?”

“The part that likes anchovies.” He sat down on the sofa, gesturing to her to sit beside him, and picked up his phone. “Let's look at the menu.”

All the lights went out.

“Again?” Annabeth groaned. This winter had been particularly bad for blackouts. There had been one in her neighborhood the last week, when a tree branch snapped under the weight of snow and took out a power line.

“At least this place is heated with gas,” Norris said. His face looked pale in the light of his phone. “And we'll have nice hot pizza.”

That was a good thought, up until the point when he tried dialing the pizza place and his call didn't go through. Neither did Annabeth's, when she tried on her phone. The wifi was out too.

“We can drive to the pizza place and get takeout,” Norris said, then groaned. “No. We can't. The garage door only opens electrically.”

Though she was disappointed about the pizza, Annabeth wasn't worried. It wasn't uncommon for snow or high winds to take down power lines, but the damage was quickly repaired. Blackouts rarely lasted longer than a few hours, and never more than overnight.

“Hmmm,” she said mischievously. “I guess we’re stuck here. Together. All night. Whatever will we do with all that time?”

Even in the dim light of the phone, she could see his answering look of mischief. “Oh, I think we’ll figure something out.”

Her stomach rumbled, breaking the mood.

“Let’s see if we can find something to eat,” Norris suggested. “The microwave won’t work, but the stove is gas.”

From the way he said “*find something to eat*,” as if he meant to strap on a backpack and snowshoes and go hunt down a wild boar, her previous suspicion became a certainty. “You don’t cook, do you?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Unless you count ramen. What about you?”

“I can cook a few things other than ramen.” She held her hand, fingers outspread. “About five.” Then, mentally adding them up, she folded her thumb into her palm. “Or four.”

They made their way into the kitchen by the light of their phones. She took a quick peek in the refrigerator, which was mostly bare, and removed a dozen eggs and a bottle of wine before quickly shutting it to keep the cold in.

Norris picked up the egg carton. “I don’t remember buying those. My scrambled eggs are styrofoam and my fried ones are hockey pucks.”

“Absent-minded professor,” she replied with a laugh. “You probably meant to make marinated eggs for ramen.”

“Oh, right. That must be it.”

She began hunting through the cupboards. “Ramen. More ramen.” She opened another cupboard. “Good to know you have ramen.”

“I also have pop-tarts.” Norris held up a box of frosted brown sugar and another of blueberry with sprinkles. “But the toaster’s electric.”

“Boo. I guess if we’re starving, we could eat them raw.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. Hmm.” He found a package of rice, then read the directions. “Never mind. It’s microwave only.”

She knelt on the floor to shine her phone into a low cupboard beside the refrigerator. The cupboard contained a basket of Yukon gold potatoes, a basket of onions, a jar of apple sauce, and a jug of frying oil. “Jackpot!”

Norris crouched beside her to look. “Huh. I don’t remember any of that being there. It’s definitely I’d have bought.”

“Will the sharks care if you eat their potatoes?”

“They said I could help myself to any food I found. It’s weird, though. I could have sworn that cupboard was empty.”

“Maybe Santa left it for you. After he parked his flying reindeer.” Annabeth couldn’t believe she was voluntarily making Christmas jokes, but in this dark kitchen, alone with Norris, they seemed normal and funny rather than emotionally fraught.

Norris gave her a startled glance, then smiled. “Potatoes and onions. It’s a Christmas miracle.”

“More like a Hanukkah miracle,” Annabeth said as she started moving the contents of the cupboard on to the counter. “This plus the eggs is everything you need to make latkes, plus apple sauce to eat them with.” Then she laughed, realizing. “Oh! It *is* for Hanukkah. The shark family must celebrate it and keep their supplies here. Funny there’s no menorah, though.”

“Maybe they took it with them. They’ll be gone for the holidays, remember.”

“Oh, right. That must be it.”

Like her Santa joke, the Hanukkah discussion was unexpectedly easy. It was an amusing little mystery with a rational explanation, like the reindeer and sleigh tracks they’d found in the park, rather than a depressing reminder of past holiday trauma.

“Oh, hey. Look what I found.” Norris shone his phone on a drawer full of little clay deepas, plus matches and a bottle of oil.

“Hanukkah *and* Diwali? I’ve never known a family other than mine that celebrates both festivals of lights.” The odd coincidence didn’t bring back any bad memories, but instead made her smile. Her family and some shark shifters she’d never met had something in common, like they were brothers and sisters under the skin. Now *that* was what holidays ought to be like: warm memories and unexpected connections.

“Shall we light them?” Norris asked.

“Absolutely. It’ll be lovely.”

He lit the deepas and placed them around the house. The little flames burned brightly, casting a warm and welcoming light. As he lit up the house, she located a potato grater and began peeling and shredding the potatoes.

He came back into the kitchen and glanced over her shoulder. “You *are* making latkes! Or are those hash browns?”

“No, they’re latkes. I can’t just ignore a Hanukkah miracle. And they’re by far the tastiest of the food options. Unless you’d rather have ramen and cold pop tarts.”

“No, thanks!” He stood beside her at the counter and helped her shred potatoes and chop onions.

It was unexpectedly romantic, particularly in the light of the oil lamps. The flames struck golden highlights in his brown hair and made his eyes shine brightly. But even more than that, she enjoyed the companionship of standing beside him, shoulder to shoulder, as they worked together. Neither of them were the deftest in the world at either potato-shredding or onion-chopping, but their mutual awkwardness made them both laugh.

I'm making latkes with a Dunkleosteus shifter, she thought. How amazing is that?

“You were going to tell me all about shifters and being a Dunkleosteus,” she reminded him. “I want to know everything!”

She'd thought he'd be eager to tell her. But they were standing so close that she felt his body tense against hers. Slowly, he said, “I wasn't born a shifter. A couple years ago I found out that they existed, and that I could become one. And I really wanted to be a Dunkleosteus. I wanted it so much, I made some bad decisions. Not bad as in bad ideas. Bad as in... wrong.”

Annabeth hadn't expected that. Norris seemed so kind and sweet and honest. Hoping it wasn't true, she asked, “Did you steal a radioactive Dunkleosteus fossil from a museum?”

“No!” He sounded shocked at the idea, to her relief. She would never have been able to respect a fossil thief. “I would never. I was trying to get a grant to extract DNA from a Dunkleosteus tooth. No radioactivity involved. It was my big project I'd been working on ever since I got out of grad school, but no one wanted to back it. I had four roommates and I barely had enough money to buy eggs for my ramen. Then I was contacted by a woman named Elayne who said she was a big donor. I met with her, and she offered me a deal: if I worked for her in her lab and doing whatever else she wanted me to do, she'd give me the power to turn into the extinct animal of my choice!”

“Wow!” Annabeth imagined getting that offer herself. Her mind raced from animal to animal. Would she choose to be a plesiosaurus? A pterodactyl? A Dunkleosteus?

“And I... I agreed.” He hunched his broad shoulders as if he'd done something wrong.

“Of course you agreed. Who wouldn't?”

“You get it.” He spoke slowly, as if he couldn't believe his own words. “You really get why I said yes.”

“How could you have said no? I’d have said yes before she finished her offer!” Then she reconsidered. “Though I’d have wanted proof first that she really could do it.”

“So did I,” he assured her. “She brought me to her lab and turned into a harpy in front of me.”

“A harpy eagle? I love those. They’re so huge and strange-looking.”

“Yeah, they’re great,” he agreed. “But no. An actual harpy. The mythical bird-woman. They’re even stranger-looking than harpy eagles. But not as big.”

She held up her hand, trying to process this. “So harpies are real too. And people can turn into them.”

“I don’t know if there’s regular harpies. But there’s definitely harpy shifters. And then!” His voice rose excitedly. “Elayne took me into this huge empty warehouse attached to her lab. One of the lab assistants, this little waif-like woman, came with us, and she turned into a Quetzalcoatlus!”

“Ohhh.” Annabeth breathed a sigh of pure envy. “My favorite pterosaur! Oh, I’d love to get a chance to see one of those. I’m so jealous. You must have been over the moon.”

“I was.” Norris chopped onions fiercely, avoiding meeting her eyes. “Elayne wasn’t thrilled when I told her that my choice was the Dunkleosteus. She said it wasn’t practical. I should have asked her what she meant by practical. But I assumed she wanted to explore new areas and find new fossils. I told her a Dunkleosteus would be perfect for finding marine fossils.”

“And you became a Dunkleosteus!” Annabeth said excitedly.

“I did. And it was amazing.” He met her eyes now, and she could see that he was remembering the wonder and joy of that moment. Then the happiness faded, and he returned to chopping and staring hard at the cutting board.

“There was only one problem. Unfortunately, it turned out that Elayne was evil.”

“But she was bringing back extinct species!” Annabeth was having trouble wrapping her head around how someone who was restoring Dunkleosteuses and Quetzalcoatluses to life could be the bad guy.

“Yeah, but she wasn’t doing it so we could bring extinct species back into the world or learn more about them. It turned out that she hadn’t even picked me because of the papers I’d written about the Devonian period. She wanted someone who’d agree to work with her in exchange for becoming a shifter, and she picked me because she knew I would and because I’m a big guy. She

took one look at me, and she thought I was a bully who'd enjoy hitting people. Just like that football coach in high school."

Annabeth's hand jerked so hard that she nearly shredded her finger along with the potatoes. "That's horrible! What an awful person!"

"Yeah," Norris said glumly. "She didn't just want me as a scientist. She wanted a henchman. A minion. A thug. Elayne was a wizard-scientist, and they're all awful. They give scientists a bad name. They probably give wizards a bad name, too."

"What was she even doing it all for, if it wasn't for species restoration and the pursuit of knowledge?"

He shrugged. "I never really understood exactly what she was up to. But I found out that she was bad news when she ordered me to go defeat this powerful shifter and his... uh... his girlfriend."

It was surreal to imagine Norris being sent off to fight, like some kind of hit man. Annabeth wished she had Elayne there right now, so she could throw onions in her face. "Who was he?"

"One of the Defenders." Norris rubbed his hand over his face, then winced. "Ow. I forgot I'd been chopping onions. I refused at first, but Elaine said if I didn't help her out, she'd take away my ability to turn into a Dunkleosteus. And I just couldn't stand having that happen. It's not just how fun it is to be a Dunkleosteus. It's the inner animal – the voice in my mind. I wouldn't only be losing an ability, I'd be losing a friend. And a part of myself. So I said yes."

Incredulous, Annabeth said, "So you beat up one of the Defenders?"

Norris muttered to the chopped onions, "No, but I did help Elaine lock him and his—er—girlfriend in a basement with a bunch of animatronics. Then the rest of the Defenders arrived. Carter punched me in the face. They won the fight, and we all went to jail for assault and kidnapping."

"You went to *jail*?!"

"Shifter jail. I don't have an official criminal record. I served some time, but then I got the chance to help out the Defenders, and they testified on my behalf. The rest of my sentence got commuted. The Defenders were really nice about it. We even got to be friends. Especially me and Carter and his... Um. His wife, Fen."

Annabeth was still taking it all in. "So basically, you got made into a shifter by a supervillain."

"Um. Yes."

She rescued the onions before he could chop them into mush, and stirred them into the shredded potato mixture. “What was it like being in shifter jail?”

“Boring. And depressing. It didn’t have a swimming pool, so the only times I got to shift were when they let me out of my cell so I could get some exercise. I was supposed to run around a track, but it was the only time I had room to shift. I’d turn into a Dunkleosteus for a couple minutes, and just... sit there... and then I’d have to turn back.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Yeah. But I can’t argue with the sentence. I *did* do some bad things.”

“And you paid your dues.”

“Yes.” He looked up from the onion-drenched cutting board. “It did all work out in the end. I didn’t do any real harm, and the Defenders don’t hold a grudge. I was mostly worried about how you’d feel about it... How *do* you feel about it?”

Annabeth had only been thinking about how it had all felt for him. She’d been excited with him when he’d explained how he’d gotten the chance to become a Dunkleosteus, and angry when he’d told her how Elayne had blackmailed him, and sad over his jail time. It was only then that she realized that he’d told her the whole story believing that she might judge him for it, or even break up with him.

Her words tumbled over themselves in her haste to reassure him. “Norris, if someone had offered me the chance to turn into a Dunkleosteus—or any marine creature, honestly—I might’ve locked some people in a basement too. I’m not proud of that...”

“Me neither.”

“But I can see the temptation,” she concluded. “So I can’t judge you. I *don’t* judge you. You’re human, that’s all. We all make mistakes. And it’s not as if you did it out of malice. Unlike a certain cheating toad I can think of.”

He looked horrified at the very idea. “I would *never* do anything like that.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” she said simply. “I trust you. Now let’s make our Hanukkah miracle latkes.”

They deep-fried the potato pancakes and ate them with apple sauce. They were crisp and delicious and marvelously unhealthy. They ate them and drank the wine, and enjoyed each other’s company until the little oil lamps burned low.

“Come on,” said Annabeth, rising from the table. “Let’s try out the bed.”

CHAPTER 8

It was the best awakening Norris had ever had—even better than the first time he'd slept underwater as a Dunkleosteus. Even before he opened his eyes, he felt Annabeth's warm body beside him, nude and entangled with his, and remembered everything about the night before.

My mate, he thought, savoring the words. *My wonderful, wonderful mate.*

He opened his eyes. Annabeth was fast asleep beside him (and partly on top of him.) Her curly hair was spread out across the pillow and over his face, as if it was floating in water. He breathed deeply, inhaling her scent. Her hair had picked up the aromas of the coffeeshop—coffee and caramel and cinnamon—but beneath it was her own inherent scent, that intoxicating aroma that was all her own.

Norris felt as if he was going to burst with happiness.

Then he realized that he was going to burst in a completely different way.

Unnecessarily, his Dunkleosteus informed him, *The curse is upon us. We must vacate these premises.*

Norris sat bolt upright, realizing too late that he'd dumped Annabeth onto the mattress. She blinked foggily up at him, then gave him the sweetest smile he'd ever seen. "Morning."

"Good-morning-I-love-you-I-have-to-go-for-my-morning-swim!" he said, leaping out of bed. He bolted naked across the room, pausing only to call over his shoulder, "Come join me!"

He flung open the back door and raced to the swimming pool. When he was close enough, he realized that he was going to shift before he reached it. Hoping to avoid crushing the lounge chairs and umbrellas with his enormous bulk, he took a desperate flying leap. He was just in time. The Dunkleosteus sailed through the air and landed in the swimming pool with a tremendous splash.

Norris resurfaced and peered around. Everything on the patio was completely drenched, but at least it wasn't crushed into splinters. The curtains in the bedroom were drawn. Annabeth stood at the window, watching him incredulously. He flapped his fins at her encouragingly.

A few minutes later, she came out the back door in a breathtaking black bikini that highlighted her Junoesque form. He flapped his fins and opened and closed his jaws, hoping she'd understand his approval.

She chuckled. “You really do love your morning swim, huh? Do you do that cannonball every morning, or was that just for me?”

Norris flapped his fins.

“You big show-off,” she teased. “But okay, seeing a gigantic armored prehistoric fish flying through the air was a truly amazing way to start the day.”

He had an idea for making her day even more amazing. Norris swam so his back was parallel with the edge of the pool and gave a little flip of his tail.

“You want to give me a ride?”

He flipped his tail again.

She grinned like a kid with a free pass to Disneyland and gracefully settled down on his back. “Ride ‘em, cowboy!” Then, with a laugh, she amended it to “Ride ‘em, fishgirl!”

Norris took off with a surge of his powerful piscine muscles. Atop his back, Annabeth whooped and cheered. He rolled his eyes and saw her waving an imaginary hat in the air before she hurriedly grabbed on with both hands. But he knew his mate wouldn’t fall off his back. He wouldn’t *let* her fall. All the same, he intended to give her an exciting ride.

He swam back and forth in the pool, sometimes gently, sometimes fast, and sometimes with a playful shimmy. Finally he stopped and floated at one end of the pool, then dipped his head into the water and rolled his eyes up at her.

She patted his armored back. “Go for it!”

Our mate is a courageous creature of the watery depths, said his Dunkleosteus.

Don’t I know it, Norris replied.

He dove down, all the way to the turquoise-tiled bottom. The fresh, unchlorinated water was clear as crystal. When he rolled his eyes, he could see Annabeth underwater, still clinging to his back, her hair floating and swirling in a glorious cloud. Her eyes were wide open, and though her mouth was closed, she was smiling.

He swam the entire length of the pool underwater, then surfaced.

Annabeth gave sigh of pure happiness. “That was absolutely marvelous.”

Norris flapped his fins in agreement and pleasure.

“Want to change back so we can communicate without fin language?”

Uh-oh, Norris thought. He had been so caught up in the joy of swimming with his mate that he’d forgotten that he hadn’t shifted on purpose. Mentally

crossing his fingers, he tried to shift back.

To his immense relief, the next moment he was a man again. He and Annabeth treaded water together.

“Was that as good for you as it was for me?” she asked with a grin.

“Definitely. You can ride me any time. In any sense of the word.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” But tempting as it was to think of picking her up and carrying her straight back to bed, he’d thought of something else they could do that day while he’d been swimming her around. Ever since he’d become a Dunkleosteus shifter, he’d gotten a lot of his best ideas underwater. And if they went straight back to bed, he wasn’t sure they’d get out of it till the morning.

“But not right now.” Norris climbed out of the pool and offered her a hand up. As he pulled her out, he said, “Can you excuse me for a moment? I got an idea for a present for you that I think you’ll really like. I just need to make a phone call to set it up...”

CHAPTER 9

Annabeth was wild with curiosity. Norris had barely taken the time to get dressed before ducking into the garage to make his mystery phone call. (As usual, the power, wifi, and phone service had come back on at some point in the night.) She made coffee and waited for him to return, wondering about his gift. She'd love any gift from him, because it was from him. But the gleam in his eyes had told her he had something truly special in mind.

While he was gone, she thought about *his* gift. She'd put off getting presents for her family, as everything associated with Christmakkalistic depressed her, and the idea of forcing herself to select presents rather than enjoying the process depressed her even more. But when she thought about getting a holiday present for Norris, she was filled with pleasurable anticipation rather than dread. She wanted to get him something he loved because it would make him happy, and trying to think of what would make him happy made her happy.

She'd taken a few pottery classes, and while she'd never mastered the wheel, she'd enjoyed hand-building. Maybe she could sculpt him a ceramic Dunkleosteus! He'd be sure to love that.

Norris burst back in, the gleam in his eyes brighter than ever. "Come on. We're going on a drive."

"Coffee first?"

He shook his head. "Take it with you. This is, uh, time-sensitive."

That did nothing to dampen her curiosity. Was he going to take her on a hot air balloon that had to launch in the morning? To catch a train to the countryside? Bird-watching?

Grabbing his mug and hers, she followed him to his car. As he drove through the city, making zipped-lips gestures every time she tried to get him to give her a hint, she tried to figure out what had to happen at around 11:00 AM on a Thursday. (Thursdays and Fridays were her days off from the coffeeshop.)

She was even more puzzled when he drove into a residential area, one of the many cookie-cutter suburban neighborhoods that surrounded the city. Some were populated by retirees, some by young families, and some by large numbers of college students crammed into a single house. Judging by the

absence of parked cars and the total lack of signs of life, this one was inhabited by people with nine-to-five day jobs.

Norris pulled up at a small and rather unimpressive park, and beckoned for her to get out.

“Are we having a picnic?” she asked doubtfully.

“Nope.”

She followed him to a clump of sad-looking trees. As she got closer, she saw a group of workers hanging out. Then she recognized the Defenders, dressed in workmen outfits. All of them were there except for Tirzah and Ransom. Carter’s wife Fen was there too, even though she wasn’t a Defender, dressed to the nines and looking distinctly out of place.

For a moment, Annabeth was baffled. Then she realized what it had to be about.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, delighted. “You’re going to show me your shift forms! Oh, I can’t wait! Especially for the extinct ones... er, not that I don’t want to see the others too. I want to see all of them! I guess this a secret shifter neighborhood where you can all turn into giant sloths and brachiosauruses and glyptodons with no one batting an eyelash, right? It’s deliberately boring-looking as protective coloration!”

The Defenders looked at each other, then laughed. But they clearly weren’t laughing *at* her.

“I’m so glad you’re Norris’s—er, that you and Norris are dating,” said Merlin. “Because I can’t wait to show you my shift form! You’re going to love it!”

“I see why you two...” Roland began, looking at her and Norris, then paused. He concluded, “...get along.”

“It’s not a secret shifter neighborhood,” said Carter. “Though those do exist. We could take you to one of them later and show you our shift forms, if you like.”

“I’d love that!” Annabeth exclaimed. “But if that’s not why you’re here, then...?”

Norris gave her a distinctly wicked grin. “This is the cheating toad’s neighborhood. We’re going to give you a very special present.”

“Revenge!” Natalie declared dramatically. “Sweet, sweet revenge!”

“Served cold as a frappuccino!” Merlin proclaimed.

“It won’t be anything that will get me thrown in jail,” Norris assured Annabeth. “Or you. Or any of us. Carter’s disabled the security cameras.”

Pete put in, “Tirzah and Ransom are in a parked van, monitoring the house. No one’s home. They’ll give us plenty of warning if anyone approaches.”

“And I shifted to make sure no one’s at home around the cheating toad’s house,” Merlin put in.

Natalie brushed her rainbow hair out of her face and gave Annabeth a pat on the shoulder. “Plus, what we’re doing isn’t the sort of thing that’s likely to get reported to the police, or that the police would prioritize investigating if it did get reported, or that could ever be proved who did it if they did investigate.”

“What *are* we doing?” Annabeth asked.

Norris squeezed her hand. “We’re giving the cheating toad a little Christmakkalistic present.”

Wildly curious and bubbling with anticipation, Annabeth threw on the workman’s clothes they gave her. Norris put on an outfit as well. They walked to a house with a van parked outside. The Defenders took ladders and moving equipment from the van, while Carter unlocked the door.

Roland snapped his fingers. “Let’s get going!”

The Defenders and Norris sprang into action. Dali and Fen oversaw them. Tirzah stayed in the van, and Annabeth stood outside and watched. She wasn’t sure exactly what they were doing until Norris and Pete carried out a sofa, then carefully maneuvered it up the ladders and placed it on the roof.

Annabeth burst out laughing. “Are you moving all his furniture onto the roof?”

“Furniture, TV, clothes, everything,” said Norris. “He can have fun getting it down.”

“We won’t damage anything,” said Dali. “No guarantees for him, though.”

Annabeth felt like her heart was growing three sizes as she watched Norris and the Defenders pile all the cheating toad’s possessions into a household Jenga tower atop the roof. The dining room table stood upright with all the chairs standing on top of it, a heavy-looking dresser balanced on the chair seats, the microwave on top of the dresser, and the TV on top of the microwave.

All of the cheating toad’s belongings were neatly packed in cardboard boxes, sealed and unlabeled, and stacked atop the sofa. Annabeth had never seen a house packed up so quickly. It was a wonder of efficiency. They even

packed the toilet paper, in a box that Natalie carefully maneuvered so it was wedged under the sofa. The contents of the refrigerator and freezer went into coolers filled with dry ice. Once they were placed on top of the roof, the refrigerator was unplugged and stood on top of the coolers.

The Defenders hadn't damaged anything. They'd taken care to not even let his frozen food get spoiled. And yet...

Norris handed Annabeth a piece of paper and a Sharpie. "Want to write him a note? I'll pin it to the sofa for you."

She grinned fiercely and took the paper and pen. A few minutes later, she stood looking at an empty house, a roof stacked up like some work of modern art commenting on American life, and a note pinned to the sofa that read "HAPPY CHRISTMAKKALISTICE. HO. HO. HO."

Annabeth once again began to laugh as she imagined the cheating toad and the antlered blonde coming home to find this scene. She laughed and laughed, letting all her hurt and anger and humiliation float away in the breeze. Her ex was a petty, shallow, awful person, not worthy of her attention. How could she let someone as pathetic as him ruin something as wonderful as winter holidays?

"Now we're even," she said to Norris. "And I'm free of him. This is the best Christmakkalistic ever. And you gave it to me."

She flung herself into his arms, and they kissed until she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"I hate to break you up," said Dali. "But we really shouldn't stand around here for longer than we have to."

"Right, right," Annabeth said, and turned toward the van.

As Norris fell into step beside her, he said, "How do you feel about the Defenders holiday party now?"

Annabeth didn't hesitate. "Of course I'll come! I was cutting off my nose to spite my face before. I'm sure it'll be lovely."

Norris looked immensely relieved. "Oh, good. Because there's something I have to tell—Uh-oh."

He stopped in the middle of the lawn, looking worried. His face began to turn red. He looked around wildly.

Annabeth grabbed his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Er... Not exactly." Sweat broke out on his face.

She snatched her cell phone out of her purse. "I'll call 911!"

"No, no!" Norris exclaimed, backing away from her.

As she started to follow him, Roland caught her elbow. “Stay here. He’ll be fine.”

“There’s a hose!” Merlin shouted, and dashed to a faucet at the side of the house.

Natalie neatly plucked the phone from Annabeth’s hand. “He’s fine, he just—”

Norris turned into a Dunkleosteus.

Annabeth stared, baffled and relieved and astounded. She’d seen his Dunkleosteus before—she’d ridden on its back that very morning—but there was something incredibly surreal about the sight of an enormous armored fish on a suburban front lawn.

Norris flapped his fins reassuringly at her.

“He needs water!” Annabeth shouted, then saw that Merlin was already aiming a garden hose at his gills.

Norris gave a grateful flip of his tail, sending a trash can flying.

Annabeth turned to the Defenders, puzzled. “Er... Is this normal?”

They looked at each other with the distinctive furtive expressions of people who know something they’ve promised not to tell.

“Norris will explain,” said Carter.

The Defenders seized upon this with visible gratitude.

“Yes, Norris will tell you what’s going on,” said Dali.

Pete spoke loudly, meeting Norris’s eyes. “He’ll tell you *everything*.”

“He should shift back in about five minutes,” Roland said reassuringly.

Sure enough, after a few minutes the Dunkleosteus vanished. Norris spluttered as the blast from the hose caught him in the face.

“Sorry!” Merlin hurriedly switched off the hose.

Tirzah rolled down the van window and stuck out her head. “Guys, we have got to get out of here. Pile in!”

They all piled into the van, leaving the hose where it was. Annabeth took a last look out the window as the van pulled away. The entire area around the house was drenched.

“That’s going to turn into ice in a couple hours,” she remarked. “That’ll be going to make it even harder to get his stuff off the roof. I’m not sure he’ll even be able to set up ladders.”

“Too bad for him,” said Norris, not sounding sorry at all.

Annabeth caught his gaze with hers. “Exactly what’s going on? Why did you suddenly turn into a Dunkleosteus? Was that what was going on this

morning when you leaped out of bed and dove into the pool?”

“Er,” Norris said. “Um.”

“You’re trapped in a van together,” Carter remarked. “There’s no dodging the question.”

“I’m not trying to dodge,” Norris said indignantly, then turned back to Annabeth. “Okay. This is what I’d started to tell you when I got interrupted by turning into a Dunkleosteus. When I was helping the Defenders after I got out of jail, one of the wizard-scientists put a curse on me that stuck me in my Dunkleosteus form. A witch named Kerenza Couch removed it, but recently it’s started coming back. That’s what was going on when I ran out to the pool this morning. It’s also why I dashed out of the coffee shop when we first met. I had to go jump in a lake.”

Annabeth had already figured out some of that, minus the specifics about wizards and witches and curses. “But why didn’t you want to tell me even after I knew you were a shifter? No. Wait. I still want to know that, but the really important thing is getting the curse reversed. It’s dangerous—you can’t breathe on land! Let’s go visit that witch again to see if she can fix you.”

Ransom smiled. Fen and Dali giggled. Tirzah snickered. Roland chuckled. Merlin, Carter, and Pete laughed outright.

Annabeth glared at them. “What’s so funny? His life is in danger!”

“They’re not laughing about that,” Norris put in. He looked like he was trying not to laugh himself. “They’re laughing at me. Not in a bad way,” he added quickly when Annabeth glared at them harder. “I already talked to Kerenza, and she told me how to break the curse. I have to bring my mate to the Defenders’ holiday party.”

“Your mate?” Annabeth asked, baffled. “Who’s your mate?”

“You are,” Norris replied. He took her hands. “Your mate is your true love. The person you’re perfectly compatible with. A shifter’s inner animal can recognize their mate at first sight. My Dunkleosteus recognized you. But honestly, I didn’t really need him to. I’d have known I’d love you forever halfway through our first conversation.”

Annabeth was stunned. But somehow, she wasn’t surprised. “I don’t have an inner animal. So I guess that’s why it took me longer. I’m pretty sure I fell in love with you halfway through our first date.”

She wasn’t sure how long they sat gazing adoringly into each other’s eyes before she remembered what they’d been talking about before.

“Hey!” she exclaimed. Norris jumped slightly. “Why didn’t you tell me all that once you’d told me about your Dunkleosteus? Did you actually think I’d still refuse to go to a holiday party even if I knew it would *save your life?*”

“No, no!” He patted her reassuringly. “I knew you’d go if I told you why. That’s why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to make you feel obligated to do something you wouldn’t enjoy. I was hoping you’d come around to going because you wanted to go.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Norris, that is very sweet but also very ridiculous. You would’ve told me eventually if I hadn’t decided to go on my own, right?”

“I hoped it wouldn’t come to that. But yes, I would’ve.”

“I’m glad you have *some* sense of self-preservation. But seriously, next time just tell me what’s going on!”

“I will,” Norris promised. “But I’m glad it happened this way.”

“Me too. It was no fun for me to keep on hating winter holidays.”

Remembering that they had an audience, she turned to the Defenders. “Norris and I have been having all these weird, amazing winter holiday moments. We found tracks from a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer in the park, and there was oil and latkes for Hanukkah, and a drawer full of Diwali lamps...”

Ransom’s lips twitched. Roland smiled. Tirzah stifled a snort. Pete chuckled. Dali stuffed her fist against her mouth. Carter laughed outright. Fen began to giggle, and Merlin and Natalie joined her.

Annabeth was instantly suspicious, but Norris spoke first. He stabbed a finger at Merlin. “Did you make those sleigh prints?”

Merlin shook his head violently, looking offended. “Absolutely not!”

There was a moment of silence, then he grinned and went on, “Dali made the sleigh prints. I made the reindeer prints. Carter and Natalie made it look like they landed and then flew away.”

“And the Hanukkah miracle?” Annabeth inquired.

“Carter cut the power to your house,” Tirzah confessed. “Phone and wifi too. I told Pete what you needed for your Hanukkah miracle, and he and Roland snuck it into the house. It was Ransom’s idea to combine it with a Diwali celebration.”

Annabeth was dumbstruck. It seemed like Norris was too, because there was a silence in the van.

“You’re not mad, are you?” Merlin asked. “Or disappointed that it wasn’t really Santa?”

“We never thought it was Santa,” Norris said, with a slightly defensive note in his voice. “We thought it was a family of flying reindeer shifters giving their kids a Christmas treat.”

“I’m not mad,” Annabeth said. She swallowed hard, not wanting her emotion to make the Defenders think they’d hurt her feelings. “I’m touched. You guys went to so much trouble to help out Norris and help me enjoy the holidays again.”

A general aura of relief filled the van.

“Did you have plans for a Winter Solstice miracle?” Norris asked.

“That was going to be next,” Fen admitted. “But I guess it’s off now.”

Annabeth and Norris looked at each other, and she knew they were thinking the same thing.

“Bring it on,” said Norris. “We wouldn’t want to miss it.”

CHAPTER 10

Norris offered Annabeth his arm. He wasn't normally quite that formal, but the occasion of bringing his mate to the party that would break his curse felt like it called for at least a little bit of ceremony.

It is a grand and momentous occasion, agreed his Dunkleosteus.

The Defenders were throwing two separate holiday parties, one for everyone who didn't know about shifters, and one for everyone who did. Annabeth had originally been invited to the non-shifter party, but they'd decided to attend the shifter party so she could meet the magical pets.

She took his arm as they stepped into the elevator. She wore what she'd called a little black dress, which was actually a goddess-proportioned black dress, a little Star of David on a slim silver chain, and earrings shaped like Christmas tree ornaments. She looked absolutely glorious.

"I'm so lucky," Norris said.

Annabeth smiled. "*I'm* the lucky one."

Norris was filled with the heat of passion...

...or maybe another kind of heat.

Please no, he thought. But the increasing heat was joined by an all too familiar swelling sensation.

I perceive that the curse will only be broken when we reach the place of the party itself, said his Dunkleosteus. After a pause that it probably thought was brief but felt eternal to Norris, the great fish went on, *I do hope this elevator isn't prone to stopping between floors.*

You just had to mention that, Norris replied. He was torn between panic that he was about to become an armored fish that was much bigger than the space he was in, and panic that he'd become one the instant the doors opened and completely trash the party.

Annabeth hadn't failed to notice what was going on. "Hang on, Norris. It'll only be another moment."

The ding of the elevator arriving was the most welcome sound he'd ever heard. He lunged out of the doors the instant they opened, almost colliding with Pete. A spiky green cactus kitten launched itself off Pete's shoulder in bristling alarm.

"Take it easy," said Pete.

Norris looked around wildly to make sure he wouldn't squash anyone if he turned into a Dunkleosteus before the curse could break. The Defenders were all there, plus their pets and friends and family. All the damage had been repaired, the Christmas tree was thoroughly decorated, and bowls and platters of festive candies and cookies and savory snacks were on every flat surface. A banner hung across the room, decorated with velociraptor, hellhound, Gabriel hound, chimera, phoenix, cave bear, kitten, puppy, dragonette, sugar glider, and bugbear prints, reading, HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM THE DEFENDERS & PETS.

There wasn't enough room for Norris to spread his arms without touching someone or banging into something, let alone room to become a giant armored fish.

"Hello, fish boy," came an unexpected but familiar voice.

Norris blinked bewilderedly at the sight of a plump, gray-haired woman in red velour stretch pants and a hideous knitted sweater with spookily elongated gingerbread men. A hairless creature the size of a Chihuahua sat at her feet, its scorpion tail curled over its back. It blinked its yellow eyes and yawned, showing its forked tongue. The demonic-looking creature was wearing a fuzzy knit sweater with a pattern of lopsided, leering snowmen.

"Kerenza!" Norris exclaimed.

But he had no thoughts to spare to wonder what she was doing there. He'd brought his mate to the holiday party. The spell should have broken. The about-to-turn-into-a-Dunkleosteus feeling ought to have gone away. But instead, it was intensifying.

Then he realized that Annabeth was still in the elevator, holding it open with one hand and dubiously eyeing the fanged, scorpion-tailed creature at Kerenza's feet.

"Annabeth! You're not technically at the party!" Norris gasped. "You have to come out to break the curse!"

Annabeth rushed out into the middle of the room. She flung out her arms and declaimed, "I'm here! I'm Norris's mate! I'm at the party! The curse is broken!"

The heat inside Norris blazed even hotter. The floor seemed to pitch under his feet. Sweat was dripping down his face.

I cannot hold off the shift much longer, came the ponderous yet stressed voice of his Dunkleosteus.

Kerenza yanked a zip-lock bag out of her purse and hurled the contents in his face. A cloud of pink powder enveloped his head. Norris sneezed three times. As the powder dissipated, he realized that the hot, about-to-explode feeling had vanished.

He stared at Kerenza, baffled. “Did you do that?”

“What do you think, sonny?” Kerenza replied with a snort.

Annabeth returned to his side, taking care to stay out of ankle-biting range of the fanged, scorpion-tailed creature at Kerenza’s feet. “What’s that thing in the sweater?”

Kerenza sniffed. “That *thing* is a purebred miniature manticore, young lady. Her name is Blossom. What was all that nonsense you were spouting about parties and curses?”

“Hey!” Norris said indignantly.

“It wasn’t nonsense,” Annabeth said. “This witch named Kerenza told Norris the curse could only be broken if he brought his mate to the Defenders’ holiday party.”

“I’m Kerenza.” The plump witch drew herself up to her full height, which wasn’t much. “And I said no such thing. I broke the curse just now. You had nothing to do with it.”

“What?!” Norris and Annabeth exclaimed.

A beat later, his inner Dunkleosteus said, “*What?!?*”

“Whatever would you think...” Kerenza began, then trailed off. She squinted upward. Norris guessed that she was mentally replaying their phone conversation. He sure was.

“You told me I had to bring my mate to the Defenders’ holiday party to break the curse,” he said, but he could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

“Didn’t you?”

“Young man, I said *you* needed to come to the Defenders’ holiday party to break the curse. Because I was coming to the party, and I could break the curse. Convenient, see?”

“Then why did you tell me to bring my mate?” Norris demanded, baffled.

“Because I wanted to meet her. I was curious about her, fish boy.”

Kerenza eyed Annabeth. “Fond of swimming finny things, are you?”

“I’m getting a PhD in marine biology,” Annabeth said. “And don’t call my mate fish boy!”

Blossom hissed, her lips writhing back from her protruding fangs.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Norris said hurriedly. “It’s a term of endearment. I think.”

Annabeth’s lips were quivering. For a horrified instant, Norris thought she was about to burst into tears. Instead, she burst out laughing. In between gales, she gasped, “So I never needed to come! She just wanted to meet me!” She gulped, wiped her eyes, and said, “Actually, I have to thank you twice over, Kerenza. Thank you for taking off the curse. And thank you for misleading Norris—”

“I was perfectly clear,” grumbled Kerenza.

“—because it gave me back my love of winter holidays,” Annabeth went on, ignoring the interruption.

The Defenders had gathered around. Tirzah said thoughtfully, “It’s almost like *your* curse was broken too, Annabeth.”

“That’s true,” Annabeth said, sounding both pleased and surprised. “It was.”

Her gaze was caught by Batcat, who perched on Tirzah’s shoulder. The winged kitten’s yellow eyes opened even wider than usual as she blinked owlishly at Annabeth. As Annabeth slowly looked around the room, Norris realized that she’d been so distracted by first him and then Kerenza that she hadn’t had the chance to take it all in before.

A deep, warm happiness filled him as he watched her incredulous, delighted gaze travel from Batcat to Dali’s dragonfly-winged kitten Cloud, who sat beneath the Christmas tree, stealthily batting at a dangling candy cane ornament made of twisted glass.

“Look up,” said Norris.

Annabeth looked up toward the ceiling, and gave a laugh of sheer joy as she saw Carter’s golden dragonette swooping and diving in a game of tag with Pete’s daughter’s tiny white pegasus.

“Is that a miniature drag—” She broke off with a start and looked down. “What’s *that*?”

A hairy blue creature had snuck up and was attempting to wedge itself between her ankles, its incongruously tiny dragonfly wings buzzing madly.

“That’s Merlin’s bugbear, Blue.” Norris stooped and scratched behind Blue’s ears. The bugbear whacked his head against Norris’s legs, sending bright blue hairs floating to the ground.

“Amazing,” she breathed. “Incredible!”

“An incredible nuisance,” remarked Carter. He offered her jewel-bright chocolates on a platter. “Don’t let Blue eat any. He already got into the macarons.”

Annabeth took a chocolate with a shell of swirled pink and red. “Lychee-rose. Delicious.”

Fen took a chocolate with glittering with galaxy colors. Norris selected a green-blue one, which turned out to be chocolate mint.

“How did you two like your Winter Solstice miracle?” Fen asked.

“We loved it,” said Norris.

After the longest night of the year, he and Annabeth had gone to have coffee by the pool and found the patio artfully scattered with the symbols of the Winter Solstice: holly leaves and berries, ivy leaves, oak leaves, and yew leaves. A sprig of mistletoe was caught on one umbrella, as if it had just happened to have fallen there and gotten stuck. None of the plants grew in the yard. They’d stepped under the mistletoe, of course.

“It was subtle and lovely,” said Annabeth. “My sister-in-law Julie would have really appreciated it.”

“We could engineer some more miracles,” Merlin offered as he selected a dark chocolate streaked with gold dust. “There’s plenty more winter holidays. There’s Saint Lucy’s Day, when you eat saffron buns and girls wear a crown of lit candles —”

Night of the Radishes, put in the Dunkleosteus.

That’s not a thing, said Norris.

“—and Night of the Radishes,” Merlin went on.

“Wait,” said Norris. “Night of the Radishes is real?”

“*Noche de Rábanos*,” said Pete’s mother Lola, who sat on the sofa with a mug of cocoa in one hand and a gingerbread man in the other. “We celebrated it in Oaxaca, when I was a little girl. There was a radish-carving contest in the town square. Giant radishes, not the tiny ones you put in tacos.”

“Maybe you can sneak some carved radishes into our backyard, Merlin,” suggested Annabeth.

“It’s no fun if it’s not a surprise,” said Merlin.

And, of course, the Feast of the Seven Fishes, concluded his Dunkleosteus.

“Is the Feast of the Seven Fishes real?” Norris asked the room at large.

“It’s a traditional Italian Christmas Eve celebration,” said Ransom. “They serve seven different seafood dishes.”

Apologies, buddy, said Norris silently. *I'll never doubt again.*

Accepted, replied his Dunkleosteus. *So long as we celebrate the Feast of the Seven Fishes.*

Done, replied Norris.

“Hey, Merlin?” Annabeth said. “Norris said you were one of the Defenders who could show me your shift form inside.”

Merlin glanced at Norris. “Did you tell her what it is?”

Norris shook his head. “She said she’d rather be surprised.”

Merlin’s blue eyes glittered with mischief. He picked up an empty mug, set it down on a low coffee table, and said, “Watch this!”

He spoke loudly enough that the entire party stopped chatting and watched. Merlin leaped acrobatically into the air, and plummeted down on a direct collision course with the mug and the coffee table. At the last instant before he would have hit and smashed everything, he vanished. A tiny black thing landed in the mug.

“What...?” Annabeth gasped.

A tiny black head popped out of the mug, followed by a pair of tiny clawed arms. The gecko-sized velociraptor leaped out of the mug and posed on the coffee table.

“Is that...?” She knelt down to peer at the little creature. “That’s not...”

The velociraptor grew to the size of a kitten.

“It is!” Annabeth exclaimed. “You’re a velociraptor! A size-changing velociraptor! How big can you—”

Dali, Roland, Pete, and Carter spoke up at once. “Don’t ask that!”

The kitten-sized velociraptor leaped off the table and grew to size of a small human. Annabeth walked around him, examining his claws and his eyes and his sleek black skin. Norris took the opportunity to join her. It was so fascinating to be able to get a close look at an extinct creature.

“No feathers,” remarked Annabeth. “Guess we’ve been wrong about that.”

“I’m not sure that we are,” Norris said. “The raptors are partly defined by size, and Merlin can change that. If he’s the size of a chicken, like a real velociraptor, does that make him a velociraptor? If he’s seven feet tall, does that make him a Utahaptor? I think Merlin’s really his own thing.”

The sleek black raptor became Merlin again. He said, “That’s right. I wouldn’t take me as an example of what a velociraptor was really like. I’m not like Norris, who does turn into an exact version of a Dunkleosteus. Me

and the other Defenders are a bit more... experimental. None of us recognized our mates at first sight, for instance. We had to fall in love first.”

Merlin’s sunny smile faded as he seemed to catch sight of something off to the side. Norris followed his gaze, and caught Roland, the Defenders boss, with a stark expression of utter heartbreak.

A split second later, Roland picked up the mug Merlin had landed in, saying, “I’m taking this to the sink before someone drinks out of it.”

There was nothing in his face or tone but a mixture of wry amusement and mild disgust, making Norris wonder if he’d imagined that glimpse of devastating sorrow. On the other hand, Roland was the only Defender who had no mate.

Merlin went on, “Or, well, that’s how it’s seemed to work so far. Anyway, you two can study me as much as you like. And if you’re extra nice to Pete, maybe he’ll let you study him too! I think he’s an excellent example of a prehistoric bear. Shifted or not.”

“Hey!” Pete said.

“I’ll give you my employee discount if you do,” Annabeth offered. Then, more seriously, she went on, “I have to say, I’m jealous. I know there were major, major downsides to how you all became shifters, but I can’t help wishing I could be one.”

“I get it,” Merlin assured her. “I love my raptor!”

“And I love my Dunkleosteus.” Norris put an arm around her. “I’d share him with you if I could.”

“You can,” came Kerenza’s voice.

Norris jumped. The witch had come up behind him, Blossom trotting at her heels. The fat little manticores stared at him with its yellow eyes, the slotted goat-like pupils narrowing.

“He can?” Annabeth asked. A wild hope was in her voice.

“Sonny boy here isn’t like the Defenders. He was meant to be a minion, so those wizard-scientists—pah!” Kerenza mimed spitting on the ground. “—they didn’t put the same restrictions on him. That’s why he was able to recognize his mate at first sight. And unlike them, he can turn you the same way most other shifters can.”

Carter frowned. “That’s very dangerous, though.”

Kerenza rolled her eyes at him. “Young man, that depends on who’s turning who into what, and whether or not there’s anyone like me around

who can tell if it's a bad idea. If it was going to harm fish boy's mate here if he makes her into fish girl, I wouldn't have mentioned it."

"How does it work?" Annabeth asked eagerly.

"He bites you while he's in his shift form," said Kerenza.

"Um," said Norris.

Much as I would love to assist our mate into a glorious transformation, I see some practical problems with the method, put in his inner Dunkleosteus.

Norris clarified, "My jaws are enormous and they evolved to bite through armor."

Kerenza rolled her eyes. "You don't have to literally bite her, fish boy. You just have to draw blood with your teeth. She can put her hand in your mouth and press down until a tooth nicks her finger."

"Oh!" Norris exclaimed.

"Oh!" Annabeth echoed.

He didn't know which of them moved first. All he knew was that their hands had leaped together as if they were made of magnets, and they were hurrying through the crowd as fast as they could go without barging into anyone.

They were already in the elevator when they heard Kerenza shout behind them, "Aren't you staying for the Secret Santa gift exchange? I knitted a sweater!"

The elevator doors closed, saving them from having to reply.

"Those sweaters were absolutely ghastly," said Annabeth. "The gingerbread men looked like Slenderman!"

"Slenderbread Man," said Norris.

"Her sweater probably had a hairless manticores pattern."

"Honestly? I'd wear that."

"Not around me, you wouldn't."

"Hey." Norris gave her a stern look. "Do you want to become fish girl or don't you?"

Annabeth lifted her head high. "That's fish woman to you."

EPILOGUE

They drove along the coast until they found a sheltered beach. Granite cliffs curved around it, forming a cup and cutting them off from view. In warmer weather the beach would have been packed, but snow was falling lightly and it was completely empty. Of people, that was. A few seagulls flew in the distance, and the tidepools teemed with cold-hardy life.

Norris and Annabeth had stopped to change out of their party clothes and into warmer attire, but Annabeth had kept on her Star of David necklace and her Christmas tree ornament earrings, a pair of cheerful red balls dangling from tinsel chains.

She fingered them both now. “My jewelry comes with me, right?”

Norris nodded. “Jewelry, clothes, shoes, and small items without much mass, like wallets.”

“I wonder where the mass of the Dunkleosteus comes from. And where it goes.”

“That,” he said enthusiastically, “is the key mystery of shifters. I was hoping to study that when I had access to Elayne’s lab, but it wasn’t anything she was interested in. And then, well.”

Jail, his Dunkleosteus put in gloomily. *Durance vile on dry land.*

“After that, nobody else was interested either,” he concluded. “At least, not interested enough to fund the research. Shifters just shrug and say it’s magic. But what *is* magic? Is it a force, like gravity? Is it a new field in biology? Is it a new field of study altogether?”

“Maybe when I get my PhD, we can start our own lab,” she suggested. “We can figure out what sort of equipment we’d need. And what sort of colleagues we’d want. I have a feeling we’d need a physicist.”

“And a witch,” said Norris.

Annabeth snickered. “Imagine Blossom trotting around the lab in a fuzzy sweater.”

“I was thinking more of asking Kerenza if she knew anyone who wasn’t retired.”

“And has a less terrifying familiar?”

“Aww,” said Norris reproachfully. “Blossom’s sweet once you get used to her.”

“Imagine us trying to interview some poor unsuspecting physicist with Blossom hissing in the background,” Annabeth said, grinning. “And no bugbears either. Or flying kittens. Nothing that sheds.”

“Blossom doesn’t shed.”

“Her sweaters do.”

Norris laughed, and Annabeth joined him. She felt giddy with happiness. It felt impossible how quickly her life had been upended, and how wonderful the new pattern had been. Tomorrow she’d bring Norris to celebrate Christmakkalistic with her family. She knew they’d love him—how could they not?—and he’d love them.

And now, she was about to become a new woman—to irrevocably alter her very self.

She couldn’t wait.

“Ready to become Fish Woman?” Norris asked.

“Bring it, Fish Boy.”

They walked out on to a rocky promontory that jutted out into deeper waters. Snowflakes whirled around them in the cold and briny breeze. Annabeth’s nose and cheeks were going numb, and she shivered with cold as much as with anticipation.

Norris held up his hand. “Stop here.”

He gave her a last, lingering kiss, then ran straight out to the edge. Just before he reached it, he leaped into the air. Annabeth’s heart rose as high as the flying Dunkleosteus he became. The splash was magnificent, but she was standing back far enough that she wasn’t soaked. As the foamy ripples subsided, an immense armored head arose from the water. Norris’s eyes fixed on her as he opened his vast toothy jaws.

Annabeth walked up to the edge. She took a moment to admire his sharp triangular teeth, each one bigger than her head, and leaned out to give his armored nose a pat. He happily flapped his fins.

This is it, she thought. The moment when everything changes.

She thought of the curse, and of that strange, heartbroken look in Roland’s eyes when Merlin had talked about how the Defenders hadn’t been able to recognize their mates until they fell in love. Being a shifter had its down sides, too. She could still change her mind, if she wanted.

Her head said, *Do it.*

Her heart said, *Do it.*

She pushed her palm down on the nearest tooth until she felt a small, sharp pain. A bead of blood rose up on her hand.

Norris flapped his fins again, splashing her ankles, and swam out farther. He flipped his tail encouragingly, in a “*Come on in, the water’s fine*” gesture.

Annabeth hadn’t thought out the details past this moment. She wished she’d pressed Norris more on how to shift. He’d said, “You’ll just know how,” which now didn’t seem very helpful.

A voice spoke in her mind. It was a vast and learned voice, yet a voice with an essential quickness. It reminded her a little bit of the science teacher she’d had in sixth grade who’d sparked her interest in marine biology, a little bit of her swimming coach in tenth grade, and a little bit of her thesis advisor. Annabeth had never heard it before, but she recognized it immediately.

Jump, said her inner Dunkleosteus. *Show our mate how we sail through the air!*

Annabeth jumped, trusting in that inner voice.

Norris was right. She did just know how to shift. Just before she hit the water, she became a Dunkleosteus.

She made an enormous splash. Then she was underwater, in her immense new body. The salt water didn’t feel cold or sting her eyes. She was meant for the ocean, as she’d always felt she had been. But now she had a body to match.

That vast inner voice spoke again. *No regrets?*

Absolutely none, Annabeth replied.

She swam in the welcoming water, glorying in the power of her tail and fins. She was weightless yet strong, huge but fast. She could see every rock and fish and strand of kelp as if the water was clear as crystal.

And she could see Norris. He swam up to her with a single flick of his powerful tail, then made a small gesture with one fin: *Isn’t it wonderful?*

She flicked her own fin in reply: *Marvelous! Thank you!*

Just as she simply knew how to shift and swim, she now could understand and communicate as Dunkleosteuses did.

Norris curled his fin: *I love you.*

Annabeth curled hers: *I love you too.*

Together, they swam out to sea.

A NOTE FROM ZOE CHANT

Thank you for reading *Splashing Through the Snow*! I hope you enjoyed it. It's a spinoff from of my Protection, Inc: Defenders series. Norris and Annabeth make their first appearances in that series. If you'd like to try it out, keep paging down to read a sneak preview of the first chapter of *Defender Cave Bear*.

If you'd like to be emailed when I release my next book, please [click here](#) to be added to my mailing list. You can also visit [my webpage](#), or join my [VIP Readers Group on Facebook](#) and get sneak previews and free stories! [Shifter Vets](#) is a related series about veterinarians for magical creatures. It has guest appearances by the Defenders and Protection, Inc. characters.

If you enjoy *Protection, Inc.* and *Defenders*, I also write the [Werewolf Marines](#) series under the pen name of Lia Silver. Both series have hot romances, exciting action, emotional healing, brave heroines who stand up for their men, and strong heroes who protect their mates with their lives.

Please review this book on Amazon, even if you only write a line or two. Hearing from readers like you is what keeps me writing!

ALSO BY ZOE CHANT

Protection, Inc: Defenders

[Defender Cave Bear](#)

[Defender Raptor](#)

[Defender Hellhound](#)

[Defender Chimera](#)

Defender Phoenix (forthcoming)

Protection, Inc: Defenders: Defenders & Friends

Splashing Through the Snow

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[Bodyguard Bear](#)

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Shifter Vets

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DEFENDER CAVE BEAR: SNEAK PREVIEW

PROTECTION, INC, DEFENDERS # 1

BY ZOE CHANT

Someone's following me.

Tirzah glanced behind her. The sidewalk was full of people, most briskly walking, plus a few elderly folk moving slowly and with the help of canes. No one seemed to pay any attention to her, let alone give her a sinister stare. But when she turned to face forward, she once again felt that prickling sensation at the back of her neck, as if the intensity of that unseen watcher's gaze was actually striking her skin. She shivered.

It wasn't as if anyone could do anything to her on a busy city sidewalk in broad daylight. All the same, it wasn't impossible that she could have a stalker. Someone could have found out about her little hobby. Or some creep could have just spotted her and decided that she looked vulnerable.

She *was* vulnerable, now. Maybe she should go home...

"No, screw that," Tirzah muttered to herself, and kept on moving. "If the grannies are out for their walks, I'm finishing mine."

No one so much as gave her a curious glance. You had to do a lot more than talk to yourself quietly to get people's attention in Refuge City.

Screaming at yourself might get a raised eyebrow or two—

"Excuse me!"

It was a loud male voice. Tirzah almost jumped out of her skin.

The man addressing her looked abashed. "Sorry to startle you. Do you love cats?"

"How did you—" Then she smiled as she noticed his Humane Society T-shirt and clipboard. "I'm already a regular donor. But yes, I do love cats. So if you're doing something special for them, I could chip in a bit more."

"We are!" Enthusiastically, he went on, "We're building a new, state-of-the-art shelter exclusively for them. They're very sensitive animals, and it

stresses them out if they're housed in the same building as dogs."

"Good for you! I mean, good for the Humane Society. Will it be a no-kill shelter?"

He looked horrified at the very idea of it being anything else. "Of course!"

"Sold." Tirzah took out her purse and wrote the Humane Society a check.

"Thank you so much..." He looked at the name on the check before carefully tucking it away. "...Tirzah. And pleased to meet you! I'm Jerry. Do you have cats yourself?"

"No."

"Would you like to? Or doesn't your landlord allow them?"

Tirzah dodged the landlord question. "Just haven't gotten around to it. It's been a busy year."

That was certainly true. She'd intended to get a cat a year ago. And then, well, there'd been a whole lot of things she'd been too busy to do. But there wasn't anything stopping her now.

Though she should renovate her apartment *before* she got a cat. As Jerry had said, they were sensitive animals. If Tirzah herself hated having construction going on and her place all torn up so much that she'd put it off for an entire year, a cat would probably be terrified.

But Jerry obviously knew the look of someone who didn't have a cat and wished she did. An eager gleam lit his eyes as he asked, "Would you like to take a look at our kittens? Someone left a basket of them on a church doorstep yesterday, and we're keeping them in here. Our very first guests!" He indicated the door behind him.

"Oh, is this the place you're converting into a shelter?"

He nodded. "It's still very much under construction, but we made some space for the kittens. Come on in and meet them. They like sleeping in the basket, so we kept it in their cage for them. It's the cutest thing you've ever seen!"

She knew that if she met the kittens, she very likely wouldn't escape without adopting one. But she couldn't resist the invitation to pet a litter of kittens—in a basket, no less! Anyway, it was about time for her to start moving on with her life.

Jerry held the door open for her, and she wheeled her chair up the ramp.

Tirzah knew the building well, though she'd never been inside. Locals here at Refuge City called it Sucks To Be You Square. It had last been

occupied by a travel agency, Fly You To The Moon. The agency's logo was the man in the moon, with craters that made him look like an ad for Clearasil and a distinctly sinister smile. Tirzah hadn't been surprised when it went out of business.

Before that, it had been a pizza parlor, Hollywood Pizza, with a logo of palm trees with pizzas instead of fronds, dripping melted cheese on to the Hollywood sign. Refuge City was famous for pizza, but East Coast style; the worst insult anyone could throw at a pizza here was that it tasted like it was from Los Angeles.

Before that, it had been a plus-size clothing store called Bright. Its dresses made up in cheapness what they lacked in colorfastness. Tirzah had gotten an earful about that from both a plus-sized neighbor and the plus-sized neighbor's teenage son, who had owned a number of black T-shirts with white images and writing. His skulls and angry slogans were now a bubblegum pink that was very bright indeed.

And before *that*, the building had been No Pain Dentistry, which immediately had several letters of its neon sign burn out so it seemed to ominously advertise "Pain Dentistry."

If a cat shelter with baskets full of darling kittens couldn't turn around the luck of Sucks To Be You Square, it had no hope.

Tirzah winced as her chair went over a bump at the top of the ramp. She hated that jolt.

Jerry closed the door behind her as she glanced around. As he'd said, the place was still under construction, with the old office cubicles still in place. The Humane Society hadn't even had a chance to replace the creepy Fly You To The Moon posters with some cute cat photos. The pimply man in the moon leered down at her from every wall.

"Okay, where's these kittens you promised me?" Tirzah asked, grinning. "I gave you a nice fat check, so they better be adorable!"

Only silence met her words. No answering chuckle. No meows. And then the unmistakable sound of a door being bolted.

That eerie prickling sensation she'd felt earlier and then had been distracted from returned in full force. Tirzah twisted around.

The man who'd lured her inside was standing in front of the closed—and padlocked—door, tauntingly dangling a key just out of reach. His contemptuous sneer was a nearly perfect match for that of the Fly You To The Moon man's, only with less crater-acne.

I can't believe I fell for that, Tirzah thought. *He might as well have said, "Want some kittens, little girl?"*

"You open that door right now," she demanded. "Or I'll scream for help."

Jerry—she supposed that wasn't his real name, but that was the only one she had—gestured with his other hand at the base of the door. "It's soundproofed."

She looked, hoping it was a bluff. It wasn't. That was what that bump at the top of the ramp had been: high-grade industrial soundproofing. He was right: no one would hear her scream.

Tirzah considered the key. Jerry obviously didn't know it, but she was capable of standing. If she stood up fast, held on to her chair, and leaned forward, she could snatch the key right out of his hand. Unfortunately, she could only stand on one leg, and she hadn't brought her crutches with her. Why would she, when she hated them and had a perfectly good wheelchair? So even if she managed to get the key, Jerry would grab it back while she was still opening the lock, let alone opening the door and maneuvering her wheelchair out.

"You want money? Fine. Just let me go. You can have my wallet. Here..." Tirzah reached into her purse. But she felt for her phone, not her wallet. She'd rigged her phone with an emergency button, among some other little alterations she'd made in her spare time, and could dial 911 with a single tap. The operator would hear any ensuing commotion, and would trace the call and—

"Ah-ah-ah," said Jerry, wagging his finger at her like she was a toddler. "Don't try calling the police. If you do, I'll tip them off about the *real* criminal they should arrest... Override."

Tirzah froze at the sound of the name that she'd never heard spoken aloud before, though she'd read it on a screen a million times.

Override was the notorious hacker who broke into corporate databases, ferreted out their dirty secrets, and sent them to journalists. Override had been the catalyst for class action lawsuits against factories that dumped toxic waste near communities, and was responsible for handing actual jail terms to executives who had suppressed studies showing that their new wonder drug had the nasty little side effect of making patients drop dead.

Override was also Tirzah's secret identity.

She withdrew her hand from her phone. As far as the law was concerned, it was irrelevant that she'd never stolen a cent from the multi-billion-dollar

corporations she'd spied on, or that she'd only revealed their secrets if they were harming others. Hacking was illegal, plain and simple. So was corporate espionage. If the police ever found out what she did in her spare time, she'd go to jail.

"What do you want with me?" Tirzah tried not to let her voice waver. She didn't succeed.

"Nothing important," Jerry replied with an unconcerned shrug as fake as his Humane Society clipboard. "Just your password."

There was a pause as he waited for her to obey and she waited for him to be more specific.

"Give it to me," he said impatiently. "Now."

"Er..." Tirzah could hardly believe that a man smart enough to lure her with kittens could be that ignorant about computers. "Which one?"

She caught the brief flash of confusion that crossed his face before he covered it up. "Both of them."

Tirzah felt like she was back in college and working part-time on a technical support hotline. Using the calm tone she'd used then, the one that soothed frantic students who'd spilled a venti latte over their keyboard right after they'd finished a last-minute essay that was due in an hour, she said, "Why don't you tell me exactly what you want?"

"Just give it to me!" His voice rose angrily.

"I have hundreds of passwords. All hackers do."

Jerry stared intently into her eyes, then nodded as if he'd seen that she was telling the truth. "What's the password for your Amazon account?"

That was random. And something about the way he was eyeing her made her skin creep even more than it was already creeping. She decided to give it to him. The worst he could do was order a widescreen TV or a whole lot of books on her credit card. "Um... Capital L numeral 4 exclamation point pound key pound key capital Z small h numeral—"

"That's enough," he snarled. "You can get into everything with your phone, right?"

She considered bluffing and saying she needed to use her computer at home, but if he didn't already know where she lived, she didn't want to be forced to lead him there. Tirzah nodded.

"Last week you downloaded an encrypted file labeled Apex 3.0," he went on.

That was what he wanted? Out of all the valuable data she had, he wanted a file she'd come across by accident while looking for something else, downloaded out of nothing more than idle curiosity as to why it was encrypted, and had never gotten around to decrypting?

"Did you make a copy of it?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. I sent it to a friend of mine, a hacker who goes by—"

"No, you didn't," Jerry said. She felt pinned against the back of her chair by his intense stare. "You didn't make any copies, either. Did you decode it?"

"No."

He again stared deeply into her eyes, then gave a satisfied nod. Was she really that transparent? He seemed to always know whether or not she was telling the truth.

"Good. I want you to delete it. Can you do that from here?"

Tirzah nodded.

"Then do it. Now."

"I will," she said. "But before I do, I want you to know that I have a dead man's switch. If I don't log in every day, all my files get sent to all my contacts—the New York Times, the Refuge City News, everywhere. Your file included."

He gave her that searching look again, then relaxed. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you. Once that file is deleted, I'll let you go."

Icy fear struck into Tirzah's heart. It would've been easy to set up that sort of dead man's switch. But she hadn't done it. And just like he'd known she was lying, she intuitively knew that he was. Once she erased that file, he'd have what he wanted. And then he'd kill her to keep the secret.

She took her phone out of her purse. Her hands trembled as she punched in the password to unlock her phone.

Jerry smirked. He was obviously pleased that she was afraid of him. More than that, he seemed completely unafraid of *her*. He was standing between her and the door, but he hadn't bothered to pull a weapon on her or even step out of her reach. He obviously thought a woman in a wheelchair was completely helpless.

That made her fear smolder into anger. Sure, she couldn't win a wrestling match with him. But she couldn't have before the accident, either. And she wasn't only Tirzah Lowenstein, disabled cyber security expert. She was also Override, hacker extraordinaire. Override fought wealthy, powerful

corporations—and won! Sure, she did it by sneaking in through their virtual back doors rather than by punching them in the face, but a win was a win.

She needed to stop thinking of herself as a woman who couldn't even run away pitted against a man who could pin her down with one hand, and start thinking of herself as Override versus some idiot who probably kept his password on a post-it note stuck under his keyboard, reading "Password: mypassword."

Tirzah's hands stopped shaking. Since Jerry was obviously good at reading her expressions, she lowered her head. Her hair fell across her face as her fingers danced over her phone.

An ear-piercing siren went off, and a gruff voice blared out from a bullhorn, "FBI! STEP AWAY FROM THE DOOR!"

Jerry leaped like he'd been goosed. Tirzah dropped her phone back into her purse and moved her wheelchair forward like she was in the last stretch of a Paralympics sprint. Her front wheel, plus the entire combined weight of her chair and herself, ran over her enemy's toes.

Now that was a bump she didn't mind rolling over. His shriek of pain and fury was satisfying, too. Almost as satisfying as the jingle of the key falling to the floor.

Tirzah leaned over and snatched it up.

"Hey!" Jerry had been doubled over, but he started to straighten up.

She spun her wheels in reverse, rolling over his toes again. The sound he made then indicated that he wasn't going to chase her or anyone any time soon. She unlocked the padlock and took it with her as she opened the door. Then she rolled over the soundproofing bump (not as big a bump as his toes had been) and twisted around to slam the door behind her. His second anguished scream was cut off.

A few people were looking at her. Apparently her phone and Jerry had made enough noise to attract attention. Tirzah looked down in simulated alarm, pulled her phone out of her purse, and made sure to fumble around a bit before hitting the mute button. The cop movie she'd been playing in the directional sound mode she'd installed in her phone, so it sounded like it was coming from outside, was silenced as instantly as Jerry's scream. The looky-loos lost interest and went on their way.

Tirzah carefully stood up on her left leg and padlocked the door. Then she rolled sedately down the ramp, keeping an innocent smile plastered to her

face. *Just a harmless woman in a wheelchair enjoying the fresh air on this lovely day, nothing here to see, folks.*

Just in case Sucks to Be You Square had a rear exit, Tirzah took a roundabout way back, keeping to side streets with plenty of foot traffic, until she was satisfied that she hadn't been followed. Only then did she turn toward home.

By the time she got back to her apartment building, the jigsaw puzzle of the sky as seen between skyscrapers had gone from the deep blue of late afternoon to the gold and pink clouds of sunset. The old men playing chess on a folding table they'd put out on the sidewalk smiled at her, the chatting women holding grocery bags broke off their conversation to greet her, and the sullen teenager staring at his phone, hunched over to hide the bubblegum-pink anarchy symbol on his T-shirt, straightened up and wordlessly held the door open for her.

"Thanks, Jamal," Tirzah said. "Hi, Miriam. Hi, Khaliya. Yeah, I had a great stroll. I'd love some cookies, thanks! Just knock on my door when you bake them."

As she went up the ramp, Tirzah relaxed. Even if her mysterious enemy had figured out where she lived, he wasn't likely to try ambushing her at home. Her apartment building was crowded and bustling, everyone knew everyone, and there were always plenty of people there. If she screamed, ten people would call 911 within seconds, and she'd have burly men breaking down her door only seconds after that, with grandmas and grandpas lurking behind them, ready to bash any evildoers over the head with their canes. She was as safe in her apartment as it was possible to be.

She took the elevator up to the fifth floor and headed down the hallway, nodding at the neighbors who had their doors open, until she got to her front door. Tirzah unlocked the doorknob, then braced her hand on the arm of her chair so she could stand and fit her key into the high top lock.

"I got it!" squealed Amy, the six-year-old next door.

She darted out of her apartment, carrot hair flying out behind her, then skidded to a stop in front of Tirzah at her father's yell of "Ask first!"

"Want me to open the door?" Amy asked belatedly.

"Sure. Thanks, Amy." For at least the 365th time, Tirzah promised herself that she'd call that renovator tomorrow and have her apartment made more accessible. It wasn't like there would be any problem with the landlord, and while she *could* stand up to reach the top lock and high shelves and

everything else that was otherwise out of reach, it made more sense to move them lower down so she could use both hands.

On the other hand, it wasn't as if she ever had any trouble finding a neighbor to give her a hand, or that she minded giving Amy an excuse to come over and look at her collections. Sure enough, Amy stood on her tiptoes to unlock the deadbolt, handed Tirzah the key, then hung around with a hopeful look on her face.

"Want to look at my dollhouses?" Tirzah asked, grinning.

Amy nodded eagerly and followed her inside, yelling over her shoulder, "Looking at Tirzah's dolls!"

"Yeah, sure!" her father yelled back.

"Okay if I give her a cookie?" Tirzah called.

"Please, Daddy, please please please?" Amy begged.

"Just one!" her father shouted.

Tirzah went to the kitchen, poured milk into a teacup, and opened the cabinet. "Khaliya's lavender shortbread, Ruben's oatmeal squares, or Circus Animals?"

"Circus Animals!" Amy exclaimed gleefully.

It was part of their ritual. Tirzah was well-supplied with delicious homemade baked goods by the other tenants, but she always kept some kind of brand-name supermarket cookie on stock for Amy. To her parents' everlasting despair, Amy disdained all home cooking in favor of junk food, and the more artificially colored, preservative-filled, and heavily advertised, the better.

Amy dashed back to the door and shouted, "Can I have two? They're small!"

"Yeah, sure!" her father called back. "But no refusing to eat your dinner! Yes, Amy, even it doesn't come out of a box."

"I won't!" Amy shouted, clearly lying.

"Your dad's a pushover," Tirzah remarked.

Amy gave her a blank look. "He's too big to push over."

Smiling, Tirzah got out the fancy saucer with roses painted around the rim. Amy had already vanished into Tirzah's bedroom, where the dollhouses were. Tirzah placed one pink and one white Circus Animal cookie on the saucer, then followed Amy in.

"I want to look at the lacy house," Amy said, and pulled up a chair in front of the Victorian dollhouse, her favorite. She watched it like a TV set as

she nibbled her cookies and drank her milk. “The red-headed doll looks like me.”

Tirzah considered the Little Orphan Annie doll, which she’d posed in front of a closet of tiny dresses, her arms raised to select one. “Yeah, she does. If you had curly hair.”

“You should get her a friend with straight red hair, like mine. Then they could be sisters.”

“Okay. I’ll keep an eye out for one.”

Amy finished her cookies and milk, gave Tirzah her plates, washed and dried her hands, then gleefully approached the Victorian dollhouse. “Can I move the doll who looks me?”

That, too, was part of their deal: Amy could touch all but the most fragile dolls and animals, but she had to have clean hands and ask permission first.

“Go for it.”

Ceremonially, Amy closed the closet door, lifted Little Orphan Annie, and placed her in a bedroom occupied by a Mexican doll in an embroidered dancing dress. She posed the two dolls sitting on a bed, their heads close together as if deep in conversation.

“Now she has a friend,” Amy said with satisfaction, and headed back out. Over her shoulder, she called, “Next time I want to look at the ninja house!”

“Any time!” Tirzah called back. “Just knock!”

Any time Amy wanted to look at Tirzah’s dollhouses, she could knock. If Tirzah was working or just didn’t want to be bothered, she wouldn’t answer the door. If she didn’t mind a visit, she’d let Amy in.

The door closed behind Amy with a solid thud. Tirzah could still hear the sounds of people talking, cars driving in stop-and-start traffic, the calls of crows, and the rumble of the subway. But they were faint and distant. The apartment suddenly felt very quiet and alone. And, though she was surrounded by friends and neighbors, not quite safe.

Tirzah shivered, remembering the solid thunk of the bolt sliding into place as Jerry had locked her inside. She’d escaped once, but would he try again?

There was one thing she knew for sure: she had to find out what was on that file he’d wanted her to delete.

Tirzah opened her laptop and got to work. First she set up the dead man’s switch she’d told Jerry she already had. Once she was finished, that file would be automatically mailed to all her media contacts, along with a note

explaining why they were getting it, unless she manually turned off the switch every 24 hours. Then she pulled up the file itself.

She prided herself on being able to decode any file or break into any system, but the mystery file was a tough nut to crack. Three hours later, she'd barely made any headway, and took a break to eat something. Hunger made her lose focus.

As she sat munching on a hastily slapped-together peanut butter sandwich, she thought about how ironic the whole thing was. She'd downloaded the file out of nothing more than idle curiosity. It could have sat on her laptop for months or even years before she'd ever gotten around to looking at it. She might even have eventually deleted it unread while doing some virtual tidying-up. If she had tried to decode it, with no reason to believe it was anything special, she'd probably have decided it was too much work for too little clear reward, and *then* deleted it.

"But now?" Tirzah muttered to herself. "Nobody messes with Override!"

She returned to her laptop. It was hours later, well into the early morning when even most of Refuge City was asleep, that she finally cracked the code.

She read the file.

What the hell...?

It had been a stressful day and she'd stayed up all night; she needed to analyze this with a clear head. Tirzah went to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on her face, then returned to her laptop and read the file again.

No way.

She made herself some coffee, drank a cup, and took a second cup back to her desk to read the file for the third time.

What's the only thing more ironic than Jerry making sure I read this file by trying to make me delete it? Tirzah thought. *Jerry making sure I believed this file by trying to make me delete it.*

The file labeled Apex 3.0 was a set of notes on an experiment with human subjects. Tirzah had come across that sort of thing before, and had been instrumental in getting a drug company exposed for falsifying the results of their studies on a medication. (Information removed: the part about it occasionally making people drop dead.) But this was a whole 'nother ballgame.

If she hadn't been locked in and threatened, she'd have assumed the file was part of a fantasy novel some government employee had been writing in

their spare time and storing on the department server, and the only reason it was coded was that they were paranoid about being plagiarized. In fact, she still wasn't one hundred percent sure that *wasn't* what it was.

“Secret black ops experiments on kidnapped soldiers,” she said aloud, incredulous. “To give them super powers and make them into shapeshifters. And not even just regular shapeshifters, but shapeshifters that turn into magical or extinct animals. I'd watch the hell out of that movie!”

She read the file for the fourth time, skimming over the more technical parts and focusing on the nitty-gritty, which included an awful lot of To Be Determineds:

Subject: Thirty

Name: Pierce, Ransom.

Occupation: Recon Marine.

Previous/Other Occupations: [Redacted]

Shift Form: Hellhound.

Powers: TBD. Possible clairvoyance?

Limitations: Ability to recognize and bond with mate has been severed.

As a mythic shifter, he cannot shift while touching shiftsilver.

Subject: Thirty-One

Name: TBD.

Alias: Merrick, Merlin.

Occupation: Recon Marine.

Previous/Other Occupations: Circus performer, talk show host, rodeo clown, private language teacher, short order cook, fortune cookie writer, Olympic gymnast, stunt man, chicken sexer. [Attn: Dr. Lamorat: There were more but I stopped noting them down before he stopped talking. Do you want every occupation he claims to have had listed on this form? Unclear as to whether any of them are even real so could be a lot of work for Investigations to verify them, with no obvious benefit.]

Shift Form: Raptor.

Powers: TBD.

Limitations: Ability to recognize and bond with mate has been severed.

Subject: Thirty-Two

Name: Valdez, Pete.

Shift Form: Cave bear.

Occupation: Recon Marine.

Previous/Other Occupations: Police Officer. [Attn: Dr. Lamorat: Portions of his police file appear to have been deleted and/or altered. Do you want me to have Investigations look into this?]

Powers: TBD.

Limitations: Ability to recognize and bond with mate has been severed.

Tirzah leaned back with a sigh. The file left her with so many unanswered questions.

What was a mate, and why did it matter if the men couldn't recognize or bond with one?

What were the men's powers?

Who was Dr. Lamorat?

Most importantly, was any of it even real?

Cave bear, Tirzah thought. *Raptor*. *Hellhound*. *Seriously?*

But Jerry had sure been serious about threatening her. If she'd obeyed him and deleted the file, she was sure he'd have killed her. And then the cover-up would be complete. The whole thing made no sense if the file was fiction. At the very least, *Jerry* must believe it was for real.

And he'd somehow figured out that she was *Override*. Tirzah's fingers drummed nervously on her desk. Journalists, the FBI, and powerful corporations had tried to track down *Override*'s identity, and all of them had failed. She hadn't gotten to be *Override* by failing to cover her virtual tracks. But Jerry—or the people behind Jerry—had managed to identify her.

The fear she'd kept at bay until that moment washed over her in an icy wave. Jerry knew who she was. He knew she gave money to cat rescues. He knew the streets where she took her daily walk. (*My daily roll*, she sardonically corrected herself.) He had to know her address, too. He—or someone worse than him—could be coming up the stairs, right now, while most of her neighbors were asleep...

"Stop," she said. The sound of her own voice calmed her. She spent so much time alone, she'd gotten in the habit of talking to herself. "If he wanted to do that, he'd have tried that first. He obviously doesn't want to risk drawing attention to himself."

But now he knew she'd been alerted. He might decide that keeping his bizarre secret was worth taking more risks. Besides, she couldn't just stay in her apartment for the rest of her life.

She needed protection. And she couldn't go to the police.

For the first time since Amy had left, Tirzah smiled. Maybe nothing else going on was simple, but that particular problem had a very simple and easy solution. She'd just hire a personal bodyguard. She sure wasn't going to mention Override, but she could just tell the bodyguard and her curious neighbors that she had a stalker.

The nice thing about being a hacker was that if you had the skills to hack, you also had the skills to make money legally. She could afford the best. And she could do better research than googling "What's the best security agency in Refuge City," which would just get her every agency that put that phrase on their website. Her fingers flew across the keyboard.

It wasn't long before she'd figured out that the answer was Defenders, which was the new East Coast branch of the security agency Protection, Inc. Their website was nice and professional. The names of the individual bodyguards weren't listed, unsurprisingly, but it was child's play for Override to find that out...

A few minutes later, Tirzah sat dumbstruck, staring at her laptop screen.

"You have *got* to be kidding," she said aloud. "Defenders is the hellhound and the cave bear and the velociraptor?"

And some other guy, too, the boss: Roland Walker. She looked him up, but found nothing but an exemplary Army record. Then again, the Apex 3.0 file had records for subjects thirty through thirty-two. For all she knew, Walker was subject twenty-nine or thirty-three.

She tried digging deeper, both into Defenders itself and into the individual men, but hit a wall. Their servers had better protections than the Pentagon, and the men's information seemed to have been wiped beyond some public record stuff that didn't tell her much.

"Okay," she muttered. "So this'll be a challenge."

She organized the few photos she'd found of the bodyguards/experimental test subjects into a neat collage. Which one to research first? The cave bear who used to be a cop before...something? The hellhound with the top secret past? The raptor who either had a lot of weird jobs or a quirky sense of humor? The boss who might or might not be some sort of strange shapeshifter too?

Tirzah decided to start with the cave bear cop. A clumsily falsified police record would probably be the easiest thing to sort out. She quickly broke into the police database and pulled it up. Whoever had written up the Apex file had been correct about Pete Valdez's police records: someone who clearly

wasn't used to falsifying records had indeed altered portions, inserting assorted minor infractions and acts of poor judgment in an apparent effort to make him look bad.

Further digging uncovered the intriguing tidbit that much of his department had been indicted for corruption and drug trafficking shortly after he'd resigned from the force. Coincidence? Had he left in disgust at what the other cops were up to? Or had he been involved, but had been smart enough to flee before everyone else got scooped up?

Her gaze returned to one of the photos she'd found of him. It was from a few years ago, and was part of photo-essay on Recon Marines by a war reporter. The caption read, *Wounded Marine waits for medical evacuation.*

A Marine lay on a stretcher, with a medic crouched beside him. Valdez stood over them both, guarding them. His handsome face was streaked with blood and grime, and his camouflage shirt was ripped half off his body, exposing muscles way more impressive than anything she'd seen at the gym. Not that she spent much time in gyms.

But what kept drawing her attention was his eyes, which were big and brown, with an unexpected depth of feeling, and his stance, which looked like you could push the world out from under his feet sooner than you could move him away from the men he was shielding.

He did not look like a crooked cop. He did look like he'd be one hell of a bodyguard.

He looked like he'd be one hell of a boyfriend, come to think of it. Those soulful eyes... Those enormous biceps... That fiercely protective expression...

Tirzah cut off that line of thinking right away. What she needed was a competent person to do a job for her, not a soulmate or a roll in the hay. She had way too much on her plate to deal with a relationship. Just the thought of a first-date conversation made her shudder:

"Hi, I'm Tirzah Lowenstein. I've spent most of the last year recovering from some injuries and adjusting to using a wheelchair. NO I don't want to talk about how the injuries happened. Anyway, I only recently got back to what I normally do, which is illegally hacking for the greater good. Oh, and yesterday someone tried to kill me because I found out about secret government experiments to turn Marines into dinosaurs. And you? What do you do?"

Ugh!

Well, no point brooding over things she couldn't have. She'd stayed up so long that the scrap of sky outside her window was brightening with dawn. No, she didn't need a man. What she needed was more coffee. Tirzah started to push herself away from the desk.

Something slammed into the window, making it rattle in its frame. The thing that had struck the window stayed there, a black blob clinging to the screen.

Tirzah recoiled, instinctively scrabbling for a weapon. She snatched up her phone in one hand and a pen in the other.

The black blob opened a rose-pink mouth and let out a tiny meow.

Her pen fell unnoticed to the floor. She barely managed to lay her phone back on the desk rather than dropping it as well. The creature hanging on to her screen was a very tiny, very furry black kitten.

Five stories up. How had it managed to get that high? More importantly, how could she get it in without scaring it and making it fall to its death?

Her heart pounding, Tirzah reached up very slowly, giving the kitten plenty of time to see her coming, and eased the window open a crack. To her immense relief, the kitten did nothing but stare at her with huge golden eyes, brilliant against its black fur. Even more slowly, Tirzah pulled the window inward.

When the kitten, still clinging to the screen with tiny translucent claws, was inside the apartment, Tirzah heaved such a sigh of relief that she ruffled its fur. The kitten meowed indignantly, then jumped from the screen to her thigh. Tirzah hurriedly slammed the window shut and latched it. The kitten yawned and stretched, arching its back and digging in its pinprick claws.

A pair of wings, as furry and black as the rest of the kitten, unfurled and spread out before Tirzah's disbelieving eyes. The kitten's hindquarters bunched, its little tail twitched, and it launched itself off her thigh.

"No way," Tirzah said aloud. "That is *impossible*."

As impossible as hot Marines who turned into cave bears, she supposed.

The impossible and absolutely adorable flying kitten flew into her kitchen. A few black hairs drifted down in its wake, catching the slanting rays of early dawn light through the blinds that Tirzah thanked her lucky stars she'd pulled.

She followed it into the kitchen, where it was circling below the ceiling like the world's cutest vulture. It looked down at her and meowed like it hadn't eaten in days. Maybe it hadn't. She didn't have any cat food, of

course, but she did have some lox in the refrigerator. She wasn't sure how cats felt about smoked salmon, but it was fish so she figured it was worth a try.

Tirzah got it out, then went to get a knife. The kitten let out a triumphant meow and plummeted down like a hawk. It landed with a thump on the cutting board, with all four paws planted in the lox.

"Hey!" Tirzah protested. "I was just going to cut you off a kitten-sized piece. The rest of that was for *my* lunch."

The kitten made a sound that somehow conveyed the message of "finders keepers," despite the fact that it consisted of a meow and was muffled by a giant mouthful of lox.

"I have to cut it up," Tirzah explained. "You'll choke."

The kitten ignored her, growling as it worried at the lox. Tirzah put down the knife and pried the kitten off the pink slab. It flapped its wings, shedding more black hairs, then gulped down a mouthful and choked.

Tirzah swatted it on the back, then held the struggling kitten in one hand and a knife in the other as she cut the lox into kitten-sized bits and scraped it into a saucer. She plunked down the saucer and released the kitten, then watched in amazement as it flew rather than jumped to the floor to devour its meal.

A part of her still wondered if she was having an incredibly vivid dream. But the shed fur all over her clothes, the scratches on her hand, the paw-prints in what remained of the smoked salmon, and the sound of the kitten greedily gobbling up her lox had the unmistakable feel of solid reality.

Tirzah supposed she needed to get some real kitten food. And a litter box. She didn't feel like going out again, especially when that meant leaving the winged troublemaker alone in her apartment, but luckily she could order everything she needed online and get it rush-delivered to her doorstep within the next few hours.

Unless the kitten was like those talking animals from the folktales Grandma used to tell. Those all went on their way once the princess helped them out, returned when she needed help herself, and left for good once she got to her happily ever after. When Tirzah had been a little girl, she'd have preferred the talking horse or hound or hunting cat to the prince. When she'd gotten older, she'd wondered why the princess couldn't have both.

Tirzah really hoped she wasn't living in that sort of fairytale. The kitten had only arrived ten minutes ago, but she loved the little hellraiser already.

The idea of a kitten-less apartment suddenly seemed very lonely.

The kitten finished its meal, licked itself thoroughly, then waddled to Tirzah and climbed up her legs, digging in its claws with every step.

“Ow!”

But before she could scoop it up, the kitten was in her lap. There it turned round three times, curled up into a ball that could fit into the palm of her hand, and closed its golden eyes. A disproportionately loud purr rumbled up.

Tirzah guessed the fuzzball was staying.

“And now for you, Pete Valdez,” she muttered to herself. “Mr. Hot Marine Bodyguard Cave Bear. Let’s see how good you really are before I decide to hire you...”

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