

CHALLENGER

The Siggie Smith Series

Book 1

JAXON LEE ROSE



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CHALLENGER

*To the one person who supports everything I've ever
tried to do with my life, helps me even when I don't
deserve it, and puts up with all of the f-bombs I sneak
into the horrible short stories I write.
I love you even though you refuse to babysit my cat.*

Preface

As an indie author living abroad, my life has been pretty topsy-turvy since this book originally came out. I finished uni, started a company that failed, slept on couches, started a 3D miniature business to pay the bills, couch surfed some more, moved to a new country, lived abroad through COVID, founded and launched a game studio, found a partner, and moved at least twice more. It's been nuts.

This novella now has a new cover, and before my debut novel *Bloody Frost* comes out, I've changed this universe's tagline to *Her Buried Legacies*, formerly *The Galean Universe*.

I've also changed the overall language to U.K English. This means, my American friends, that there will be a distinct lack of Z's available.

I get it, I was born in Texas, I like my Z's, but previously all of my work jumped back and forth between the two languages because my devices were confused as to which language we should be using, and I was getting whiplash between the lack of Z's and overuse of U's.

I had to choose, so I chose the spelling style of the part of

Preface

the world I'm living in, which is (for now) New Zealand/Australia.

Now, I know it hurts, so if you're American and you feel pained by this, I've included a bunch of Zs here to hold you over until your next book. There's nothing I can do about the surplus of U's, you'll just have to accept them.

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Z

Challenger

THE SIGGY SMITH SERIES, BOOK 1

February 9, 2011

OUTLOOK LIQUIDATION FACILITY, SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH
DAKOTA

Prologue

TENDRILS OF BLOOD seeped from beneath the cold iron shackles that secured her wrists. She watched the blood slide down her skin and catch on the hairs and texture of her hands. One drop somehow travelled all the way down her hand to her finger, and on and on it went until it finally slid down the smooth crevice around her nail and finally let go.

The sound of that single, tiny droplet hitting the table exploded in her ears like a gunshot and she flinched. They'd chained her to the table in the tiny eight by eight cell for so long she couldn't even guess the hours that had passed.

It could have been days for all she knew.

She was more interested in counting down her remaining time, but again, the clock in her head had been crushed by the defining silence and solitude, and they hadn't given a deadline to begin with.

Deadline. Interesting word, she thought.

It never held much meaning until that moment.

Surely it should have happened by now?

Those sentenced to liquidation weren't granted the same luxuries as those sentenced to death row. A last meal, let alone a clock were both out of the question if you were anything other than a human.

The only sign she had that a world still existed outside the soundproof cell was the ever-blinking red light of the camera hanging from the ceiling in the corner.

She'd tried counting the ticks of the light, but the repetitive flashes and the growing number had become too hypnotic and mentally debilitating once she'd reached the tens-of-thousands.

Her stomach cramped with hunger and her throat felt like sandpaper from thirst.

She looked down at the shackles, at the bar she was chained to on the table.

I could break them, she thought.

She'd have to break her own wrists and hands to do it, but she could make it happen.

Iron be damned.

Instead she wrapped her fingers around the cold chain links and thought about it until a scream welled up in her chest.

The urge to let it out nearly overwhelmed her. She wanted to release everything that had built up inside.

To cry.

To sob.

To beat something until her hands were bloody and broken and she had nothing left to give because they'd already taken everything worthwhile to her.

However strong the urge, however, she resisted.

The light of the camera continued to blink in the corner of her eye and she bit her tongue until blood welled up in her mouth.

They were watching, of course. They probably had a betting pool to see how long it would take her to break.

How long until the animal goes rabid and they can charge in and execute her the old fashioned way.

That would surely make the five o'clock news, but at the end of the day she refused to give them the satisfaction of watching her break. In her own mind, that moment had been when she'd snapped that man's neck.

That had been her breaking point.

That had been her end point.

She could have been anywhere by now, anywhere in the world. She could have been with John, wherever he was, if he was even alive.

Instead she was here, waiting to die, because after the crack of that man's neck had echoed in her ears, everything had stopped for her. The will to survive, to live, just ... evaporated.

Her eyes burned. Not from un-shed tears, but from exhaustion. She relaxed her hands on the table and leaned forward to lay her head down.

They'd kill her when they killed her.

It would all be over.

She could rest.

Maybe she'd see John on the other side.

A sharp click snapped through the room and she felt the door swing open, but she didn't react.

It's not real, she told herself. It's in your head.

She didn't sit up, because if she looked, and it really was in her head, then that would mean her mind had officially broken, and she didn't want to know if it had.

A cool crust of air rushed through the room and the sound of life gradually built in her ears.

Heartbeats that weren't her own.

Footsteps that shouldn't have been there.

Radio static echoing off concrete walls.

Doors opening and closing in the distance.

Cages rattling with the shuffle of the dogs they held.

Keys jangling from belts.

It was all too loud.

It was all too much.

Full expecting to see a tightly closed door, she finally lifted her head and looked.

It wasn't.

A tall black man with greying hair and a tailored black suit stood framed in the doorway with a green file folder in his hands.

He stepped inside and the door slammed shut behind him, silencing the life that had been just outside. Real.

He wasn't looking at her. He hadn't looked at her since he'd appeared. Instead, his head was turned down to the contents of the folder he was holding. He stood there so long she was ready to scream, instead she swallowed, and tried to sound in control.

"Did you finally come to give me my liquidation date?" Her voice was cracked and rough from thirst and lack of use. "Since I at least look human, it doesn't seem like too much to ask."

He walked around to the other side of the table but didn't look at her.

"Sigyn Verndal Smith," he said and flipped a page. "Therianthropic shifter, tiger, born February 14th, 1982 to Natasha Sofia Verndal, human. Father unknown. Moved to Australia at age five. Mother passed away at thirteen. Adopted by an American couple at fifteen."

He paced back and forth on the other side of the table while he spoke and her knuckles started to turn white from the force of her clenching them, but she relaxed when he finally stopped directly in front of her and look at her.

"Not the easiest childhood," he said and laid the folder down on the table.

"According to some ... incomplete ... social services files,

you spent the majority of the next three years on the streets. Avoiding your adoptive parents, I assume. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that they were probably fur-paddlers. Am I right?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't even if she wanted to, not without crying. Or screaming.

Either way, it didn't matter now what they were. It had been well over ten years since then and she'd made do with her life, and done better than they'd set out for her.

Until now.

She didn't regret a thing.

He readjusted his glasses before he continued.

"After that you got your G.E.D, put yourself through junior college and then went on to Colorado State on a scholarship and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in ..." He looked up. "Photography. Interesting, I didn't peg you for an artist, but I guess we all have our secrets." He smiled at her, but when she didn't return it he looked back down.

"You were offered a position with National Geographic just before graduation as a wildlife photographer, only to walk away at the last minute and join the Marines." He pulled off his glasses. "That's a rather drastic career change, what prompted that?"

Son of a bitch.

She wanted to talk. She did. She could imagine ripping him apart, verbally. Physically even.

This was a special kind of torture when she was meant to be put to death.

What was the point?

He sighed.

"Mrs. Smith, I don't mean to come across as insensitive or overstep my bounds, but I do urge you to speak with me. This is a very important moment in your life."

In your life.

The words echoed in her head.

What life? There was nothing left. This was it.

“Mrs. Smith?”

She sighed, and the chains rattled as she tried to minutely readjust her posture.

Talking to him would be better than the silence at least.

Her voice came out cracked and hoarse.

“Could you repeat the question?”

He looked satisfied, and his mouth twitched with a smile.

“You were offered a position with the National Geographic, but at the last minute you turned it down and joined the Marines. Why the change?”

She sighed again, and for the first time she felt truly emotional. That had been a wretched time.

She’d been so close to her dream, only to have it taken away at the last minute.

“My parents,” she bit the word, “went to the Geographic and ousted me as a Thero. It was only a matter of time before they yanked the offer so I did it first, and joined an organisation where my ... unnaturalness ... would be regarded as more of an asset.”

“Well, you were right about that last part,” he said. “A shame though. Your would-be boss actually tracked you down to the Marine office where you enlisted to try and get you back, but by the time he found you, you’d already shipped out for training. You are very good at running away, it seems. But you didn’t run this time. Interesting.”

Say that word again ...

His statement ripped through her like a blunt knife twisting and turning in her gut.

She’d never known that. She’d just assumed that it was all over after the Hundleys ousted her. She’d never looked back after that, and nobody had ever told her.

The thoughts kept swirling around until he interrupted her.

“Now,” he smiled, again. “We get to the good part.”

“Unless the good part is some food,” she growled at him, “I don’t think I’m interested any more. Though you’re fat enough to make for a decent meal ...”

“A sense of humour,” he said. “I like that. Good to know your incarceration hasn’t stripped that away from you.”

“Exactly how is anything about this situation good?”

“Well, after you ran away from the world and joined the Marines, you blasted through basic training in record time, with flying colours. You did it again with the Special Operations Individual Course and your career took off from there. Marine Corps Special Forces. No small feat, even for a shifter. Countless black-ops missions, from South America to Africa to the Middle East.”

“You’re not cleared to know any of that,” she said instinctively.

“My clearance says I can know that,” he said smartly. “Not that I’m bragging. Continuing on,” he boomed. “Five years ago you retired early with an honourable discharge so you could start a family with your husband, fellow platoon mate John Smith, who is currently M.I.A after being sent on what we both know was another black-ops mission. He didn’t just walk out on you, like you let everyone think.”

“It’s time for you to get to the point,” she said. This time her voice wasn’t cracked or hoarse. I was firm and angry, and teetered on the edge of animalistic.

“We’ll get there, Mrs. Smith, on my time not yours. I want to make sure I go over everything in your history thoroughly so I can make my decision.”

“What decision?”

“Did you think I came all the way out to the middle of

nowhere willy nilly? I don't enjoy coming to this place, and it's certainly not in my job description. No, I tracked down your commanding officers first. Then your platoon mates, at least the ones that aren't deployed. Not a single person I spoke to had anything even remotely diminishing to say about you. Except for Ross, he's apparently still very angry that you stole his pudding on the regular."

She was quiet for a moment, and when she couldn't think of something adequate to say she went with the only thing she could think of.

"Allegedly."

"A daring crime," he said. "But a survivable one." He closed the file and pushed it aside.

"I also spoke to the officer who arrested you, the judge who ruled your case, your neighbour, the fire-fighters you volunteered with ... Nearly every single person I have approached has asked me to do the same thing."

"And what is that?"

"Save Siggy Smith."

The words sounded wrong.

"I'm sorry?" She asked rhetorically. This was a waste of time. There was nothing good coming out of this.

"Are you retarded?" She snapped. "Everyone knows the law, three strikes and you're out. How about you just give me my execution time so we can be done with it. I'm tired of sitting here waiting." She jerked at the shackles and the metal whined with the pressure.

She realised she could probably snap the links if she tried hard enough, iron or not. She was a trained Marine. She was strong enough.

He didn't even flinch. Instead he leaned in closer even when a wave of heat rolled off her skin and warmed the room, and a low growl rumbled up her chest. She felt her eyes

change, felt the ripple of fur beneath her skin as her tigress came to the surface and flashed.

“Mrs. Smith,” he said. “I have no doubt that if you really wanted to kill me, those shackles wouldn’t stop you. You’re not some nobody off the streets stuck in here over bullshit charges. You’re a highly trained war-fighter. You’re one of the best and I respect that. Now I want you to listen to what I’m going to say to you and take it seriously.”

He leaned even closer, putting himself in real danger, and he knew it.

“Your case has sparked a movement across this country. While you’ve been sitting in here staring at the wall, millions of people across this country have been rallying protests against the Three-Strike-Law, and the mob of protesters I had to wade through to get in here are all waving signs and chanting the same thing: Save Siggy Smith.”

The metal screamed again when she jerked at the shackles and forced herself to lean into him.

Their faces were mere inches apart.

“You. Are. A. Liar.” She snarled the words.

He never broke eye contact, but reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“I’ll prove it,” he said.

She scoffed, and almost laughed in his face.

“There is no reception in this place.”

“There is if you’re me.” He started typing away on the lit screen before laying the phone in front of her.

He’d pulled up a news site with a live feed ... supposedly. The time-stamp said it was just past six in the morning. That felt right. It didn’t matter how long she’d been in there, her internal clock was still ticking. More than that though, as the camera panned over the crowd of people chanting and holding up the signs he’d said they had, she recognized faces in the crowd gathered in front of the Overlook Liquidation Facility.

They were from her town.

They were her neighbour.

She was only able to recognise the outside of the facility because the guards who had wheeled her in chained to a dolly had forgotten to put her blindfold on. They'd been too busy taunting her and spitting on her to remember.

The man hadn't lied. Not according to what she was looking at on the phone.

She didn't know what to feel in that moment. Relief? Anguish? Hopelessness? Happiness that somebody actually gave a shit?

"You committed murder," he said, "plain and simple. You turned yourself in, admitted it outright, which is why we're here right now instead of a courtroom. Though the nature of your crime is being widely debated, you are being hailed a hero. You did what parents all over the world wish they could under the circumstances."

He paused for a moment, and she tried to take in his words but she couldn't take her eyes off the little screen. Her eyes changed back to normal, her aura changed and calmness came over her, replacing the anger.

"Regardless of your intentions, you saved the life of another little girl. A little girl who would have ended up just like yours had you not done what you did. If you were a human, based on the circumstances, you would probably be walking free right now. Even if you were charged you wouldn't be looking at anything as peremptory as a liquidation sentence. Hell, your first two charges were nothing. Petty assault charges I'm betting aren't even legit and should have never been filed. But they were, which is why we're sitting here right now."

He pulled a second file from beneath the first and placed it in front of her with a pen.

"Now, I have gone out on a limb for you today, and you have a decision to make. I hope you make the right one, other-

wise you're going to be paraded out of here in chains, and those people outside? Your friends, neighbour and co-workers? They're all going to have to stand there and watch while you are beheaded. They'll have to watch the sadistic shits who run this place dismember your body in front of them and burn you piece by piece. All for what? For stopping the man who killed your daughter from killing someone else's?"

She didn't speak. She was back to being lost, and exhausted, and ready for this to just be over, but he kept on talking.

"Your ashes will be dumped in the garbage. There will be nothing left of you except the videos of your execution that will live forever on the internet. The world will forget you. Sickos will jerk off over your mutilated body. Nothing will change."

He opened the file for her and flipped the booklet of papers to the last page where there was a signature line waiting for her.

"You sign here, and you and I will walk out of this place today. Your record will be expunged, and you will have set a precedent for overturning the Three-Strike-Law."

Her breath caught in her throat and stared down at the page for a long moment.

"What's the catch?" She asked quietly.

"The only catch is you come out of retirement. You do what you were trained to do, for me."

"You want me to re-enlist?" She asked. That wasn't so bad, actually.

"Not quite," he said and picked up the pen.

She took the pen, but she didn't sign.

"Who did you say you were again?"

"My name is Gerald Tremaine, and I'm a Deputy Director with the Central Intelligence Agency. I also work closely within the DOD and I have gone about to assemble a special

task force intended to specialise in threats of a ... non-typical nature.”

“Of a non-typical nature ...”

He struggled to find words to describe his meaning, then settled for what sounded like the simplest answer.

“We hunt monsters,” he said. “The real monsters that demolish entire villages and towns overnight. We don’t go after shape-shifters with criminal records. We track and analyse threats not suitable for the five-o’clock news.”

She nodded, a tiny, fractional movement. “I heard chatter about a new Preternatural Crime unit —”

“No,” he said. “That’s another project entirely that will hopefully get the green light soon. They’ll deal with cases like yours. No, what you’re signing up for is the Militarised Operational Network of Supernatural Tactical Responders. Military. You’ll operate both on U.S soil and abroad. You answer to me and your commanding officer on the ground.”

“The CIA can’t operate on US soil though,” she said.

“And you won’t be CIA,” he said. “You’re a black-ops unit with a specialisation in bat-shit-crazy.”

He pointed to the bottom of the contract.

“You sign, now. You work for me for five years and you wipe this shit off your record forever. When the contract is done, your life is yours again. You can stay, you can go, the choice will be yours.”

She twisted the pen between her fingers.

“I get my life back, unless I die in one of these missions ...”

“That’s the same chance you took when you were a Marine,” he said. “This time though you’ll have much more interesting stories to tell.”

How he managed to make light of it ...

She caught the name of the organisation in the text of the

contract and one word popped out at her as she read it over a couple of times.

“Wait a second ...” she said. “The Militarised Operational Network of Supernatural Tactical Responders. Are you fucking serious?”

He looked offended. “You don’t like it?”

“It sounds like a joke.”

“I’m taking that as the insult you mean it to be.”

“How long did it take you to come up with that shit?” Just like that her fear was gone. A tiny speck of the person she really was started to shine through the dark circles that had taken over her eyes, her face.

“Much longer than it should have,” he said. “But now we all get to wear patches that say M.O.N.S.T.R Squad, how cool is that?”

“I feel inclined to take my chances with the executioners outside,” she said blandly.

“You are a liar,” he said, mimicking her earlier sentiment, but with a smile. “Sign. We’ll walk out of here and get a good steak dinner somewhere.”

“Before I go die fighting some horror flick monster?”

“A much better death than dismemberment in chains, don’t you think?”

She glanced at the phone that was still sitting on the table. It was still on, and still showing the crowd outside, live.

She’d never seen anything like it.

There were so many people out there. So many that she knew, and more that she didn’t. The camera stopped on one red haired man standing at the front of the others.

It was Timonds. The green-around-the-gills officer she’d turned herself in to after she’d done what she’d done. He’d been so nervous and confused, she’d actually talked him through putting the cuffs on her, reading her her rights, putting her in the car and calling it in to his superiors.

He was holding up one of the Save Siggy signs.

If he could do that, she could do this.

She scrawled her full name across the bottom of the contract.

Maybe it was legit. Maybe it was a mistake. Either way, she'd be alive for a while longer to find out and curiosity killed the cat.

At least she'd finally get some fucking food.

February 14, 2011

ERRA BIO-SYSTEMS RESEARCH STATION, ANTARCTICA

THE THICK METAL doors slammed shut behind us and the sudden silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the ragged breaths of the four CDC doctors we'd just dragged through thirty yards of Arctic tundra in the middle of a blizzard.

I hadn't realised exactly how loud it was out there until we'd made it inside.

Sergeant Call-Me-Sargy Luther pounded on my back with a heavy fist where I lay face down on the ground trying to catch my breath and defrost my lungs.

"Deep breaths, Smith," he said. "I think you just set a record."

"More than a record," someone said. I didn't recognise the voice.

A pair of heavy boots appeared in front of my face and one of the men who'd met us at the doors held his hand down to me. I smacked it away and pushed myself to my feet.

"You should be dead," he said. "Nobody survives that long in these temperatures."

It was a struggle not to cough, but worth it to see the look on his face.

“Do I look like a nobody to you?” I asked him. He was an older man, thinning and grey with a shrivelled face that resembled a turkey’s.

“I’m assuming you’re all from the CDC?” He asked, still staring at me with a look of disbelief.

“Nah,” Sargy said. “We were on our way to the Taco Bell for a snack, but we got turned around and now we’re here. You know how it goes.”

He laughed at his own joke.

Nobody else did, but the corners of my mouth tugged at his antics, but it was more frustration and anger that swept around the room.

One of the scientists I’d just risked my life and appendages for stepped forward. It was the bossy one that hadn’t shut his fucking mouth since we’d boarded the flight twenty hours earlier.

“We are,” he said curtly. “I’m Dr. Taylor. These are Doctors Bennet, Bartowski and Robinson.” He gestured to the others and I was already over this whole trip.

“Did you bring food and supplies?” The man asked.

“Sure,” I said. “I think we lost it while we were looking for the Taco Bell though. Got hungry.”

He glared at me and started pulling off his outer gear and throwing it to the ground in anger.

“Maybe if your superiors had been a little more forthcoming in how bad the situation was down here then maybe we would have known to bring food and supplies,” I said. “Too bad they weren’t.”

When he pulled off his final coat I noticed that his blue shirt was covered in blood.

Fresh blood.

It also had a name patch that read ‘Hastings’ beneath one of a Canadian flag.

I pulled off my own bulky winger gear and took my rifle back from Sargy and secured it to the front of my body. I’d kept both of my M45s, but skipping through a snowstorm with a rifle while trying to keep the idiot humans on track and alive was pushing it.

I pointed to the blood on his sleeve with the tip of my rifle. “Where did this come from?” I asked.

“He cut himself on one of the hatches when we pried it open to get in here,” a second man said. He’d been decidedly quiet until now. “When the system registered the breach of containment, the fail-safe kicked in. All hatches and doors sealed shut. Airtight.”

“What’s your name?” Dr. Taylor asked.

“Mitchell,” the man said.

“Mitchell,” Taylor echoed. “The fail-safe is meant to quarantine the facility to stop the spread of the disease that escaped, and you saw fit to breach the containment?”

“If we hadn’t then dozens of us would have starved to death already,” Hastings snapped. “How else were we going to get you in? We’re not stupid. We’ve set up safe zones and done what we can to keep the vectors contained.”

“Vectors?” Sargy asked.

“The infected,” I said.

“Now how in the hell do you know that?” He asked me.

I shrugged. “I watch a lot of movies.”

“Are you two done?” Hastings barked.

“That depends on whether you’re able to walk and talk at the same time,” Sargy said. “Though, for a Canadian, you’re not very nice.”

The scent of blood that filled the air of the small holding room held no taint of infection or disease that I could smell.

Everything had a smell: healthy, unhealthy, infections, diseases, emotions.

I could smell anger in the room, fear and lies, but no illness.

“How about you lead the way,” I said giving him a little push forward. “Let’s multi-task. I want to talk to your boss.”

“Yeah,” Sargy barked. “We’ve got sick people to fix, right Bartowski?” I smacked the quiet, brooding man on the shoulder and got him moving. The entire plane ride here that man hadn’t uttered a single word. He had, however, spent a good chunk of time glaring at me.

Mitchell and Hastings didn’t wait for a second invitation. They led the way.

Bennett, a little round woman with a brunette pixie cut piped up with a crisp, high pitched harpy voice from hell.

“We’re going to need records of all of your on-going experiments within the facility as well as a list of pathogens being stored on site. We’ll also need a full report outlining how the smallpox virus escaped in the first place.”

“We also need an up-to-date report of who’s infected and their treatment thus far,” Taylor said. “The report we were sent stated that this particular strain is highly resistant to both vaccine and treatment?”

Mitchell looked at Hastings to answer and the older man hesitated.

Interesting, though unsurprising.

“Erra BioSystems is a private facility,” he finally said. “Our work here is highly classified so we won’t be able to give you most of what you’re asking for.”

Sargy mimicked Bennett’s voice, and the urge to sink a long, dull knife into his left ass cheek was strong.

“We’re going to need records of all ongoing experiments and a list of pathogens being stored on site. And all of that other sciencey shit too.”

“Do I need to repeat myself in a funny voice for you to understand what I just said?” Hastings snapped.

Sargy grabbed the man’s shoulder and pulled him to a stop. “Oh son,” he said. “You seem to be under the impression that that was a request. Let me clarify it for you. You will hand over everything we ask for, right down to your mama’s social security number or I’m going to hand you over to my very grumpy mini-Marine over here.” He nodded his head towards me.

“This is a private—“

I cut him off. “If you think we flew down to the planet’s frozen shit-hole to play games with you science freaks then you’re not as smart as your pay check says you are. You guys fucked up and we’re here to clean up the mess, so you’re going to give our doctors what they want and we’re going to have a little chat with your boss.”

My voice echoed off the walls with a ring of finality, disrupted only by Sargy.

“Yeah,” he snapped. “What my little mini-Marine just said.”

I watched Hastings’ face contort with a string of thoughts. The wheels slowly turned and he finally came to the realisation that we weren’t here just because they’d let loose a very deadly virus, we were here because they’d also been very naughty little scientists.

Sargy stooped down from his great height so he was eye to eye with the man. “I suggest you get moving,” he growled.

There was no point in trying to argue and the old man knew it. What would he do? Beat a guy like Sargy into submission with big sciencey words? He’d be lucky to keep his jaw attached to his head. He certainly couldn’t run. We had the guns and he was trapped inside a pathogen ravaged facility in the middle of Antarctica.

He was going to do what he was told, and if he was lucky the doctors would fix it so he wouldn’t die, though something

told me that wasn't going to happen either. They hadn't quite picked up on the gravity of the situation either. They thought it was a smallpox outbreak, but if they knew what we knew they wouldn't have been so surprised when we walked past the window of a lab that wasn't covered with a curtain on the inside.

The room looked like something out of a bad horror film.

The bloated body in the centre was face down amongst the wreckage and debris. A pool of blood and other fluids had leaked out around it and spread over the stark white tiles like a nightmare.

The hands were the only bits of skin that were visible, and they were covered in red, purple and green pustules. The fingertips were black and gnarled.

I readjusted the front of my vest, but what I really did was turn on the camera that had been made to look like a button. I saw Sargy do the same from the corner of my eye.

If anyone took notice, all they would see was two grunts tugging at their gear.

"So this is what a mutated smallpox virus looks like," Sargy said.

Bennett pushed her way between us. "Nothing like I've ever seen before," she said. "Exactly what kind of research is being conducted down here?"

"We're not at liberty to discuss," Hastings said and the man seemed to make a point of staying out of Sargy's reach.

Sargy leaned down like he was going to say something quietly into Bennett's ear, but instead he damn near yelled. "That's code for super-illegal-shit."

That led to an argument between all of the lab-monkeys.

I turned back to the bodies and nudged Sargy to get his attention.

The scene itself was eye-catching, so much so that I almost missed the most important part. At first glance, you'd

think the room had been ransacked for supplies, but it hadn't.

Bags of food and supplies lay strewn across the ground and muddled with the debris. The room had been destroyed.

I let my eyes wander up the walls and Sargy followed my gaze.

Bloody claw marks covered the walls, ceiling and floor. I pointed to the door on the far side of the room. Through its window we could see chairs and furniture piled up to barricade it from the other side.

Sargy nodded and made sure his camera pointed in that direction to catch it.

"Change of plan," he said to me while everyone else continued to argue behind us. "We find our guy and get the hell out of here when the rest of the team arrives. I don't think we're equipped for whatever this is, and we can't risk getting stuck here all winter."

"What about them?" I nodded back behind us. They were still going at it and using words so big I wasn't convinced they were real.

"That's up to them," he said.

The other four members of the M.O.N.S.T.R squad had flown to the continent four days earlier and landed at the Vostok research station. From there they'd headed East to see for themselves what was left of the Mirny station, because it had reportedly just ... vanished.

I liked it think that an entire station with hundreds of crew couldn't just disappear, but this one had along with three tourist vessels that had been sailing around the peninsula up north. Or was it south?

All the intel we had pointed to this facility and the outbreak had been the lucky break we needed to gain access.

A mere accident, no doubt.

Bad for them, good for us.

Sargy nodded more to himself then turned on the lab-rat shit stains.

“Enough of this bullshit!” He yelled over them all and they fell into silence.

“You,” he pointed at Mitchell. “Who’s in charge of this destabilised shit-hole?”

“Margaret Johnson is the director,” he said.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

He hesitated and looked at Hastings.

“Don’t make her ask you twice, boy,” Sargy warned. “You won’t like it.”

“She’s quarantined in her offices,” he said quickly.

A low rumble rolled up my chest and reverberated the stark hallway. Mitchell turned white at the tiger’s growl.

“Don’t make her ask the question, boy,” Sargy said slowly, taking a step forward.

“Level four!” He said a little too high pitched. “It’s below us.”

“If she’s down there then who’s in charge of your little safe zones you’ve failed to take us to so far?”

“Jennings,” Hastings said, as if that really meant anything.

“For fucks sake,” I growled. “It’s like pulling teeth, except that’s easier.”

Sargy spoke slowly, like he would to a toddler. “Is Jennings in the safe zone?”

Hastings and Mitchell both nodded.

“Start. Walking.”

They walked.

The hatch they’d mentioned before was an airtight steel door that sectioned off the entire hallway. They’d propped it open with a steel pipe that was groaning under the pressure and left only about a foot of space to squeeze through.

“Well, I’m not going to fit through there,” Sargy said.

“Neither will I,” Bennet chimed in.

“That’s what you get for being a giant, German asshole,” I said to him.

“Well, now,” he said. “Why don’t you just squeeze your tiny, Norwegian self through there and pull this sucker open so I can get my big ol’ asshole self to the other side.”

I handed him my rifle, again.

“That door is over five-hundred pounds,” Mitchell said. “It took six of us to get it open this far.”

“And that,” Sargy said and pointed to me. “Is a fucking Marine, so just hang tight, kid.”

I decided the best way to tackle it would be from the other side so Sargy could pull from this side if I needed him too. It would also give me a chance to scope out the hallway without anyone hovering over my shoulder too.

The hatch itself was a good two and a half feet thick, and I was halfway through to the other side when it groaned and creaked under whatever pressure was being exerted onto it to close. The pipe over my head shrieked and I saw a crisp bend appear in the side of it and the door jerked towards me an inch.

I felt Sargy’s fingers curl around my arm at the same time another hand bit into my other arm on the other side.

My shoulders popped as I was pulled from both sides, but the second grip won and Sargy’s fingers slid away and whoever had my other arm pulled me through the gap and hurled me down the hall.

The few milliseconds I was airborne fell like slow motion until I hit the floor and rolled to my feet in time to see the hatch slam shut with everyone else on the other side.

Everyone except one.

I didn’t move, but rather let my gaze slowly slide up the body of the creature that now towered over me.

A lycanthrope.

He stood on two feet with his body halfway through transi-

tion and looked more like a wolf-man out of a movie than anything else.

His appearance wasn't out of the ordinary for a lycan, but that seven feet of fur, muscles, claws and fangs stared down at me with blood-shot eyes that danced on the edge of insanity.

I looked him up and down and the longer I did so the more he looked like something that wasn't supposed to exist.

Spittle frothed around his jaws and leaked down his chest. His snout was covered in the same pustules and lesions as the body we'd passed before. One of his hands was still in human form and the fingertips were blackened.

He was infected.

That wasn't possible.

The best upside to being any kind of shifter was the immunity boost. We couldn't contract diseases, illnesses or viruses.

The man before me, however, proved otherwise.

He stank of it.

These mother-fuckers had cooked up a disease just for shifters and suddenly I felt more vulnerable than I ever had in my life.

I didn't have any kind of mask to put over my face. We'd walked in here knowing I would be immune to smallpox and whatever else they could potentially have in here.

How wrong we had been.

Silence filled the space between us, broken only by his haggard breaths. Saliva dripped from his jaws and his body shuddered. His muscles twitched. What was left of his clothes were shredded and hung tattered around his body. His once white lab coat was covered in blood and pus but his name tag was still visible.

His name was Zilaney.

Well, that wasn't him any more.

I looked into his eyes and I saw crazy staring back at me, but every time he blinked I saw a flicker of something else.

Awareness, maybe. Fleeting and barely there, but there nonetheless.

Somewhere inside that body the Zilaney that used to exist was struggling against whatever was tearing through his body and mind, but he was losing.

Perhaps that had been the part that had pulled me through the hatch?

He took a single step back and I stayed still, but kept his eye contact. I had no idea what to expect. I had no idea if I'd already been exposed or if I was still safe.

I had no idea how to proceed.

Whatever it was that kept him from attacking, whatever shred of sanity was still in there fighting for survival was obliterated when my earpiece called and Sargy's stupid fucking accent blasted into my ear.

Zilaney charged with a snarling roar unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

In the spirit second between his charge and my reaction I heard an answer to his haggard howls.

There were more.

I rolled out of the way and his claws sank with a crack into the floor where I'd just been.

He moved faster than he should have been able to, faster than me, faster than what was normal for the preternatural.

My feet left the ground and the sensation of butterflies in my stomach crashed with the reality of a rabid beast slamming my body into the wall.

I heard the concrete of the wall crack with the impact and felt a series of cracks inside my own body.

He held me up with one massive claw across my torso and now injured shoulder. He put all of his strength into that grip and I felt claws sink into flesh and my bones strain and crack as he slowly crushed my torso.

I barely threw my arms up in time to hold off those wide, canine jaws as they lurched towards me, gaping wide.

Teeth sank through my armour and into flesh, and I had a fleeting moment to wonder about those pustules and sores all over his snout, but the pain quickly erased the worry.

It was all I could do to keep those jaws away from my face and neck long enough to pull my pistol from its holster.

I couldn't shift, not now. Those few seconds between human and tiger were all he would need to rip my head from my shoulders.

I jerked my pistol out of its holster and jammed it up under his chin and tried to angle it away from my arm in his mouth at the same time I hooked my foot behind his knee and jerked it forward.

He stumbled, and his grip on my chest loosened but his teeth didn't.

I unloaded half a clip into his head.

One shot after the other. His body jerked and his jaws loosened and I fell from where he had me against the wall and I pushed forward and kicked him square in the chest, sending that massive body sprawling across the floor. He fell onto his back and blood poured from his head and his body kept moving, jerking, reaching. His jaws kept opening and closing.

I put three bullets into his heart.

Cold iron.

The shots to the head should have killed him instantly, the fact that they didn't ...

After the third bullet thumped into his chest his breathing wheezed and then stopped, and the body went limp.

He was dead.

I took a step forward and looked down at him, at what was left of someone who was supposed to be on my side in a world where people like us were still despised.

The dead eyes that stared blankly at the ceiling weren't crazy any more.

They looked human.

"Is it dead?"

I looked back Sargy stood there with the others behind him. He'd pulled it open himself and propped it up with another pipe. Mitchell was staring down at Zilaney on the floor.

"Is it dead?" He asked again.

I saw Sargy's eyes flick from my bleeding arm to the thing on the floor.

"All clear," I said.

There was nothing down the hall that I could see.

My chest burned and I struggled to take in air, but all of those wounds would heal in a few hours.

I hoped.

I was surprised my arm wasn't broken, or maybe it was and I just hadn't noticed yet.

One by one the rest of the doctors slipped through the hatch and took turns gawking at the mess on the floor.

Hastings came last.

I moved faster than any of them could see, faster than they could stop me, and grabbed the turkey faced man by the back of the neck and dragged him over to the body. Shoved his face down next to the wolfened snout until he was mere inches away.

He struggled against me, his hands grasping against my grip but I shoved him down further and he started to cry and plead with me to let him go.

The smell was ... awful. The scent of infection was unlike anything I'd ever smelled before and it wafted up my nose like a plague.

The doctors all started yelling again and I saw Mitchell try

to get to me from the corner of my eye but Sargy put a halt to that, which only made the chaos of the others worse.

The sound that spilled from my lips wasn't human, and it filled the stark white hallway with a resounding echo. The tiger's roar silenced them all.

"You people made a virus that infects shifters," I growled. "Please tell me in what sick, fucked up world that makes sense."

He cried out and covered his mouth with his hands.

"How does it spread?" I demanded, but he just shook his head. I reached down and pulled his hands away from his face.

I didn't care about his life. He'd be lucky if I didn't snap his neck at this point.

"How is it spread?" I asked again, a growl lacing my words.

"It's airborne," Mitchell yelled. His voice was muffled and I looked back to see that he and everyone else, except Sargy, had their mouths covered with either their shirts or a surgical mask that they'd had stashed somewhere.

I dragged Hastings away and threw his fragile human body up against the concrete wall, exactly where the lycan had pinned me, right where the concrete had cracked and spider-webbed out from the impact I'd made against it earlier.

I shoved my bloody gun up under his chin and pressed it until he was forced to stand on his toes and stare up at the ceiling.

"How infectious is it?" I asked again.

He stammered. "One hundred percent infection rate for humans exposed. Seventy percent for lycanthropes. Thero shifters" He trailed off, and I jabbed him with the gun.

"I don't remember telling you to stop talking," I snapped and squeezed his shoulder hard enough for him to know I could break it.

“Thero shifters have shown to be resistant to airborne transmission, but ...”

“But,” I prompted.

He whimpered. “Please ...”

“Thero shifters can still contract it via blood transmission,” Mitchell said. “But still at a lower rate than lycans,” he added.

I dropped Hastings to the floor. “Well, isn’t that just fucking perfect,” I growled and looked down at my arm that Zilaney had gnawed on. It was covered in slobber and pus and who knew what else.

All mixed in with my blood.

I reloaded the empty clip of my gun and put it back in its holster.

“It wasn’t loaded?” Hastings screeched.

“If I die, you die,” I said. “And I don’t need a gun to kill you.”

The doctors all took steps away from me, except for Sargy.

“You’re Thero, right?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

He nodded. “Well, there ya go. You’re gonna be fine.” He pulled a flask out of one of his many pockets and took a swig of it before offering it to me.

The liquid was hot, spiced and welcome, but instead of putting it back into his pocket when I was done, he grabbed my arm and poured it all over the wounds.

It stung like a bitch and I hissed at him. He clapped me on the shoulder. “You’ll be fine,” he said. “If you’re not, I’ll start wackin’ doctors until they fix you.”

He said it so matter of factly I couldn’t tell if he meant it or if he only said it to intimidate everyone else.

I glanced down at Zilaney. “That guy wasn’t just sick,” I said. “He was insane. Rabid, even. What the fuck have you people been doing?”

“Insane how?” Sargy asked.

“Like rabies on steroids,” I said.

“It’s time for my chat with the Jennings lady,” Sargy said. “You lot! Start moving. No more distractions, let’s go. You first kid, lead the way.” He shoved Mitchell in front of him and down the hall.

“Keep her away from me!” Hastings yelled and pointed at me.

“Oh please,” I snapped. “If I’m infected then you definitely are. One hundred percent in humans, remember?”

“You’ve murdered me,” he stammered. “You know that right?”

“No,” I said. “You murdered yourself when you cooked this shit up. You’ve got no one to blame but yourself.”

“The company—“

“You had the power to quit,” I said simply. “Don’t try and tell me they forced you into it. You made your choices, now walk.” I shoved him ahead of me and waited until I was at the rear to go back and check the hatch.

Sargy had propped it open better than it had been before, and as I thought it he appeared beside me. I nodded at his pack and he got the message and pulled out the masks he had and tossed them to the other side of the hatch for the guys to find when they arrived.

They’d get through the doors no problem on their own, but they might need the masks because they were human after all.

Precautions.

“We might have to tell them to wait in the car,” I said.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, let’s go.”

THE SAFE ZONE was made up of the cafeteria and the surrounding labs, hallways and lounge rooms. It was a small maze of twists, turns, quarantined doors and walled off halls.

As I perused through what they'd put together I decided that the only way they could have opened as many hatches as they had would be if they had some uninfected shifters among them, but as I scented the air around me, I smelled only humans in the immediate area.

That said, it didn't take a genius to realise that Zilaney had been in the safe zone, because the hall we'd come down was part of that zone and the whole thing was sealed off. Maybe he'd been the one to open the hatches for them all, and it had cost him his life.

I grimaced when I realised that our entire group was potentially exposed now, even the doctors. From the way they walked, their stiff steps, their ragged breathing, their fear that permeated the air like a rank cologne, they knew it too.

The only person who didn't seem rattled in the slightest was Sargy. I hadn't forgotten that he'd opened the hatch all on his own. I'd wondered before if he was all human, but now I wondered if any part of him was human, and what was he if not that? He wasn't shifter, that much I could smell.

As we passed by windows and doors, people stared back at us with dark, bloodshot eyes and pale faces. I hung back with Hastings and let the rest go into the cafeteria. They were all potentially exposed, but if they were lucky enough not to be then I wasn't going to compromise them and everyone else on purpose, especially if our asset was in there.

Hastings whimpered but didn't protest.

"We're looking for Jennings," Sargy said loudly to the cafeteria.

Silence fell over them all and they looked like they barely understood what was happening they were all so tired.

"We're from the CDC—" Taylor started but Sargy interrupted him.

"Shut the fuck up, Doc," he snapped. "Jen-nings. Step forward."

A tall, brown haired woman with sharp features and a lithe form stood from one of the tables and came around to us. She looked haggard and tired, but not nearly as hungry as the rest of them.

“Miss Jennings,” Sargy said casually. “So nice to see you again. You’ve changed your hair.”

I pulled Hastings along with me so I could look through the large window to watch what was happening rather than the little window in the door.

This hadn’t been part of the debriefing. Jennings wasn’t our asset.

“Excuse me?” She looked as confused as I suddenly felt.

“Well, the last time I saw you, you were blonde and standing over the body of a very prominent Norwegian researcher at a conference in Paris a few years ago.”

Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke

The place was dead quiet with only the distant howls of infected shifters prowling around in the facility somewhere. The air ducts carried their sounds remarkably well ...

“Fun fact,” Sargy continued. “That researcher was studying the physiological structure of lycanthropes and therianthropic shifters to find out how they were able to remain naturally immune to all of these pesky human viruses. Smallpox, for example.”

I couldn’t stop the anger that roiled up inside of me, but I made sure nobody saw it. The mission was need-to-know, I understood that, but this seemed like something I needed to know.

If he’d known what they were doing in here then he’d killed me before we even got on the plane and he knew it.

I watched Jennings face turned even paler than it had been, and people looked wide-eyed at each other. I stared at Sargy’s back.

The man had balls.

He'd walked into the middle of a hundred or so people and called her out for murder point blank.

If I hadn't been so angry at him, I would have been more impressed.

"And now here you are," Sargy said. "Right smack in the middle of a smallpox outbreak that is infecting lycanthropes. What are the odds of that I wonder?"

She looked caught, but she quickly composed herself.

"I think you're confused," she said. "Definitely misinformed on a scale that I can't even fathom and at a time where it could cost these people their lives." She looked pointedly at Mitchell, then at me and Hastings through the large window.

Mitchell started to walk towards Jennings but Sargy stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, it could," Sargy said. "If I receive anything less than full cooperation, lives will be lost."

"You brought these CDC doctors here to help us contain the outbreak but instead you're holding two of my people hostage based on a wild conspiracy that you, what, made up on the spot?"

"Let's swivel to a new talking point," Sargy said. "You and your director failed to disclose the severity of your outbreak and the true ramifications should it somehow reach the mainland, but I'm willing to look past all of that If you'd like to tell me where S. North is."

"Ah," she said with a smile. "Well, that explains everything. I'm assuming North fed you this nonsense about murdered scientists and weaponised viruses. I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Commander, but you're operating on fairy tales. North had a mental breakdown and has been spouting all kinds of unbiased conspiracy theories."

"I never announced my rank," Sargy said smoothly. "Nor

said anything about weaponised viruses. I think the hunger is getting to you, you've lost your touch."

He had her, but she didn't miss a beat. "We reach out for help and you don't think they informed us of who was coming?"

I squeezed Hastings' shoulder.

"You know North?" I asked quietly.

He nodded.

"He here?"

He shook his head and I squeezed a little harder.

"If she's still alive then she's probably still in the lab where the virus escaped."

Sargy's back was to us, but he turned his head ever so slightly, like he was listening.

"Why would she be in the lab where the virus was released from?"

He was silent for a moment. "Because she released it," he said. "Level thirty-two, section B. That's where the virus escaped, and those are her labs."

"Level thirty-two, section B," Sargy said loudly. "Is that where North is?" So he could hear us, and now I wondered even more than before what he really was ...

"That is where the outbreak began," Jennings said obviously. "If you want to go down there then by all means, do so, but please leave the doctors here."

"Fantastic," Sargy said.

He kept his hand on Mitchell's shoulder and with his other hand he pulled his pistol from its holsters and put a bullet between Jennings' eyes.

People screamed and scrambled back. Mitchell pissed himself where he stood and I bit my tongue and gripped Hastings' shoulder to both stop him from bolting and to keep myself from reacting.

That hadn't been part of the debriefing either.

"Believe me folks," Sargy bellowed. "I just did you a favour." He pointed his gun to a man a few tables away in front of a laptop. "If you're smart you wont contact your director again," he said. "Unless you want to disappear along with the rest of this facility, which is what will happen as soon as Erra finds out we're here. I'm surprised they haven't blown you all to kingdom-come already."

"I'm betting it's the storms," I said through the window. "The director is still here and doesn't want to go down with the ship, so she hasn't told the people in charge how bad it really is. That's why we only had limited information. They played it down to buy themselves time to get out."

"That makes sense," Sargy said. "OK, you. Doctors." He pointed to Taylor. "Do your thing, start with my Marine. Take her blood and see if she's infected. You," he pointed to Mitchell. "Tell me how to get to the directors office and to North's office."

"And you," I shook Hastings to get his attention. "Tell me what you know about North."

He shook his head and raised his hands. "All I know is that she was assigned to the Challenger project. Big military contract. Classified. I'm not even supposed to know it exists."

"The Challenger project?" I asked.

"I don't know anything about it," he said quickly. "Really, I don't. I could get in big trouble if they even knew I knew the name."

"Why would Erra be against military coming on site if they're taking out military contracts?" I asked. "What military are they working for?"

"I don't know," he said again. "I do cancer research. I don't know anything about anything else."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure you don't."

“Smith!” Sargy barked.

“What?” I snapped.

“Give this ding-dong your blood,” he said and pointed to Bartowski, our sullen, angry little CDC doctor.

Lovely.

He donned a surgical mask and gloves before he came out into the hallway, and even behind the mask he didn’t look happy to be there.

He was still glaring at me.

I kept a firm hold on Hastings while Bartowski took blood from my uninjured arm. Why? I had no idea, because there was plenty of blood still oozing from the puncture wounds he could have swabbed up instead.

It quickly became clear, however, that he wasn’t trying very hard. It took him eight tries to find a vein in my arm. It took all of my self restraint not to knock him down a few pegs.

He took Hastings’ blood as well, and wouldn’t you know. He hit the vein on the first try.

“How many employees does this place have?” I asked Hastings.

He sighed. “Around two hundred, maybe closer to three. Used to, anyway.”

“How many of them are shifters?”

“Maybe a quarter, pushing half. I don’t know who’s who, though I only know the stats,” he said.

I whistled. “Very progressive,” I said. “If you ignore the fact that they were probably hired to be lab rats. How many people are here in your safe zone?”

“I’m not sure, around fifty or so I think.”

I hadn’t smelled any non-humans before, but now that I’d had time to really take in the air I’d picked out maybe two or three lycans. Maybe a few Theros but they were harder to pick up on just scent, even if you were one.

Down the hall we were in was another hatch, and on the

other side I could hear the shuffling and coughs and sputters of infected lycans like Zilaney.

They didn't attack each other.

Odd.

Sargy burst through the cafeteria doors and pointed at Hastings.

"He stays. Let's go."

"Hey wait a minute," Taylor ran up to the cafeteria doors but didn't step out into the hall ... with me. "Where do you think you're going? I think we deserve an explanation as to what the fuck just happened. You're meant to be here to protect us."

"Actually," I said. "We're not. Sorry."

"Don't worry," Sargy said. "Your actual military escort is supposed to be here any day now to evacuate though. Of course they didn't factor in the storm, so it could take longer. Make sure you're alive when they get here."

He turned away from the man as if that was that.

"Where to first?" I asked.

A sharp screech echoed down the hall where claws raked down the other side of the hatch.

"Not that way," he said. "I'm thinking ventilation shaft. We get down to level thirty-two and find our asset, then we worry about the director."

"Do you think it's OK leaving the CDC docs here alone? I don't really give a shit about anyone working here, but they weren't part of this mess."

"Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the greater good," he said. "Trust me, if we manage to pull off what we came here to do, anything that happens to them will be sad, but worth it."

"That's a very morbid way to look at things," I said blandly. "Exactly how many sacrifices did you intend to make on this little trip?" I asked, and I didn't keep the accusation out of my

voice.

It took him a minute, but then I saw the realisation on his face when he understood what I was getting at.

“We legitimately thought that what we had here was a smallpox outbreak. We were supposed to get in, deliver the doctors to deal with that while we raided the directors computer and copied their intel, looked into the disappearance of the vessels up north and the other research station. That was it. If I’d known they’d made a virus that you could catch, I wouldn’t have brought you, that’s the truth.”

He was so bland. So matter-of-fact about it, it was hard to tell if he was being truthful, but I wanted to believe him. My gut said he was telling the truth, and my gut was usually right.

At least if I died down here it was still better than getting beheaded and dismembered in front of a crowd and recorded for the internet enjoyment of sickos for rest of time. I’d rather be forgotten entirely than remembered like that.

“How’s the arm?” He asked.

“Hurts,” I said. “But not broken. It’ll heal soon enough.” My collar bone felt like it had started to heal too. The sharp pains had subsided and left only a dull ache.

We left a radio with the doctors with instructions to contact us if anything went wrong and with the results of my blood test. If they didn’t, I’d come back and ask in person. Up close.

I had a fleeting moment to wonder if I was sick, if I’d be like Zilaney, though I was positive Sargy would put me down just like Jennings if I came back positive.

Sargy started scoping out the ventilation shaft, which he would not fit into, and I walked past him and opted for the elevator shaft instead.

He tried to play the moment like it was his idea and he was just letting me have some glory, we both knew better.

“This will be easier than trying to fit your fat ass down

those shafts.” I knocked on the silver doors before I pried them open and peered down into the long shaft below.

“Yeaaaah. I don’t like heights,” he complained.

“I don’t like getting bitten by disease ridden lycans in fucking Antarctica,” I said. “Get over it.”

“I think I like you,” he said.

“Yeah well, it was this or death row, at least this shit is mildly entertaining.”

“I take it back,” he barked with a laugh. “I do like you.”

“Whatever,” I clapped back. “You go first.”

“Why me?”

“Because if you barf I don’t want it on me,” I griped.

He nodded. “Good point,” he conceded and started the climb down.

I glanced back towards the cafeteria and felt uneasy.

They’d given us little resistance, even after we’d executed one of their own, point blank without question.

Their attitudes weren’t right.

I climbed down after Sargy and couldn’t stop the swirling conspiracy theories in my head.

“Whatever you’re not saying,” Sargy said. “You’re not saying it very loudly.”

“Feels too easy,” I said after a few moments.

“You think this shit is easy right now?”

“They barely reacted when you killed Jennings,” I said.

“They were fully aware that the shit they were doing here is fucked up. Maybe they knew it was her fault at the end of the day.”

“I’m assuming she was on a kill list,” I said, hoping the answer was yes, otherwise what had I gotten myself into?

“Ha!” The sound echoed all the way up and down the shaft and a series of howls and snarls answered it.

“Damn near every agency world wide had a kill order out

on her. She got away from me at that conference a few years back and disappeared.”

“How do people on kill lists end up running a private facility that takes military contracts. I’m going to go out on a limb and assume that it’s our military, because it’s always our fucking military.”

“Oh, don’t be that way,” he said. “It could be the Russians.”

“Is it?”

He sighed. “No. It’s our god-damn military.”

“OK then,” I said with a tinge of triumph.

“Well, that is the question I’m hoping our asset can enlighten us on, because we don’t actually know what that contract was for. A weapon, because it’s always a weapon, but what kind? We got no idea.”

When we reached level thirty-two it was quiet on the other side of the closed elevator doors. The elevator itself was still multiple levels beneath us.

How deep did this place go?

I banged on the doors but no sounds came from the other side.

I didn’t like it.

We both grasped one of the doors from opposite sides and pulled them open.

Still nothing.

No movement.

I couldn’t smell or hear anything alive, not even a rodent.

We started to sweep each room one by one, but we were only three in when the lights flipped off. A deeper silence fell over us, but a few moments later a generator kicked on somewhere and red lights flickered above us as the auxiliary power kicked in.

“Well, that’s disconcerting,” I said.

“They’ve been locked inside for days,” Sargy said.

"Nobody's been maintaining the generators. Storm might have knocked them out."

"That's OK," I said. "I don't need the lights anyway."

"Well, I'm not ready to freeze to death yet," he said.

"Something tells me you'll be fine," I said with a tone I hoped he would pick up on. What are you?

There were empty rodent cages in some of the labs we went through, but still I could hear no hint of them. If they'd crawled into a hole somewhere and died I would have smelled them, but still, nothing. No blood. No bodies. No life. Nothing.

We continued room to room.

"If this is where the virus was released wouldn't it make sense for there to be dead people down here?" I asked.

"It would make sense," Sargy said.

"Wishful thinking?" I asked.

I heard something then, so small I thought for a moment it had been in my head until I heard it again. The smallest slide of fabric brushing against itself. Muffled. Nearly nonexistent.

I raised my rifle and turned its light down the one darkened hall we had yet to sweep through, more for Sargy's benefit than mine. I could see just fine in the dark.

I preferred it actually.

Midway down there were a set of double doors with a big red B printed over them.

I shrugged. "B marks the spot," I said.

What were the chances that North was still alive?

The doors were unlocked and we slowly pushed our way through, rifles up.

Again there were rooms and labs on either side of us as we slowly swept down the long hall, and again each one was dark and quiet. We finally came to the end of the hall to another set of double doors.

"Let's see what's behind door number two, shall we?" Sargy said.

He went first but looked bereft and disappointed when the door didn't budge. It was locked.

"That was anticlimactic," I said.

"We'll have to break the bolt," he said. "You ready?"

I wondered if I held back and let him do the heavy lifting if I'd figure out what the fuck he was but I didn't get the chance.

"Stop."

The voice rang out loud and clear over our radios, and it didn't belong to anyone we knew.

A tiny whirring caught my attention and I looked up to see a camera come to life and turn towards us.

"Who do you work for?" It was a woman.

"We were sent by Gerald Tremaine," Sargy said. "Will you open the door?"

"Tell me what movie was playing at the cinema when I had my first meeting with Tremaine," she said instead.

"I can't do that," Sargy said.

Shit ...

"Because you didn't meet at a cinema," he continued, giving me hope. "Your first meeting was at a café in Queens. Frank Sinatra was playing on the radio. You ordered an orange cake with hot chocolate. He had black coffee."

I breathed a sigh of relief even as we stood in silence for a few more moments.

"I'm going to unlock the door. Enter and close it behind you. Wait two minutes before you enter the lab."

"Affirmative," Sargy said.

Three bolts slid out of place one by one and I went through first this time, rifle up and ready for whatever was on the other side.

Nothing.

The small square room was empty save for three doors. One ahead of us and one to either side.

When the door closed behind us the bolts slid back into

place one by one, the clicks echoed with an ominous tone as if to say you can't get out now.

Bitch, I could, I thought to myself.

The lights suddenly flipped on and the hiss of air started a moment before vents in the ceiling opened up and flooded the room in a white gas.

I pointed my gun out of instinct and felt silly doing it.

It was odourless and was sucked out as soon as it entered through a series of vents that had opened along the walls. Through the window of the lab doors ahead of us I could see more gas swirling around inside.

She was decontaminating both rooms.

Sargy checked his watch and waited for the full two minutes before entering the doors directly in front of us. I hesitated but Sargy pushed me inside.

"You're not sick," he said.

"You don't know that," I hissed at him but went through anyway.

When the doors closed behind us they let out a hiss of air.

This room had retained power. The computers were all glowing bright as they continued to operate around the room, but I didn't pretend to understand what was on them.

There was a table in the centre of the room and on it sat a closed laptop, a stack of files, six blood vials, a little black box and four memory cards. It looked like it had been laid out purposefully, for us.

Along the far wall of the room were two large windows showing two brightly lit rooms.

An older, grey haired woman stood inside one of them and watched us through the glass. She reached out and pushed a button on her side and her voice rang over the intercom.

It was an isolation chamber.

"I didn't think you'd make it," she said.

"What are you doing in there?"

“Protecting you,” she said. “I’ve decontaminated the room. Everything on that table is safe to touch and it all needs to get back to Tremaine as soon as possible, above everything else.”

“We were sent here to retrieve you, Ms. North,” Sargy said

“And I appreciate it very much,” she said sadly, but remained standing straight with her shoulders pulled back.

She looked healthy enough, but when I looked into her eyes I saw another story.

“You’re infected,” I said softly.

She nodded.

“But you don’t look like the other one I saw,” I said.

“I’m a Thero shifter, like you. It doesn’t affect us the same way it does lycans.”

“Why not?” Sargy asked.

“How did you know I was a Thero if you’re locked up in there?”

He smacked my shoulder. “My questions first.”

North smiled. “The virus that was released is a genetically modified strain of smallpox. Sequences of Black Death, rabies and Marburg were added to the strain. It’s been specifically designed to combat the heightened immune systems of shifters which makes it far more deadly to humans, and since lycanthropes were once human and you and I never were ...” She trailed off, but I thought I understood.

“But you’re infected anyway?” Sargy asked.

“Prolonged exposure,” she said. “And bad luck. I’m an old woman,” she laughed then. “A lot older than I look. You’re young though.” She looked at my bloody arm. “Have you been tested?”

“They’re running her blood upstairs,” Sargy said. “I’m assuming there’s no cure?”

“This wasn’t my project initially. I only found out about it when my colleague came to me about it. A cure was started, but that research was terminated quite early on. That’s the

information in those files there. There's more there than she was able to tell me."

"Where's your colleague now?" Sargy asked. "Maybe we can take her with us instead."

She looked towards the next room. She couldn't see inside, but we could.

I stepped up to the window and peered down into the small cell.

On the floor was the bloated body of another woman. She was maybe three days dead, based on the level of decomposition. She'd shot herself in the head.

Her face was puffed up, but still intact enough to see it was nearly identical to North's.

"Is she?" I didn't finish the sentence.

"My sister," she said. "Yes, that's Samantha North. She's the one you were sent here to retrieve. She was infected first and when she came to me and shared this project, I shared mine and we realised if we didn't do something now it would only get worse. There was no way for us to get out with the proof you needed, and no way to send it digitally, not with the firewalls protecting this place. We figured the only way to get it out was to get someone here to get it, and the only way to do that ..."

"The only way to do that would be to create a situation where they had no choice but to call outside help, and run the place into the ground enough for us to get in without issue," Sargy said.

"Correct," she said. "A small price to pay to stop this from being released to the civilian population. If this virus gets off this continent, it could ravage the entire world in days. With your arrival, I'm surprised they haven't blown this facility off the face of the planet. I'm assuming the storms have stopped the upload of information and that's the only reason we're still here."

“Hastings said you were working on the Challenger project. Is that the virus or is that something else?” I asked.

“Something else,” she said. “Tremaine placed us both here for different reasons. Her to follow the progress of the virus and me to follow the Challenger project. Both equally dangerous, though in different ways. That said, I don’t think Challenger can be stopped at this point. Not here and now, anyway. You’re not even remotely equipped to face it, but maybe we can stop the virus before it gets out of this facility.”

“If Erra bombs the facility they’ll lose their weapon and their virus,” Sargy said.

“They have enough money to start over elsewhere though I doubt they will,” she said. “The Challenger project means more to them and can’t be replicated. That said, my sister and I have been down here for years. We’ve rigged the place to blow in such a way that all organic material being housed here should be eradicated. We created a self destruct sequence. I locked the director out of her system and all I have to do is start the countdown. I’ve used the threat of it to stop her from reaching out, though whether that or the storm stayed her hand, I’m not sure.”

“Smart women,” Sargy said.

“Not smart enough,” she said. “Because once this facility is gone the Challenger project will escape.”

“This is the part of the story where you explain what Challenger is,” I said.

She looked at me then back to Sargy and smiled. “I’ve never met a Sidhe before. I’m happy I finally got the chance.” The words came out wistfully.

I turned to him.

“You’re a fucking fairy?”

He snapped his fingers in my face. “Not another fucking word.”

"I'm going to assume you've both heard of Torhein?" She asked.

Who hadn't? It was a childhood fairy tale. Once upon a time all of the world's fey and non-human creatures migrated here from another realm called Torhein. They taught cavemen how to make fire and now the humans lived in skyscrapers and the fey lived underground somewhere.

"I have," Sargy said.

"Well, as a Sidhe I assume you would, and that you'd also know that once in a while something from that realm slips through a dimensional crack and ends up in our world," she said.

I laughed at the absurdity of it. "That's a kid's story," I said. "You can get picture books about it."

"I'm aware of the phenomenon," Sargy said, ignoring me.

"Well, something big came through and Erra got their hands on it and decided to weaponise it," she said.

"Is it big enough to eat a few ships?" Sargy asked. "And take out another research station? How big does it have to be to do that and what exactly is it?"

"Well, as for what exactly it is, we're still not sure. It doesn't exist in our fossil record. What it is now, and what its offspring are, is genetically modified."

Sargy held his hands about a foot apart and just nodded. "So, big? Like really big or medium big? How many teeth does it got?"

Her lips quirked at his antics. "Much bigger," she said. "With a lot of teeth."

"EXACTLY HOW THE fuck did we transition from mutated smallpox to mutated monsters?" My voice echoed off the walls of the elevator shaft as we climbed back up.

North had refused to say much more after that. Instead she'd insisted we reach site B to retrieve the hard drives she hadn't been able to copy over before she'd gotten sick and they'd released the virus.

She'd given us three hours to get there and get out, because she was going to blow the place to hell with everyone still inside. Vicious woman.

We decided to forego the director. With an expiration date ticking down on us, we decided it would be more beneficial to get what North had told us about rather than waste time trying to tear the information out of someone who was going to put up a fight.

"So now you've got an idea as to why our little club isn't officially affiliated with any specific military organisation," Sargy said. "You regretting signing the contract yet?"

"Well, it's more fun than getting executed on live TV," I said bluntly. "I'm going to go with no."

He laughed. "Well, that's one way of looking at it I guess."

We reached the elevator doors to level twenty-seven. I had a moment to wonder if the doctors had bothered to test my blood yet, but thus far I felt fine. Were they all dead? Maybe it was chaos back up there, or maybe one of the shifters I'd sniffed out had changed. Or maybe Hastings got sick and made everyone else sick.

I felt bad for the CDC doctors, but they weren't our responsibility any more.

Now we had to get to Site B, but based on the noise coming from the other side of the elevator doors we hung by now, the tunnel that led from here to there was teeming with crazed and infected lycanthropes.

"So now we gotta go find another facility, inside this facility, and find a hard drive that has all of the bad-guy-monster-evidence on it. All without getting eaten by other monsters," Sargy said. "When I retire I'm going to write fiction books

about this shit. Gonna make a lot more money than I do now, too.”

“Yeah,” I drawled while I tried to figure out how to go forward. “Meet author Sargy Luthor, the fairy fiction writer. Do you sparkle? Fairies are supposed to sparkle. You can sparkle autograph everyone’s books.”

“I will come over there and make you regret not getting executed on live TV,” he snapped. “Don’t make me, I don’t want to mess up my hair.”

“You’ve got a fucking buzz cut,” I snapped.

“My point still stands.”

Our spat must have caught the attention of the lycans on the other side of the doors, because one of them slammed into it and the metal shuddered with the impact. We both took up our places on either side of the doors. I could already smell the stink of them on the other side. The infection. The decomposition.

It was sickly sweet with an undertone of something horribly indescribable. There was nothing comparable.

“OK,” he said. “We pull these doors. Then left, left, right, left and through the third set of double doors. That’s the tunnel to Site B. Don’t stop, just haul ass.”

Don’t stop.

I repeated the words over and over in my head and stuck my fingers into the groove of the elevator doors and he did the same on his side.

“Ready?” he asked.

“You got any tricks to help us get through this?” I asked, delaying the inevitable. “Some fairy dust or ...”

He glared at me and his jaw clenched. “I was just starting to like you,” he growled.

We pulled the doors apart and they squealed and immediately three lycans came spilling into the shaft and fell down to

their deaths. Wolf, tiger, bear. They were all stuck in a midway transition like Zilancy had been.

The rest of them erupted. They charged the doors and I leaned back away from the opening and, like the first ones, they fell through the opening one by one. A couple of them were fully shifted, but they all made the same mistakes as the ones before them.

“This might be easier than we thought it would be,” Sargy said.

A man who was still mostly human reached around the side of the doors and grabbed at me with black pus covered hands. Two bullets later his body fell down the shaft with the others and landed with a sharp splat somewhere very far below us.

I didn't know how many levels this place had, but it was enough that none of them would be getting up again.

I grabbed the fur of the next lycan that tried to reach around the doors and pulled him through which gave Sargy the break he needed to get through onto solid ground.

I swung around and into the hallway behind him and he already had his rifle up and firing down the lycans coming towards us from the left.

The right was sealed by a hatch.

If there was a hatch between here and where we needed to be it was going to slow us down immensely.

They came from everywhere. More and more of them. Nothing phased them. They had no awareness of their surroundings, of their actions, of themselves. They only had rabid impulses.

Quick-fire shots echoed through the corridors which only aided in drawing more of them from wherever they had been lying dormant waiting to die.

The only saving grace was the few times they started fighting each other. Once they went focused on a target, anything that got in its way also became a target.

Sargy charged straight through them like a linebacker, knocking them left and right, guns blazing.

I dodged them. Over, under, around, doing whatever I could to avoid contact with claws and teeth alike.

Adrenaline spiked and shell casings flew. Navigating the corridors was more instinct than tact. Sometimes reaction was more effective than pro-action.

Left, left, right. One more left and we were on the home-stretch.

I dropped to my knees and slid beneath a wolf that flew out of a side corridor, firing straight up as it passed overhead. It shrieked and landed in a bloody mess across the floor behind me. Another wolf tackled it and started to tear away at its flesh. It sounded like paper through a shredder accompanied by the snap and crack of bone and ligament.

Sargy disappeared around the last corner and when I rounded it behind him I only caught a glimpse of a dark blur before a leopard tangled itself around his legs and took them both crashing to the floor.

I couldn't shoot, they were too close together. Sargy's arm was pinned under his body while he held the beast away from his face with the other.

I grabbed the cat in a choke-hold and pulled it away. It thrashed and twisted in my arms and the jaws of another beast sank into my leg. I paid no mind to who was gnawing on my leg. Instead I gripped the leopard around the neck and the middle and twisted until its neck snapped and its body went limp.

I felt the heat of bullets whiz by before I heard the sharp pop of gunfire. The wolf on my leg let go and I let the leopard's body drop and brought my rifle up to take out the wolf that appeared behind Sargy.

Three more beasts were behind it, but slid to a halt. Two

wolves and a lion stood there snarling and trembling, staring us down, but they didn't take another step forward.

One of the wolves suddenly turned and ran. The others stayed where they were. The lion tried to take a step forward, but then reeled backwards away from us with a roar.

We backed up, keeping our backs to the double doors behind us and our rifles on the two lycans.

I reached back and pushed on the double doors.

They were bolted.

"Son of a bitch," Sargy growled.

The soft whir of a camera above us got our attention and I glanced up. A little red light on the camera flipped on a moment before the bolts slid out of place.

North was watching us.

We pushed through the doors and slammed them shut, but still the lycans wouldn't come any closer, but their eyes were fixed on us.

"That's not right," I said. "They're rabid. They shouldn't have the ability to be afraid."

"Maybe they do if the monster on this side of the door is bigger than they are," Sargy said. "They must have some instinct left."

The scent of blood filled the air, and it wasn't mine and it wasn't infected.

I looked down the tunnel and then touched Sargy's shoulder to get his attention. He was still watching the lycans through the window of the door.

"You're not wrong," I said, and he turned.

Body parts littered the tunnel for as far as I could see. Some were just smears of blood and chunks of organ across the floor, the walls, the ceiling.

Another camera kicked on over above us and then another gate slid down over the double doors, effectively locking us out.

Or in.

“I’m starting to wonder whether or not that woman is on our side,” Sargy said.

“How’s the laptop and the stuff she gave us?” I asked, nodding to his pack.

He patted the hardback case. “Safe n’ sound. Your leg is bleeding.”

“It’ll heal,” I said and pointed my light down the hall. I smelled no infection, but plenty of bowels and other bodily fluids.

Sargy dropped to a knee and wrapped a strip of cloth around my leg to stop the bleeding. I let him, only because arguing would take more time than just letting him do it.

After two nasty bites, chances were I’d caught whatever the fuck it was. North hadn’t gotten around to telling us the symptoms of a Thero. Everyone seemed to forget that informational detour.

“I guess there’s only one way from here,” Sargy said. “Down the bloody brick road.”

“Lions and tigers and genetically mutated monsters,” I said.

“You have a knack for sucking the fun out of things, you know that,” he said as we started to manoeuvre our way down the tunnel. It was dark and made of unpainted concrete. A stark contrast to white painted facility behind us.

Avoiding the bodies was like trying to play a game of hopscotch made up of a thousand one-inch squares.

In-fucking-possible.

She’d told us the tunnel was long, but it just didn’t fucking end. Neither did the bloody bodies.

“So,” I pondered to break the silence. “Out of morbid curiosity, since we’re both probably going to die, me especially, I’d like to ask—”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Smith. I kid you not—”

“Do you sparkle? Do you have wings? Do you have big pretty wings and sparkle?”

“I will shoot you and take my chances with the big alien-monster by myself,” he growled.

“Do you find that being a sparkly fairy is a turn-on to women. I’m not sure how I would feel if my husband sparkled. Would depend on the mood I guess.”

The words spilled out of me as a joke before I realised what I’d said, and when I did, it brought with it a sweeping sadness that I’d been ignoring and pushing away for months and months ...

I pushed it away again. Now wasn’t the time.

“I’ll have you know that my wife loves my sparkles,” he said and swept his rifle side to side in front of him. The carnage was getting thicker as we went.

“So you admit you sparkle,” I shot back. “And that you’re married. Is she a fairy princess? Does she sparkle too? Or grant wishes?”

Anything.

I’d say anything at this point to try and not think too hard about what had crushed and torn its way through all of these people.

Hastings had said there were just over two hundred or so employees at Erra, but Site B must have been manned by a whole other team he didn’t know about because there were easily twice that many people strewn across the tunnel.

“You’re damn right she’s a fairy princess,” he said. “I’ll tell you what. We make it out of here alive, and you never mention sparkles again, I might see what I can do about tracking down that husband of yours. Black ops or not, there’s a trail.”

That was the fairytale right there.

“Don’t hold your breath,” I said and stepped over a decapitated head. “He’s been MIA for years. He’s not coming back.”

My light glinted off something shiny in the carnage. At first

I thought it was bone, but it was too large. The closer I got to it the bigger it got until I realised it was nearly as tall as I was and protruded from the torso of the only intact man around.

It was a tooth. A big, round, shiny tooth unlike anything I'd ever seen before, even in the movies.

"Don't say that, Smith," he said from behind me. "After being married to you, a few years in the middle east would be like a vacation. I'm sure he's fine—"

"How's this for your vacation?" I said and pointed my light at the tooth on the ground before me.

He stopped beside me.

"Holy shit ..." he breathed.

"We're definitely fucked," I said.

The radios suddenly cackled and I flinched and raised my rifle, my finger grazing the trigger, ready to blast away something that wasn't there.

Sargy sniggered and Jacob Scott's voice came over the waves. He was our communications expert.

"Scott ... Sarg ... read ..." The static was harsh and the signal weak, but the fact that we had any signal at all given the weather and how far underground we were was something else.

"Scott, this is Sargy, please repeat," he said.

Only static came back this time. He repeated the transmission twice more but we only received noise.

A soft scuffle up ahead had us both on alert again, but nothing moved.

Another camera clicked on high over our heads on the far wall followed by a second farther down.

We took it as a sign to hurry. I only hoped at this point that the cameras were being watched by North and not someone else from Erra. I made sure the camera on my body was still on, and I hoped it was still working because you wouldn't believe this shit unless you saw it.

Another set of open doors big enough for a small plane loomed up before us and blue light spilled out from beyond.

We were finally here.

We took to the side and approached ready for anything. Monsters. Lycans. Humans.

The floor changed from concrete to metal and what we walked into looked like a giant lab and my breath fogged out in front of my face.

It was much, much colder in here.

I looked around the vast expanse of a lab.

Site B was a giant cylinder with a hollow centre leading all the way down into icy sea water. It splashed and rocked hundreds of feet down and I leaned over the railing to see. It looked like an aquarium, sort of. A very large, multi level aquarium big enough for Godzilla's goldfish.

There was a railing to stop you from falling over, but as my eyes went around the edge of the hollow I found most of it to be torn away, and claw marks so large I didn't even realise what they were at first marred the walls and floor.

Metal had been shredded like a cat tearing up toilet paper.

"I'm going to assume that Challenger is aquatic," I said and peered down again. I couldn't see anything except for the black and white water itself. White ice, black depths, big monsters.

The radios cackled again and then I felt it. That sense of being watched, of knowing you were being watched.

I looked back over my left shoulder even though I knew that whoever, or whatever, it was at my four o'clock. I let my senses expand and evolve. I looked with more than my eyes, listened with more than my ears. You could form an image in your mind of what was around you without actually seeing it if you took stock of your other senses.

The softest pad of a paw brushed the metal floor. A flick of a whisker disrupted the air. A touch of fur slid against a

concrete pillar. A breath so light it barely registered ebbed with a heartbeat so steady and controlled that I hadn't noticed it until now.

I turned, slowly, all the way around with my rifle only half raised because after all of that, the only thing I didn't smell was infection.

Sargy turned to look where I was looking with a curious look on his face.

He hadn't heard it.

Good to know my hearing was better than his at least, for pride's sake.

The tiger moved with a silence and grace only a thero shifter possessed. It stepped out from around the pillar and Sargy raised his rifle but I stopped him with a hand on the barrel.

"He's not infected," I said.

The tiger ducked around the pillar again and we both raised our rifles, but I saw the soft flash of light and he stepped out from behind the pillar again as a man, fully nude and very cold, based on his body's reaction.

"North sent you," he said. "She contacted me after you left her labs. As far as I know I'm the only one still alive on this end. Lucky for you."

He walked right up to me and stuck his face against my neck. First on the right, and then on the left, inhaling as he did so.

Sargy looked downright flabbergasted but I knew what the man was doing, and I let him.

"I think you're OK," he said. "As far as infection goes. It would be apparent by now if you'd contracted it."

"Thanks for the check-up," I said blandly.

"You're lucky," he said. "Zeus went back down a few minutes before you walked in. I've been cramped up waiting for him to go for hours. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one left on

this side.” He laughed, but it held a note of hysteria to it. He walked to one of the terminals and gestured for us to follow.

“Zeus?” Sargy asked, tilting his head to the side. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“The youngest. There’s four, that we know of at least. The original beast that came through the rift was a female that we named Rhea. The second, a genetically modified clone, we named Kronos. A male. Then we have the two babies, each genetically modified and incubated in the lab. One male and one female. Zeus and Hera. We think that Rhea and Kronos have mated off site, as have the two babies.” He fiddled with the terminal, but nothing happened.

“Not to be a drag, but we don’t even know what we’re dealing with here,” I snapped. “You’re throwing names around like we give a fuck. Show me a picture of what killed all of your people in that tunnel. Tick tock doc. “

He led us into a smaller lab beside an overhanging bridge of the pool and flipped on a projector and a photo of his home-grown monster.

What we were looking at was inconceivable. By the scale on the screen the creature was massive. Nearly twenty meters in length with the likeness of a piranha but with a set of jaws that more resembled a shark, with much larger teeth.

It didn’t match the tooth I’d seen in the tunnel though, and this was a fish, so how did it get into the tunnel in the first place?

He flipped through a series of images so we could see it from all angles. It had multiple sets of fins and spikes that all looked deadly. It was white, nearly translucent with blues and purples being the hues of its insides which looked like guts I’d never seen before, and I had seen a lot of guts in my time.

Even its eyes were solid white rather than black.

“This is Rhea. Origin unknown. Species unknown. She predates everything in the fossil record and based on our

carbon dating we estimate her age to be in the thousands of years. She's truly not-of-this-world. All the proof you need that Torhein is real is right there," he said. He sounded proud and awestruck at the same time.

He stood there bare ass naked, in Antarctica, in the middle of his slaughtered co-workers and he was somehow still proud of his little monster.

He flipped another set of images onto the screen.

This creature was slightly smaller but bulkier. This time it resembled more of a great white than a piranha, but its colour scheme was the same aside from the eyes. They were red.

"This is Kronos. We spliced carcharodon carcharias DNA into the original sequence to try and adapt it to our oceans since Rhea seemed to have trouble in-taking oxygen from our salt-water and freshwater."

"OK," Sargy snapped at him. "So you made the big monster fuck a normal shark fish, and now we have this mother-fucking fish. What exactly was the point of this sci-fi fuck-fest? Tell it to me like I'm five. Use small fucking words or I'll throw your ass into that hole," he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder to the pit.

That seemed to bring our new friend back into the present. He clicked something on his computer and the screen popped up with a map of the continent. He zoomed into the western area of it and there was a little red blip right on top of us.

He pointed at it. "That's Zeus. The only reason he's showing up is because his GPS is still intact. These things are naturally undetectable by any technology anywhere on the planet. We caught Rhea by accident. Just imagine, an undetectable spy that could observe and even take out enemy vessels, both top water and submarines, without so much as being seen. Radar would never pick them up. Satellites would never read them. Even a fish finder doesn't pick them up when

you're right on top of them. We just ... failed in our control of the animals."

I looked at the man. "You're being extremely forthcoming with information your bosses would very much like us not to have," I said and lifted my rifle ever so slightly. "Why is that?"

"Because the first chance I get I'm out of here," he said and held up his hands. "I don't care if I have to walk across this entire fucking continent. I'm a tiger. I'll survive. I hear Vietnam is nice this time of year." He was scared, but also smitten and snappy and I didn't like it one bit.

"Hold on," Sargy said. "If those two fishy mother-fuckers look like that, how the fuck were they up here doing that?" He pointed to the massive claw marks on the sides of the pit. "And eating all of your friends in the tunnel over there? Remember them? And tell me about the Mirny research station. These are the questions I need answered and we're running out of time. Give me the fucking hard drive and start talking."

He started clicking away on his computer again and the map was replaced by another image.

"Meet Zeus and Hera," he said quickly.

They didn't look like fish this time. My gaze travelled from their long snouts to their clawed, short legs all the way back to their tails complete with spikes and scales.

That explained a lot.

"Let me guess," I ventured this time. "You took your monster fish and made them fuck some crocodiles, and now they walk on land. Isn't that just fucking peachy?"

He looked like he was going to correct me, but he stopped himself. "Well ... yes, in a nutshell. We added new sequences to adapt it to the land—"

"And then they got loose," Sargy said. "And you think they're out there fucking some more and having babies without you. Tell me, did it occur to anyone to disable that feature when you were in here doing your sciencey shit?"

“We did,” he said crisply. “They ... mutated and evolved the ability.”

“Isn’t there an entire franchise of movies explaining how shit like this is a bad idea?” I asked rhetorically.

Our radios started to cackle again and Sargy answered it. It took a few more moments before Scott’s voice rang out loud and clear.

“Sargy this is Scott, please respond. Over.”

The tiger shifter pulled a hard drive out of the computer and handed it to me.

“This is everything on the Challenger projects. All of our research, all of our data and what little I could get regarding the contracts.”

“Why isn’t that front and centre?” I snapped.

“Because I don’t have clearance for that information,” he said. “The guys who did are back there.” He jabbed his thumb back towards the tunnel.

The static on the radios popped in my ear and was then followed by the sound of gunfire that echoed up from below us.

A moment later a huge, ear shattering roar erupted with a massive splash of water from down in the pit.

The tiger took off back the way we’d come, down the tunnel and I ran to the railing around the pit and looked down in time to catch a glimpse of Zeus before he slipped down into the darkness.

I let out a breath of relief that was short lived, because a moment later he launched himself out of the water and then clawed his way up the side of the pit.

He was much, much larger in person than in the photos.

Massive elongated jaws snapped in the air and the creature leaned its head back and grabbed onto the bridge that stretched the length of the pit and tore it away with a loud screech of metal.

Gunfire ensued and the shouts that followed were unmistakable.

Those were our guys.

Sargy hollered down the pit and Zeus turned and levelled his gaze with us.

“Now you’ve fuckin’ done it,” I hissed at him.

“Yell at me later,” he yelled. “Run!”

I didn’t move.

“What are you doing?” He hissed and grabbed my arm.

I looked at the giant doors that opened to the tunnel we’d come through.

“The tunnel,” I said. “Logically it’s going to go that way again.”

“Which is a prime opportunity for us to get down to the lower levels with the guys,” he snapped.

I smacked him in the chest. “If we can close the doors and lock it inside it’ll get caught in the blast.”

He went still, then nodded. “Right. That works too. How do we close the doors?”

Zeus scrambled up out of the pit and pulled himself onto our level on the other side of the pit from us.

I pointed to a red lever jutting out of the floor by the doors. “That looks promising,” I said.

He grabbed my arm. “I’ll take it, now we just have to figure out how to get it into the tunnel.”

“And get to the lever,” I finished.

The thing was between us and it, but thankfully the pit was between us and him.

Sargy hollered down the pit and the guys yelled back, but Zeus took no notice, he went in the direction of the tiger instead.

“The tiger went that way,” I said.

The creature’s huge body slid partly out of view into the

darkness of the tunnel and a crash echoed back to us followed by a shrill and short scream.

“That was a bad idea,” Sargy said.

“So much for Vietnam,” I said quietly.

“We’ve gotta get him all the way in there before we can even think of closing those doors,” I said and could only think of one very bad way of making it happen.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Sargy groaned. “OK—“

“You better hit that lever as soon as it goes all the way in,” I said and took off at a run, around the railing of the pit and across the room, right up behind the creature. Sargy yelled behind me but I ignored him.

I was faster than him and all of the other humans put together. I was the obvious choice for this stupid move, and arguing about it would only waste time.

We were on a clock and our time was ticking down. We still had to get far enough away not to get caught up in the blast too.

I skidded to a halt about fifteen feet away from the beast and he swivelled his head around to look back at me and the man’s arm dangled from the creature’s mouth and it worked its jaw and crunched the rest of the body while it watched me, eyeing up its next meal no doubt.

I drew my pistol and aimed for its eye.

The sound of my shot was nothing compared to his scream of pain and he went crazy and flung his head back and forth causing the whole place to shudder under my feet.

I only needed him to follow me in so far.

I heard Sargy running up behind me and I took off towards the beast and darted under its roaring head and into the tunnel in front of it.

I didn’t need to look behind to know it was following me now. It roared a deep shuddering noise that rattled my ears and each step it took reverberated beneath my feet. I zigzagged

through the wreckage and felt the beasts head swing over me, close enough to snag my hair but it missed.

It was fast.

I skidded to a halt and ducked so the creature flew over my head, unable to stop itself. It's whole body flowed over me and I got an up close view of its underside and narrowly ducked around its swinging tail and dodged its back legs.

It thrashed that massive tail and barred my way and tried to turn in the space that was technically too small for it.

I ran and jumped over the tail like you would a hurdle, narrowly missing the massive spikes protruding from the appendage but as my body brushed the beast a scale sharper than a knife tore through my gear and split the flesh along my leg open. I rolled across the ground and ducked as it swung its tail back towards me and it missed me by inches.

I heard the rattle of the great doors at the mouth of the tunnel as they rumbled closed far quicker than I would have liked.

Far quicker than Sargy liked, because he started screaming at me to run.

I did, and I felt the beast ravaging around behind me, fighting to get turned all the way around so he could come after me again.

Silhouettes appeared in the blue light spilling from the closing doors and gunfire started. I felt the bullets whiz past me as they put clip after clip into the beast behind me. He screamed and roared, the bullets only making it angrier than before.

Screams, yells, shots, destruction. It was all profound. It was all a blur. I leapt across that last bit of space between me and the door and just managed to squeeze through the gap that was then less than two feet wide. I crashed to the floor and rolled, coming up to my feet again and turning in time to see the Zeus bear down on the doors right as they closed shut and

he slammed into them. They bent outwards, but they didn't give.

His roar was deafening, and he started throwing his body against them and clawing the thick metal.

They wouldn't hold forever.

Colours whirled in my eyes as the adrenaline rushed.

It was a thrill, that was for sure.

"You pull a stunt like that and I'll shoot you myself," Sargy yelled at me.

I pointed one trembling finger at him. "Threaten me again and I'll tell everyone your deep dark sparkly secret," I clapped back.

"Hey what secret?" Clark asked. The blond haired Texan's face was covered in blood, but he didn't look outwardly hurt.

Sargy ignored him. So did I.

"Scott!" Sargy barked instead. "Get on the radio and tell the CDC doctors to evacuate to the plane. This place is going up. Everyone sick stays. Everyone healthy goes. If they argue, leave them."

Scott got on the radio and did as he was told.

Zeus continued to smash into the doors, and the metal groaned from the force of it. I backed up and turned when a splash sounded down in the pit. I gripped my pistol and went to the edge and looked down into the dark swirling water.

I saw a flash of something white, not ice, just beneath the surface. Just a glimpse, then it disappeared.

"That's our cue to leave," Sargy said.

"I most definitely second that," Clark said. "Though I am jealous I didn't get to run underneath a big monster butt." He looked at me when he said the last bit and it took all of my self restraint not to put a bullet in his ass.

"Shut the fuck up, Clark," Andrews snapped. "Elevator is over here," he said and pointed. "We can go back out the way

we came and get around to the plane. We've got a couple of Hägglands outside. Courtesy of the Russians."

"You idiots weren't supposed to be here for another day at least," Sargy said.

"Yeah well," Malone said. "You were here with the nice doctors and we were out there with big Ralfy and we decided to change the fuckin' rules."

"Zeus," I said.

"What?"

"His name is Zeus," I said. I wanted to keep them all straight in my head.

"Ooh," Malone said sarcastically. "Ooh, did you hear that guys? His name is Zeus. Well, Zeus's last meal was a large portion of Russian researchers with a side of cargo plane so if you don't mind I'd like to not be second dinner. Why can't we just get back to the plane through the facility? It's warmer in here."

I scoffed at him. "Not unless you want to catch a mutated smallpox virus or get munched on by rabid lycans sick with said smallpox virus." I stuck my leg out so he could see the bloody mess that had been left behind by the last one to nibble on me.

He started cursing and looked at me like I was crazy.

"Time to go guys," Scott said. "We've got an LC-130 inbound to McMurdo to get us the fuck out of here."

A phone on the wall beside us rang.

"That's not creepy at all," Clark said.

Sargy answered it, listened for ten seconds then hung up.

"We've got fifteen minutes before North manually detonates."

Zeus took the opportunity to remind us all he was still there.

"Because those doors are not going to hold for much longer," he finished.

Nobody argued another word. We fucking left.

FROM THE FREEZING interior of the Hågglands we watched the plane we'd come in on disappear with the scientists on it and us decidedly not on it.

They'd left without us the cunts.

The storm hadn't lasted as long as we thought it would, or we'd met a break, but it was still raging. Flyable, but still raging.

"Four minutes, Malone," Sargy said. "Step on it."

"Please tell me that plane will be meeting heavy military when it lands," I said. "If just one of those fuckers is infected ..."

"Oh, believe me," Sargy said. "None of them are getting off. They're all culpable in this mess. There's a reason we're not on it."

We all turned and looked at him.

"We put the CDC docs on that plane," I protested.

"Which is why I didn't say anything until now," he said looking pointedly at me. "I made a decision. We missed the plane on purpose. We're going back to the other Russian station. Step on it!"

The vehicle suddenly shuddered and shook, and a moment later a great orange blaze blossomed outside the windows where the station was supposed to be in the white-out outside.

"Ho-ly shit," Clark said.

"I second that," I said.

The flames exploded, reaching up to the sky like a drowning man reaching for air. The light blazed as it reflected off of the white snow and ice and I had to shield my eyes from the intensity of the orange haze.

Even through the walls of the Hägglund I felt like I could feel the heat of it.

“What the mother shit is that?”

Through the flames another massive figure appeared, blazing bright against the orange. It was much, much bigger than Zeus with much longer legs and white, reflective scales to match its parents.

We watched as it galloped, galloped around the billowing flames and even from here I could see the silhouette of its teeth and jaws snapping in the air.

“That’s Hera,” I said.

The ground beneath the vehicle rocked and shuddered as more explosions went off underground.

“No,” Sargy said. “That’s our next mission, and that’s the real reason they named us the M.O.N.S.T.R. Squad.”

February 27, 2011

DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

COOL MORNING AIR blew over the gentle waves as Lucas paddled his little orange kayak along the coastline. The sun had yet to break over the horizon and his breath fogged in front of his face.

It was an abnormally cool morning, but no doubt that would change as soon as the sun came out.

Despite the slight chill and the goosebumps blossoming along his arms, he relished in the calm and quiet of the waves.

Out here on the water he was most at peace. Out here he felt closer to God than he ever had in any church.

The sky sparkled with the last glimmer of stars as it started to fade from the black of night to the deep blue that came before the sunrise.

He slowed his progress and settled his paddle across his lap so he could dig his camera out of his bag and get it ready. He'd spent countless mornings out on the water over the years to shoot the sunrise, trying to make each shot better than the last.

The first time he'd ever tried, back when his photography had been more of a hobby than a profession, he'd been blessed with a pod of dolphins playing in the pastel lights of the morn-

ing, but he'd been an amateur. His shots had been blurry and off-centre and his exposure all wrong.

That was the day he'd started taking his photography seriously, and since then he'd built a good side income from his prints, to the point he now owned his own gallery.

It was small, nothing to be too giddy about, but it was a testament to how far he'd come.

Despite that, he'd yet to come across a pod of dolphins in the sunrise again, but he was determined to do so. He'd come out every morning for the next ten years that is what it took.

He would get his shot.

He let out a foggy breath and settled into a more comfortable position in his kayak and waited. He found comfort in the swell of the waves, in the distant flash of water over the beach, from the chirp of birds overhead and the splashes of fish nipping at the water's surface.

Slowly the sky started to brighten and change, and as it did, it felt as if the world was letting out a foggy breath of its own. A veil was being lifted, and a few white crests broke on the water's surface as it turned light blue, then green, then pink and orange as the sun broke over the horizon.

The play of colours that surrounded him and lit up the cloudless sky was the only proof of God he needed.

He hefted his camera in his hands, still unsteady with the new weight of the waterproof case he'd fitted it with, but he tinkered with the dials and settings, getting it ready for his first wave of shots when a loud splash grabbed his attention.

His head snapped up, searching for the source, but whatever it was left only a patch of bubbles and ripples in its wake.

He'd missed it.

Dammit.

He raised the camera, ready for whatever it was to make another appearance and prayed it was a dolphin. Or a whole

pod of dolphins. If they could just play in the sunlight, he'd have his winning shot.

At the very least a nice big fish would make for an interesting photo.

Minutes passed, and though they ticked by far slower than he liked, to the point his arms started to ache from his efforts, Lucas stayed poised and ready, but nothing came.

He let out a sigh of disappointment and started taking some test shots of the horizon and then swivelled around to catch the coast as well.

The light danced like flitting fairies over the water and beach. The fish nipped at the water, causing ripples to glitter and birds cast gorgeous silhouettes against the sky above him.

Nearly every shot he got he was sure would be worthy of print.

Without warning, a flash so bright shot through his lens and blinded him. He cursed and dropped the camera to his lap, checking it for water or damage but found nothing. It was snug and tight inside the waterproof case.

Another flash of light glinted in the corner of his eye and he looked up to find the source right in front of him.

His heart leapt.

A whale.

A white whale.

Its skin was glossy and smooth and opalescent. Colours glinted off of it like mother-of-pearl.

It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

He fumbled with his camera and brought it back up to his face, snapping photos before he'd even put it up to his eye. He kept his finger on the shutter, no longer thinking about exposures or shutter settings.

He just wanted to record this, however possible.

Lucas glanced up over the camera and saw the cliffs beyond the beach before him and cursed himself for not being

up there. From there he could have seen the whale's entirety and had a full shot. From down here he could only see what was in front of him. The whale's head and tail disappeared beneath the water and he only caught glimpses of its white skin flashing back at him.

He couldn't even see where the animal began and where it ended. It was the biggest creature he'd ever seen.

This will be the feature of my next gallery, he thought.

He grabbed his paddle with one hand and kept clicking photos with his other as he tried to manoeuvre his boat around to get a better angle and widen his shot.

When he was far enough away, he started checking his settings to make sure his next shot was of pristine quality.

The whale didn't move. Instead, it stayed quiet and still, basking in what, for it, would be the shallows.

Lucas took a moment to admire the animal without his camera pressed to his face and glanced past it towards the beach. He said a small prayer that it wouldn't venture any closer because it would surely get itself stuck if it did.

As the water's current brought him closer to the whale, he took his paddle and pushed back away from it. You weren't supposed to get close to them. All it had to do was slap its tail in fun and it could crush him and his little kayak.

He still held the paddle partway in the water when, without warning, something wrenched it from his grasp and down into the water with a splash..

He yelled, from both surprise and pain and clenched his now throbbing hand while glaring down into the water, searching for his missing paddle. His first thought was that seaweed and snagged it and the current had pulled him away from it, but the current wasn't that strong. His boat gently swayed with the waves, but not nearly strong enough to cause what just happened.

He glanced back at the whale to find it was still laying

quietly in the water. It had yet to let out a blow which worried him. That wasn't normal. If it was at the surface, it would have come for air, why hadn't it let out a breath yet?

As he pondered the question, he suddenly noticed the quiet. Not the normal quiet of the morning, but pure silence.

The birds had gone. He glanced up at the sky, then all around him looking for the seagulls but they were nowhere to be seen. He looked back at the beach and the cliffs beyond, and there, high up along the edge of the cliff looking down over the water, sat all the birds. Each one, side by side all along the ledges and outcropping.

Silent.

He glanced down into the water, searching for the orange of his paddle, hoping it would float back up to the surface like it was meant to, but he could see nothing but the deep blue of the water.

The sun was higher now, the pastel colours of sunrise disappearing into the normal light of the day. He turned in place, looking all around him but saw no sign of his paddle, of birds or even the fish nipping at the surface. When he glanced back down one more time instead of finding the blue of the water, or even the orange of his paddle, he instead found a white silhouette sliding beneath his boat.

It was only a little longer than his little kayak, but when his mind registered what he was looking at, he let out a sigh of hopeful relief.

It was a calf.

The whale before him was a mother. The calf must have snatched his paddle to play. He pursed his lips in annoyance at losing it, but babies caused trouble no matter what species they were. He quickly brought his camera around and snapped a few before the calf disappeared down into the water. It amazed him that the mother had passed down her albino genes and still wondered what species they were. Possibly a Bryde's whale,

though she didn't have the exact shape he'd seen of them before.

It was far too large to be a killer whale or even a beluga whale, which was unlikely all on its own.

If it was a Bryde's whale, it would certainly explain the size, which he'd yet to determine.

He looked down again and the calf was back, floating just beneath the water next to his boat. The fear that had gripped him earlier disappeared into sheer awe. This was better than dolphins, and he smiled despite himself.

Something bumped his boat from the other side and he turned to find a second calf.

Twins!

It bumped the side of his kayak again and he gripped the side and tried to stay balanced, but he kept his camera in his hand with his finger on the shutter, snapping photos left and right.

They'd knock him over if he wasn't careful, and he didn't want to get drug down to the bottom as their next play toy. They wouldn't know to let him go.

He turned to look back at the first baby and instead found two.

Three calves?

He'd never heard of a whale having triplets. Twins yes, but triplets?

He snapped photos of the two and looked back at the one who bumped his boat again and his breath hitched in his throat.

Three.

That made five.

It's not possible.

Yet how else could he could explain it? They were all white like the mother. The only other explanation was that there had

to be more mothers in the group and that they were all albinos by some crazy stretch of genetics.

The mother still basked silently before him and still had not let out a blow of air.

He looked back at the calves and his body seized up with fear. He tried to push it down, but the cold, jolting feel of it paralysed him.

More.

There were more.

Seven, nine, ten, twelve.

They kept coming, sliding up out of the depths of the water and forming a circle around his kayak. There were so many now he lost count.

He looked back at the mother, praying that somehow she would call off her babies, whatever they were, but his gut said that wasn't about to happen.

His gut said that this would not end well, and he believed it.

Movement up on the beach caught his attention, and he looked past the mother to see another creature emerge out of the water and crawl up onto the sand.

He blinked, sure that what he was seeing wasn't real, because it couldn't be real, there was no way ... yet there it was. What looked like a crocodile, only bigger turned its head and looked back at him.

Lucas was a few hundred meters away from the beach, and as the animal settled itself on the land, he realised that it was possibly the length of two semi-trucks sitting bumper to bumper, at the very least.

He sat frozen and watched, bewildered, as the massive thing changed colour. Where it had been a dark greenish-blue, it now took on the colour of the sand. Before his eyes, like magic, it disappeared. Had he not already known it was there, he never would have noticed it.

What caught his attention next scared him more than the crocodile and the things surrounding him, and he was too afraid to look down again and see how many were now there.

No, what he saw were the shapes of three girls coming down the beach from the other way with surfboards. He could see the bright colours of their boards, their hair blowing in the wind. The sounds of their voices travelled across the water as they walked along the water's edge, right towards the beast that had just slipped out of the water like a shadow from a nightmare.

He did the only thing he knew to do. The only thing he could think to do. He raised his hands and yelled, trying to catch the girls' attention, but it was the worst thing he could have done.

In an instant, the creatures that had surrounded him all moved together. The water swelled over him.

Lucas was lucky. The babies were so fast that his life was over before he even realized they had dragged him beneath the water. They tore his body apart and picked it clean in seconds, leaving behind nothing but a swell of red blood where his kayak had been.

His camera, with his hand still holding on and his finger still pressed to the shutter slowly sank to the bottom of the ocean.

A moment later, the hand disappeared in a flash of white, leaving the camera behind.

Back on the beach, the three girls shouted back and forth to one another, talking nonsense in the early morning sun as they got ready to start what they hoped to be a long day of surfing.

They didn't see the predator laying so still on the beach for what it was. They only saw what they thought was a massive dune. Their minds didn't register the reality of what it was, and by the time they realised their mistake, it was too late.

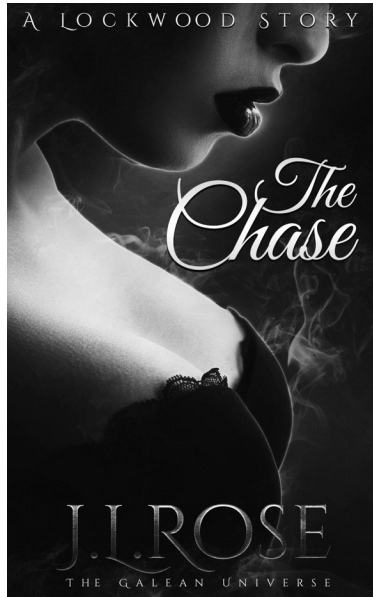
Moments later the beast slid back down into the water, its

hunger barely sated by the tiny meal and swam to join his mother.

She'd disappeared back down into the water without anyone or anything noticing and now slid along the bottom of the ocean with her many babies surrounding her. They picked off anything and everything unlucky enough to cross their paths.

None of it was enough to satiate their hunger, and as the babies grew, they would need more.

Also by Jaxon Lee Rose



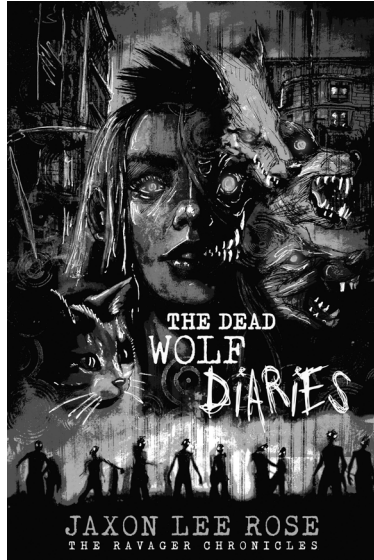
The Chase is the first book in The Lockwood Series, part of *Her Buried Legacies*.

After three long months in a new town with a new job, things aren't going exactly to plan for Cosima Lockwood.

The job? Not at all what she thought it would be. The town? Deader than ever, and just when she decides it's time to pack up and move on, the local shape-shifter packs start closing in after learning that she's been residing in their territory illegally for over three months.

If that's not bad enough, her partner is nowhere to be seen, which robs the entire trip of its salacious intentions.

Included in this ebook is *The Flight*, Book 1.5 in The Lockwood Series



The Dead Wolf Diaries is a standalone serial series currently available on Patreon at the **Nomadic Shifter** tier.

My name is Persephone Lennox, and I've left the capitalistic, slave driven empire of the Safe Cities to take my chances with the Deadies in the Deadlands. Six years ago I came back to visit friends and take a Vegas trip, but whereas planes were flying into the country, nobody was being allowed to leave. America was cut off from the world, and the world was being fed the illusion of normalcy when it was anything but. I'm now a defect of Dallas, a criminal with a diary and I hope to make it out.

About the Author



Jaxon is an American expat currently living in New Zealand. Her love of reading and fantastical tales started in grade school, and it wasn't long before she was crafting her own stories with a dream of turning it into a lifelong journey. She particularly enjoys urban fantasy, paranormal romance, high fantasy, sci-fi, and horror.

In her early twenties she started work on *Her Buried Legacies*.

Jaxon is a 3D artist and a game developer. She owns and is an artist for Bella Nacht Miniatures, a small indie studio dedicated to creating figurines for 3D printing and TTRPG.

She is also a co-founder and Narrative Designer at Ghost

Moth, a Melbourne based game studio working on it's debut title, *Matchmaker: Dungeon Heart*.

In her spare time she loves chilling out with her cat, Moose, scuba diving, photography, horse riding, art, and video games.

Don't forget the pumpkin spice lattes!

