



**I**T WAS STILL SO HARD FOR HIM TO ACCEPT.

Up until this moment, almost everything had gone wrong. Unexpected forces were aligned against him. Variables not considered in his equations and simulations somehow appeared with regularity. There was no doubt about it: Dr. Catalyst's plan to restore the Florida ecosystem was falling apart before his eyes.

Everything that could go wrong did. One by one, his Pterogators were being gathered up in the Everglades. While their introduction dramatically reduced the snake population, they had not eradicated the pythons and boa constrictors as he had hoped. His Muraecudas put a severe dent in the number of lionfish on the coastal reefs. But apparently they'd migrated to other

waters, or had perhaps fallen victim to sharks or bigger predators. None had been sighted in weeks, and the lionfish were returning.

And the media was reporting that his Blood Jackets, which he considered his crowning achievement, were dying off. Scores of them had been found dead all over Florida City and the surrounding countryside. He hadn't even been able to recover the body of the inept Dr. Newton from the swamp. Surely the man was dead, but it was a loose end, and Dr. Catalyst did not like loose ends.

It felt as if he was teetering on the brink of total failure. Early on in his campaign, he had issued a manifesto. Sent to hundreds of media outlets and posted online, it called for like-minded individuals to join his efforts. It was his hope to start a movement, to rally others to his side. It had utterly failed. No one had offered to join him. A few fringe environmental groups had "endorsed" his efforts, but Dr. Catalyst had envisioned throngs of people — hundreds, if not thousands — flocking to his cause. They never materialized. The media called him a crackpot and a danger to society. How preposterous.

He was a visionary.

Still, despite his genius, his efforts had not had the desired effects. And there was one reason. In his mind, his creatures would be healing the fragile Florida

ecosystem right now if not for the harassment and interference of a particular individual.

Emmet Doyle.

When the Doyle brat showed up — that was when his plans had gone awry. Someone not even old enough to shave was dashing his hopes and dreams for a naturally restored Florida Everglades. Interfering. Agitating. Forcing him to divert his precious time and resources from his mission. And now he was left with no other choice but to remove this obstacle. No matter the cost.

Prior to releasing his creatures, Dr. Catalyst had purchased over two dozen vehicles. It had been comically simple for someone of his brilliance to hack into the Florida Department of Motor Vehicles registration database and create false registrations and titles of ownership for each vehicle.

One of them, a dark brown panel van, was parked at the curb a few hundred yards down the street from the Doyle home. The windows on the rear door were tinted, allowing no one to see inside. A few ventilation slots were cut into the vehicle to allow air to circulate. The name of a famous national delivery service company had been painted on the side. The van's license plate and registration would easily pass muster if he were to meet a police officer. Provided they did not ask him to open the rear doors. No one must view his cargo.

That would be a problem.

As if to illustrate his point, the van jerked on its suspension and a strange growling, laughing roar came from the van's cargo bay. His newest creation was keen to steal into the night. A low growl sounded through the rear wall of the van, and the vehicle bounced again as the creature threw itself against its cage. It was eager to be set free. To hunt.

But patience was required.

At his campaign's start, Dr. Catalyst had placed video and audio recording devices at National Park Service headquarters. It allowed him to keep tabs on the comings and goings of Dr. Geaux and Dr. Doyle, and on their efforts to thwart him. Somehow they had discovered he was monitoring them and staged a futile attempt to capture him by feeding him false information. He had easily seen through their feeble deception. However, they had removed his surveillance equipment. Now he no longer had inside information on the movements of his enemies.

Dr. Catalyst paused mid-thought. He could hear muffled growls and groans from the animal in back. The van shook again as the creature launched itself repeatedly at the side of its cage. He had not fed it yet today, deciding that hunger would hone its hunting instincts.

Finally the animal quieted. Dr. Catalyst resumed watching the street.

The loss of his equipment forced him to resort to actual physical observation. He couldn't trust replacing the bugs at the park offices or on Doyle's and Geaux's vehicles. They were now regularly checked for listening devices. So he did it the old-fashioned way. Trailing them around town. Spying on them whenever he could do so unobserved, until he had enough data on their routine behavior for his next grand demonstration.

It took precious time away from his work, but eliminating Emmet Doyle would also remove Dr. Doyle and Dr. Geaux from the equation. Then his mission could continue.

His fleet of vehicles had come in handy as he followed Emmet and his father at various times during the day and night. Tonight was Thursday. On Thursdays, Emmet and his father joined Dr. Geaux and Calvin at Pompano's Pizzeria and did not return until after 9 P.M.

Dr. Catalyst looked at his watch. 9:10 P.M. They would be arriving any moment. As if on cue, he saw their pickup truck in his driver's-side mirror, turning onto the street. He leaned down in the seat as their truck passed by, making sure they didn't spot him. A lone man sitting in a van at night might be remembered. An empty vehicle would draw little attention. The truck passed by and continued down the street until it turned into their driveway. He sat up, watching as Emmet and his dad exited the pickup and entered their home.

On the seat next to him sat a pistol loaded with an extremely powerful tranquilizer dart. In the unlikely event that the creature in back decided to turn on him, he would need it. Next to it was a cattle prod. Dr. Catalyst was not cruel to animals, nor was he particularly worried it might attack him. It had been engineered and trained to seek out only one prey.

Still, Dr. Catalyst muttered his mantra.

“No chances.”

Scanning the street, he confirmed that no one was around. He grabbed the tranquilizer gun and cattle prod, then opened the door. Quietly, he stole toward the rear of the van. Dr. Catalyst holstered the pistol and put his free hand on the door handle. Flicking the switch on the cattle prod, he heard a whirring hum as the device charged.

Dr. Catalyst took a deep breath. Once the rear door was opened, a system of cables and pulleys attached to the cage gate would raise it, and his creature would bound from the van.

And it would hunt.

It growled again, and the van shook once more. It was almost as if the creature could sense that it was about to be set free. And it was impatient. Dr. Catalyst pushed a button on a small device attached to his wristband. It sent a signal to a collar the creature wore, delivering a mild electric shock to the beast. From

within the bowels of the van, Dr. Catalyst heard a cackling laugh from the animal. The “laughing” sound signified submission to a superior.

What waited inside the pen was his latest hybrid. A singular creation. It was not made to counter an invasive species. It was not born in his lab to prevent the destruction of the Everglades. This beast had one purpose and one purpose only.

To find, follow, and kill Emmet Doyle.

Dr. Catalyst opened the door and heard the squeak of cables and pulleys raising the gate to the metal cage. He stepped behind the van door, peeking around to view the magnificent animal emerging from the dark interior. It strode to the edge of the cargo bay and stood in the open rear doorway. It sniffed the night air, then raised its head and howled its odd and terrifying cry. It was half the laugh of a hyena, and the other half the growl of the Florida panther.

It was a terrifying monster. It had the long tail and strong, thickly muscled rear legs of the panther. The front legs, spotted coloring, and head were all hyena.

Except for the jaws.

The jaws and fangs were a wicked combination of each species. Two rows of razor-sharp teeth emerged from its mouth. It looked as if hunting knives were somehow growing from each jaw.

For a moment, Dr. Catalyst worried the creature would not leave. It sat on the edge of the van, surveying the night. Ever since his Pterogators were first released, Emmet Doyle had interfered at every turn. After Emmet rescued his father in the swamp, Dr. Catalyst began to prepare for this eventuality. As he nursed his wounds and cursed his fate, he had understood the boy and his father would continue to be a problem. And they had thwarted him again and again. The only solution to the obstacle was to eliminate it. So he created what now stood there, still and silent. He savored the moment.

Each stage of his experiments produced vast improvements in his gene splicing, recombinant DNA, and accelerated growth methods. Until the Blood Jackets, which appeared to be dying out. He suspected the cause was that the two species used to create them were too divergent.

But hyenas were a close relative of the feline family — although they resembled dogs, and most people assumed they were canines. Dr. Catalyst was sure this combination of species would be his greatest achievement yet. It had to be. There was too much at stake. Once he had created a predator that could identify, stalk, and eliminate a single target, there would be no limits on the environmental damage he could reverse. With this technique perfected, he could generate an entire



species that would cull other invasive species all over the world.

The genes of the panther would create a stalking predator that would fixate on its prey. The hyena genes forged a relentless and fearless hunter. Hyenas excelled at hunting, despite their reputation as scavengers. And they were ferocious in their own right, often driving off much bigger leopards and lionesses from their kills. The look of the animal alone would send terror coursing through Emmet Doyle. Dr. Catalyst's face twisted into a snarl. How he wished he could be there the first time the obnoxious little brat encountered the animal. To see the fear and terror in his eyes would be such a thrill. Instead, he would have to settle for letting his surrogate enjoy the final victory.

The great beast sniffed the air again, and Dr. Catalyst pushed the button on the cattle prod, hearing a crackle of electricity as it discharged. He hoped it would not require any convincing to leave. But he would be ready if it did.

But he needn't have worried. Using powerful hind legs, it leapt from the van and landed deftly on the blacktop. Without looking back, it trotted away. For a brief moment Dr. Catalyst wondered if he would ever see it again. There was a tracking device inserted in the skin beneath its neck, but who knew how long the power would last?

The creature stopped in the middle of the street and inhaled the night air. It paused, shaking its head back and forth, as if trying to focus. Then it caught the scent it desired and loped away into the darkness.

Heading directly for the Doyle home.