

When Kai Fell In Love

The human was large. Dark and large. With big white teeth, blunt and square behind fat, fleshy lips. It leaned in closer, trying to trap me against the flat, painted rock but I knew better than to let it get that close. I could not tell what sex it was. It was hard with the humans. They smelled wrong, sticky and hard in my nose but this one smelled of dragon-spark powder and something sweet. Like flowers or bee-vomit but better. Smoother. Milkier.

"What are you calling him again?" The dark human straightened, looming over me and I scuttled across the ground, looking for a shadow to fold into. "Did you figure something out?"

The sounds he made were words. Words I knew but they were strung together funny, odd-shaped beads not fitting together to make the right shapes in my head.

It was as dark as one of the Master's dogs, but red instead of blue underneath. I'd never seen a human as deep brown as it before, more tree than flesh and I wondered if he had bark instead of skin. Sniffing at him didn't tell me anything other than the sharp powder the fat, hairy human smelled like too.

That one hit if I moved wrong, with harder fists than the Master but without any magic to carve away my skin. I wasn't sure if I liked the purple aching spots more than bleeding and I struggled to understand some of the things the fat, hairy one wanted from me. I knew that one was a he, especially after he shoved me under the water and I bit at him, tearing off a part of his sex and thigh. It was only skin but he screamed, banshee loud and the cold river turned pink. I spat the parts of him out. He tasted bad and... I would not eat human or elf meat.

I was not my father, the Master.

"Gonna call him Kai. It's the noise that elfin made when he handed him over. Kai something or other." The fat one got up from the rock he'd been sitting on and lifted the flat stone he put on the bubbling food. The fire was tall and hot, warm enough to burn and I hissed a warning at him, telling him to stay clear but he ignored me.

Humans, and the sounds they make, are foolish.

The fat one stuck fingers into the liquid and made pained sounds but the dark one only laughed and inched closer to me.

I was going to have to bite it soon. It was going to grab me. I could sense it. See it in the way its skin shifted and the way its arms tensed. It was going to do something but there was going to be food. The fat one was getting food and he always gave me some, not caring I let it get cold.

I also watched him while he ate first. He might die from the food. The Master was good at sneaking in poisons. I'd been sick before, so sick my flesh wept from my bones. If the fat one's meat fell off, I wouldn't eat the food. Because I didn't want to die. Not yet. Not until I killed the Master. For what he did to me. For what he was going to me if he ever caught me again.

Because the next time I saw him, one of us was going to die and I had to be strong enough for it not to be me.

"Jonas, leave him alone. You're just going to get bitten," the fat one grumbled. I knew that word—bitten. To sink my teeth into flesh and tear out a bit. It kept things away from me. Unless they were stronger then they would hurt me more. It was worth the risk. "Don't give him anything. Kid needs some stew in him. Gets any skinnier and he's not going to be useless. I'm not dragging around a bag of bones."

Jonas. The sound was the dark one's name, maybe? It was hard to tell. The fat one had many names. Dempsey. Asshole. Fucker. Mistah Dee. And Prick. That was the easiest to pronounce or so I thought. It was a spitting word and I couldn't get the sound right.

"What are you giving him? God, are you serious?" The fat one exclaimed, scratching at the hair coming out of his tunic. There was so much hair. Lots of it. And it was everywhere. "You're going to give him sugar?"

"No, I'm going to give him a treat," the dark one said, pushing at the fat one's side, knocking him away. "He's had sugar before. You gave him a honey-pop or five the other day. This is different. He'll like this."

"It's like you're tying a pork chop around your neck so the dog will play with you," he growled, a good deep sound that scared me and I pushed further into the bushes.

I couldn't go far. I...hurt. All over and the fat, hairy one fed me.

He also caught me every time I ran away. My legs weren't working right and I couldn't see out of one of my eyes, not well. My nose worked and I heard everything, including the dark one coming closer.

"You get bit and it's on you, Jonas. That's one mean, fucking kid." The fat one was taking out the things he put food in and my stomach growled. It'd been a long time since we'd eaten, since before the sun came up and I was hungry, hurting down in my guts. "I'm telling you, he goes nuts because of the candy and the little fucker is sleeping with you."

"It'll be fine," the dark one—Jonas—said. "Trust me."

It took something out of its tunic, a heavy thick piece like the one the fat, hairy man wore when it was cold. He'd tried to put one of me but I couldn't move in it. It was too heavy and it felt like... I was tied down. The world went red for a moment and when I blinked, the heavy tunic was in pieces and there were feathers everywhere.

It was like I ate a bird but I didn't feel full.

That was the last time the fat, hairy one tried to put any heavy thing on me.

The something in the dark human's hand was shiny and smelled...wonderful. So wonderful. Better than any meat I'd ever smelled. Better than anything I'd ever had in my nose and I wanted it. Badly.

"Come on, Kai. I'm not going to hurt you." It— if the lump on his leg was like the fat, hairy man's and my pee-stick, then it was a he—he crouched down, making himself as small as he could.

I didn't trust him. He could grab me. He could hurt me. He could tear me apart just to watch me form back together again...like my father... like my Master... but the *thing*—the gloriously smelling thing—was calling to me and I wanted it.

Then he tore a part of it off and the shiny was brown underneath, maybe as brown as his flesh but the smell got even better. A piece came off and he put it down on a rock in front of me then shuffled back, giving me room.

I grabbed it and sniffed it. Then shoved it into my mouth because my stomach knew it was food and the smell—it was worth being turned into liquid from poison just for the taste.

It tasted like freedom. Like no pain. Like a good long sleep and warm sun on my skin. It was smooth and creamy and something in me started to make a sound, then my mouth watered and I held it on my tongue, letting the liquid from my glands soothe the thing's moistened soft flesh down my throat.

"That, little one, is *chocolate*," the dark one—Jonas—said softly, putting another piece on the rock then leaning back to let me steal it away. "And it is one of my favourite things too."

When Kai Discovers He Does Not Bounce

“Hold the shotgun steady, boy,” Dempsey screamed at me from across the truck’s cab. “I’m going to see if I can outrun these bastards.”

I’d lost count on how many times I’d heard him say that over the years and every single time, it was because he’d fucked something up. Just like he’d done not more than five minutes ago and now we had a pack of pissed off white howlers hounding our asses.

The shotgun was too big for me. Most of Dempsey’s shotguns were because he liked them like he liked his women; long, lean and hostile. The Red Betty Special he’d been favouring lately had a hell of a recoil and it left me bruised every time I shot it but we weren’t going to have much time to argue about weaponry. Not with the howlers on our trail.

For the most part, howlers were as sedate as cows...if cows were round balls of fluffy white fur with wicked forward pointing black horns and could spit acid with more accuracy than a baby boy pissing in his father’s mouth when he was being changed.

I’d learned that kind of accuracy watching Jonas diapering his second son and it’d been an interesting game of duck, weave and spit. The kid laughed its ass off when it scored a direct hit on Jonas’ mouth because even a baby knew when something was funny. Or maybe it had to be because Jonas laughed all the time when he was with his kids and the baby—Kamala—knew he was safe and loved. Either way, the little bastard could teach a howler a thing or two about aim and that was saying something because even at full gallop, a howler could nearly always hit its target.

With us being current said targets, there wasn’t going to be much hope for Dempsey’s truck.

This truck. Not much hope. To go with the other four or five trucks who’d lost their sides, fenders, engines and any chance of hope surviving the insane asshole who won me in a poker game more than ten years ago.

I wasn’t sure who had it worse...me or the truck.

We hit a rock. Or a rock hit us. Perspective and hindsight would force me to re-evaluate that if I wasn’t flying through the truck’s window and bouncing along the ridge. Stones and dirt scraped my back open and my shoulder was on fire. I’d be lucky if I had any skin left and as I tumbled across the desert floor, I realized I had a lot bigger things to worry about than a bit of road rash.

In the middle of my shit storm of pain and regret, I was lying in a heap between a thundering herd of white howlers and the asshole who’d just driven his truck through their nesting grounds, splattering egg juice and meaty bits all over the truck’s undercarriage.

White howlers are near-sighted or at least that’s what we’ve all figured. Of course, anyone would have trouble seeing if their tiny little eyes were buried under a mountain of flowing, frost-coloured hair. They maneuvered for shit, their stubby legs strong enough to hold up their nearly spherical bodies but turning was always problematic and once they got going, they were like out-of-control tik-tiks, stuck on a straight line until they could slow down enough to turn without topping over and rolling across the desert.

At the speed they were going...and given the fact I was laid flat out on my ass with a suspicious ache in my leg I feared I’d broken something... it was going to be less than a minute before I would be nothing more than elfin tartar beneath their sharp, little hooves.

The crack of a shotgun snuck in between the pounding rain of hooves and my shoulder burned. The howlers were almost on me, and despite the wrenching pain coursing through me, I forced my body into a tucked ball. I’d survived being skinned, carved apart like one of Dempsey’s badly roasted holiday birds and had my bones

screwed together with poisonous iron. In the small bit of my brain overriding my panic, I guess I figured I only needed to protect my head and I'd survive.

Of course I'd never come back from being smeared along a Borrego Springs dune but there was always a first time for everything.

The herd drew closer, a hot mass of flesh, fluff and rage and as I snuck one last peek in the wild hope they'd shifted course, another blast went off behind me and the howler bearing down on me stumbled, its head—or somewhere between the black jutting horns poking out from its maybe-skull—exploded.

The howler's intense blue blood splattered my eyes, coating my arm with a thick stew of brains, fur and bone. I wasn't going to die by being run over. No, my demise would come from being crushed by a rotund, ball of white fur as its death throes carried its body over mine and grinding me into the sand I was lying on. The howler fell but the momentum of its powerful gallop drove it forward, kicking up a wave of sand and dirt.

It hit me, hard and by some freak twist of physics, the thing's fur cushioned me against the bulk of its body, a reverse bumper padded by fluff. Still, the howler's strike only layered more pain on top of the already throbbing rawness of my skinned arms and legs. I was shoved a good twenty feet, the grit sanding off probably every inch of flesh I had left on that side of my body.

The herd continued, leaping over their dead companion's body as if it were nothing more than a pebble. I shoved myself as far into the bulky monster's hot flesh as I could, trying to shelter myself from the deadly hooves flying above me. One caught my shoulder, the same one the first bullet creased and I began to bleed from that wound too.

It seemed like an entire week went by as I waited in partial terror for the herd to pass over me. After a few minutes, I realized I was actually getting bored, then the pain hit again, reminding me I wasn't out of the woods yet. Finally the last of the bouncing, deadly poof-balls leaped over the dead howler and I was safe.

I couldn't breathe through the detritus in the air. The rains hadn't hit Borrego in months and any sign of life burrowed down away from the SoCal heat. Even under the pinking skies of an early morning sun, the desert was already too warm to be comfortable and within a few hours, the howler and I would be cooked to leathery husks. The jeans and short-sleeved shirt I'd tugged on that morning were threads and I was bleeding everywhere, oozing really if I wanted to be technical.

Problem was, there I lay, skinless and breathless with only the screaming in my mind to keep me company because Dempsey and his fucking truck was nowhere to be found and Pele only knew who'd been shooting...and at what...me or the howler.

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I passed out. It was a stupid thing to do, especially bleeding out of every pore in a land where any bit of moisture is sacred and there are a million skittering, flesh-eating things living under the sandy hillocks and rocks.

Passed out probably wasn't the right term. It was more like dove straight down into a nerve-blown unconscious state where I heard nothing, felt nothing and more importantly, had no intention of waking up from my blessed near-coma. Unfortunately, it looked like the gods—and there were many in the post-Merge chaos of this world—weren't quite done with me.

A hard jostle jerked me from my pain-induced slumber and despite everything Dempsey taught me about waking up in an unknown place, I gasped when I came to. Agony bled through my marrow and I fucking *hurt*. No amount of training or self-control was going to help me come to slowly, not let anyone know I was awake and assess my surroundings when I fucking felt like I was being chewed apart by a million fire ants.

"Stay down." The voice was an older woman's, rough and gravelly, admonishing and firm. "We're almost there."

I tried to open my eyes but they were swollen and the skin across my cheeks and jaw was dry to the point of cracking. There wasn't any moisture on my tongue so it stuck to the roof of my mouth, a useless chunk of meat with shredded bits along one side, probably where I'd bitten into it at some point. I was lying down, stretched out across a bench seat and something scratchy was underneath my abraded back. It could have been anything from an old wool blanket to a fine satin sheet because my nerves were prickling and angry. The stinging needles across my shoulder blades and spine were enough proof I hadn't scraped down past what would be a third degree burn so I was probably healing quickly.

Which meant if I didn't get off of what was underneath me, my skin would knit right into it and I'd have to spend an agonizingly long time getting whatever it was cut out of me.

Struggling, I choked out through the five pounds of sand in my parched throat, "Where there?"

"If that's a where wolf, there castle joke, I'm going to tell you you're reaching," she muttered at me. "And beggars can't be choosers about where they're being taken, especially after they've fallen out of a truck and are almost made into hamburger meat by some angry white howlers."

I wanted to get into the stupidity of the phrases hamburger meat and white howlers. What other kind of hamburger was there besides meat? And howlers only came in one colour—white—but everyone always called them white howlers. Singlish was a weird, fucked-up kind of language and not even the first language to be called Singlish. Single-English my ass, or what was left of it after I used the desert floor like an industrial grade sander on it.

There were a few more jostles, one hard enough to pitch me off of the bench seat and onto the floor then the vehicle came to a screeching, skidding stop. I hit the front seats with a thump and my head bumped on something metal with a sharp edge because there was no mistaking that sickening jolt into my scalp.

"What the fricking hell is going on?" She barked and the vehicle surged forward, swerving to the right. I followed its movement, a ball of bones and meat without much strength to do anything other than let gravity take control. We came to another stop, as abrupt and bone-jarring as the first. "Son of a bitch, what the hell does this asshole want now? You ain't nothing but scavenge now."

There was a familiar squeal, the sound of a manual window crank chunking through its gears to lower its glass then I was hit by a rush of too hot air. The engine roar grew louder and then another motor joined in followed by a familiar gruff voice shouting to be heard over the rush of tires fighting through the grit on a desert road.

"You just hold on right there, Missy and tell me what you've done with my boy," Dempsey's rage sputtered through his words. "Or so fucking help me God, I'm going to empty this shotgun right into that fool head of yours."

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If there was any physical means for me to have crawled out of the Quonset hut I was tossed into after my encounter with the Borrego desert dunes and a herd of white howlers, I'd have been kissing the wind before the couch I'd been deposited on grew warm from my body heat. As it was, I was weaker than a newborn salamander and packing about as much fire.

But that didn't stop the two humans from arguing over my almost-corpse.

"Look at him," the woman griped at Dempsey. "He's damned skin and bones. You should be shot for what you're doing to that boy."

She was fierce, I'd give her that. The woman was more dried out saguaro cactus than human, a skinny grey thing with deep crows' feet around her pale eyes and sun-bleached short silver hair. She'd be lost in the full-moon night, a gloaming brought to flesh but unlike a moonbeam, she was hot and scorching like the desert she lived in.

I used what little breath I could draw in around the pain blanketing my body to chuckle when she stabbed Dempsey's thick chest with a hard, sharp finger, pushing him back a few steps. He wasn't willing to give ground but then Dempsey rarely did. I didn't know where he'd gone in between me falling out of the truck and her picking me up but I'd gotten the hours turned around after skidding across the length of Borrego.

"Kid, pull your hair back because obviously this one here didn't take a good look at you," Dempsey ordered, waving one fat-fingered hand at me.

"No." I didn't say no to Dempsey often but when I did, I meant it. I was older now, knew most of the language and was stronger. He wouldn't hit me for saying no but sometimes I wondered if I'd ever have enough muscle to defend myself if he took it into his head to hurt me something bad. It ached to talk and something clicked ominously in my chest when I coughed but I spat out, "Fuck you."

I was tired of being on display for the humans we ran into and I'd heard the tale of how he won me playing poker more times than a dragon had scales. The story changed frequently—the elfin was a guard or the cards in his hand was a full house or a royal flush— it all depend on who was listening and how much alcohol Dempsey'd gotten into himself.

The ending remained a constant as firm a prime number; he'd had the winning hand and I was a part of the pot.

"Jesus, kid, it's like you want to screw up my life," Dempsey grumbled, stomping over to the cot she'd slung me on. Grabbing a handful of my hair, he yanked it from my face and I was left bared to the harsh overhead lights, blinking at the sudden pain along my scalp. "He's a damned elfin, you silly git, and he's a damn sight better looking than when I first got him."

I'd grown. Some. I didn't know how old I was or what I'd done to deserve Dempsey as my savior but I was still damned thankful for him. I opened my mouth to protest his rough handling when something on my back caught on the blanket she'd tossed under me. I smelled blood and felt the wet begin to seep from one of my wounds and I winced when my shoulders began to throb.

"Move aside, you fricking idiot. The kid's in pain. Elfin or not, he's a damned mess." She shoved past Dempsey, nearly knocking him off his feet. "My name's Sparky, kiddo. Let's get you fixed up a bit and then we can get you some food."

Shoving an arm under me, she lifted, trying to get me to sit upright but the pain intensified and the blanket clung to me, hung up on my body. It didn't feel like the fabric was under my skin. I hadn't healed enough since they'd yanked the wool throw off my back earlier but there was definitely a problem. I tried to shift my body, hoping to get some relief when I heard Sparky suck in a sharp breath.

"Oh by the Dead God, what...?" She touched something on my shoulder and I lost control of my stomach, puking all over my own feet. Her fingers rattled something hanging from my back and I heard her hitch back a sob then she turned her head to spit at Dempsey. "Did you do this to him, you bastard? Did you put these in him?"

"No, but I've been pulling them out of him since I found the first one," he growled back at her. "And now that his back's all torn open and shit, maybe you want to help me get rid of the rest of the damned iron bolts some asshole screwed into his bones and then you can see if you've got enough stomach left to eat."

That Time Kai Rescued A Shoe

San Diego was... odd.

The city itself was okay, one of the best cities I'd ever been too. Split level with its rich on the upper side and its middle class and poor living in its undercity, San Diego was colour and diverse, a blend of cultures and human eccentricities with a little bit of danger to whet the appetite.

I loved living there. Loved the warehouse I bought after Dempsey turned in his license and went native over in Lakeside. The idea of living in reclaimed shipping containers—basically metal boxes—in the middle of Hell's shit storm of a desert wasn't my idea of fun. Instead, I'd contemplated living in the actual city, a decision I quickly made once Dempsey hooked up with a hatchet-nosed blonde he'd met at the Smoke-N-Easy bar. She didn't like elfin and I didn't care for the way she kept trying to steal money out of my wallet.

One of us had to go and since I wasn't willing to fuck Dempsey—not that he'd want me to—it was going to have to be me.

I liked the warehouse. It sat on the shoreline where the two levels of the city merged together and was close to Medical, not that they'd ever actually let me through the doors as a patient but I knew a couple of people I could bribe to get supplies.

Because sometimes, not even being elfin helped with some of the damage I took hunting down monsters.

Much like right now as I sat on my living room couch stitching the inside of my arm together when someone knocked on my front door.

I left the needle and thread dangling from my arm when I got up to answer the door, stopping long enough to grab one of my Glocks from the table. The neighbourhood was still kind of sketchy and well, I was an elfin Stalker living among humans, some of whom still weren't convinced the Wars were over. In the three months since Dempsey and I moved what little shit I owned into the warehouse, my front wall was covered in anti-elfin graffiti three times, my front walk was egged twice and the last and final straw was some asshole spray painted shitty things all over my truck.

You don't fuck with a man's truck.

I took care of the problem a few nights later with a high-powered tranq gun, a perch on my rooftop nearly three stories above the street and silicon balls filled with indelible neon green skin stain and anal gland fluid milked from giant sloths that Dempsey used to keep the mountain lions off of his property. Paintballs hurt when fired with something meant to take down large animals and I'd pretty much had enough of other people's shit.

People tended to take things more seriously when there was a little pain involved with their adulting.

It didn't come as a surprise to me to discover the two teenaged boys living across the street glowed the next afternoon when their mom brought their bruised and smelly bodies over to apologize to me. I'd caught the ginger one near the eye, probably glanced off the beanie he'd worn to cover his bright copper penny hair but as they were fumbling over their so sorrys, I was rather taken aback to see the mail man slink by behind them sporting a mottled green splatter across his face and neck.

On the plus side, none of my mail ever went missing and no one fucked with my truck anymore.

Still, caution is always key and answering the door with a weapon never killed anyone that didn't need killing. Or at least where I was concerned. Pretty certain Dempsey avoided more than a few bullets meant for him and he'd probably deserved every single last one of them.

A quick peek through the sneak hole and I grinned, turning the latch. Cracking the door open, I said, "Come on in, Jonas."

Then I put the gun down and went back to the couch to finish sewing myself up.

"You know Medical can probably do that for you, kid," Jonas rumbled. "Because that's kind of... deep."

He swayed a bit for some reason, odd considering I was the one sipping alcohol to numb the pain but he was definitely unsteady. I didn't need him to fall over, mostly because he was a big guy and if he landed on me, it was going to hurt. I already had sliced my arm open to try to get it to heal better, I didn't need any more bruises.

I studied the gash. It was pretty deep. I could see clear down to bone and the meat was slow to heal, probably because of the iron dust from the flats blew into the wound. It'd bled all the way down from Temecula and while the skin closed up, it'd been hot to touch. A quick slice and a sluice brought me a rush of iron-scented watery blood and an almost clearly bitten through piece of wood I'd shoved between my teeth so I could ride out the pain.

All that was left was the stitching which for some reason turned Jonas's face an odd ashy colour.

I snorted. "Almost done. And well, *Medical*."

He knew better. We all did. No amount of money or cajoling would get Medical to take me in. We'd all learned *that* lesson after I'd broken my leg bone clear through and had to depend on Sparky to shove it back into place. Settling on the couch, I untangled the needle from its thread nest then stuck the pointy end into the flesh under the cut, pulling the meat in so I could get a clean stitch line on my skin.

"What'cha need?" I hit a nerve ending and hissed, letting the needle go so I could take a sip from the whiskey bottle I'd left on the table. "Unless you just came by for dinner or something."

"You know that kind of shit disturbs me, boy," Jonas growled at me. "And I came by because you're not answering your damned link again. The Post just put out an all-points contract out for the undercity. Seems like there's a newt roaming around down there and it's gotten big enough to be swallowing dogs. And you know what that means."

"Yeah, I do." I took a large mouthful of whiskey and swallowed, willing its burn to carry me through the rest of the stitches. "Big enough for a dog, big enough for a kid."

"Yep, and the bastard's apparently already gotten one." Jonas grimaced when I hurriedly stabbed and pulled short jumps of thread through my arm. "Best you hurry that up, boy, before that thing gets another one and I lose my damned lunch."

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Somehow, I'd lost Jonas a few hours ago. He probably wasn't really lost. Hard to lose a man built like a sequoia and carrying an assault rifle. It was more that he zigged when I zagged and it was especially difficult to stay together in the outer edges of Old San Diego's ruins. I wasn't concerned. Not about Jonas. The understreets were crawling with people either hunting the newt or hiding from it. I'd stopped one guy from staking a stray dog out in a field to lure the monster in so he could club it with a baseball bat.

I'd cut the dog loose and well, the guy was going to need some assistance getting that bat out but I was good with my life decisions.

I was going to have to get to someplace a little bit wetter than where I was standing. Thing was, we'd been dry for the past couple of months so there wasn't a lot of rainfall or run-off trickling down from the upper levels. I'd spotted a few kids running by earlier, kicking a soccer ball back and forth a few times before coming to a dead stop when they spotted me.

Stalkers were issued badges just like any other LEO or SoCalGov agent but that was pretty much where our similarities ended. While we were required to openly wear our badges while on official duty, we didn't have a uniform or a set type of weapon. I'd seen a Stalker walk the streets to look for a bounty jumper wearing head-to-toe pink camo while wielding a flame thrower. It took all kinds to be a Stalker and mostly it seemed like the insane were the most drawn to the craziness of being a SoCalGov meat puppet.

So it wasn't my black jeans, old leather jacket and sawed off shotgun that drew their notice. Or the badge clipped to my belt. People weren't ever surprised by a shield and a weapon. No, chances are the kids stopped and stared because I definitely wasn't human. Nice of them to notice.

Still there was an upside to kids being nosy little bastards and if there was one thing I'd learned, it was never to overlook a source of information.

"Hey! I've got a five for whoever can tell me where they've spotted the newt people are looking for," I called out, holding the bill up for them to see. Their eyes were wide open, nearly bulging out of their heads and I frowned, trying to take into considering they'd probably never actually seen an elfin anywhere other than vids. I tapped at my badge and waved the bill again. "Come on, guys. You can buy a lot of shit with five bucks. Don't you want it?"

"Yeah, I do, mister," said a lanky Asian kid as the others took off running, leaving him behind with the ball. "But not enough to die for it. Damned thing's right behind you and it's going to eat that little girl."

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The newt was huge. Larger than a lot of dragons stomping around the lava fields in Pendle pretending to be apex predators. Okay, it might not have been that big but it was certainly bigger than a standard tiger. Not one of the saber toothed ones, just a standard.

One thing for sure, the tiger would be a lot prettier.

Cave newts were somewhat see-through, mottled geckos who waddled at alarming speeds and preferred to spend their time partially submerged in muck and water. Normally, they were harmless, inedible blobs of gelatinous meat without much interaction with the human world, hibernating much of their life away.

Until they woke up and then an insane hunger drove them from their happy little mud packs and up towards the surface where they feasted on pigeons, rats, fish and the occasional bunny. It was a cyclic life of sleep, raging hunger, frenzied feeding then more sleep.

Problem was, they grew while they slept, using up their energy reserves so when they woke again, their only instinct was to consume everything in their path. And if they'd eaten something particularly large, they doubled or sometimes even tripled their size during their slumber.

From the size of the green and grey spotted frilled newt currently tearing apart the remains of a roasted chicken carcass it found in a tipped over dumpster, the damned thing used to live and feed off a mutant pig farm.

"Okay, hate to kill it but...Where the fuck did it come from?" I glanced over my shoulder, following the slime trail it'd left behind when it'd swung into a strip-mall alleyway, a narrow wedge of space between a Chinese restaurant and a massage parlour with blinking signs aggressively proclaiming it was a legitimate business and the only happy ending I would find behind its blacked-out glass doors and windows was the satisfaction of a good night's sleep. "Newt, I do not want to kill you. Can't we just find out where you used to live and get you back there before someone else loses their shit?"

I didn't like killing things that didn't need killing. The alleged dog the newt swallowed was just that...alleged. No one had any witnesses to the event or even spoke to someone missing a dog. Some mindless idiot probably spotted the huge giant proto-gojira with red frilled tassels along its jawline and freaked out.

It turned, its baleful yellow gaze a wet and sticky mess, with moist threads forming a weave over its eyeballs when it blinked slowly as it studied me. The shotgun would take care of it. I didn't have any fear of that but what I did notice was the little curly-haired girl standing frozen in a not-so-safe niche a few feet away from the newt's massive head.

Considering it was technically late afternoon, there wasn't any reason for the little girl to be in bed asleep and far away from a starving cave newt but it would have been nice. I was crap at guessing the ages of kids and humans aged at bizarre rates. One moment they were still drooling into their oatmeal then the next they were off peeing in my shoes. I had Jonas's kids to thank for that little lesson in human age progression but she seemed young. Too young really to be out on her own.

Or she could have just been short.

The alleyway and the newt were a tight fight. If it turned, it would see her. No avoiding that. Thing with newts were they couldn't see for shit but man, did their noses work. And to a nearly sightless wet lizard, a little girl—even one dressed in a yellow pinafore with pink ribbons—smelled like meat.

Tasty, tasty meat and about the shape and weight of a medium-sized dog.

The girl didn't make eye contact with me. It was like I didn't even exist. Her eyes were pinned to the newt and when it slowly lowered its head to dumpster dive again, she moved, probably meaning to run down the alleyway. She made it two steps then the newt struck, its mouth unhinged, its jagged sharp little nubs of teeth glistening with its poisonous spit.

I was behind the damned thing but I was going to be fucked if I let it munch down on a little kid. Sure fire lose my license event and I clamoured over the newt's slippery body, nearly losing my footing. Coming up over its shoulder, I saw its mouth was already on the girl and I made a grab for her with one hand, gripping as much hair, dress and girl as I could while I brought up the shotgun and blew a hole straight through the newt's head.

The splatter was glorious. Jonas would have been proud if he'd been there. Dempsey would have been too but he would instead grumble and bitch about how I didn't use my knives to kill it because that's what a real Stalker used. This from a man who shot holes in his eaves because there was a wasp nest—a tiny wasp nest—and he'd scared to death of them.

I still had to get the fucking nest down and burn it.

This time, there was no one to glorify in the newt's death and to top things off, the little girl began to scream.

The newt's body was twitching, death throes of a spectacular scale so it was difficult to get around the damned thing to check on the girl. By the time I worked my way over its beefy, plump thigh, she was to sniffing and the sobbing was down to a few tears and hiccups. Her dress was torn, some bits of it caught on the newt's mouth and that's when I noticed she only had one shoe. She held the other one up by its ribbons or... no, they were ribbons... and the sobbing began again.

"Shoe!" She pointed at the still convulsing newt. "Ate my shoe."

"Oh for... really? You're fucking alive and you're complaining about a damned shoe?" The wailing began again and now I heard people shouting for help, probably heading towards the alleyway where they'll find me, a distraught tiny girl in a torn dress and a dead lizard the size of La Jolla.

"Fine. Shit." I probably wasn't supposed to swear in front of kids. I wouldn't know. My first Singlish words were *tāmā de guānbì* according to Dempsey. The crying became screaming and I waved my hands in front of her, panicking at the rising volume. "*Iesu*, shut up. Fine. I'll go get your damned shoe...just...*shut up*."

§

I wasn't happy.

Actually I was long past unhappy and straight into miserable. It'd taken me and a couple of people I'd conned into helping me get the newt's cooling body into the back of my truck. And that was after I'd gotten the truck from where I'd left it, smearing newt guts and juice all over a perfectly good tarp which I'd laid down on my front seat to keep it relatively clean. Backing it up to the mouth of the alleyway, one thing became crystal clear.

The fricking newt would not fit into the bed of my truck.

Not without some help.

And that help came from a bunch of my knives, a crowd of backseat carvers and a few towels the girl's mother brought me after I'd slit the newt from stem to stern to look for her daughter's damned shoe. I'd found the shoe.

I'd also found the dog so alleged went straight out the window.

Getting as much of the gore off of me as I could, I looked around for the woman who'd given me the towels but she was long gone. As were most of the people who'd come to see the newt and take pictures standing next to it. There were a few crazies—there were always a few crazies—but for the most part, everyone was decent.

Closing the tailgate was a chore and something was making an odd noise, like a frozen goat being run through with a chain saw. I flicked a piece of the newt's foot out of the way of the gate's track when I heard the noise again, a soft growling then a mlemmlem sound, all coming from one side of the truck bed.

There was a kitten. An ugly as fuck newt-coloured kitten sitting on the damned lizard's sagging shoulder, trying to eat its way down to the bone. With his mouth full of newt-meat, the kitten growled at me, standing on his three good legs over the tear he'd made in the creature's shoulder. He was ugly, with matted short fur the color of vomit and concrete and holding a paw up against his body.. There was a notch missing from his left ear, like the one in my right, and his other ear wasn't much better.

And when I plucked him from the newt's shoulder, it bit me.

It was angry, furious at losing its meal and growling a warning loud enough to wake the dead.

For the first time in my life—second if I counted chocolate—I fell in love.

"You, little asshole, are coming home with me," I murmured, tucking it into the crook of my arm, or as much as it would let me. "And I think I'm going to call you Newt."