

## *Scales*

Pulling at the chain on his wrist, Blade tried to squeeze his hand through. He grunted in pain. Every bone in his hand felt like it was going to be crushed. Just when he thought he would have to stop, his hand slipped through the metal links. Blade massaged his aching palm and fingers for a moment. Quietly, he rose to his feet and looked around. There were no windows in the sterile room with medical equipment; only a wooden staircase on one side of the room. Climbing up the steps, Blade pulled at the door handle. He expected it to be locked, but the door swung open with a loud creak. Blade winced at the noise. Another door opened and shut somewhere nearby, and Blade knew he would be discovered soon.

Running through a room furnished comfortably with deep couches and mahogany furniture, Blade flung open the front door and took off into the forest. He could hear shouting behind him coming from the cabin. The night air was cool, and a chilly wind whipped back his dark brown hair. Blade stumbled and fell onto the ground. The dry leaves crackled underneath his body. Pushing himself back up, Blade kept running. He couldn't tell what direction he was heading in, but eventually he was bound to hit the road. The moon's bright beams shone down through the trees casting strange shadows on the ground.

Blade panted heavily as he clawed his way up an incline. He had to get to safety because his family needed him. His little sister with big, blue eyes was celebrating her fourteenth birthday in a week. With one last heave, Blade pulled himself over the top of the hill and stood up. He had reached a road at last. Yellow headlights were coming his direction. Blade waved his arms in the air to get the vehicle's attention even though the driver probably wasn't close enough to see him yet.

Suddenly, a hand reached out from behind and grabbed Blade's shoulder. The strong, sinewy grip jerked him backwards and sent him tumbling down to the bottom of the hill. Blade lay for a moment stunned, the breath knocked out of his body. His assailant leapt down and stood over him. The moonlight shone from behind him so that Blade could only see his silhouette.

"Get up," the man hissed at him.

Slowly, Blade rose to his feet and held his hands up. The man stepped closer and grabbed his arm. Blade looked down at the hand that held him. The skin was rough and appeared to be cracked into dark, solid flakes. The fingers were bony and narrow with long, curved nails. Blade looked up into the man's face. As he shifted, Blade saw a pair of bright green eyes set into a face that was definitely not human. The creature was bald with scaly skin and two slits for a nose. It began dragging him back through the forest.

"What are you? What do you want with me?" Blade demanded.

"Back home," the creature answered. "No escape this time."

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"We made it! We're here! I survived! I'm alive!"

Dramatically, Syrenthia flung herself out of the vehicle and danced around in a circle. Her friend stepped out of the driver's side much more calmly.

"Good grief, Syrenthia. It wasn't that bad of a drive."

"Okay, Miss Catalin who has always has plenty of leg room anywhere because she's the size of a child," Syrenthia retorted.

Rolling her eyes, Catalin popped the trunk of her car and began unloading suitcases and tubs full of clothes. She piled a stack of boxes stuffed with notebooks in Syrenthia's arms.

“All right, Long Legs. You can get rid of some of your excess energy by taking these up while I keep watch on our luggage.”

“To our new penthouse apartment! Yay!” Syrenthia squealed, her hazel eyes sparkling.

With another excited bounce, she began walking towards the elevator in the parking garage. Her long, brown hair bounced up and down as she skipped a few steps. Catalin smiled as she looked at her friend.

“She is never going to pass as a native New Yorker. Especially in Manhattan,” she murmured under her breath.

Turning back to her vehicle, Catalin began pulling out more boxes and stacking them on the ground. Once she had emptied her car’s trunk, she straightened up and looked around the parking garage. The concrete complex had a few people walking through, but there was one man who was standing still staring at Catalin. His sea green eyes were focused on the small Asian girl. Brushing her short black hair behind her ears, Catalin looked back at the man. As he began walking towards her, Catalin shifted her car key between her fingers and reached for the mace in her pocket.

“Okay, load me up again.”

Catalin whirled around at Syrenthia’s voice.

“Whoa, calm down!” Syrenthia held up her hands. “It’s just me, Cat. Remember? Your roommate?”

“Sorry.” Catalin glanced over her shoulder. “I’m a little on edge. Guy over there is giving me the creeps.”

Syrenthia looked over where Catalin indicated. The tall, well-built man drew nearer and waved his hand as the slender girl made eye contact with him.

“Miss Larkin, you made it.” The man’s Irish accent lilted through the parking garage.

“Yes, I didn’t expect to see you so soon. Oh, this is my friend who I told you about.”

Syrenthia gestured to her friend. “Catalin, this is Eamon Walsh. He’s my agent.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Walsh.” Catalin shook the agent’s hand.

“The pleasure is all mine. Please call me Eamon.” The young man turned back to Syrenthia. “I just wanted to make sure your move went smoothly.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know.” Eamon shrugged slightly and smiled. “But it’s a long way from Texas to New York City, so I thought I’d come see if you needed any help. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course, thank you.”

“Here, allow me to take these things for you.”

Eamon picked up a stack of boxes and began walking towards the elevator. Syrenthia followed him with some more cases while Catalin locked up her car and took the last of the luggage. When they reached the top floor, Syrenthia unlocked the handle and pushed the door open. Setting down the boxes, Eamon looked around the living room.

“I see you went with the brown leather couch instead of the red cushioned one,” he commented.

Catalin raised an eyebrow at Syrenthia behind Eamon’s back. The brunette shook her head quickly before he looked back.

“Well, I’m going to leave you two ladies to settle in. Welcome to New York.”

“Thank you for your help.” Syrenthia walked Eamon to the door. “I’ll see you for our meeting on Wednesday.”

“I look forward to it. I’m happy that you won’t have to take those long plane rides every two weeks. We’ll be able to see each other more frequently now.” Eamon glanced over at Catalin. “It was very nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

Syrenthia closed and locked the door behind Eamon. Spinning around, she ran over to Catalin and wrapped her arms around her friend’s tiny frame.

“We did it! We’re in New York City!” Syrenthia lifted Catalin into the air.

“Put me down, you hooligan!” Catalin yelled.

“Make me!”

Poking her fingers into Syrenthia’s ribs, Catalin began tickling her friend mercilessly. The two chased each other over the apartment before collapsing breathlessly on the couch. Syrenthia tossed her arms up in the air.

“I cannot believe that we are here.” Syrenthia rolled over and gazed into Catalin’s dark slanted eyes. “You are starting filming for a major television show next week and rehearsing a Broadway play at the same time.”

“While you are working on the sequel to your incredibly popular book series and creating major art pieces for several galleries,” Catalin interrupted. “Not to mention flirting with a super handsome guy with awesome wavy hair and an Irish accent who owns an agency. How old is he anyway? I mean he looks like he’s about our age, but he owns a business. Also, how did he know about the couch?”

“Wow, so many questions.” Syrenthia laughed. “Okay, well first of all, we are just friends. Eamon is from Ireland, but he’s lived in the states since he was fourteen. His uncle used

him as a high school intern at the agency, and after he graduated college, he took over. He's been running it for two years now."

"And he was the one who picked you out and got your first book published?"

"Yeah. And he helped me pick out our couch when I was here three weeks ago. We were at a lunch meeting reading over my new pages and I mentioned that I was going furniture shopping afterwards, so he asked if he could come along."

"Uh huh, I bet he did."

Picking up a decorative pillow, Syrenthia swung it at Catalin who dodged the blow by rolling off the couch. She hopped up and ran to the kitchen.

"Come on. Let's order some New York pizza or Chinese or something. I'm starving. It'll be our first meal in our new home."

While the girls waited for the food to arrive, Syrenthia poured two glasses of cream soda. She handed one to Catalin and held hers up. The two girls touched their glasses together and said their favorite toast in tandem.

"To the start of a new adventure!"

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Blade dropped his head down in defeat. After he had been caught by the strange creature, he had been dragged back to the secluded cabin. A few of the monsters with similar green and brown scale patterning had dragged him down to the basement. The sterile, white room had even more medical equipment in it than before. Blade had been strapped down to a silver table in the center of the room. He had tried to break free, but the leather straps were too strong.

As he laid on the cold metal, Blade tried to relax so he could think of a way to escape. Closing his eyes, he tried to ignore the pounding in his head. It felt as if his brain was getting

ready to burst. Memories of his family and past kept invading his thoughts. His father's deep brown eyes that were just like his. Cooking banana pancakes for breakfast with his mother. The middle school play that made him want to become an actor. He needed to get out of here and back to his life. With a deep breath, Blade pulled against the restraints again.

“You can stop that. They're not going to break.”

Turning his head to the side, Blade saw a tall man standing on the other side of the room. He walked over and stood above the table.

“What's going on? Who were those monsters that pulled me down here?”

“Monsters?” The man laughed lightly. “Oh Blade.”

Rotating his shoulders in a circle, the man shook his head from side to side. Suddenly, the man began transforming. A forked tongue came out of his mouth, his hair retracted into his head, and his skin began shimmering in ebony and silver colors. The tip of a tail arched over his shoulder and black leathery wings sprouted from his shoulders.

“You're one of them,” Blade gasped. “What are you?”

“Well, some humanoid figures call us reptilians, but we prefer the term superior beings. My name is Vortex.” The reptilian creature leaned over Blade's prostrate body. “Now stay still, and this won't hurt much.”

“What won't hurt?”

Vortex snapped his long, bony fingers. Three reptilians with blue and yellow scales and white lab coats came into the room. Without speaking, they began to attach white round pieces to Blade's temples and forehead. When they were finished, they stretched thin black cords from a large machine into the white circles on Blade's head.

“We're finished, sir.”

“Good, start the process,” Vortex replied.

One of the reptilians pressed a blue button on the machine. A searing pain immediately shot through Blade’s head. Crying out, he writhed on the table. Finally, Vortex held up his hand, and the reptilian hit a green button. The burning slowly receded from Blade’s brain.

“Did it work?” Vortex asked.

“Ask him.”

Vortex looked at Blade. “Tell me who you are.”

“What?”

“Tell me who you are.”

“My name is Blade. Why are you keeping me captive? I’ve done nothing to you,” Blade protested.

Lowering his head, Vortex sighed. “It didn’t work. Go again until he remembers.”

“Please, wait! No!” Blade pleaded.

The reptilian doctor hit the blue button again. As the blinding pain restarted, Blade screamed. He was back in his prison with no possible hope of escape.

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Lifting the brown package under her arm, Syrenthia turned and waved to her roommate. Catalin was in the kitchen finishing her breakfast of toast and grapefruit. She didn’t have to leave for several hours, so she was casually dressed in a black tank-top, denim shorts, and flats.

“See you later, Cat!”

“Bye! I’ll be home late because we’re filming the night scene after rehearsal, so don’t wait up for me,” Catalin called back with her mouth full of food. “Have fun at the gallery.”

Opening the door, Syrenthia jumped back, startled. Eamon was standing right outside with his fist held up ready to knock.

“Eamon, hello!” Syrenthia greeted him. “You surprised me. I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“Yes, I came by for your new pages in the book, and that’s all,” Eamon responded coldly.

“Oh, I thought we were going to look over those on Friday at dinner.”

“I changed my mind.” Eamon’s face remained hardened. “I don’t want to go to dinner.”

“Um okay, uh, I haven’t gathered together all my papers yet,” Syrenthia stammered.

“Syrenthia has to go deliver her painting to the gallery.” Catalin stepped forward out of the kitchen. “She can’t be late for her first meeting there. Why don’t I go get you the pages? That way she won’t be late, and you guys can meet up later to discuss them.”

“I suppose that will do,” Eamon said begrudgingly.

“Great, feel free to take a seat in the living room while I get them.”

As Eamon crossed over to the couch, Catalin looked at Syrenthia and raised her eyebrows. The two had been friends for so long that they didn’t even have to speak to communicate their thoughts. Syrenthia shrugged her shoulders slightly and walked back to the front door.

“I’ll see you later, Cat.”

Catalin waved and turned to Eamon who was still sitting stiffly on the couch. He returned her gaze with icy green eyes.

“Well, I’ll go get those pages for you, so you can be on your way.”

Eamon cocked his head and continued staring at Catalin until she left the room.

Shuddering slightly, Catalin crossed through the back hall into Syrenthia’s bedroom and walked

over to the printer on the desk. She knew her friend trusted her writing agent and had known him for several years, but something about Eamon didn't seem right. Catalin picked up the pages and placed them in a dark blue folder and hurried back to the living room. She wanted to get this creepy guy out of their apartment as soon as possible.

“Okay, I have the new pages. Sorry it took me so long. I was putting them in a folder to make things easier for...”

Catalin's voice trailed off as she entered the living room. Another man was standing next to Eamon. He was tall and well-built with piercing green eyes wearing a postal uniform. The two men stared at Catalin with unblinking gazes.

“Um, who's this?”

“My friend,” Eamon replied, his face expressionless.

“Okay.” Slowly, Catalin placed the folder on a side table next to the couch and backed up into the kitchen. “Well, there's the pages. See you around.”

“Actually, there's one more thing we need,” the other man spoke up, his voice low and rough.

“What's that?” Catalin asked apprehensively.

The two men walked past the folder and drew nearer. Reaching behind her, Catalin wrapped her fingers around the handle of a kitchen knife.

“You.”

Eamon pulled out a roll of silver duct tape while the other man approached Catalin. Quickly, the small girl whipped the knife out in front of her and kicked forward at the man. He dodged nimbly, but Catalin followed up with an elbow strike to his head. As he collapsed on the floor, she whirled around to face Eamon. Suddenly, a misty spray blinded Catalin. A grey haze

formed over her eyes, and she could feel the knife being wrenched from her hand. Hitting out blindly, Catalin tried to defend herself, but she was swiftly overwhelmed. Her wrists and ankles were bound together with several layers of duct tape. She lay on the ground trying to regain her breath.

“You need to correct its vision. If you leave the sight deprivation on too long, it can permanently damage them, and Vortex wants perfect specimens.”

Catalin recognized the other man’s gravelly voice. A few moments later, a bony hand seized her shoulder and forced her to sit up. The same spray misted across her eyes again, and the grey cloudiness cleared away. Catalin blinked several times while her vision returned to normal. Eamon’s hand was in front of her face, and the mist was coming from the center of his palm.

“Who are you?” Catalin gasped.

Eamon pulled his hand away, and the other man approached. Ignoring Catalin, they began pulling the large Persian rug from the living room into the kitchen.

“If you don’t leave now, I’m going to scream, and my neighbors will call the police,” Catalin threatened.

“Your neighbors won’t hear you. All of them have left for work already. The nearest person is five stories down,” Eamon answered indifferently.

Leaning back against the wall, Catalin tried not to panic. She had no idea how they knew her neighbors’ schedules. They must have been stalking her.

“Look, if you want money, I can get that for you,” Catalin offered although she doubted the two were after money.

“No more talking,” Eamon ordered.

Pulling off a strip of duct tape, he placed it across Catalin's mouth and then picked her up. He dropped her on the side of the carpet and looked at his partner.

"You take my form while I take this one back. Follow me soon."

Eamon shook his body. He and the other man began contorting. Suddenly, Eamon transformed into a short, compact man in a khaki uniform while the other man switched into Eamon. Catalin struggled against the duct tape holding her hands behind her back, but it was too strong. She had to find a way to warn Syrenthia. These kidnapers weren't normal people. While the two men continued talking, Catalin looked around desperately. An idea came to her suddenly, and Catalin acted instinctively. The khaki-clothed man had moved into one of the bedrooms, and the new Eamon was opening the front door. Slipping off one of her shoes, Catalin kicked it under one of the dining room chairs.

"All right, I'm heading out. I'll tell Vortex that you'll be along shortly."

The man in khaki knelt down next to Catalin and began rolling the small girl into the carpet. When he was finished, he flung her over his shoulder and walked out of the apartment. Catalin felt despair sink deeper into her stomach with every jolting step that carried her farther away.

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The white room whirled around and floated in the air. Blade groaned as the burning pain receded and left him dizzy and disoriented.

"That's enough for now. He is too weak to continue treatments. Let us see if it has taken effect."

The reptilian doctors unfastened Blade's restraints and dragged his limp body off the table. Collapsing into a heap on the floor, Blade tried to control the trembling in his muscles.

Two of the reptilians seized his upper arms and pulled him to a chair. As he sank onto the rough wooden seat, Blade dropped his head and closed his eyes. He was so tired. If only they would let him sleep.

“What’s your name?”

Opening his eyes, Blade looked up. Vortex was standing in front of him. His forked tongue flickered out of his mouth as he repeated the question.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Blade Levené.”

Vortex sighed and stroked his forehead with his curved black fingernail. His black wings drooped behind his back.

“Where are you from?” he continued questioning Blade.

“New York City. I moved there from my home in Nebraska.”

“What were you doing in New York City?”

Blade hesitated for a moment. A brief memory passed through his mind, but then it was gone before he could grasp it. Vortex scrutinized him with his brilliant blue eyes until Blade answered.

“I was with a theater developing a new musical to take to the Papermill Playhouse. I just graduated college, and that was my first job offer,” Blade replied.

Raising his hand, Vortex summoned one of the doctors over. The reptilian approached with a sheaf of papers on a clipboard.

“There appears to be no progress. What do you suggest?”

The doctor flipped through several of the pages before speaking. “There is nothing more we can do without harming his mind. If we push more treatments now, the damage will undoubtedly be irreversible.”

“What would you suggest then?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing for the present. We’ll just have to watch and see if there’s any change.”

Vortex nodded, and the doctor bowed his head and left the room. Placing a scaly hand on Blade’s shoulder, the reptilian motioned to the green and brown guards.

“Lock him in the green room,” Vortex ordered. “Make sure he doesn’t escape again, but treat him gently.”

“As you command, so shall it be,” the guards replied in unison.

Lifting Blade up by the arms, they hauled him up the stairs and out of the basement. When he was propelled through the living room, Blade noticed a figure on one of the couches. A small girl with short, dark hair was lying unconscious on the plump cushions. Her wrists were fastened behind her back, and a strip of silver duct tape had been placed over her mouth. Blade tried to catch a closer look, but the guards pushed him past the girl and into a side room. As the door slammed behind him, Blade heard the lock click. He was a prisoner.

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“Cat, I’m back!”

Closing the door, Syrenthia stepped inside and kicked the door closed behind her. She set the large canvas in her arms on the dining room table. The gallery had given her another commission, but Syrenthia had been too distracted with Eamon’s strange behavior to be inspired.

Hopefully, Catalin would help her come up with some ideas. She thought that her roommate would be gone by now, but all the lights were still on.

“Hey, did your rehearsal get canceled?”

Syrenthia stepped into the kitchen and looked around. Catalin’s breakfast was still on the counter. Frowning, Syrenthia turned to the back hall.

“Cat? Are you here?”

“Catalin’s not available.”

Whirling around, Syrenthia saw Eamon standing in the center of the living room. He had the same emotionless expression on his face that he had before she left.

“Eamon! What are you still doing here?” Syrenthia asked surprised. “Where’s Cat?”

“She had to leave for a little while. She is out retrieving necessary items.”

Puzzled, Syrenthia moved out of the kitchen. Catalin would never leave their apartment with someone she had just met inside.

“Unfortunately, she had to leave before bringing me the pages,” Eamon interrupted Syrenthia’s thoughts. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.”

As Syrenthia turned to walk to the back hall, she caught sight of something under one of the dining room chairs. Bending down, she picked up Catalin’s shoe.

“That’s odd,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Syrenthia examined the black ballet flat in her hand. Catalin had definitely been wearing the shoe this morning. This was her favorite pair of flats, and she never left her shoes out of her

closet. While Syrenthia went back through the kitchen towards the back hall, she felt a movement behind her. A shadow fell over her, and Syrenthia instinctually spun around with her hands held up. A misty spray hit her arms. Eamon was directly in front of her holding out his hands. Kicking forward, Syrenthia knocked her agent away from her. He stumbled backwards, wrapping his arms around his middle. As he dropped his hands, the spray dissipated.

“What is going on?” Syrenthia yelled. “What did you do to Cat?”

Eamon straightened up and massaged his ribs. Raising his fists, he approached the girl. Syrenthia backed up until she hit the oven. As Eamon struck at her, she dodged to the side, but he managed to grab her arm. Swinging around, Syrenthia scrabbled her hands on the counter trying to find a weapon. Her fingers closed around the plate Catalin had used for breakfast. Quickly, Syrenthia bashed it into the side of Eamon’s head. The glass shattered and sent the man crashing to the ground. With a swift move, Syrenthia opened a drawer and pulled out a Taser and her mace.

“Okay Eamon, if that even is your real name,” she panted out, “you are going to tell me what is going on right now.”

“Or what?” Eamon sneered.

Syrenthia pressed the button on the Taser making the electric current spark brightly and held her mace ready to fire. Holding one hand to his bleeding head, Eamon shrank back slightly.

“Where is Catalin?” Syrenthia demanded. “Tell me or I will make you.”

“You will never find her,” Eamon hissed.

Before Syrenthia could react, Eamon began writhing, his skin began melting away to reveal green and brown scales that were linked together like armor. Syrenthia stared while

Eamon transformed into a hideous creature with long, black, curved fingernails and a tail. Only his icy green eyes remained the same.

“What are you?” Syrenthia gasped.

The creature didn't answer. His tongue hissed out, but he merely shook his head and pressed another button on his watch which had turned into a silver band around his wrist. Syrenthia leapt forward, but it was too late. The creature vanished completely.

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Shaking her head slightly, Catalin lifted her neck up and looked around. She was lying on a hard bed with her hands fastened to the headboard with duct tape. The room was small and had no other furnishings other than the bed. There were no windows and only one door. Catalin strained against the tape binding her hands. The strip over her mouth had begun slipping slightly. Rubbing her mouth on her shoulder, Catalin pulled the tape off completely. She scooted up towards the top of the bed and began biting through the tape until it fell loose on one wrist. Ripping the tape off her other arm, she leapt lightly off the bed and pulled off her one shoe. Quietly, Catalin crossed to the door and touched the handle. As she began to turn the knob, the door swung open knocking her backwards on the carpet. A group of seven people were standing in the hallway outside the room.

“Who are you?” one of the women asked. “Are you one of them?”

Catalin rose to her feet and shook her head. Moving into the hallway, she looked at the group of people. There were three women and four men of different ages and appearances. Suddenly, Catalin tackled one of the men and pinned him to the floor.

“What did you do to Syrenthia?” she demanded. “Eamon or whoever you are, what have you done to her?”

The other men dragged Catalin off Eamon and threw her against the wall. Getting back up, Eamon clapped his hand over Catalin's mouth and pushed her backwards. The small girl struggled against the muscular man, but he pressed his weight against her body trapping her against the wall.

"Listen Catalin," Eamon whispered, "I don't know what happened to you. Whoever you saw earlier was not me though. I'm going to explain everything, but I need you to promise to keep quiet. Okay?"

Slowly, Catalin nodded her head. Eamon removed his hand and stepped back.

"What is going on?" Catalin asked.

"All of us were kidnapped from our homes. The kidnappers were people that we thought we knew who blinded us with some kind of spray from their hands and brought us here. But we found out when we got here that the kidnappers weren't who we thought they were."

"What do you mean?" Catalin interrupted. "Who were they?"

Eamon glanced around before answering in a hushed tone. "I don't know exactly. It's just...they are...they're not..."

"They're not what?"

"They're not human," one of the girls blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"They're some sort of creatures," Eamon took up the explanation. "They can shapeshift into any human, but their natural shape is some type of reptile like creature that walks on two legs. A few of them even have wings."

"But that's impossible," Catalin gasped.

“That’s what we thought,” Eamon answered. “But it’s not. More exists than we considered possible.”

Catalin stepped back and leaned against the wall. Her mind was reeling from all she had been told.

“If what you are saying is true,” she whispered, “then how do I know that you are the actual Eamon? How do I know that you’re not one of the shapeshifters pretending to be Eamon?”

“If I were one of them, why would I have told you any of this?”

“Good point.” Catalin looked around. “So why are you guys all standing around here? Why haven’t you tried to escape yet?”

“Oh believe me, we have tried.” Eamon sighed and ran his fingers through his wavy blonde hair. “There’s no escape route out of here. We are in the middle of the forest, and every time we try to get out of the door, they catch us and throw us in the hole in the wall.”

“In the what?”

“The hole in the wall.” The girl who first spoke to Syrenthia pointed to a small door on the opposite wall at the end of the hall. “It’s right over there. It’s a tiny room that they force us to stay in for days when we break the rules. They turn the lights off so it’s completely dark in there, and there’s freezing cold water that drips down the walls.”

Glancing at the hole in the wall, Catalin turned back to the group.

“So what are the rules, and how do they know if you break them?”

“There aren’t that many rules,” Eamon replied. “Obviously we’re not supposed to try to escape, but we also can’t be too loud or fight with each other. Oh, and we can’t go down to the basement either unless they take us.”

“Good because I wanted to go to the creepy basement,” Catalin muttered under her breath.

“We’re not sure how they know when we’ve broken the rules, but they know,” Eamon continued,” and they punish us worse every time.”

“How do you know that one of you isn’t a reptilian? Maybe that’s how they find out things,” Catalin suggested.

“No, everyone here checks out same as you. We figured out that when the reptilians pose as humans, they transform all of themselves except their eyes. As humans, their eyes are always either blue, green, or hazel and are unnaturally bright,” Eamon said.

“I see that you are giving away all of our secrets.”

Catalin spun around with the rest of the group. A man who looked exactly like Eamon stood at the other end of the hall. As he drew nearer, Catalin could see that his eyes were a more brilliant icy blue than the real Eamon.

“Do you remember me?”

“I wish I didn’t,” Catalin returned brusquely.

“You may have confused me with someone else, but my real name is actually Ryker.”

The reptilian contorted his body and transformed into his natural form. Reaching out one long claw, Ryker pressed a button on the wall. Instantly, a row of wooden chairs rose out of the ground by one of the walls.

“Everyone take a seat,” the reptilian commanded.

Slowly, everyone obeyed the order. When Catalin hesitated, the reptilian seized her arm and dragged her to a chair. Four more reptilians with yellow and blue scales entered the hall and helped Ryker strap everyone’s arms and legs down.

“What are they going to do to us?” Catalin whispered to Eamon who sat next to her.

Before he could answer, one of the reptilians backhanded Catalin in the face. Her head whipped to the side and struck the side of the chair. Catalin could feel blood dripping down the side of her head.

“Do not injure the subjects without orders from me,” Ryker ordered. “And you, do not speak again without permission.”

“Hey, leave her alone!” Eamon called out.

Ryker shoved the Irish agent back in his chair and fastened a silver band tightly around his head. Eamon grunted in pain as the reptilian tightened the headpiece. One of the blue and yellow reptilians attached a matching metallic circle around Catalin’s head. Craning her neck around, Catalin could see the other three reptilians placing headpieces on the rest of the prisoners.

“Stop moving.” Ryker placed a claw around Catalin’s neck and forced her to face forward. “Believe me, it will be much less painful if you remain still.”

Pulling out a black remote, the reptilian pressed a yellow button in the center. Immediately, a burning pain shot through her head. Catalin could feel the burning worsen until it felt as though her brain was a torch scorching through her skull. Screams and groans echoed around her. Just when she thought she could not take any more pain, the burning receded slightly. Catalin gasped for breath as her muscles shook uncontrollably. The reptilians pulled off the silver bands and unfastened the restraints.

“Now,” Ryker instructed, “everyone kneel.”

Catalin watched while two of the men and one of the women obeyed. The others remained in their chairs with their eyes tightly closed against the pain.

“Kneel!” Ryker yelled.

The rest of the group except Catalin and Eamon mechanically slipped out of their chairs and knelt. Looking at the girl to the right of her, Catalin gasped. Her pupils had expanded over almost all of her eyes.

“Sir, what do we do with this one?”

One of the reptilian doctors seized a handful of Catalin’s short black hair, pulled her up, and shoved her towards Ryker. Losing her balance, Catalin stumbled and fell in a heap at the reptilian guard’s feet.

“She must first learn obedience before her mind is pliable enough for use,” the doctor instructed.

“Understood.” Ryker grabbed Catalin’s upper arm and threw her against the wall. “Kneel in front of me.”

“Why?” Catalin asked.

“No more questions!” Ryker slammed his claw against the wall right next to Catalin’s head. “Do it. Kneel down now.”

Tightening her lips, Catalin refused to move. She knew that these strange creatures could probably force her to kneel, but she wouldn’t let them break her without a fight.

“I did not want to have to do this, but you give me no choice. This is your last chance. Kneel down.”

“No,” Catalin replied.

With one strong blow, Ryker knocked the girl to the floor and held out his hand. One of the doctors handed him a long wooden stick. The scaly creature brought the switch down heavily. Curling up in a ball, Catalin brought her arms up over her head. Her back was throbbing

with each new stroke. Through the blur of pain, Catalin vaguely heard Eamon's voice yelling, and suddenly, Ryker was jerked away. Coughing and gasping for air, Catalin collapsed to the floor. She could see Eamon on top of Ryker punching the reptilian in the face. The doctors quickly grabbed Eamon and pulled him away while Ryker stood up.

"Throw him in the hole in the wall," the reptilian ordered emotionlessly. "And take the girl to the basement. We'll deal with her more effectively there."

"Yes sir."

Still panting for breath, Catalin watched helplessly as Eamon was hurled through the small door in the wall. She was dragged to her feet and pulled away down a wooden staircase into the unknown.

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"Come on," Blade gasped in frustration.

The small staple that he had managed to yank out of the carpet snapped off in the door's keyhole. Blade threw it down in disgust and laid back on the floor. He had to think of a way to get out of this room.

"Let her go! Leave her alone!"

Sitting up, Blade pressed his ear against the door. He could hear shouting and yelling coming from outside his room. It sounded like a man with an Irish accent screaming at someone else. Suddenly, his yells seemed to break off as though he had been struck in the stomach. A few moments later, Blade heard a thudding sound in the distance as though a body had been thrown against a wall.

"Stop it! Eamon!"

A girl's voice was calling out now. Blade glanced around the room again searching for a way to escape. There were no windows and the vents were far too small. Leaping on the bed, Blade gazed upwards. The grey panels on the ceiling seemed to be loose. Blade reached up and pushed one of the panels up and to the side. Quickly, he jumped on the bed and grabbed the edge of the opening. Hoisting himself into the empty space, Blade began crawling towards the direction of the hallway.

The voices grew louder as he continued moving. Once he was directly above the yelling, Blade quietly shifted one of the ceiling tiles a few inches. He could see several of the reptilian creatures dragging the girl he had seen earlier down the basement stairs. The rest of the reptilians were forcing a small group of people into a different room. When everyone had left the hall, Blade pulled the ceiling tile away and let himself down quietly. Dropping the last few inches to the ground, he began tiptoeing down the hall towards the front door.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and two reptilians entered talking to each other. Before they looked up, Blade dashed to the side. As their voices drew nearer, he looked around frantically for a place to hide. The only clear direction was down the wooden staircase towards the basement. Blade hesitated for a moment. He knew that the medical room was at the bottom, and he didn't want to return to it. The reptilians were getting ready to turn the corner.

Blade made a split-second decision and went down the stairs. The small girl that had been dragged away was being strapped down onto the silver table, and reptilian scientists in lab coats were pulling out IVs. Staying near the shadows by the wall, Blade managed to slip down the stairs and hide behind a tall filing cabinet. The girl was struggling, but the reptilians held her arms down and stabbed the IVs into her veins.

Ryker nodded to one of the scientists who pressed a button. A green liquid sped through the IVs. Immediately, the girl's body stiffened, and her muscles began shaking wildly. Glancing around the room, Blade tried to find another way out. The only escape seemed to be back up the stairs, but there was no way that he could leave without being seen. He would just have to wait until the reptilians had left. Blade peered out again. The girl had fallen limp and appeared to be unconscious. Ryker slapped her face, but her eyes remained closed.

“Leave her. We will continue later. Let us go check on the others and the one in the green room.”

The rest of the reptilians followed Ryker up the stairs. Quietly, Blade slipped around to the other side of the filing cabinet as they passed him. Once they had reached the top of the steps and rounded the corner, Blade stood up and began walking to the stairs. Suddenly, a groan came from behind him. Turning around, Blade looked at the table. The girl had begun moving slightly. Her eyes were still closed, but her head was moving from side to side.

Blade started towards her, but then moved back to the stairs. He didn't have time to worry about this girl that he had never met. It was now or never for his escape. Blade placed his foot on the first step. He could hear the girl groaning in pain again, but he knew better than to go back for her. Even though she might know more information that could help him, it wasn't worth the risk. Taking a deep breath, Blade shook his head. He knew he was getting ready to make a decision he was going to regret.

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Syrenthia slammed her hand on the counter. The rest of the people in the lobby turned to look at her, but the girl didn't care. Her only focus was getting someone to help her.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but until your friend has been missing for 24 hours we cannot report this as an official kidnapping,” the police officer at the desk repeated.

“But I’m sure that’s what has happened to her,” Syrenthia protested. “And the longer we wait, the harder it will be to find her.”

“Ma’am, if you actually saw the kidnapping or received a phone call from the kidnappers, we could do something.”

“As I already told you, I was out on an errand when she went missing,” Syrenthia started to speak, but the officer interrupted.

“Then, how do you know that she was kidnapped? Maybe she just stepped out to take care of something or had an emergency to take care of or was called into work.”

“I know she was kidnapped because I was attacked!”

“Who attacked you, ma’am?”

“He was...it was...I mean...” Syrenthia faltered and trailed off.

She knew that she couldn’t tell the police what had happened. No one would believe that her writing agent had turned into a strange creature with scales and a tail. She hardly believed it herself. If she told the police, she would probably be put in an insane asylum, leaving no one to rescue Catalin.

“Look, I’m telling you the truth. My friend was kidnapped, but if you won’t believe me, then I’ll just go find her myself,” Syrenthia said.

“Ma’am, I would advise against taking any rash actions...”

Throwing open the door, Syrenthia walked out on the rest of the officer’s speech into the bright daylight. As she moved down the street, her mind raced frantically. She had to think of a way to find Catalin. Syrenthia slowed down and sat on a bench.

“Okay, think. Think. There has to be a clue somewhere,” she muttered to herself. “Eamon must have taken Catalin to a place and then come back to kidnap me which means that she can’t be far. Unless he had help.”

Syrenthia sighed. There was one option. Her only lead was Eamon. She had to track him down and force him to tell her where he had taken Catalin. Standing up, Syrenthia signaled a cab and gave the address for Eamon’s office. While the taxi sped over the blocks, she tried to formulate a plan. She had put her mace and Taser into her backpack with a few other supplies. As the car ground to a halt outside of a tall office building, Syrenthia took a deep breath. She had beaten Eamon before, and she was going to do it again. Opening the front door, Syrenthia walked over to the receptionist.

“Hello Kathy, how are you doing?”

“Miss Larkin, nice to see you,” Kathy replied looking up. “We were not expecting you today.”

“I’m here to see Eamon Walsh. I know that I don’t have an appointment, but it’s urgent.”

Syrenthia glanced around furtively while Kathy clicked a few keys on her computer. After a moment, the receptionist looked back up.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Larkin. It appears as though Mr. Walsh isn’t in today. He’s actually been absent for several days now.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Kathy sent Syrenthia a slightly reproving stare. “I don’t make it a habit to question the CEO’s decisions especially when it comes to personal matters. If you would like though, I will send him an email saying that you dropped by.”

“Thanks, that would be great.”

Syrenthia started for the door when an idea struck her. Turning around, she walked back to the reception desk.

“Actually I was hoping to just leave this in his office.” Syrenthia held up a blue folder. “Eamon asked to read my new pages as soon as possible, so I thought I might as well drop them off now since I was in the area. I’d like to leave them on his desk if that’s possible just to make sure that no one else sees them except him.”

“Of course.” Kathy stood up. “Please follow me. Mr. Walsh’s office is just down the hall.”

Syrenthia racked her brain for a way to get rid of the receptionist once she was inside Eamon’s office. As she set the folder down, Syrenthia caught sight of a large stack of unopened letters on the edge of the large wooden desk.

“Okay, well I guess that’s it,” she said.

Quickly, Syrenthia spun around so that her elbow knocked off a cup of pencils.

“I’m so sorry,” she apologized. “I’m so clumsy.”

“Let me help you,” Kathy offered.

While the receptionist bent down, Syrenthia whipped out her phone and took a picture of the letter on top. After apologizing a few more times, she left the office and signaled a cab. Pulling up her photos, Syrenthia zoomed in on the letter’s address and called it out to the driver. Eamon’s house was in a small neighborhood in New Jersey. The area seemed to be fairly quiet.

“Okay, just stop here,” Syrenthia instructed.

“Are you sure?” the driver asked. “The address is actually around the corner.”

“Yeah, I know. Here is fine.”

Opening the door, Syrenthia shoved a wad of bills in the driver's hand before taking off. Carefully, she walked to the corner and peered around. No one was on the street, but Syrenthia still clutched her mace in one hand. Eamon's house was the fourth one on the left. It didn't appear as though his car had been driven in at least a week. The leaves and dust had gathered on the windshield and roof. A stack of unopened newspapers was on the front porch. Bracing herself, Syrenthia approached the door and tried the handle. Surprisingly, it turned easily, and the door swung inward. Syrenthia stepped inside and gently closed the door behind her. Adrenaline rushed through her body as she walked silently down the hallway. With a deep breath, she slipped around the corner into another room.

"What happened here?" Syrenthia gasped.

The place had been completely wrecked as though a fight had taken place in the middle of the living room. The side tables had been knocked over, the couch cushions were slashed and ripped, and the television was lying on the ground. Cautiously, Syrenthia moved into the living room. Broken glass crunched under her boots. Bending down, she examined the ground. There were a few crimson drops on the beige carpet. Syrenthia's heart sank as she realized the sticky stains were blood. There were more droplets leading to another room. The girl followed the trail to a table in the dining room. The blood ended at a rug situated under the table.

"I wonder..." Syrenthia murmured.

Pushing the table away, she picked up the large rug and tossed it to the side. The wood floor underneath seemed to be completely normal until she caught sight of a small hole. Syrenthia pushed two of her fingers into the opening and heaved upwards. A large panel pulled away revealing a deep pit beneath with a rope ladder dangling down into the darkness. Hastily,

Syrenthia pulled an LED flashlight from her backpack and clipped it onto her jean's belt loops. Stepping onto the first rung, she carefully made her way down to the bottom.

Once her feet had reached solid ground, Syrenthia unfastened her flashlight and shone it around. She appeared to be in a tunnel of sorts. There were long metal strips on the ground in front of her that resembled train tracks. A large steel cart was standing on top of the tracks. Syrenthia walked over to the tracks and shone her light as far as it would reach. The tunnel went much farther than her flashlight could reach. Hoisting herself into the cart, Syrenthia glanced around. There were two floor pedals at the front of the cart and two at the back. Still standing, the girl pressed down on the left pedal at the front, but nothing happened.

“Well, let's see what the other one does.”

Syrenthia stepped on the right pedal, and the cart lurched forward. Bright lights beamed from the front down the tracks. The harder that she pressed on the pedal, the faster she sped along. After a while, Syrenthia could see the headlights shining on a wall up ahead. Quickly, the girl hit the left pedal and ground to a halt a few yards away from the wall. Leaping out of the cart, Syrenthia walked over to the wall where a tall metal ladder was attached and began climbing upwards.

“Hang on, Catalin. I'm coming.”

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The fluorescent light pierced through her head. Catalin groaned and shut her eyes. Her body felt drained and weak as though she had been running for a very long time. Suddenly, a warm hand touched her face. Opening her eyes quickly, Catalin jerked away from the person.

“Hey, it's all right. I'm not going to hurt you,” the young man whispered.

Catalin stared at the boy. He had dark brown hair and hazel eyes. When he unfastened the restraints on her wrists, Catalin reached down and released her ankles.

“Who are you?” she asked in a hushed tone.

“My name is Blade. I’ve been a prisoner here for a while, but I managed to escape today. I was hoping that you maybe knew of an escape route.”

“I’m so sorry,” Catalin replied. “I don’t know how to get out of here. The other prisoners told me that this place is in the middle of the woods.”

“Yeah, I made it out to the highway once before I got recaptured.”

“Then you could take us that way again!” Catalin said excitedly.

“I could except I don’t know how to get out of this building. The front door is the only way that I have found, and it’s now heavily guarded.”

Biting her lip, Catalin considered any other escape routes. She could feel Blade’s eyes studying her. Finally, she looked up and shook her head.

“The only exit that I have seen is the front door. There’s probably another way out, but I haven’t found it. I haven’t even found any windows.”

“Then, I guess we’re stuck here until we can figure out an escape.”

“Maybe I could help with that.”

Catalin yelped with surprise when the voice came from seemingly nowhere. Swiftly, Blade placed a hand over Catalin’s mouth and pointed. A grate on the floor just below her shifted to the side. Two hands came out of the opening, and then a head popped through unexpectedly.

“Did you miss me?”

“Syrenthia,” Catalin gasped, “what in the world are you doing here?”

“I’m your knight in shining armor here to rescue you of course,” Syrenthia replied, pulling herself the rest of the way up. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Blade,” Catalin introduced the young man. “Now, let’s get out of here. You won’t believe what all has happened.”

“I might.” Syrenthia led the way back down the ladder. “I did see Eamon turn into some type of crazy monster thing.”

“Oh yeah, that’s not actually Eamon,” Catalin explained. “He’s being held captive here. That was just one of those reptilian creatures pretending.”

“Eamon’s here!” Syrenthia stopped moving. “We have to go back and save him.”

“No,” Blade disagreed. “It’s too dangerous. If we go back, we’ll get caught for sure.”

“Blade is right,” Catalin put in. “The only way to rescue him is to get out of here and contact the authorities.”

Syrenthia hesitated for a moment and then nodded her head. Blade followed her into the cart and held out his hand for Catalin. While the small girl clambered inside, she glanced backwards. Two brilliant blue spots stood out in the darkness. Catalin squinted at them for a moment before realizing that they were eyes.

“Syrenthia, go!” she yelled. “Now!”

Instantly, the reptilian looking down the trapdoor leapt to the ground. Syrenthia slammed down on the right floor pedal at the back of the cart. Lurching forward, the cart began rumbling down the tracks. The black and silver reptilian spread out his wings and lifted into the air.

“He’s following us! Hurry!” Catalin shouted.

Syrenthia pressed down on the pedal with all of her strength. As the cart began picking up speed, the reptilian fell farther and farther behind. Breathing in deeply, Catalin sank down to

the floor of the cart. Relief flooded through her as she realized that they were on their way to safety.

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“Watch out!”

Immediately, Blade withdrew his hand at Syrenthia’s call.

“Move your hand a little bit to the right before you pull yourself out. There’s broken glass where you were reaching,” Syrenthia explained.

Shifting his hand over to where she directed, Blade raised himself out of the trapdoor and into a trashed dining room. Syrenthia was standing in the living room, peeking out of the windows. As soon as Blade had moved to the side, Catalin emerged.

“Here, give me your hand. I don’t want you to get cut since you’re not wearing shoes.”

Blade extended his hand and lifted Catalin’s small figure out of the hole. Setting her down where there was no broken glass, he looked over at Syrenthia.

“Are we good?” he asked.

“I think so,” she replied. “I don’t see anyone out there.”

“Sh,” Catalin held up a hand, “I think I hear something.”

All three fell silent. In the stillness, Blade could hear thumping from down below.

“They’re coming after us!” Syrenthia began racing towards the front door. “We have to leave now!”

Quickly, Blade picked Catalin up and carried her over the broken glass through the house. Syrenthia flung the door open for them. Once they reached the yard, Blade set the small girl down. The three set off running. Before they had reached the end of the block, seven men had burst out of the front door and began chasing them. Glancing over his shoulder, Blade could

see the men were gaining on them rapidly. They were only a few yards away. Unexpectedly, a police car pulled around the corner. The officers stopped and leapt out of their cruiser. Blade followed Syrenthia as she raced towards the policemen.

“Are you guys okay?” one of the officers asked.

“Those men are trying to kidnap us!” Catalin cried out.

The policemen drew their guns and yelled for the small group to get into the back of the car. Blade sat in between the two girls. As the group of seven men approached with weapons drawn, the officers retreated back to the vehicle. Jumping inside, they backed down the street and turned onto a larger road.

“You have to call for backup,” Syrenthia said. “Those guys have a lot of other people held captive in a cabin in the woods.”

The two officers looked at each other, but did not respond. Blade could see one of them press a button on the side.

“You have to call for backup,” Syrenthia repeated.

The policeman in the passenger seat turned to face the backseat. His bright blue eyes looked directly at Blade.

“I do hope you are quite finished with this escaping business, Blade,” he said in a calm, collected voice.

“What? Who are you?” Syrenthia asked.

“Quick! Get out!” Catalin yelled.

Grabbing the handle, the girl tried to open the door, but it was locked. The officer laughed lightly and shook his head.

“You can give that up,” he said, pulling out a gun. “We are not ignorant enough as to let you escape that easily.”

Pointing the gun at the back seat, the officer pushed another button on the panel. Two sets of handcuffs came down from the ceiling. The chains dangled above the girls’ heads.

“Cuff them,” the man ordered.

As Blade pulled the girls’ wrists up and fastened them in the cuffs, the officer took out two syringes. He held them out to Blade.

“Do it.”

When she caught sight of the needles, Catalin began struggling against her restraints. The policeman quickly transformed into his natural form with black and silver scales.

“Vortex,” Blade said.

“Yes, I am glad you remembered my name. That seems like a good sign.” Vortex pointed the gun at Catalin. “Stay still or I will put a bullet in you.”

“Do it.” Catalin glared at the reptilian. “Why don’t you just skip the torture and kill me?”

Vortex jerked his head towards Blade. “He can answer that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Blade protested. “I don’t know why you’re doing this.”

“Yes, you do.” Vortex grabbed Blade’s face with his free hand. “Think hard. When was the first time you saw us?”

“I don’t remember. I don’t know.” Blade screwed his eyes shut. A faint image was in the back of his head. “You were...I was...it was raining.”

“Yes,” Vortex replied, “there was rain, and what else?”

“Blue and red.” Blade pressed his fingers against his temples. “There were flashing blue and red lights. I was upside down.”

Snapping his eyes open, he looked into Vortex’s face. His mind was spinning, and he felt slightly dizzy.

“I was in a car crash.”

“Yes, you were. Now, tell that inferior being why I will not kill her.”

Blade turned to Catalin. “He is not going to kill you because he needs you. The reptilians have been replacing humans in influential positions for years. They take the human memories and implant them in their own minds so they can take their roles in society. However, there are not enough of them to continue this way. This time, they plan to take the humans for only a short period of time so they can reeducate their minds to receive orders. Then, they will release them under their control.”

“How do you know that?” Syrenthia asked.

“Because.”

Blade’s body began shaking uncontrollably. His skin became rough and scaly. Two humps began growing on his back until they burst through as leathery black wings. In a few moments, Blade had completely transformed into a black and silver reptilian.

“Because,” he repeated, “I am one of them.”

Taking the syringes, he stabbed them into the girls’ veins and pressed down on the plungers. Their screams filled the vehicle as it rolled down a road into the dense forest.