

5.

HYBRID KINDERGARTEN

GOSHA, 2:08 PM

From its exterior, the place could hardly be called a building; it was more like four walls and a roof held up by goodwill and luck; to the city, the place was as forgotten as Friday night, its funding long since left to charity and chance. Nestled between larger warehouses bordering the edge of the Black Market, it thrived nonetheless, unseen, a second home for children, but itself an orphan.

And yet, no tears awaited the old komodo dragon as he approached, no wails of the exiled. The walls were shaking not with struggle to maintain themselves, but with the cheers of countless little voices—and those voices were having a *blast*.

The door opened with the chime of a little old bell, still sharp, still clear.

“Uncle Gosha!”

The first voice leapt up in time with the first kid to see him. Then:

“Gosha-san!”

“Ah, Gosha!”

“Yay!”

“Ah!”

Just as it was every week, in one moment—one perfect moment—the lizard felt like his grin could have held the entire place up. For that one moment, as far as he was concerned, it was an *entire room* of his grandson, all happy to see him again.

The dragon’s scales nearly creaked out from the pressure of his own joy before he forced it back down, beamed, and flashed the many bags he had draped along his arms. The little gasps increased exponentially on sight of them, and the horde advanced.

An impala wheeled about behind a counter, wiping her hands down, her big eyes fixed on

the old-timer as he loomed over them all (herself included). She stayed back not out of indifference or of fear (given what komodos could do), but simply to let the kids rush him first.

“Hold me!” one smaller child demanded, gleefully, attacking Gosha in a hug. Another animal just had its wings out, pleading quietly for the same, and the reptile easily bore them both up, the bags rustling along his arms by their straps.

“Haha,” Gosha rumbled, big and strong, his scales rough but smooth as he held a mixed-breed cat-dog child and a platypus-hawk tight. “Surprise! Ah, I brought books and markers and treats today—but I’ll have to use my arms to get them out, so...are you sure you want me to hold you all day?”

One kid rushed back down, wide-eyed and wagging wild. The other clung a little longer, squeezing in closer as Gosha paused the theatrics long enough to let him.

“You usually come on Saturdays, Mr. Gosha,” the impala began, patiently detaching the avian child and setting him down as the other kids flooded in and groped up at the bags. “It actually is something of a surprise!”

“Well, construction at the site is at a standstill, haha,” Gosha politely explained, lowering himself just enough to let the kids tear through the frightened bags for their spoils. “Contract adjustments, I imagine. So, here I am, free on a weekday!”

“Well, I know they hardly mind,” she laughed, stepping back as the tiny mob broke into a frenzy of page-flipping and marker waving.

Some kids cheered at the sight of cookies in paper bags, while one brandished a huge lollipop like it was a magic wand, already pointing it at his friends and rivals. Another sniffed at three wrapped goods, then made a face.

“What are these, Uncle?” an anteater-giraffe hybrid asked, confused. “They smell funny.”

“Hmm?” Gosha grunted, grabbing them up and looking closer. “Ah, these were specialty-bought, see the colored wrapping?”

“They smell.”

“Do they?”

Gosha investigated with a flick of his tongue, taking her seriously.

“They smell like rolls and sweets to me. You sure you don’t want them?”

She nodded fast, opting for a set of colored pencils instead.

“Anyone want these?” the lizard offered, waving them over the frenzied kids and their prizes. “If not, I’ll set them down for later.”

“Maybe they’re poisoned!” another kid muttered, wagging.

“I...assure you, I didn’t bring poisoned sweets, haha,” Gosha playfully countered.

“But that witch poisoned that one apple!” another counter-counter.

“Hah, okay, then. Here, look.”

Gosha grinned, unwrapping a roll from the trio, holding it up.

“Don’t do it, Uncle!” another kid balked, serious.

“Oh, no!”

“Stop!”

“I’ll show you all, okay?” Gosha laughed, cocking his head. “Then, story time!”

“Ooh, story time!”

“Okay!”

He hardly cared for sweets, but it was best to squelch rumors right away, so the reptile opened his jaws, set the entire roll in, and gulped it right down, in full. The kids all watched, mouths open, brows high, waiting for him to maybe die, when—

“Gah,” Gosha wheezed, suddenly, clutching his stomach. The eyes widened considerably around him as he wobbled in place and moaned, breathing harder, more raggedly.

“Oh, no!” one girl finally cried, the other kids lurching back.

The impala sighed.

“Uncle Gosha, no!”

“I told you, I *knew* it!”

“It...it’s so delicious!” Gosha exclaimed, rubbing his stomach over demonstrably. “You kids really should have tried it when you had the chance! You have to try new things, after all!”

“Uncle Gosha!” they all roared in unison, half-enraged, half laughing.

“You’re not dead, Uncle?” one kid balked, still not sure.

“Not yet!”

“Then, story time!” the kids all cheered, making him lean back.

“Well. You could be a *little* more relieved,” the old lizard chuckled, wagging his tail.

“Read this, Uncle Gosha, read this!” one kid roared, bouncing in place with a large picture book in tow, making it impossible for the komodo to even see what it was.

She was a mix of a panda and rabbit, large black circles caging great big eyes, matching dark ears flapping in excitement. They were all mixed, a daycare filled with nothing but ‘troublesome’ hybrids. The lizard’s sympathy overflowed so bad it hurt, every single time he came over.

God. If Toki had still been there.

“Okay, haha, okay,” Gosha agreed, setting the rumpled bags down and cracking his large scaled knuckles dramatically. “Let’s just see what this is, then! Lots of romance and slow walks and kissing, I bet—”

“Eww!”

“Haha, no!”

“Ugh!”

“It has a dragon in it, no! It’s awesome!”

That last bit got him smiling so much wider. Komodo dragons never heard that out loud, in public, ever. *Ever, ever*. That might have seriously been the first time in his 54 years of existence that the words had been strung together in that pleasant of a manner.

“Well,” the old reptile started, sitting down on the kindergarten mat with a suddenly-attentive cluster of kids, “you’ve sold me! Let’s see what this is all about!”

That very same clump of kids wiggled in place, eyes bulging.

The picture book cracked open, new and vocal, when the door chimed again.

“This is the story of a young minstrel saving a town from a...from a great, big dragon,” he spoke, quickly recovering from the unseen blow as he read the front page.

Ah. There it is.

“The dragon’s fire terrified everyone in the little hamlet—”

“What’s a hamlet?” one kid asked, peeking up over the group.

“Ah, that’s another word for a village or little town,” Gosha answered, not missing a beat. “Just a *little* smaller, like a settlement in the old days.”

“Ooh.”

“Sounds like meat,” another whispered.

“Well, I don’t think the dragon really wanted ham, haha,” Gosha added. “Now, in this town was a young minstrel, a traveling singer and storyteller—”

“Like you!” another kid chirped.

“Haha, I’m no singer—”

“Physicals?”

The impala’s soft voice reached Gosha, just over the chatterings of the kids as they reacted. Another voice answered, a bit out of breath, as though recovering.

“Haha, yes ma’am, I—”

A page rustled.

“Yes, this should be it. This is the Hybrid Kindergarten?”

“Well, yes...but check-ups are semiannual, we aren’t due by the city for a few months.”

“Oh, no,” the male voice replied. “Well, that’s a mixup, isn’t it? Shoot. Okay, well...I mean, I have my tools with me, though some knucklehead at HQ took my good bags by mistake. I don’t mean to bother you over a clerical error, but if you want, I can clear you today. I don’t have anywhere else to be, hah.”

Gosha’s eyes were on the book, but his ears (such as they were) were pulling at the front desk. His tongue darted out on reflex, tasting the air rapidly, making him stop-start his reading of the story.

“Uncle Gosha, you’re reading it funny,” one kid gently fussed, ears twitching.

“Oh, am I?”

“—if you don’t mind, but I’m surprised you’re willing. Frankly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen the city this intent on helping...well, *them*.”

Out of the corner of Gosha’s eye, he saw.

A tall, slender gazelle in a medical mask was turning from the front desk to look. It wasn’t a glance in Gosha’s direction, but rather past him, at the crowd of tiny hybrids. The passivity of his closed eyes changed as he opened them and stared at them all. So much raced by in that beat, in that blink, that they appeared blank, back at square one, but not. Was it sympathy Gosha saw in his eyes? Kindness? Sadness?

Why, in that instant, did the gazelle doctor look so...off?

“...Patients are patients, miss,” the gazelle said, looking back her way, his eyes closed again. “They’re all the same, to me.”

“Oh,” she huffed, relieved. “I can’t say how refreshing it is to hear that. Should I stop them, and we begin, or do you want to set up for a bit?”

“I’m not here to interrupt, haha,” the gazelle hummed. “Why don’t I set up? Ah, is there

anywhere in the back I could—”

“Of course, of course! There’s a back door right down past the stack of naptime pads in that corner, you see it?”

“Oh, perfect, a back room?”

“Well, it connects to the old warehouse system, so the city lets us use it. There’s plenty of room back there.”

“Don’t mind me, then. It might take a few minutes.”

Gosha had stopped outright, the old-timer twisting halfway over to watch as the gazelle passed them all, waving, his eyes still closed. The lizard’s tongue flickered faster.

“I’m happy to help, doctor,” he offered, getting up to a stand.

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself, sir, haha,” the gazelle murmured through his mask. “It’s generally a one-person operation! Thank you, though, really.”

A police siren rolled by, loudly, bleeping twice. The doctor didn’t react at all.

“You’re sure?” Gosha asked, smiling. “From the smell, you must have cut yourself earlier, I don’t mind playing assistant if you need to rebandage any!”

The gazelle’s eyes nearly opened. Nearly.

“The smell?”

“Blood.”

The group of kids looked back and forth as the two adults stared at each other, silent.

“Wow, you’re good, haha,” the doctor started, smirking through the edges of the mask. “That’s not my blood, actually, the nurse at HQ bungled a donation, so I stepped in to help, last minute, before leaving for my rounds. New hire, and all.”

“That’s a relief!” Gosha hummed, nodding. “I’m a busybody, then, my mistake.”

The gazelle’s hands went up, one holding a large medical bag. A few splotches of blood

were hurriedly wiped off the handles. The slight smudges of remaining pink told it all.

“Hey, no harm, no foul, sir. If you’ll excuse me.”

He made for the back door and grabbed its handle, then paused.

“You know,” he spoke, thinking out loud. “I think we’ll do this in a line, when I start calling you kids in. I’ll call one in at a time, from the line. That usually works fastest. Is that alright, ma’am?”

The impala nodded.

“We have a plan, then,” the gazelle chuckled. “All prepared for anything, that’s how to be, I say. Give me just one minute.”

The kids were already refocused on Gosha as the gazelle entered the back door.

“Uncle Gosha?” one asked, breaking the lizard out of his stare.

“Hmm.”

“The dragon!” another kid reminded, impatient. “What’s the dragon going to do?”

“We’ll find out,” Gosha answered, grinning once again, realizing his old face had taken over; hopefully he hadn’t scared any of the kids in the doing. “But first, since the doctor wants to help you all out, why don’t I bring him a thank-you treat? I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t poison him!” the anteater-giraffe added.

“That’s enough with that, honey,” the impala cut in. “We don’t joke about that with Uncle Gosha, okay? That’s serious.”

The kid looked utterly baffled, not old enough to understand what komodo venom even was, let alone generations of hardwired social implications.

“Haha, it’s alright,” Gosha soothed, grabbing both unwanted treats as he stood. “I’ll be right back, okay? Then you’ll all get a *great* show, I promise.”

Every little tail thumped as he sighed, gave the apologetic-looking impala a smile, and headed over to the back room.

2:20 PM

The gazelle still detected the shutting of the back door, quiet as Gosha had been.

“Ah, hello again,” he huffed, looking back over his shoulder as the lizard entered. “Did I forget something out there?”

Instead of taking everything out of his bag, the doctor was putting something *back in*, fast. His eyes remained close, nonetheless, with not one hint of anxiety. He set the bag down on an old warehouse crate, and the slightest metal *thud* rang out.

“Ah, I’m being a pest again, I imagine,” Gosha replied, shrugging. “Old age and all that. I was just moved by your kindness. It’s not every day that someone cares about hybrids.”

The doctor watched him.

“...I find them interesting, really,” he finally said, clasping his hands together, keeping the tops of the fingers as hidden as possible. “That’s all.”

“Ah, modest too, haha,” Gosha added. “All the better! Well, I won’t hold you up, I just wanted to offer these as a quick thanks for your help.”

The doctor impassively gazed as the old lizard showed him the two treats.

“Freshly bought.”

“Hm,” the gazelle puffed. “Kids didn’t want them, did they?”

“You got me! Haha! Still, they are very good. I had one myself a minute ago.”

“A komodo dragon, eating sweets? What a day. But no, thank you, I don’t really enjoy sweets very much. I can’t taste food. Genetic condition, wouldn’t you know. But again, thanks.”

“Really!”

“Mm. Everything tastes like sand to me.”

“Oh, dear. You really never know with *anyone*, do you?”

The doctor nodded indifferently. Silence took the throne, a second time.

“Did you need anything else?” the gazelle asked, a bit more coldly.

“I was going to ask you the same, actually.”

“Nope. I can set up fine, on my lonesome.”

“Ah, just thought I should check.”

The doctor’s stare worsened, somehow, through his closed eyes. He made no motions to set up anything—not that he had much, anyhow, besides the bag.

“Shouldn’t you start?”

“Just a bit awkward, haha, if I can be blunt,” the doctor slowly said. “Let me guess: you’re taking a break from the kids, back here?”

“You really are one heck of a doctor,” Gosha laughed, straightening his buttoned up flannel shirt. “Quickest diagnosis I’ve ever heard. I’m old, and they aren’t, is all. Can’t tell you the dread I feel when just one of them wants to spin twenty times in place. One cycle destroys me for an hour, haha.”

“Hmm.”

Gosha’s stomach rumbled, breaking through a mounting tension, making him blink in surprise. The doctor noticed, too.

“Sounds like your treat doesn’t agree with you. Maybe you should take your break in the bathroom, instead, if you don’t mind my saying.”

The silence settled one last time, heavy, ugly. Gosha didn’t move.

“Maybe I’ll stay.”

The gazelle watched, and watched, then finally opened his eyes.

“Mm.”

“The first kid that comes in,” Gosha finally said, straightening himself, rolling one sleeve up, then the other. “Was that enough for your plan?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

The hand moving for the bag said otherwise. Gosha locked the door behind him.

“I mean, is one hostage optimal, or were you going for the whole room?”

Yet again, the doctor didn’t react. Same as with the police sirens.

“In case the police found you.”

The gazelle’s brows lifted. To be honest, Gosha had been expecting some sinister glare.

“Oh,” the doctor hummed. “They wouldn’t bother with *this* place unless someone made a ruckus, would they? Not all the way back here. Of course, once I exit the back way, I’ll may very well be exposing myself again, so...one is really all I need, in a pinch.”

The hand was in the bag.

“So. *Am* I in a pinch?”

By the time the gun was out, so was the venom. It sprayed out in a long arc as Gosha spat, the streak nearly slapping the gazelle in the face as one bad shot fired, missing narrowly and striking the wall by the door.

Screams broke out on the other side as Melon swung low and left, dodging the venom at the cost of his aim. It splattered the crate behind him as the gazelle bolted behind a stack of boxes and vanished outright.

Gosha hunched over and tasted the air, breaking around to the far left of that portion of the warehouse at the tattling scent.

“If you think I’d let you slither off with even *one* of those kids—”

“Slither off?” the voice answered, bolder, louder. “That’s the pot, isn’t it! Like I’m escaping, after firing a gun! What were you thinking, coming at me? Haha, you really care that little for those poor little rejects? Don’t you know what cornered animals do!?”

The old Gosha—the *young* one—flared to life, anger stabbing up through his scales as he charged around several rows of crates and burst through one, blowing wood debris and packing hay everywhere as he slashed for Melon, and actually clipped his shoulder.

A second shot fired, killing-close. Like Gosha, this one didn't miss.

“Gah!”

A thin river of blood went airborne as the bullet grazed his left bicep, pulled back enough by his strike with the right that the damage wasn't fatal. Still, Gosha was around him in an instant, tail curling after, forming a semicircle that left the gazelle stumbling back over it as he slashed again, *fast*.

The gun caught his claws as Melon brought it up, last-second, knocking it away.

The syringe from the bag glinted in the attacker's other hand, making for the lizard's exposed eye as they drew in tight. Gosha caught it with his jaws, cracking the shot and spitting it and more venom out in return.

Melon pulled hard right, dodging, pivoting on his heel and using his own weight to throw Gosha off balance with him. They both slammed another crate, shaking it as Gosha wound up again—only for the medical mask to snap around his muzzle as Melon spun the other way and twisted the strings, tying them tight around the back of the reptile's head in a second.

Gosha understood one beat too late as Melon effectively muzzled him shut, jabbing his own claws deep into the lizard's back. It only went in so far, with his thick scales, but the old-timer sure felt it.

“RRRH!”

“The elderly wisdom will have to wait,” the gazelle mock-snarled, scrambling for his gun down the row. “But I can retort, just fine!”

Gosha brought his hands up to the mask, but stopped as Melon snatched the gun. The barrel pointed his way just as Gosha hurled the pastry into his exposed face. The third shot flew wild as it splatted into his muzzle, the wrapping exploding free, covering his opened mouth on impact as the rest went in.

The old lizard tore down the row and back into the open, passing iron shelves as he pulled at the mask, only to find it stuck tight from tension, the knot at the back rendered

unnegotiable. Its elastic nature made it bounce with a rubber-band snap as he tried his claws, but the sound of thumping feet interrupted, and the fourth bullet managed to bite his tail mid-way just as he leapt down another aisle, pain sizzling through it immediately.

“I’ll admit,” he heard the gazelle pant nearby, “you can certainly move!”

The model gun hadn’t eluded Gosha, when the ‘doctor’ had brought it up to shield himself. The clip either had 12 or 15 rounds, depending on the magazine, but 15 was the safer guess overall.

Minimum? 8 left. Maximum, 11.

Not great, either way.

“You want to hide, back there?” Melon crowed, nearby, his smile audible. “That works out. Stay on the shelf that you chose!”

A stack of crates rattled. Then, they rattled again, tumbling over onto the outermost shelf, knocking it over with a startling *bang* as it banged into the next shelf, which toppled the next. Gosha desperately worked his claw up around the taut mask’s band, but the shelf next to him crashed over too fast, pinning him down with its weight.

Strong as he was, it took everything the reptile had just to budge the shelf up a few inches; even that progress sank back down as Melon clambered up the toppled mess, compounding its weight. He coughed and swallowed as he collected himself, inadvertently licking more sweets off his muzzle, revealing rows of sharp leopard’s teeth.

“And *really*, gramps,” Melon muttered, looking down as Gosha stared up through the shelving, struggling to free himself, “why bother like this? Why protect? Hybrids don’t have great lives, you should know that full-well. Take it from me, if you don’t, it’s not very fun. You have to make your own, it’s exhausting.”

“T-they aren’t s...scumbags, either,” Gosha growled, before wincing as his stomach bellowed and rumbled, shaking him terribly down below. “D...d-on’t lump the i-innocents in with you!”

“Hmm? Oh, no, they aren’t like me, at all. That’s a misread.”

Melon casually took aim, this time with both hands, steadying himself.

“But hey, it won’t stay your problem any longer, gramp—”

The massive shelf twitched, in its entirety, as if hiccupping underfoot, making Melon blink in confusion as he rode the tremor. Then, another hit, even deeper, until the whole thing was starting to rumble angrily, more and more.

“What—”

Where Gosha’s reptilian muzzle had been, there were now two swollen mounds, throbbing out against the shelf, as though the reptile was taking an infinite breath in. Scales stretched tighter, tighter, pleading for relief as the flannel pulled apart, then burst, button by *p-pping* button.

“—in—”

The reptile’s muzzle pushed up between a higher shelf level, filling it as it grew—yes, *grew*—the mask straining to contain his snout as a thickening neck bulged around its sides.

“—the—”

A tremendous *rip* followed as he looked back, seeing the reptile’s jeans catch against increasing muscles, bursting open at unhappy conjunctions; the stitching popped as his thighs ballooned bigger and bigger, his tail swelling out under the many tangled arms of the wreckage and threading through like a vine.

“—hell is—”

The entire shelf lifted, pitching and angling up to the right, then evening out and heaving higher left, putting Melon into a dance for balance as Gosha ballooned under him, swelling larger, stronger, wider, longer. *Bigger*.

Gosha’s eyes rolled, then lidded to helpless slits as an overwhelming blast of power rammed through his body, unceremoniously blowing it up. Within the stretching mask his teeth were grit, pleasure so great that it hurt etching a snarl on his lips as he felt his shirt *pop-pop-pop* against his yawning bulk.

There was no time to process, no chance to understand—he was growing. That was it.

His scaled biceps screamed larger, pulsing into bowling balls, then beach balls, his triceps

bloating noisily against them as his forearms flared larger. His lats burst out against his tearing shirt, forcing the triceps up into the shelf; more small boxes and knick-knacks scattered away, shoved back as his rump inflated against his pants, snapping his tight belt and splitting the pockets. His zipper pleaded for help as the crotch mounded higher, higher, booming against the denim, forced to swell wider over his hips. The zipper held as his tip throbbed out, out, peeking between his swollen abs and the over-tight rim of his waistband. His shoulders erupted into pumpkins, shredding the sleeves in seconds, leaving their tatters to cling to blown-out green as his pectorals erupted higher, and higher.

“GGGGHH-GHNGH!”

The mask stretched too far, digging stubbornly into his scales as his muzzle grew up through the higher shelf, his bulky arms flexing on habit as they grabbed at the shelf’s frame, and put all that overflowing energy into lifting.

Melon staggered back as the entire shelf rose, inch by surreal inch. More and more of Gosha was spreading beneath him, the reptile having blown up from maybe 6 feet to 9 in one hard, hot gush, before billowing even larger, the groan of pulled scales dropping lower and louder as he passed 14 feet...19 feet...

“H-hey, wait,” Melon muttered, slack-jawed, knitting his forehead in astonishment, more than fear. “Th-this isn’t right. What is this!?”

The shelf, like the others, must have stood at least twenty-five feet high. That Gosha’s overstuffed shoes were pushing out beyond the bottom spoke to his true size now, just as both socked feet *boomed* free, only for the socks to rip and burst apart after.

“How the hell is this possible?” he gawked, just as Gosha bellowed into the mask, shaking with more and more and more power, the buildup visibly increasing as his massive body rumbled and shook, until even the rising shelf rattled.

He finally thought to take aim and fire, when the reptile’s mask screeched too tight at last, now nearly three times its intended dimensions. It pinged off as the straps tore, slapping up at Melon’s face and sending him tumbling down as the shelf surged up higher, angling along the incline of his pectorals.

The hybrid slammed into a concrete pillar, wincing, but putting the pain away long enough to see Gosha’s body relentlessly expanding, so much so that the shelving slid off of his muscles, submitting at last to the larger being.

“H-how!?”

As if in reply, Gosha rose to a seat, the merest movement making every tight muscle *boom* bigger. Shreds of cloth heaved angrily, barely containing the raw bulk as it twitched and pulsed, humming with energy and strength. He shook his head, tongue out, then felt down along his massively wide neck and gasped.

“A...amazing!” he gulped, mutually astonished, flexing a monumental bicep, watching it responsively peak higher and higher and higher, the more he tried. “How is this...”

A fifth shot rang out, making the 30-foot reptile grimace in...annoyance, really.

“Shit!”

Melon kept his synopsis brief as the bullet left a bug bite between the lizard’s palm-wide scales. He looked at his gun, bit his lip, then took off down another row of crates.

“He—oh, NO YOU DON’T—”

A Melon-sized hand bashed down on the warehouse floor, just large enough to accommodate him. The hybrid was quicker, however, and slipped around the crates on the other end of the row as it smashed at least five crates to nothing at all. The floor itself shuddered as Gosha stood up, thudding the steel rafters with a clumsy *bonk* of his head.

Misjudging his height, the towering reptile’s cranium put a mean dent in it, sending him back a few thundering steps.

“GAH! Ah!”

Rather than lose any more time, Gosha opted to spin his bulk around, putting serious muscle into simply *moving* his own muscle. As he did, he swung his tail out, sweeping the rows of boxes and crates and flinging them all into the air, blowing a hollering Melon out with the mix. The hybrid crashed into another stack of crates, knocking them away as he rolled limp.

However this was happening—forget *why* it was happening—the old lizard knew he had to act. *Use it or lose it*, as they probably said.

By the time Melon stirred, let alone looked up, Gosha was boom-booming over to him, now at least 35 feet tall. The idea that the old-timer was still getting bigger, getting *stronger*, proved just enough to put the fiend into a stutter, a mental slip—more than time enough for the

reptile to bring a toppled shelf up with both huge hands, then slam it down over him. Melon brought both arms up as it landed, only to find the individual shelves therein rested on either side of him. Rather than kill, Gosha instead lifted, scooping the startled hybrid up with it as Melon clung to them to avoid the fall.

“You,” Gosha rumbled, his body still shuddering larger all around, “were right—you won’t e-escape...anywhere!”

A pectoral field met the gasping predator as Gosha brought the shelf up close, thumping it against his chest and scooping his massive arms up under it on either side. He grunted, flexing harder, his scaly biceps erupting even larger as he snorted and strained, until the sides started to deflate and cave inward. He kept flexing, the stupendous reptile bursting to 40 feet as his arms nearly matched his torso in total width; the sides crumpled in, and in, and in, his pectorals growing bigger and hotter and thicker as they shoved the center shelf out and out.

In seconds, Gosha had collapsed both ends into points, making the thing look like an absurd candy wrapper, with Melon’s body caught in the middle, between partially-crimped shelf levels. For all intents and purposes, he might as well have been wrapped in a bow.

“Wuh,” Melon wheezed, gulping, trying to get words together as the placement put his muzzle right in between the lizard’s inflated pecs, which buffeted out bigger and wider against him and the shelf. “Whmmhm!”

“Heh, heh,” Gosha panted, his chest pushing out larger and larger, swelling out ahead of him as he snorted and shivered, then blew up to 45 feet, pushing his head into the warping rafter frame. “Y-you can stay on the shelf I chose...*kid*. There’s your *pinch*.”

Feeling the wriggle below, the enormous male blinked, then thought to pull the shelf off, letting Melon gasp for air as he was released.

“Huah, huh,” the gazelle rasped, eyes set on the looming giant. “O-of course.”

“What?” the mighty komodo puffed, looking out over his inflated chest.

“Of course, a *carnivore* would get the advantage. Hah. Haha.”

“I didn’t have a loaded gun.”

“Pfft, big deal,” Melon shot back, reflexively struggling against the shelf here and there as Gosha held it aloft. “What’s a gun, compared to...this? Herbivores have to work so hard to get

around your advantages, and then *this* happens. Why not just...make you all gods, at this r-rate?"

"You're clearly half carnivore, yourself, kid," Gosha boomed, closing his eyes and trembling even bigger, the ceiling surging up against his rumbling growth. His arms swelled to absurdity, the lizard nearly 50 feet tall, and 35 across, his chest crowding up against his chin. "I would think you'd understand, at least partly."

"Oh, I do, old-timer," he huffed, shaking his head sourly. "That's just it. W-why make me half of anything, when another side is more than twice that? What's the point? Why give me these conflicting genes, then?"

For another instant, an unwelcome one, Gosha's grandson was there, instead, caught and questioning. The giant shook it off, and set the bent frame down, carefully, making sure not to actually crush or harm Melon.

"I don't have the answer," the old dragon replied, looking his mass over quietly, seeing his thighs nearly fully erupted out of his ripped jeans—including his now vast sex, throbbing partially out of a barely-holding, overtaxed pair of boxers. "But you can ask the court psychiatrist later, after the police come and get you."

Melon seemed to shake, below, likely from anger or fear. In fact, the beast seemed mute, rather suddenly, shaking so hard that nothing was capable of making it out of his jaws.

"Now," Gosha muttered powerfully, looking the much smaller interior over. "How on Earth do I get you out? Or myself? I mean, I *should* shrink back down, right? Maybe?"

"Ghhh..."

"What?" Gosha asked, blinking down over the canyon of his chest. "I'm not letting a maniac like you free, so don't...bother..."

Suddenly, Melon didn't look so small.

"...with..."

"GHHGK!"

Sharp teeth clenched as Melon's body rumbled, the hybrid kicking and snarling as his long-sleeve shirt began to draw tight around some sort of perpetual flex. His lithe body tremble-*boomed* larger, in much the same fashion as his, the metal frame groaning in protest as

his bulk surged out against it, then surge out more.

The clothing caught and tugged and angled and ripped as one thick shoulder burst too large, muscles flooding into the thrashing male as though it were from a gushing spigot.

“Ghaaaah...Gah...G-hah...haha...”

Pulse by quaking pulse, Melon was indeed growing. And *growing*.

“Oh,” Gosha groaned, leaning in over his own inflated bulk. “Oh!”

The hybrid’s gazelle horns speared out, swelling and curling longer, thicker, growing in time with his bulking neck and swelling chest. His biceps *punch-punch-punched* out against the frame, bigger and wider, bending what had been bent one way the other, instead.

“G’hah! Hahaha!”

Thinking fast, Gosha forced his girth down, his bloated sacs mashing down onto the warehouse floor as he grabbed the frame back up with both hands, looking around for somewhere, anywhere that could help keep him contained before he got too big.

“What’s the matter, g-gramps?” Melon boomed, huff-billowing even larger, blowing up from a thin 6 feet to a 10-foot bodybuilder in seconds. “Think the cops will huh-have an answer–*grunt*–for this!?”

The incredible sensation of growth was pushed aside as Gosha prioritized the next minute or two of his life. His hands were forced apart gradually as he thought, feeling Melon outgrow the confines of the shelf rapidly. Metal joints squealed as the hulking hybrid burst against them, grinning toothily, shaking and huffing as his body erupted violently, his clothes ripping apart as he boomed to 13 feet, then 17.

Where? Where could he move them to? They couldn’t stay like this.

Think think

Finally, Gosha was aware that there had been knocking and banging on the other side of the locked door to the kindergarten; likely, the impala had been trying to bust through for some time, throughout. Thankfully the door held them in.

Can’t be here at this size, the building could collapse! Just move!

Melon was already half Gosha's tremendous size as he began to duck-crawl along, dragging his billowing tail behind him as he continued to grow. Every scale was electrified, screaming in pleasure as his muscles boomed bigger, heavier, making it progressively harder to drag his mass along as he grew into (and against) himself. Pillars caught his triceps and knees as he thudded down into a crawl, hugging Melon's increasingly big body up into his chest and belly as he moved. Columns split and cracked, some bursting to rubble as he crashed through, panic spiking within.

"You're...g-gonna bring this place duh-down before I can do anything, gramps!"

"S-shut it!" Gosha bellow-spoke, his words so big they shook the interior.

Rounding a corner, the warehouse mercifully opened up some, allowing him to rise back up into a squat as he shoved Melon and the warping shelf frame out ahead. Able to see better, it was clear that Melon was catching up: easily 30 feet to his 60, the hybrid was pure muscle and fur, his horns swollen into vast spires, his teeth massive and strong.

"But h-hey, if you don't d-do it..."

Melon groaned, his eyes widening as he burst too, too big; the frame warped fully out into a ring around his quaking mass as he spurted messily to 40 feet, then 45.

"Then I'll bring it all down, m-myself!"

Looking about, Gosha caught sight of a wall-mounted lever for the floor, itself a massive shutter covering a storage pit. He did his very best to tap it with a tip of his claw, only for nothing to happen. The lights in there were on, the place couldn't have been decommissioned to the point of no power. He tried again as Melon shook and gutter-laughed, his voice swelling bigger, deeper, his furred neck blowing up with uncontrollable brawn.

"Damn it, *dammit*," the lizard murmured, jabbing at it more and more forcefully.

"That's your plan, gramps?" Melon boomed, the frame popping loose and snapping open around his 50-foot body as he stood to full glory, letting a massive shaft burst out of his torn leggings. Even Gosha lurched back as it stirred to life, throbbing bigger and fatter atop two monstrous, spherical sacs. "Hope you have a plan B, b-because I...I'm still...g-gh—"

Indeed, to even the elder's surprise, Melon wasn't done growing. His fur fluffed out in bristly waves as more and more muscle exploded onto his rising body, his shaft pumping larger,

harder, stirring to life as it swelled higher, the hybrid's bulging arms forcing the break in the frame to widen evermore.

"I...can feel it," Melon gulped, snorting lewdly as he shook. "I can a-actually *feel* it...hah! Do you u-understand, gramps? What that means for me? Can you, even?"

Gosha ballooned to 70 feet, his head rising up into the balcony area of the loading bay, his biceps bursting out 50 feet across as his pecs gorged on bulk, inflating too big for even his arms to properly cage...and yet, Melon was gaining on him fast, his erection bulging up so far out that it tip-tapped, then stroked higher up the reptile's own flaccid, enormous member, which picked there and then to pop out through his ripped boxers, a challenge answered.

"S-stop that!" Gosha barked, glaring, unable to back out into the smaller warehouse.

"I...I can feel! I-it's even *better* t-than pain!"

The massive gazelle hybrid *boomed* bigger, as if encouraging his body further, farther, uninhibited by the shackles of decency or restraint. He roared up to 75 feet and brought a massive fist up, only to strike his own pectoral, able to withstand the massive force as a shockwave tore out and cracked the old windows. The vibrations tickled through his growing bulk, making Melon's eyes flutter darkly as his erection swelled painfully tight.

"Hah...hahaha! Old-timer! Gramps! It's a gift! A gift, look! LOOK AT ME!"

Some primal madness bubbled up as the cold, calculating hybrid *bathed* in power. Panicked on multiple fronts, Gosha lashed both huge arms out, slamming Melon's girth against the back wall of the loading bay as the two titans swelled bigger, and bigger, filling the last gasp of free space.

"T-that's enough, punk!" Gosha bellowed, quaking with muscle and growth.

"Is it, though?" Melon growled, smiling wide. "Haha, don't y-you think that's a bit...i-insincere, gramps? You're getting bigger, too, aren't you!"

Inarguably, the reptile's prodigious member was flaring larger, harder, the more Melon's penis burred and bulged against it, their pectorals bloating flat against each other as his head rammed into the ceiling, and Melon's horns punched clear through. Their thighs and warm sacs collided, ballooning angrily, giddily, slipping and rubbing bigger and tighter as their muscles hit the walls and swelled further, and further.

“W-whatever was in that food,” Melon rumbled, licking his muzzle over, “remind me to thank you for it, after we bring this pitiful old building down!”

Crap!

There was no out—literally. The back wall would have to do.

In one Herculean push, Gosha planted his growing soles into the cracking floor. His bulging toes dug in, claws and all, and with a single, godly shove, Melon was driven back, then clear-through the entire warehouse wall, blowing it wide open in a spray of bricks and smoke.

The adjoining dead mall lost most of its atrium as the back wall of the connecting store shattered, Melon’s huge rump and back muscles obliterating absolutely everything as he bashed down through its glass walls and out into the heart. The food court sank into a trench of cracked tiles as his horned head slammed down, annihilating the long-closed porcelain fountain at the center, the titanic hybrid not even noticing it had been there as he blinked, then snarled in joy.

“Didn’t feel a thing! Haha, h-how funn—AAAAAAAHH!”

Again, the trembling colossus grew, shaking the atrium walls as he swelled up. His erection, wedged from the fall against the ceiling of the store’s 2nd floor, bulged up with such force that it sheared the 3rd story flooring apart, crashing out through the demolished upper balconies. Its tip flopped out into the atrium as he clenched his fists and roared, feeling his head swell bigger against the sundered bottom floor, as his thighs and biceps burst out into the remaining pillars and walls, blasting into the 1st floor stores around him as he grew and grew.

By the time Gosha pushed his way through the erection-swept ruins, Melon was actually *bigger* than him—not by much, it was roughly 100 feet versus 120—but it was enough.

He brought up his huge reptilian fists, taking a fighting stance, when he heard the warehouse start to buckle behind him, threatening to collapse.

“No!”

He circled back and knelt down through the destroyed facade, reaching into the loading bay and using both huge hands to catch the falling sides and sinking roof, lest it spread to the kindergarten itself. He steadied the fall, letting the walls converge together against his guiding hands, so that the collapsing roof and sides rested into one another.

Gosha waited, hearing no further devastation, no falling. He carefully slipped his mighty hands back out, listened, and sighed.

“Ah.”

Two bigger hands found his tail, behind him, right after. Then, came the pull.

Gosha’s view of the world changed for the worse as Melon yanked the huge komodo back, then twisted, swinging him by his tail, crashing his bulk through the entire side of the mall’s 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th floors, bashing the storefronts, balconies, potted plastic plants, light fixtures, benches and everything between into a horrible cloud of chaos.

He sailed off down the way, his back smashing the curve of the former floors and balconies, crushing the escalators and elevator shafts with his brawny back muscles—just as Melon charged, smashing into him, the two growing behemoths crashing through it all together.

Truck-sized feet bashed the cracking foundation as they grew bigger, mid-tumble, mid-push, floors and panels and ceilings all heaving off in a torrent of debris as the entire mall shook, and shook *deep*.

2:27 PM

Yahya scanned every inch of the inner city he could find, from the nearest rooftop he could get up to. It was a pain, and the horse’s sides ached from that much running and climbing, but it was a small price overall. The high ground was crucial.

“Anything yet?” he grumbled, one finger up at his earpiece. “Anyone? I know he didn’t just vanish down there.”

“Nothing yet, sir,” an officer sighed, resigned. *“We heard reports of a gunshot near the old packing district, but nothing’s there anymore.”*

“No, there’s still that school, right?” the equine said, quickly. “Some daycare?”

“That place is still around? My God. Er, I’ll pull over now, sir, it’s close by!”

“Right. Do it.”

A shrill little *bleep* interrupted, and Yahya twisted the earpiece slightly.

“S-sir, thank goodness I finally reached you,” Mienai began, taking a sip of something for just a moment, as Yahya listened. “Sir, it’s Gon, from Cherryton!”

“What about him?” Yahya asked, brusquely.

“The experiment, sir! The food! It’s all gone wrong, immediately, I-I’m afraid. The control got out of control, the food was mistakenly dispersed beyond our net, and the effects...have you not seen the TV, sir?”

“No, I’ve nearly got a murderer in my grasp, Mienai, and this isn’t helping—”

“Giants, sir. Actual, living giants. The students, they...they’ve become enormous!”

Yahya watched the city rooftops, blinking once or twice as he took it in.

“Giants.”

“Sir, yes. Bigger than entire buildings, from reports. The news has gotten wind, even. Headmaster Gon is furious, he says that most of Cherryton has been crushed, post evacuations. I take full responsibility, sir!”

“...Giants.”

“Sir! Please, I know, but believe—”

Bleep

“Yahya, sir!” the same officer shouted. “We have confirmed shots fired, at least four or five, behind the kindergarten—I repeat, confirmed shots!”

“I knew it! It’s Melon!” Yahya growled, the horse leaning out over the roof, looking out towards the area. “I want a full canvas of the packing district, that includes the abandoned warehouse strip, the closed bars, and even the mall—”

A single, terrible ripple lashed out, putting the entire block into a shudder. Windows snapped, cars wobbled and alarms blared down below, making Yahya tense up on instinct.

“What was—”

The front half of the Pawprint Mall *exploded*, spraying a mountainous blast of clouded ruin forth as two masses spilled out, crashing onto its parking lot and kicking up a bigger cloud right after. The tremor took four whole seconds to heave out under the horse, rocking the entire building as the smoke began to clear in the distance.

“Yahya, si-sir!” the officer roared over the line. *“We’ve cleared the kindergarten, but the teacher swears two animals are still back there, in the ware—oh, God, the warehouse, it’s collapsed at the back! I can’t believe the rest of the place is even standing—g-get out, everyone, clear out!”*

“Who?” Yahya demanded, watching in panoramic view as the twin clouds covered what remained of the mall, then began to dissipate. “Who went back there? Melon? Some hostage?”

“Uh, uh...she says a gazelle in a medical mask, and Osh...who? Some lizard, ah—”

The smoke cleared, and the world Yahya knew faded with it.

“Ah.”

The horse staggered in place, nearly falling over the roof at the sight of Melon, standing at least 200 feet tall, consumed with throbbing, overblown muscle. Smoke wisped in spires off of his hulking mass, covered in enlarged Melon leaf tattoos, revealing a penis nearly as long as his inflated legs. The remnants of the mall hardly reached his rear as he flexed against himself, enraptured, overtly groping himself as something else emerged—a komodo dragon.

No. *The* komodo dragon.

“Ah, sir, the lizard’s name is—”

“Gosha,” Yahya murmured, his eyes wide to the point of discomfort. “Gosha!”

The horse’s mind nearly snapped as the reptile rose to an awesome, unreal 230 feet, bigger than Melon, and even more laden with raw, pulsing brawn.

“You know him, sir? Yahya?”

The horse’s face stayed long as he watched, agape, not speaking, not thinking. Only watching. Gosha visibly rumbled all over, blowing up even bigger, making the equine step back in complete, stupefied awe.

“Gosha...gigantic?”

Math began to insinuate itself back into his faculties, adding up what was there.

Bleep

“Mienai!”

“There you are, sir—Gon is demanding to see you right away—”

“How many!”

“W-what?”

“How many giants are there!?”

With no guarantees remaining as to who would stay biggest, Gosha went for it while he was on top. The mammoth lizard stomped back towards the mall, clutching Melon directly by the burning-hot brunt of his erection.

“Eh,” Melon started, surprised out of his reverie. “Wh—”

Gripping just beneath the tip, Gosha elected turnabout and stomped back, pulling and spinning himself around, yanking Melon off the firmament by his own length. With one massive swing he spun Melon about, then put him right back into the mall, the hybrid smashing into the structure and through the collapsed street, down into the sewers.

Not finished, Gosha clutched the member tighter, feeling it receptively balloon bigger in his grip as Melon shook with pleasure.

“Right, you *like* pain,” the massive old-timer rumbled. “Then Happy...Birthday!”

Twisting it with both hands, he pulled again, lifting Melon up from the rubble and hammer-throwing the behemoth clear out over the lot, over the road, out into the abandoned stretches of buildings in the city’s old D-zone. Melon went head-first through three huge tenement blocks, blowing them into nothing as his 220-foot bulk rolled over it all like a joke.

It wasn’t a great feeling, seeing the old buildings crumble like that—but better here than anywhere else. At least no one lived here anymore—

The ruins shook as Melon burst back up, towering bigger, and bigger, getting thicker and wider as he rumbled with escalating power. His member billowed bigger, his orbs inflating down over his knees as he coughed out a great plume of soot, snorting the rest free as he surged to 260 feet, then 300 even.

“Feels...so good,” he growled, tensing all over, before bursting to 320 feet, his feet swelling bigger through the connecting buildings. “It makes s-sense, though, really! Think about it, gramps—of course I would wind up with something unfit for either side! Interesting!”

A massive foot crushed the street as Melon *thoomed* closer and clasped his huge hands around a derelict post office building, easily uprooting the whole thing.

“Why bother with guns, or knives...when I have this!?”

Gosha braced himself, welling up his venom. He spat a great streak just as Melon charged, his huge size allowing him to close the gap so fast that the building’s shell was forced over Gosha’s muzzle, damming it up entirely. A public pool’s worth of venom splashed inside it, dribbling down cracked windows and busted mortar as Gosha shook his head, trying to get it off.

“See?” Melon bellowed, smirking with even larger teeth. “You went right to your own power, when it suited you! As you should! What’s a towering thing like you going to do, otherwise, with all that size? Cuddle a group of crybabies?”

Gosha’s fist had ears, and they heard Melon just fine. A 1-ton punch fired square into his jaw, smashing it so hard that even the huge hybrid swung back from it.

“Ah! You see!?”

Melon shuddered, ballooning even *bigger*. His muscles outclassed Gosha’s, whipped into a frenzy of power as he spat enough blood to paint a bus, and replied with a high kick to the lizard’s ribs—one of such force that the ground danced from the aftershock.

“That’s exactly what this is meant for! Tell me I’m wrong, gramps! Go on!”

The 250-foot komodo thudded back, clutching his ribs, before lunging in, rearing his head back, and headbutting Melon, the building-muzzle erupting apart and sending venom everywhere. The bigger hybrid fell back-first, splitting the entire lot in half as his body hit, venom spattering the pavement, the buildings, the trees, *everything*.

It cascaded down from his massive jaws as Gosha took a great ragged breath, inflating himself up another 20 feet, then another 20, and another still. Every time he pumped larger, rumbling up to 310 feet even, nearly as big as the felled Melon.

“Huh,” Melon huffed, blinking up at the sky above, before looking over his tremendous pectorals at Gosha. “What’s this? I...oh, no way. You burst it open when it was filled with venom, but...it missed me? With that much, it missed me!?”

He lumbered up into a stand, patting his vast muscles over, his erection bobbing quizzically about as he huffed.

“Wait.”

He finally bothered to look right in front of Gosha, seeing a massive pool of venom between them both—right where the building had been muzzling him.

“I cracked a window while you were reeling from the punch,” the old-timer chuckled, wiping his muzzle politely. “Drained it out before the impact.”

Melon looked astonished. Then, utterly disappointed.

“That’s idiotic.”

“I could have killed you!” Gosha puffed, glowering.

“Like I said! You actually have such a blessing as to be able to exercise your hate, and this is what you choose to do with it? Pathetic! It figures, a senile type like you would come into this gift—”

Gosha, being big enough, had Melon’s head in his huge hand before the hybrid knew what was what. As it turned out, *what* was building-shaped, as his muzzle, head and horns were summarily smashed into an entire office building, a skyscraper, the interior pouring in over it as Gosha pulled him out, then smashed him in *deeper*.

“I didn’t...”

SMASH

“...get out of bed today...”

CRASH

“...to explain life to a stupid punk!”

Melon exploded through the skyscraper, all of it, the higher topside caving in as ton after ton of cement rained down over him. Then, the next building hit, or rather, vice versa, as Gosha battered it with Melon’s bruised body.

“If you can’t deal with life...”

Melon croaked something, before Gosha slammed his face down the side of another skyscraper, *beat-beat-beat-beat*. Melon broke off and swung the falling topside of a skyscraper around, only for Gosha to crack it in half with his elbow, flip it by its flagpole top like a handle, and crack it back around on Melon’s skull like a baseball bat.

“...then that’s your problem! Not everyone else’s! Life’s hard enough!”

At his massive size, Gosha’s lecture carried all the way over the rooftops, block after block, the decibel force pressure slamming into Yayha. From that far away, the horse didn’t just hear his old comrade laying it down for the uninitiated. He *felt* it.

“My best friend took that anger and did good with it!”

The words battered out against Yahya again, the horse still stunned. A blush might have introduced itself to the horse.

“The world hated me too! Like it hates those good-natured kids!”

“*Guh*”

Melon’s fist shot out of the smoke, pummeling Gosha in his snout—yet the old lizard shook it off like nothing, trembling deep, swelling up even bigger, and bigger, rising up over floor after floor of the surrounding buildings as he bulged thicker.

“Even you just got the gift to *feel*, and what happens? You choose to feel yourself? Feel the pain, only?”

Melon’s head and horns responded, the 400-foot male swollen with unending muscle as he pushed Gosha back through another building, blowing it apart, before the 420-foot reptile shoved even harder.

“Oh, talk, talk,” Melon snarled, battered and bloodied. “You know what your psychological profile is, gramps? Guilt!”

Again, the hybrid ballooned *even bigger*. His bus-sized feet crashed lower and lower into the snapping streets, soles as big as lanes. His arms blimped wider, stretching his tattoos out as more and more leopard spots began to swarm around his fur, growing in number as his teeth lengthened terribly. His thighs bulged grossly as he grappled the dragon, leaning in, pecs to pecs, shaft to shaft, not caring, not bothering to.

“And really, what could you do, before right now? Read to some small fries? Buy snacks? Tell me, if you’re so prosperous, then why does all the cruelty persist? Why does the Black Market still stand? And what kind of *lifetime success story* slums around with half-breeds stuck in the back corner of that sad little fridge box you call a daycare?”

Melon’s hands quested without warning for Gosha’s neck, and found it. Even with that much bulk, the lizard felt the squeeze as Melon throttled, then choked him outright.

“No one that *never* let down their loved ones *ever* ends up in places like this, and you know it.”

Gosha grimaced, landing blow after blow on Melon’s bruised ribs; the old-timer must have been landing some real crushers, being 390 feet tall to his 440, because the pain was going right to Melon’s erection, making it roar tighter and fatter against Gosha’s thighs. In kind, the hybrid’s grip tightened so much that the reptile’s vision blurred.

“In fact, let me guess! I’m good with this sort of thing: someone just like those kids. You lost someone just like them. Had to be earlier, given your age. You’re strong as hell, but you hold back too much, which points to self-blame, to limitation. Muzzling. So tell me, gramps...was it yours? A son? A grandson, even?”

Gosha’s scales shuddered, but not from growth. He was getting bigger, granted, but this was something else.

“Oh, look at that!” Melon laughed, coughing right after as Gosha landed another crushing blow to his stomach. “Ah! Huh, hah...I got it, didn’t I? Not that it’s so tough.”

Even Yahya, from that far, backed away, finally showing genuine fear. He knew what those scales were doing.

“Clear the area,” he ordered, shouting into his comm. “Right now!”

“Sir, we already cleared–”

“No, clear it all. Clear everything you can! Everyone! Get the chopper here, now!”

Gosha’s scales rattled and flared, standing at attention across his humongous form, until they clattered like a million skull-teeth. Like the dead come back.

“That’s exactly why you’ll fail here, old-timer,” Melon boomed, swelling bigger, and bigger still. His back muscles soared out, crowding his own body as more and more spots consumed him, spreading across his expanding pectorals and inflated biceps and lats. “That’s what types like you do—fail in the clutch, then spend too long making up for it with half-assed measures, to the wrong people! Some pacifist you are! You can’t repay a bank by giving an ice cream sundae to a stranger! You can’t buy off hate!”

Gosha’s entire body trembled, then vibrated eerily, even as his vision began to black out.

“How big of a sundae would you even need, to *buy back* your kid’s love—”

Yahya scrambled into the helicopter and strapped right in as it took off.

Every single scale boofed out, then held, going dead silent. Melon, all 480 feet of him, froze in the same fashion as Gosha’s trembling migrated to a second’s stillness—then, a *detonation*.

400 feet...

Melon’s hands parted, unwillingly, around a swelling neck as the old reptile thundered up larger, his chest flowing out into Melon’s, then up past it as his arms exploded in mass. Scales stretched out in unison, flaring even higher as his shoulder blades erupted too big, forcing his colossal biceps and forearms in around Melon’s sides.

490 feet...

One of the hybrid’s eyes had already swollen purple and shut, but the other saw

everything. It saw the komodo dragon boom bigger in all directions, his biceps bloating up into his downward-surging pecs, his abs swelling out in a row over his monstrous shaft. His tail plumped and swelled longer and wider at the base, demolishing the emptied old buildings down the line as he snatched Melon by his own throat. The hybrid's massive hands clawed up at the reptile's, feeling them grow and grow, until his vision was overtaken as they outgrew the sides of his neck, unable to make even a scratch.

550 feet...

“HRK”

“MY GRANDSON,” Gosha seethed, his voice doomsday in slow motion, “IS AMAZING. WHATEVER I AM, HE IS, BUT BETTER! IF I DON'T SEE HIM EVER AGAIN, I CAN AT LEAST KNOW THAT HE'S A G-GOOD BOY!”

590 feet...

Melon's feet left the ground as Gosha's arms kept exploding bigger, thicker, boundless striations clenching under his flared scales as he lifted the colossus high.

“GHK!”

“BUT IF YOU DON'T WANT ANY WISDOM FROM YOUR ELDERS...”

648 feet, exactly, nearly 550 across, and 100 from back to pecs.

“THEN I WON'T HOLD YOU UP—”

Yahya could only watch in horrified wonder as Gosha, skyscraper-sized and bursting with muscle, flipped even the immense Melon up, caught him head down, and *pile-drove* him straight into the district.

Not the street. Not the ground. Not the block.

The district.

His astronomical body weight made the trip short but impactful as Melon's upper half embedded into the earth itself, shattering the entire sector as it cratered deep. The old forgotten slums caved into great fissures as geysers five hundred feet high blew, untold pressure blasting

loose as the city shook. The shockwave narrowly missed the Black Market, rocking that sector so hard that Yahya's chopper spun from the passing air pressure.

"Gosha, dammit," the horse moaned, holding on as the chopper righted itself.

Gosha stood, and stood alone. His scales stayed high, on alert, his old, meaner self carved into his snarling muzzle as he bellowed out smoke and heat, shaking with it.

"YOU CAN'T SPELL PACIFIST...WITHOUT FIST," he boom-hissed, his vast bulk flexed too tight, too ready to strike. "...LITTLE PUNK."

Yet, Melon went limp, still half-buried into the turf, a hundred angry cracks webbed out around him. It took a full minute for the reptile to cool down enough to blink, and even that hurt a bit against the strain he'd built.

"MMH."

His eyes softened as he looked around, then went absolutely pale. His scales lowered flat, calm, like a lake after a storm, all smooth once more.

"Oh."

He had to remind himself very quickly that the old part of town had been long abandoned; the only areas still populated this far toward the edge of the Black Market were—

Ice water filled his veins.

"The Kindergarten!"

He clasped his hands over his mouth, a wave of terror crashing through him.

"They're fine, you idiot."

The komodo dragon twitched, startled, making him look all around.

"HOLD STILL, GOSHA, DAMN YOU!"

At that volume, and at that specific pitch of anger, the overgrown lizard suddenly understood—well, he didn't know how it was, but he sure knew *who* it was.

“Y...”

A tiny, mite-sized helicopter passed along, an even-smaller-but-much-brighter flare lighting up and waving his attention over to it. A reptile eye larger than a big house loomed as it BLINK-BLINKED, squinted...then widened.

The colossus’s mouth opened wide, slack-jawed, as Gosha’s maw began to overflow with venom, pouring off in awkward, open waterfalls, a blatant torrent of emotion.

“Y...YAHYA!?”

“Hmph. Been a bit,” the horse’s amplified voice said, still barely audible at Gosha’s terrific size. “I see you took care of Melon for me. And yes, before you blow us back by asking aloud, that daycare class of yours is fine. My men had them out by the time you emerged from the mall. The area was already under evacuation, luckily.”

Gosha BLINKED again, the horizon of the reptile’s face shifting as the old komodo sighed in relief, blowing out a hurricane gale just shy of the chopper.

“THANK GOODNESS, THANK GOODNESS. OH.”

“Watch where you relieve your relief!”

Yahya lowered the megaphone, rubbing his temples in agitation. As different as this scenario surely was, the horse had no trouble in understanding how little anything else had changed. Gosha was still Gosha—even if old Gosha had killed the young Gosha. *His Gosha.*

Plus, good grief...his friend wasn’t just bigger. He was *bigger*. Tracing the waterfalls of venom as they went down, the horse had seen a phallus over 200 feet long. It was an adjustment.

“Sir, we have the class moved into the nearest shelter,” the officer from before said, over the line. “Uh, we grabbed everything we could from the scene, just before the cave in at the warehouse, and all the...well. The rest.”

“Good job,” Yahya sighed. “I take it there were no accounts from the faculty or students, regarding how on Earth they got so big.”

“N-no sir, I did ask, repeatedly. They have no idea how this happened, either. Sir, the media is going to go insane with this, and soon.”

Mienai's words echoed in Yahya's memory, a bit too loud.

"Let them. Covering up is a fool's errand, at this point, time is precious. I'm sending Mienai to collect the articles from the scene. Hand them over and we'll take it from there."

"Yes, sir!"

Gosha thumped his massive palm on his even larger pectoral, trying to tell his heartbeat what it ought to slow down to, with varying results.

"Gosha."

"HMM?"

"I know it's a big ask, but considering the damages done...I want you to report in. We'll be gassing Melon out with all the tanks we have in about three minutes' time. Given our past, I...don't intend to gas you. Will you help carry him to where I tell you to go?"

Gosha glanced back down at Melon's body, still unconscious.

"OF COURSE," the behemoth rumbled, grinning warmly. "FOR YOU, ABSOLUTELY."

It still wasn't the face of his true old friend. In that moment, however, it was close enough, even for Yahya.

"Okay, then. Pick him up, and let's go."

5:03 PM

Yahya met Mienai halfway across the station lobby as every television prattled on about the giants, where they had last been seen, what they were doing, which ones had been found and taken in by top security forces and military liaisons, etc. That didn't matter so much, at that particular juncture.

"Let's have it," the horse commanded, reaching out as the zebra sheepishly offered the bag up to him. "This is everything from the scene?"

“All of it, sir. We have the harlequin rabbit in custody, along with Melon and Gosha. Our other facility took in a...sheep and a labrador, as well, deliveries from Cherryton. Gon was very adamant that you help. The rest are still at...well. They’re around.”

“One giant at a time, then,” Yahya grumbled. “Legoshi, we’ll ask next. Ugh, Gosha’s own grandson, of all the ones. It *is* Legoshi, right, his name?”

“Yes, sir, Gon confirmed it. We already tried to get them to comply, but it...didn’t work out. The deer accompanying him is Oguma’s own son, Louis, heir to the Horns corporation. They were a more manageable size earlier, b-but they’ve exploded so much bigger since—and Oguma’s surely aware that his son is not only huge, but expanding even bigger over time.”

“Great.”

“He’s already put in several calls, I’m afraid; he’ll send representatives if we don’t respond soon. Frankly, I’m concerned that he knew to contact us, before the media reported—”

“One giant at a time, I said.”

The horse took the bag up and looked through it, twitching an ear as he did.

“I didn’t have the heart to look into it before, sir. I already feel bad enough, I had no idea that this could ever result in—sir?”

Yahya went still, as if paralyzed, staring into the bag. He slowly showed Mienai the inside, holding the bag by its handles.

Inside was a Smith & Wesson, markers and books, spent casings, and a cookie wrapped in colored cellophane. They both gawked at the cookie, and it alone.

“Sir.”

“I’ll...be in my room, Mienai,” Yahya quietly said, toting the bag with him toward the elevators. Mienai followed.

“Wait, sir, shouldn’t R&D get that cookie?”

“I’ve got it.”

“Right, but ah...it’s—”

Yahya took the elevator without replying, all the way up to his chambers at the top.

The Zebra's heart drummed so loud he could hear it, as a wild thought struck.

"You wouldn't," he whispered, suddenly horrified.

The elevator *dinged* open, and Yahya stepped out. He put the bag down on a table, took the cookie out, and just held it. Felt it over. For the longest time.

"It really is a new world, now," he muttered, his heart slamming and crashing in his chest. "A world of absolute...giants."

He was really saying it. That nonsense was real, so he was saying it. Aloud.

With no one there to see, to know, the horse considered one specific thing, allowing the momentary thought of it out of a pen he never knew even existed, within him. As soon as it left, it got too big—too big to ever put back in its pen, again. In seconds, it filled his every thought, getting harder and harder to push down.

Every fiber of his herbivore being screamed for it, to the point that his hand shook.

Yahya swallowed dryly as the thought just kept swelling, overtaking reason, attacking the logic of the real world, and replacing it with a different one, bit by bit.

He put the cookie down, picked up the phone, and put in a call, controlling his breathing.

"Hello? Yes. Yes. I need a meeting, as soon as possible. Yes, I imagine he has seen the news, or at least heard. That's right. It's not just about the giants. I need to talk to the whale...about the meteor. Why?"

Multiple answers flew by, internally. He picked the most responsible-sounding one:

"To keep it from falling into the wrong hands. That's right. Every fragment, even the big one. I want it here, under *my* watch, from now on..."