

# Megaleioths

By : MosstalonWoodAdrian

The Megaleioths has no age, no gender, and a sadistic sense of humor, as a young Todd Anderson is about to find out. He just wants a job; the Megaleioths wants a toy. When Todd is handed the ownership of an entire mysterious laboratory, the Megaleioths begins poisoning his mind, fueling a bloodthirsty rage that has haunted Todd his entire life. Soon, the fate of the world rests in Todd's hands, but, in the end, he may prove to be our downfall. (This novel is split into sections, rather than chapters. Some are shorter than others)



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# Megaleioths : Chapter 1

First of all, if you ever call me 'grandpa' again, I'll pop your eyeballs out of your skull and feed them to my cat. And second, I haven't told this story to anyone in years, so I might forget a few details.

My name is Todd Anderson. When I was, oh, about twenty six years old, I applied for a job at Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. I had no friends, an apartment that smelled like a sewer, and had taken the bus to get to the tall, white tower that looked like a black (or, rather, white) sheep among the shorter, grey buildings that surrounded it.

I had applied for jobs all over the city, but not even McDonalds had bothered to read my application. I had thought it was because of the way I looked, or perhaps the fact that I had dropped out of high school, but now that I think back on it, it was more like some unseen force had lead me to this mysterious place, where, once I stepped inside, my life would change forever.

It was a cool, summer day, but inside Heisenberg Laboratories the air conditioner seemed to be on full blast, and I found myself wishing I had a winter coat. I looked around what appeared to be some kind of waiting room, already re-thinking my decision to come. The walls were the same blinding white as the outside, and the carpet beneath my feet was a strange blood-red. The glass front door was nearly invisible amongst the huge floor-to-ceiling windows that surrounded it. The ceiling itself seemed built for giants. On the left side of me were small folding chairs that looked about as comfortable as a porcupine's back. On the right, a picture of an old man. In front of me, a small desk. Behind that desk, a girl.

I straightened the dark blue tie around my neck and walked towards the desk, wishing I had spent a little more time combing my blond hair that morning. She had short light brown hair and a pair of glasses on her freckled face. Not the Hollywood version of pretty, but pretty enough for me to realize immediately she was out of my league. She had yet to notice me, and was typing away at her computer at breakneck speed.

I stood there for a moment or two before clearing my throat. She looked up at me, startled, and accidentally knocked the coffee cup next to her on to her lap.

"Ahh that's hot-!" She jumped out of her seat, coffee spilling onto the floor and soaking into her jeans.

"Oh my god I'm so sorry!" I moved forward in an attempt to help but she put up her hand.

"It's alright. I've got it." She opened a drawer in her desk, snatching a handful of napkins and hopelessly trying to lessen the embarrassing stain on her pants. "What do you want?"

Her voice, bitter and annoyed, stung. I swallowed. *Way to go.* A voice sneered in my head. *This how you always introduce yourself?* "Um... I'm here for the... well I saw the ad in the paper and..." I trailed off, unsure of how to finish. *Never mind.* I thought of saying. *Wrong address. I'll leave you alone forever now.*

"The job?" She raised an eyebrow. After a moment of hesitation, I nodded. She opened another drawer and handed me a slip of paper. "Elevators over there." She gestured behind me and got back to cleaning the mess that had been partially my fault. I thought of apologizing again, and decided it would be better if I could avoid ever speaking to or being in the same room with her again.

The elevator that I had somehow managed to miss earlier was next to the picture of the old man. I looked at the paper in my hand. Room 124, 13th floor. I tried not to see the irony in those numbers. I pushed the 'up' button and waited. For a few unbearable minutes, I stood there, staring at the elevator's silver doors while the girl I didn't even know the name of cleaned her desk to the left of me. Finally, they opened with a soft 'ding' and I stepped inside.

Smooth jazz played as I waited for the elevator to reach my floor. The seconds felt like hours, and I began to feel pretty sure that the jazz was just the same note being played over and over on the saxophone. Finally, another ding. The doors slid open to a seemingly endless hallway. I walked in an eerie silence, passing door after door.

Then, there it was. The numbers 124 gleamed in gold lettering on the door. Above them, the words **The Boss** shone in larger print. I sighed and knocked.

"Come on in!" A muffled voice called from behind the door. I did as I was told and walked into a room that felt more like a small apartment.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 The carpet was still red, but it was now matched by the walls. The room was lit only by a lamp and the sunlight flooding in through the window behind the large wooden desk at the far end of the room. An old man with white hair sat behind the desk, a wide grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye. For a crazy moment, I thought of saying *hello Santa, where's your beard?*

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Evening." The man gestured to a chair on the opposite side of his desk. "Sit down." I sat. The man, which I had now recognized to be the man in the picture in the lobby, interlocked his fingers and leaned back in his chair. "What brings you to my office this fine day?"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "I'm... I'm here about the job offer."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 He stared at me for a while, as if analyzing me. "What exactly drove you to accept a job in a place like this?"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 I opened my mouth to speak, and then closed it.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 He smiled. "No idea, huh? Maybe it was just the first ad you saw and you took a chance. Or, your parents said you had to do something with your life. No, I've got it. You're here because you're looking for an exciting career in science, is that it?"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 I got the sense he was laughing at me. A little offended, I answered "no, I just came here for a job."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 He rubbed his chin. "I see." The old man paused, as if deep in thought. "Son, I'm going to take another guess at something, and if I'm wrong, you just let me know. Your parents never really cared. Maybe they were busy with work or you had another sibling who was just about perfect. You grew up alone. Never had many friends or a real relationship with someone. Maybe you went to jail a few times, but the point is you live in a shit house and can't seem to get a job anywhere else." He leaned forward, his eyes staring straight into mine. "Am I right?"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 I didn't answer. I knew he was probably just guessing from my appearance, but he seemed to get almost every detail right. It was creepy as hell. "The ad didn't say what the job was." I managed to say.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 He looked at me, amused. "You see, Mr..."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Anderson." I said automatically. "Todd Anderson."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Mr. Anderson." He nodded. "As you can probably tell, I'm not exactly getting any younger." He swiveled his chair around to look out the window, a frown deepening on his face. "I'm old. I've been old for a long time now. I won't be around forever, Mr. Anderson, and I can't just leave this company to rot. I need a successor. But not just anyone will do."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Wait what are you-"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 He cut me off. "You may not know it, Todd Anderson, but you're a lot more special than you think." He wasn't looking at me, but I could still picture his intense blue eyes in my head.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 I blinked. It felt like I was in a dream, that in a few moments my alarm would sound and I would wake up to find myself late for the real appointment at Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. It was all a dream. An extremely *vivid* dream, but still a dream.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "...How special?" I asked when I couldn't think of anything else.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Very." He turned to face me. "I need a successor, Mr. Anderson." He repeated, sending a shiver down my spine. ĭċĭ/2 "Tag, you're it." He grinned again, and I felt like fainting.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "I-I can't." I stuttered, wanting to flee, but, like a bird caught in the eyes of a cobra, I was trapped.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 The walls were now not only the color of blood but soaked in the stuff, the metallic smell filling my nostrils, choking me. The very air seemed filled with unnatural power, and there was no escape.

Something very wrong was happening in that room and every instinct told me to get out, *get out*. But I couldn't, no matter how badly I wanted to. My fate had been chosen for me.

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Yes, you can. You have to. For the good of mankind you have to."

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 I swallowed. "...And if I do?"

ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2ĭċĭ/2 "Then, Mr. Anderson, you will become one of the most powerful men in the world." The man coughed, suddenly looking weary and ready to drop at any moment. "You will be responsible for anything that happens either in this laboratory or out of it. You will have to make hard decisions, and keep secrets anyone else would blurt out in public. You will see a lot of terrible and wonderful things in your time here, and you can never retire."

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He stood up and extended his hand for me to shake it. Still feeling like I was in a dream, I took his hand. He had what my dad would have called an ox-like grip, and he was still staring at me with those bright blue eyes. "You have 24 hours to think it over. Let's hope I don't kick the bucket before then." He smiled, but I sensed not only a kind of urgency behind that smile, but desperation. He was running out of time, and I was his last hope.

I can't remember my trip home, but I do remember standing in my apartment for hours, my thoughts whirling like a hurricane. Eventually, I suppose I decided that the old man (who I had yet to learn the name of) was crazy and went to bed.

The next thing I remember is waking up at precisely 3:15 am, snatching for the phone on my bedside table, and calling a number I didn't know. "I'll do it." I said into the phone, breathing heavily.

There was a soft click, indicating that the other person had hung up, but somehow I knew they had gotten the message. The next day, I would start training for my career at Heisenberg Laboratories Inc.

## Chapter 2

Paul Moore was the old man's name. Paul was the soul owner of Heisenberg Laboratories, and had started working there at the age of twenty seven, after his uncle died in a car crash.

"He was really my only family." Moore said, sipping at his coffee.

We were sitting in a small cafe called Taylor's Coffee House a few blocks from my apartment. I hadn't ordered anything, despite having not eaten since the day before.

"I'm sorry." I said looking anywhere but his eyes.

"Don't be. It was his time. Now, seeing as we probably only have about a week left to talk to each other, I'm going to try and teach you as much as I possibly can about The Lab." He leaned forward. "Imagine this, Mr. Anderson if you will. Say, you want to build a space station on Mars." He snapped his fingers. "Bam. Done." I raised an eyebrow. "So... you guys make space stuff?"

He laughed. "No, no. We make everything Todd! As long as it has to do with science anyway. Now, say you want to make animals talk. 'Whatever you say ol' buddy'" He mimicked a high pitch voice and laughed harder. I chuckled nervously. "That sounds great, really, but..."

Paul's laughter faded. Suddenly his expression hardened and this time when he spoke, it was barely a whisper.

"Say you want to start World War III." I swallowed, anticipating what he said next. "Done."

For a moment I felt that same dream feeling that I had in his office, then the waitress walked over with the check, and Paul looked up, breaking the trance. Moore smiled as the girl took his empty mug, looking like a completely different person from a few seconds before.

When the waitress left, I said "I'm having trouble believing someone could have that much power in their hands."

He nodded. "It takes some getting used to." If there was any foreshadowing in his voice, I didn't hear it.

"But how is that even possible?"

"Never mind that just yet." Paul stood up, wincing a little. "Damn knees just don't like me anymore. Come on, I've got something to show you."

We took a cab back to Heisenberg Laboratories, or as Moore liked to call it, The Lab. He started coughing on our way there, and for a horrible moment I thought he was just going to keel over and leave me with a job I didn't even understand. Luckily, we both made it there alive.

The building seemed more alive then when I had last been there. People in white lab coats, as well as suits and ties, were walking through the lobby, sitting in the uncomfortable chairs or chatting amongst themselves. I felt very out of place in my T-shirt and jeans, and I noticed several people watching me as I followed Moore to the elevator.

The old man was shaking hands, waving and smiling at almost every person in the room. "How are you feeling Annie?" It took me a few seconds to realize he was talking to the girl behind the desk I had met the day before.

I quickly looked away, pretending not to notice her. "I'm good. How's your cough?" 'Annie' asked, her voice now cheerful and pleasant.

"Better then ever." He laughed, apparently forgetting our ride over.

We stepped into the wonderfully empty elevator. As soon as the doors closed, he turned to me. "Sorry about all those bug-eyed people back there."

"Why were they staring?" I asked.

"Probably assuming your my successor. Which you are." He laughed. "Of course, now its going to be flying around like a rumor until I confirm it. Ah well." He waved his hand, as if banishing whatever trouble might come from it. "Anyways, they'll probably be staring at you for the next few days now. Sizing you up I mean. Seeing what qualities you have or don't, keeping tabs on how you behave or take care of yourself. It's something they have to do I suppose. They'll probably be rushing to my office pretty soon. 'Oh, Mr. Moore! You can't choose him! What if he doesn't brush his teeth every night?!'" Paul laughed and I found myself joining him, despite the sinking feeling in my stomach.

"But don't you worry." He continued as the elevator opened. "I've made my decision, and they can't change

that."

We stepped out into a small white hallway. On the right side of me was a rectangular window that showed a group of people working on some kind of engine. I paused only for a second, since Paul walked at an oddly fast pace, but for a moment I thought I saw a strange blue light shining from somewhere inside the engine. I forgot about it once we stepped through the door on the other side of the hallway, but now it comes to me as clear as water. That seems to be the case with most of the things I remember now, the little details sticking out like sore thumbs while the important parts fade away.

If I had any doubts about The Lab being a strange place, they disappeared when I saw the flying car. I didn't know what type of car it was, but I was almost certain you could see it on the streets on any normal day.

Though, this car certainty wasn't normal.

It was in the middle of a large room. Bright lights were shining on it from every direction, making the car look like it was almost glowing. It had no wheels, and there appeared to be nothing inside the car either. People like the ones I had seen working on the engine were walking around in dark blue suits that said things like

**Student Engineer** and **Supervisor**.

On one side of the room (which I had now discovered was circular) there was a group of men and women wearing white lab coats. Some scribbled things on clipboards while others pressed buttons on various monitors and scanners. I had a pretty good feeling I wouldn't understand a word of what any of them said. Paul waved to one of the lab coat wearers and they pressed a button on the wall. The lights dimmed. The blue suites retreated to the edges of the room.

"You're gonna like this." Paul grinned at me. I kept my doubts to myself.

Suddenly, a bright blue light like the one in the engine filled the room. The entire bottom half of the car was glowing. I winced against the light, but kept my eyes on the car. With a quiet humming noise, it began to lift off of the ground. Once again, my mind retreated to the safe haven of all of this being a dream.

The car hovered for about a moment or two, staring at me with its headlights, before drifting to a halt on the ground. The lights came back on and everyone went back to their business, as if nothing had happened. A man with a rag began to wash the windshield of the car.

"The hell...?" I asked, looking at Paul.

"Isn't that somethin'?" The old man grinned, crossing his arms against his chest. "We've had her for about six years now. Didn't cost hardly nothin' either." He looked at me. I don't think he was a very good mind reader, because he said to me "I know what you're thinking. Why the hell haven't I released this to the public yet?"

Which wasn't what I was thinking at all. My thoughts were more along the lines of *'how the hell?'*

He actually sort-of answered this question with what he said next. "We can't tell the public everything, Mr. Anderson. Especially not stuff like this. You see..." He trailed off, as if thinking of the best way to explain it to me. "We had a little help with this one. From friends who aren't exactly... from here."

"You mean like the Russians?" I asked.

"Well... no. More like the Marshans. Only they weren't Marshans."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're telling me you've dealt with aliens before?"

Moore scratched his head. "Well not *me*. Not directly anyway."

"Sir." I said at last. "This is all sounding pretty fucking insane."

"It will for a while. And most of it is. But as far as I can tell you don't have much of a choice when it comes to dealing with stuff like this."

"You still haven't told me what it is you actually do around here."

"I'm getting to that. First, you need to know about The Lab." We walked around the car and into another hallway. This one had the same long rectangular window as the last one, but there were three of them on each side, all looking into a different room.

"The Lab is split into several sections." Paul said as we walked at a slow pace through the hall. "This one is used mainly for medicine and technology stuff. I like to call it Tech Medics." He smiled at me, but my attention was focused on the window to the left of me, which contained what looked like a small submarine with wings. The old man kept talking though, apparently not-too concerned if I was listening or not. "We have hundreds of engineers, scientists and a few doctors running around this place. We're the reason most of the modern medicine exists today."



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"We've even got some stuff that, just like the car, hasn't and shouldn't be released yet. For instance, we've already gotten farther into finding the cure for AIDS than any other research facility in the world. But we can't tell *anyone*. We've found cures for several other things too. Cancer for instance. But as I said, none of it can be released. Now, the floor below us has-

"Wait." I cut him off. I had zoned out through most of what he said, but the C word caught my attention. "You guys have the cure for *cancer*?"

He bit his lip looking away from me. I blinked in disbelief. Nobody I knew had cancer, but I remembered that more than a few of my family members had died from it. All the slogans, fund raisers, and ads I had seen to find the cure were coming back to me. Of course, I had never really paid attention; cancer was almost unreal to me. But now, as I realized that not only did Heisenberg Laboratories have the cure, but they refused to give it to anyone, I felt a dull anger rising.

"You're telling me..." I began, my voice shaking.

Paul put up his hands. "Now, now, there's no need to-" I cut him off again.

"-That you've had the cure all this time? While people are *dieing*?"

"Listen to me, we don't have a choice-"

"You f\*cking b\*sterd!" I screamed at him.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "We don't have a choice when it comes to these things. You've seen how desperate people are to find a cure. If we give it to them now..." He trailed off.

"If you give it to them now thousands of lives will be saved!"

"And if we give it to them now thousands more will be *lost*!" Now we were both yelling. "People will be coming to us for answers to everything, they'll start thinking we're some kind of gods! America might not give it to the other countries, did you ever think of *that* mister Anderson?! Wars are started! Nukes are thrown!

And when everyone realizes we don't have the answers to everything, what do you think happens *then*? What if everyone realizes that it was *our* fault their homes are blowing up?! We can't tell the public everything Todd! People are too stupid and crazy for us to give it to them now!" He started coughing, his chest heaving. When the coughing subsided, he spoke again, his voice quieter, but still angry.

"You asked me what my job was. What your job *will* be." He looked at me. "Well Todd, my job is to decide whether a thousand or a hundred thousand people should die." He coughed. "My job is to decide whether we should build a flying car or a gun that vaporizes people. And sometimes, Mr. Anderson, I have to choose the gun. Sometimes, I have to let the world suffer for just a little longer. We're not going to keep the cure locked up forever, but we can't take it out now. We can't."

Silence fell between us. Paul looked even older standing in front of me. He looked like he had seen both war and peace, like he had held dieing children in his arms and felt the very essence of happiness. Was this what I would look like? I suddenly wondered whether Moore was as old as I thought he was.

"That's not all you have to do, Todd." He swallowed. "But sometimes it feels like it."

## Chapter 3

We explored a little more of The Lab that day until Paul said it was ok for me to go home. I barely slept that night. The next morning we met again and he continued telling me every detail he could about the place I would soon possess.

Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. has been around for as long as anyone can remember. You can't find anything to do with it in history books, and you can only find a few websites that briefly mention it. The Lab, along with the majority of its workers, barely exists in the eye of the public.

It is split in to too many sections to count, some of which being 'Tech Medics', animal research, human research, space observations, alien technology, geology, the study of the Elements, and more. Paul himself has never been to all of them.

Almost all of these sections are placed below ground level. The upper floors of the building consist of offices, break rooms and, apparently, apartments.

"I've got one picked out for you if you're interested." He said with a grin. I said I'd think about it.

Each employee is carefully looked over before they are hired. Physical and mental tests are mandatory. The employees usually picked are the ones with the least amount of family members.

"You can never be too careful." We were in Paul's office now, and he was reading a newspaper while talking to me. "We have enemies, Todd, and sometimes they try to get in."

"Why didn't I do any of those tests?" I asked.

"You didn't need to. I already know I can trust you."

The 'enemies' Moore was talking about were actually other research facilities in the area. Some were minor threats, occasionally sending a mean note or two.

"Why would you be worried about other labs?" I asked leaning back in my chair. "I mean its not like their stealing your customers or anything."

Mr. Moore looked up from his newspaper. "I'm getting to that. God you're impatient."

The biggest threat was a lab called Pasteur Labs, named after a scientist who worked on the study of germs.

"If you ask me." Paul scoffed. "They're *all* germs."

Pasteur Labs worked in a lot of the same areas as Heisenberg Laboratories, and were extremely competitive. According to Moore, however, they were a lot further behind The Lab then they thought they were. The biggest concern from Pasteur was that they occasionally sent their own employees over to see what they could sabotage or steal from The Lab.

"They've been trying for years to find out whats going on over here." Paul flipped the page on his newspaper.

"Uh, sir?" I sat up. "What exactly is going on over here? There's no way you guys could've gotten this far when no one else has."

He smiled a little, not looking at me. "You know what magic is, right?"

I laughed. "Ok, the aliens were a little much, but *magic*? You gotta be kidding me."

"I'm not talking tooth fairy magic, boy. I'm talking the kind that the Wicked Witch of the West might use. Magic that kills." I stopped laughing.

"Anyways." His face regained its odd cheerfulness. "Another part of my job is to make sure Pasteur doesn't get in here. Its tough alright, but it gets easier once you're used to their tricks. Ah, here we go." He handed me the newspaper. "That guy's name is Albert Campbell. He owns Pasteur and is the biggest asshole I've ever met."

I was starring at a picture of a man who looked to be about forty-or-fifty years old. His grey hair had disappeared from the top of his head, and he had a shit-eating grin that made me want to punch him the first time I met him. Albert, who had a fairly large belly, was holding an award in one hand and shaking the hand of the mayor with his other.

"Don't know why they'd ever give *him* an award for anything, but he seems to get a lot of them lately." Paul shrugged. "He likes rubbing it in my face. I have to remind myself almost constantly not to hire someone to set his precious house on fire."

"You can do that?" I asked, handing the newspaper back.

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"Son, when you're sitting in this chair you can get away without anything short of murder." Except I did eventually get away with that too. But we're not at that part yet.

We continued to talk about different things, mostly about how to avoid the government. They knew we existed, and they knew we had a lot of power in our little laboratory, and, like Pasteur, they were often trying to figure out what it was. Apparently another part of his/my job was to keep the whole 'magic' part secret (along with the part about how we're hiding things from everyone). Moore didn't exactly lie to them, but he didn't exactly tell the truth either.

"Sometimes." Moore began, scratching his chin. "You're gonna have guys that want you to make weapons. I'd try to avoid those people. Sometimes its the government who wants weapons. If you absolutely have to, make them a weapon that does the least amount of damage you can, got it?"

I nodded. That day we spoke for hours in his office, and when it was finally time for me to leave, I could barely stand up. We shook hands, and I took the elevator down to the lobby. When the doors opened I nearly collided with Ms. Coffee-stain Annie.

"Sorry!" We both said at the same time as we tried to avoid each other, me nearly falling over in the process. Finally, we both regained our balance. Then, we stared at each other in silence. I swear I could hear crickets somewhere. I noticed a name tag on her green work suit that I hadn't seen before. "Anna Stevenson." I said aloud, hoping to break the silence.

She nodded, smiling a little. She held up her hand, a ring glittering on one finger. "Soon to be Anna Dawson." Annie looked me up and down, her green eyes gleaming in recognition. "I know you. You're-"

"The coffee guy. Yeah." I smiled nervously.

"I was going to say Paul's Pet, but that works." She grinned when she saw my confused face. "You looked like a dog being led by a leash the other day in the lobby." She explained. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Todd. Anderson." We shook hands. I was suddenly aware of the fact that I was standing in the doorway of the elevator, keeping the doors from closing. Someone on another floor was probably going to throw a fit in a few minutes.

"Toddâ that's odd. I think I've got a call for you. I was just going up to ask Mr. Moore if there was anyone named Todd around here, but never mind I guess." Annie shrugged and gestured behind her at her desk.

"Phone's over there."

As we walked towards it and the elevator closed behind me, I asked "who called?"

"Didn't really get much of a name. He said to tell you 'Gary's calling.'"

I groaned. "How did he *find* me?"

Everyone's got someone who calls themselves your friend, even though they aren't. Mine was named Gary. I'd known him since high school (the three years I had stayed there anyway) and disliked him since the moment I'd met him.

Gary was a moocher, a coward and seemed determined to follow me everywhere I went. He also had no family other than his constant-drunk dad, and no home. I just didn't have the heart to tell him to get lost.

Annie grinned at me, her hand on the cordless red phone. "Want me to tell 'em you're busy?"

I sighed and shook my head, taking the phone.

His voice felt like it was grating on my ear. "Hey hey! I knew you were still alive you old son of a gun!" He laughed. I grimaced and fake-laughed with him.

"Yeahâ You uhâ need something Gary?"

"Word has it you've got yourself a hell of a job over there." Apparently word travels faster than I thought it did. "Didn't know you were a science guy."

"Yup, got a pretty good set up over here." I said, wishing he would just hang up.

"Mind if I swing by your new workplace?"

"Actually-"

"Great! I'll be there around noon or so." The phone clicked. I sighed, handing it back to a grinning Annie.

"I take it we're going to have a visitor tomorrow?" She put the phone down and looked at me.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"No problem, I'll see if I can set up a spot for you guys in one of the break rooms."

"Really? Thanks." I said gratefully.

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"It's nothing really." But it *was* something. To me anyway. It seemed that, despite everything, I had finally gained a friend. One who wasn't going to die in a few days anyway.

I waved a quick goodbye and walked out the large glass doors into the night air. It was June, but the breeze brought a slight chill with it. While deciding I was going to buy a jacket the next day, I didn't notice the car pull up next to me. It was a sleek black mustang, obviously very expensive and gleaming in the moonlight. It was the sound of a car door slamming that caught my attention. Three people stepped out of the car with what looked to be deliberate slowness. The one on the driver's side was wearing a black suite and staring at me. The other two appeared not to notice.

Feeling a little creeped out, I turned and started walking in the other direction when the man in the black suite spoke to me.

"You wouldn't happen to be Todd Anderson, would you?"

I swallowed. For an odd moment I remembered how kids were forbidden by their parents to talk to strangers and wondered whether this rule should be used by adults as well. "Yes." I choked out and turned around just as his fist collided with my face.

Somehow he had managed to teleport from his previous position. At least, that's what it looked like. "You son of a bitch." He sneered at me.

I quickly lost my footing and landed on the sidewalk, tailbone first. I winced in pain, feeling the blood trickling from my nose. It wasn't broken, but it hurt like *hell*. "Nice to meet you too." I gritted my teeth and stared up at him in defiance.

"You got some balls, I'll give you that. You think you can just walk in here and take over an entire company? I don't think so." Pain exploded in my side as he kicked me with his polished shoe. His buddies were standing by the car, silent and watching. "Let me tell you something, right here, right now. If you aren't gone by tomorrow I swear I'll make your life hell you little shit stain."

I coughed, the smell of blood making my head spin. "How so?" I asked, my voice trembling. I was scared, but I was also angry. This guy I didn't even know had punched me in the face and was threatening me as if he were some badass gang leader. I wanted to attack back, to at least kick this fucker in the balls, but I knew I couldn't. I hadn't won many fights in my life, and if I tried anything his buddies would probably be on me in a second. It was the fact that I couldn't do anything that made me hate the man looking down on me even more. "Let's just say I know a thing or two when it comes to this sort of thing." He smiled. "Oh, and if you want to talk some more, just ask for Mr. Dawson." He gestured at the building. "The girl in there should know who you're talking about."

He laughed and turned away from me, walking back to the car. I stood up feeling like my insides had gone through a blender. It wasn't until I was riding the bus that I realized I had just met Annie's fiancÃ©.

## Chapter 4

There were no visible bruises. Good. I wasn't in the mood to explain what had happened last night to anyone, especially not Annie. I put on a white collar shirt with the same blue tie I had worn before and stepped out of my apartment towards the bus stop.

As I stepped out of the bus and walked up to the large glass doors of The Lab, I briefly considered simply walking away forever. I often wonder what might have happened if I had. I opened the door and stepped inside. My watch read 8:05. I still had a few hours before Gary would show up.

Annie was sitting at her desk, flipping through a stack of papers. She looked up at me and waved, a friendly-but-tired smile on her face.

"Do you ever go home?" I asked, walking towards the elevator.

"Sometimes. Mr. Moore said to meet him on the floor above his office."

I pressed the 14 and the doors closed. I found myself thinking about Dawson, and how in hell he had ever managed to talk Annie into marriage. *Maybe she sees something in him you don't.* A voice in my head said. *After all, you only just met him.* I laughed a little. *And what a great impression he made!*

The 14th floor looked about the same as the 13th. I walked down the exceedingly long hallway, not entirely sure where I was going or what I should be looking for. Finally, I stopped at a door that had a piece of paper taped to it. **In Here** the paper proclaimed in sharpie.

I shrugged and knocked.

"That'd be Todd." I heard Paul's muffled voice say before the door opened. He smiled at me and said

"Morning. I've got someone here for you to meet."

The room was the same size as Moore's, but the walls were white and the floor was covered in a bright blue carpet. It had the same large window, but instead of only a lamp to light the room there were bright florescent lights above us. Small cushioned chairs were lined up in a semicircle at the far end of the room, directly in view of a large TV screen.

A tall African-American man was sitting in one of the chairs wearing a pink suit. He was old, but not as old as Paul, and he looked like he could scare a lion by saying 'boo!' I had a pretty good feeling that if I laughed at his clothes he'd snap me in half like a toothpick.

"This is Mr. Harrington. Mr. Harrington this is Todd Anderson." Paul introduced us before sitting down. I sat down on the chair on the very edge of the semicircle so I could face both of them.

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Harrington smiled at me, revealing a set of perfect white teeth.

"You too." I nodded, hoping I was making a good first impression.

"Mr. Harrington over sees most of the projects that go on in The Lab." Paul explained. "He's a very good friend of mine, and I hope he will be yours too. Now, as for the room we're in, you won't be coming in here too often, but I thought you should know where it was. That TV over there is connected to a computer somewhere around here, and allows you to talk to people through video chatting. Ain't that neat? I use it mostly for people who send me supplies and such."

"Wonderful sir, but..." Harrington looked at Paul, his voice impatient. "Shouldn't we have started paying back Morgan by now? We promised him \$50,000 two months ago."

"Did we?" Moore looked at him in surprise. "I..." He suddenly had that same look of desperation I had seen when I first met him. It was the look of someone who was beginning to realize their time was running out. "I must have forgotten. My mistake. Send him the money as soon as you can, and make sure he knows we still need those steel bars."

From the look on Harrington's face, my guess was they already had the bars. "Yes sir." He said anyway. Pity suddenly overtook me as I looked between the two of them. Here were two men who had known each other for years, and now one was being forced to watch the other fall apart. Then it hit me that, being his replacement, I was going to be a constant reminder of Paul to Harrington.

Luckily, a beeping noise began to sound off in Mr. H's pocket. "Excuse me." He said, leaving the room.

Paul turned to me, his blue eyes shining in the bright lights. "I was hoping we might get a few moments alone. What I'm about to tell you is extremely confidential. You must not tell anyone if you can avoid it." I nodded. I

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had had a pretty good idea something like this might come up sooner or later. "I don't know how much longer I have left, so I wanted to tell you this as soon as I could. There's a reason I didn't die before I met you. "That 'magic' we talked about earlier? It is the reason this company is here, it is the reason you walked through those doors a few days ago. It is the very reason, Mr. Anderson, I've kept myself together this long. You think humans made it this far on their own? Hell no. We've had help from many different sources. I don't know what the name of this magic actually is, but I like to call it Megaleioths." He smiled. "It's Greek. The Megaleioths has a personality of its own, Todd. It likes games, mind games in particular. It will play with you like a toy before you leave this world, that's for certain.

"It also likes to be in control. I wouldn't test it if I were you. It made this company so it could tease mankind with wonders of the future, but only it decides when we release what we create. It floods our inventors' heads with ideas so they can make glorious objects, only to have them be shut away in a basement for a decade or two. But it still needs someone to lead the inventors and the scientists and the engineers and every other bloody person in this place. So, every now and then, it goes out looking for someone to take over this place when the old boss is ready to die. Why speak to thousands of minds when you can have fun with just one?

"You will listen to everything the Megaleioths says, Mr. Anderson. You may not realize it's speaking to you at first, but you'll figure it out eventually. Anyway, the Megaleioths isn't dumb, it knows human beings are very fragile things. So, it gives it's favorite toy, soon to be you, a kind of force field. You will not die as long as you are the owner of this company. You can't kill yourself either."

I sat there for a moment, taking it in. I was pretty sure this was whatever disease Paul had speaking, but even then I couldn't help but feel a touch of fear. Was this my destiny? To become the plaything of something that probably existed long before Earth was even thought of? I shuddered a little, remembering Moore's last sentence. "*You can't kill yourself either.*" Had he tried? I couldn't read his expression, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"I can feel the force field slipping away as we sit here Todd. It won't be long now..." His eyes were staring straight into mine again. I never forgot his gaze.

The door opened quietly as Harrington stepped into the room. "That was our tool guy." He said bluntly. Paul sighed and stood up. "Here." He tossed me a quarter. "Get yourself a soda from one of the vending machines. Me and Mr. Harrington have stuff to take care of. Annie told me you'd be having a visitor pretty soon anyway."

I nodded, standing up and catching the quarter. "Thank you sir. When should I expect to see you again?" He paused. "Some time after 2 o'clock." And after Harrington sent me a quick nod of farewell, the two of them were gone.

## Chapter 5

It felt like ages before I finally found a soda machine near a door marked **Stairs**. Sipping my coke, I walked over to the door. I wasn't in any hurry to get downstairs, seeing as I still had about two hours left before my unwelcome guest would arrive. I opened the door out of pure curiosity and looked inside.

The stairs went through the building in a rectangular pattern with a landing and a door for each floor. In the middle, as there often was for these kinds of staircases, there was a hole that (presumably) lead to the bottom of the building. I walked forward, the soda foaming slightly in my hand. The staircase had a large wooden railing that stood up to my chest, but had huge gaps between the supporting posts. Apparently, there was little concern for children falling through.

I yawned, leaning forward on the railing so I could see over the edge. I lifted the soda to my lips, but immediately stopped, my hand shaking, when I realized I couldn't see the bottom of the staircase. Instead, it seemed to fade away in a haze of red, as if this was the Stairway to Hell.

*Those must be the lowest levels.* I thought, ignoring the rail that was digging into my chest as I leaned further forward in the hopes that I might see something. The red light looked like it was coming from deep within the building. Occasionally, I thought I saw a jet of steam hiss through the air.

I suddenly realized an unsteady wooden railing was the only thing between me and a plummet to certain death. I stepped back into the hallway and closed the door to the stairs, deciding then that I would avoid using them if I could. It took me another few minutes to find the elevator again, and by that point it was 10:45.

Annie was still at her desk, only now she was talking on the phone with someone. I stayed a reasonable distance away, but I could still hear her side of the conversation.

She was smiling, a bright and cheerful smile. "Well don't put it on the counter! Just take it outside, I'll buy us a new carton. Honey, do you know what rotten milk smells like? Exactly. Just use some paper towels. I'll talk to you later. Love you." She hung up, chuckling before she noticed me. "Oh hey Todd!"

"Hey." I smiled. "Making a few drug deals?"

"Yup." She grinned. "Gonna stash the stuff at your place. That ok?"

"You don't even know where I live."

"That's what you think."

"That break room still open?"

"Yeah, 5th floor, directly on your left. Kumar is up there. He's a friend of mine." She said casually, typing something on the computer.

"Sweet. Oh, and, when Gary gets here, don't make eye contact."

"Got it."

## Chapter 6

I liked Kumar almost instantly. Right off the bat he introduced himself, shook my hand and offered me an assortment of drinks from a small fridge in the corner of the room.

"No thanks." I smiled, tossing my empty coke can in the trash.

The room was small, but comfortable. The walls were white and the floor had a simple tile pattern. Next to the fridge, a row of counters ran with a sink and a microwave on the edge closest to me. On the other side of the room there was a vending machine and a soda machine. It had a round table in the middle that reminded me of the break room in the place I once worked at as a telemarketer. Yeah, I was one of *those* people.

I sat down in one of the folding chairs at the table and sighed. I wasn't looking forward to talking to Gary.

Kumar sat across from me. It took me a moment before I realized he was staring at me.

"Something on my face?" I asked, and he snapped out of it, embarrassed.

"Sorry!" He apologized, his voice heavy with an Indian accent. "Its just that... you're kind of a celebrity around here."

"Really?" I asked. The folding chair squeaked as I leaned back in it.

He nodded. "You're Mr. Moore's replacement right? Everyone's talking about you, though... not all of them are kind."

I chuckled a little. "I figured."

"Dawson seemed really upset."

If I had been drinking anything, I would have spat it out comically like a cartoon right then. "What?! Dawson works *here*?" I nearly fell out of my chair.

"...Yes?" Kumar said nervously. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no." I sighed, sitting up. "Its just..." Then I remembered that he was one of Annie's pals. "Never mind."

There was a long pause where we didn't talk at all. Then, Kumar leaned forward, his voice curious and inquisitive. "Where are you from?"

I shrugged. "I grew up in Nowhere Land, south of here."

He nodded. "That's the way it is with most people who come to own this place. So I've heard anyway. But, and I'm sorry if I'm being rude, why did Paul choose you? If you don't mind me asking." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I don't know. He liked the way I looked I guess." That was a lie.

"You look like a friendly person." He smiled. "Annie thinks so too. Except for when you ruined a perfectly good pair of jeans that is." We both laughed. I was a little surprised. I always thought I looked more like someone who was going to beg you for money. Or steal it.

"So, how close are you and Annie?" I asked, trying to stop laughing.

"Pretty close." He gave me a mischievous smile. "Dawson better keep an eye on her before I steal her out from under his nose." That sent us in to another fit of wild laughter. We looked pretty ridiculous, but I didn't care. Kumar was now New Friend #2.

"You know." He said, gasping for breath. "You're pretty ok."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"Hey hey! Somebody forgot to invite me to the party!" I groaned as Gary spoke behind me.

Kumar looked up in surprise. "This must be your friend." He looked back at me. "Should I leave?"

I nodded, standing up. As he passed me, I whispered "run while you still can."

He snickered and closed the door behind him. I thought I could faint laughter on the other side. I then turned to Gary, a fake friendly smile on my face.

"How's my old buddy?" He grinned. I noticed that, despite him being younger than me, his hair had started receding. "Still stealing money from banks? Or have you moved on to more organized crime?" He was joking, but I couldn't help but feel a stab of anger that he would dare mention that part of my past in front of me.

Still, I continued to smile. "No, I'm done with that. I'm getting a job here pretty soon."

"So I heard, so I heard. Hey, did you see that babe in the lobby? Nice tits-"

"What do you want Gary?" My voice shook.



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He blinked, a little surprised. "Oh right! I was thinking that... us being so close and all... you might get in a good word with your boss for me. You know, help me get a head start in this town." I had been helping Gary get 'head starts' for years. He blew it almost every single time, usually getting both of us fired.

"I don't think so. This isn't just some job Gary. I could actually have a future here. Plus, you actually need some kind of knowledge..."

He laughed, that idiotic laugh of his. "Oh please, what do you know about science? You failed that class twice! Plus, you're gonna need someone around here to help you play nice with the other kiddos."

I narrowed my eyes at him. It was true, I rarely ever got along with people, but I had been doing just fine before he showed up. "I can handle this on my own." I said, trying not to reveal my rage.

He patted me on the back, a gesture that almost made me punch him right there. "Sure you can." He said sarcastically, wandering over to the fridge.

"I mean it." I said as he rooted through the food. "I actually have something this time. And... I'm not sure if I want to risk it."

Gary turned back to me, and I wondered if that had been the right thing to say. "Now Toddy." He said. I always hated that nickname. "Don't tell me you don't want to help out your best pal!"

"It's just that-" I tried to explain.

"Don't tell me your gonna turn your back on me." He was smiling, but his eyes held little humor.

"I can't keep looking after you." I said finally.

"...What?" His smile faded.

"You heard me. I can't keep supporting you. I get you jobs and you lose them within a week. I get you places to live and you can't even bother to keep up with your payments. All you do is watch TV and waste your money on beer!"

"Hey!" He yelled. "After all I've done for you-"

"What the *hell* have you done for me?!"

"Remember that time I bailed you out-?"

"You're the one who got me in there in the first place! *You told the police who I was!*"

We stared each other down, neither one willing to break. Fury was, like Gary, an old buddy of mine, and, like Gary, decided to rear its ugly head that day. I took a step forward, my blue eyes gleaming. Suddenly, Gary looked afraid.

"Whoa buddy." He put up his hands. "Just calm down." I took another step forward. "We can work this out."

Gary was returning to his old 'innocent' appearance. I didn't care. That is, until he said "you wouldn't want to lose your job, would you?"

I paused, considering it. I relaxed a little. "I'm sorry." I said finally. Gary looked relieved. He had had past experiences with my rage. "I just can't help you right now. Maybe later..." I trailed off.

He smiled. "No problem. I'm staying at a place down by the river. They call it the Moat. Just ask for Gary if you ever want to talk." With that, he walked past me. But before he left entirely, he looked back at me. "Guess you'll never be rid of that ol' temper, huh buddy?"

I nodded quietly and he disappeared behind the door. "Shit." I said aloud. I had actually been following a kind of hope that, if I kept an upbeat attitude, eventually my anger would vanish. Stupid me.

Oh well, Gary was gone (for now), I had two friends, a place to live (I had decided to take up Paul's offer), and, according to Paul, I would soon have a job that would give me more power than the average man. My former cheerfulness returning, I walked to the elevator and pressed the button. I was beginning to enjoy the jazz music that played inside it.

I had 45 minutes before I had to go see Moore again. I pressed the button for the lobby after a moment's thought, hoping Gary would be out of the building at that point. Annie was, of course, still there.

"How'd it go?" She asked, shuffling through yet another stack of papers.

"Pretty good." I smiled, hoping I could fool her. I didn't.

"You liar. What happened?"

I sighed. "Well... considering I almost beat the tar out of him..."

"Todd?" Annie raised an eyebrow at me.

"I don't know, he just... I mean he went..." I sighed again. I had never wanted to tell anyone about my past,

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who I used to be. I looked back at Annie, and suddenly, I decided that if I had to tell anyone in The Lab, it would be her. "I guess I have to start at the beginning for any of this to make sense."

## Chapter 7

I was born into a family that had already had two other kids, Patricia and Rodney. At first, things were pretty ok, I played with my toys and my brother and sister did their own things. Then, my dad lost his job.

I was only five, so I didn't understand much, but I knew my parents were angry. Things started to get worse. Now, both of my parents had jobs, as well as my older brother Rodney. Patricia became something of a baby sitter to me.

Eventually, we had to move to a cheaper house. The neighborhood was terrible. Patricia was killed by a stray bullet. I was nine.

When I finally made it to high school, I was a mess. I was already drinking, had stolen a pack of my father's cigarettes, and lost my virginity. I was in a gang, but it was small and we barely did more than vandalize.

That was around the time I met Gary. The leader of my gang, a guy named Chuck, had introduced us. As I said before, I hated Gary immediately. There was something about the way he stood there, grinning stupidly and going on and on about what great friends we were going to be. But, I learned to pretend to like him, if only to stay on Chuck's good side.

After repeating my sophomore year, I dropped out of high school at the beginning of my junior year. Chuck's gang was larger now, and things were getting serious. I had worked my way up to Chuck's right hand man by this point, and I had a pretty well-known reputation. I didn't fight often, but it was more of the fact that I could stare anyone down in the streets.

Eventually, I did rob a bank. I would have gotten away with it too, if one of Chuck's men hadn't decided to chicken out at the last minute. I went to jail for awhile, but almost as soon as I got out I started doing the same things, vandalizing, setting fires, stealing. I was arrested a few more times, one of which because Gary tipped off the police.

Another gang had been growing in the area. They looked harmless, and only sent a few threats our way, but we should have known better. One day, the majority of Chuck's gang, including me and Gary, were camping out in an old barn. We were celebrating a plot to steal a few beers that had gone perfectly. I was at the back of the room, feeling like I was going to throw up because of a hangover.

"Drink some water or something! You look terrible!" Gary said loudly next to me, a drunken expression on his face.

I could see Chuck standing on a few boxes that had been piled up in the middle of the floor. He was singing like a maniac, and people were dancing. It wasn't a terribly happy scene, but for us, it was better than nothing. I winced in pain as the doors to the barn opened with a loud screeching noise. A group of shadowy figures were standing outside, their faces hidden by masks. Chuck shouted at them, something like "come on in!" And all hell broke loose.

The next thing I knew, people were screaming, guns were firing, and Chuck was dead. I dived inside of an animal stall, Gary following close behind me. He was shivering, his eyes wide with crazed fear. It went on for what felt like hours, blood splattering the walls and bullets whizzing past. Then it was over.

I looked out from behind the stall, my heart pounding. Bodies were everywhere, and the shadowy figures were gone. I could see a few people moving, but Gary and I were the only ones unhurt. We got out of there before the police and the medics showed up and headed back to my house. That was when I decided I didn't want to do this anymore.

My brother Rodney, who was in the military now, payed for me to go to rehab and anger management classes. My parents no longer cared what I did, so long as I didn't ask them for money. I stopped drinking and smoking, and started looking for a job. Gary, who had nothing else to do, came with me. I found a few, but I seemed unable to keep any of them. Five years later, I was walking through the doors of Heisenberg Laboratories Inc.

I had felt good these past few days with Paul and Annie and The Lab. I hadn't got angry, I hadn't got fired, and most of all, I hadn't got killed. Gary showing up was like shoving everything I wanted to forget in my face. I had felt like my old self in that break room, pissed and ready to do anything.

It felt good telling all of this to Annie, but it also made me feel sick. I was one messed up guy. I half expected

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her to get up and leave, but she just sat there, listening. When I finished, she said "you know, you sound a lot like Paul. He didn't come from a very good place either." She smiled at me, a kind, reassuring smile. That smile made me feel good inside, and I decided then that it didn't matter what Dawson did, I was going to tolerate him, if only for Annie. If only I could have kept that promise.

## Chapter 8

"So to recap, you'll spend most of your time daydreaming in this chair." Paul grinned at me. Once again, we were in his office. A day had passed since Gary's arrival, and I was already getting used to my new room in The Lab.

Moore had been telling me more about the Megaleioths. Apparently, while it was sending ideas to the employees, it would also be talking to me. I didn't even have to know how to run a company; the Megaleioths would do it for me, sending my thoughts in the right direction so I knew what to say for almost every occasion. Eventually, of course, I would get the hang of it on my own, but until then the Megaleioths would be leading me like a dog.

Not to mention, thanks to its tampering with my brain, I would be able to observe things better, to control myself (sort of), and think for long periods of time on one subject. There were, however, drawbacks. Unless I interacted with someone almost constantly, my social skills would deplete rapidly, and I would detest the thought of talking to, or seeing anyone. For Paul, this side effect had worn off over time, but he didn't know if it would do the same for me.

The other thing I had to worry about was my emotions. I had previously observed that Paul was a little bi-polar, but as it turned out he was hiding the worst from me. "You know the basic emotions right?" He had asked, the morning sunlight casting a golden light into the room. "Happy, sad, mad? You're going to be feeling one of those emotions constantly. Of course, I can ignore it, but for the first few years here it can get pretty bad."

I was already beginning to despise the Megaleioths. I thought to myself then that I was going to ignore most of what it said. Of course, I hadn't known then that that wasn't an option.

Paul had no idea how the Megaleioths came to be, or what it was exactly, but he had a pretty good idea that it had existed for a very, very long time. "Try to stay on its good side, that's all I'm saying." There had been a touch of seriousness in his voice, but I didn't care. If this thing was going to mess with me, I was going to mess right back. This was one of my worst ideas, but if I hadn't, I wouldn't have such an interesting tale to tell now would I?

## Chapter 9

My room was on the 8th floor. It took less than half an hour to move my stuff from my old apartment to there. Just by looking at the door, I knew this place was going to make my former one look like a complete trash heap.

The room was divided into three sections. To the left of me, a TV sat with a couch and a coffee table. To the right, a small kitchen with counters separating it from the 'living room'. In front of me a short hallway led into a bedroom. About halfway down the hallway there was a door to the bathroom.

The floors were wooden, with a white carpet in the bedroom and black and white checkered tiles in the bathroom. Each room had a different colored paint on the walls, but they all followed a grey/blue spectrum. The bed was two-person, and ridiculously comfortable. My room was on one corner of the building, so I had windows in both the room with the TV and the bedroom.

When I asked Paul how the hell I was going to pay for all of this, he just laughed and walked away. Still, I felt guilty. Ever since I'd agreed to be Paul's successor, the company had been sending me checks, as if I was already working there. I felt... well to be honest I felt like Gary.

I walked into the room and practically fell on the couch, a book in my hands. I was never one for reading, but I had nothing else to do, seeing as it was six in the morning. I felt incredibly tired, despite having not done really anything physically exhausting. I knew I should probably have been in bed at that point, but some stubborn instinct of mine was insisting that daily activities didn't require sleep.

Eventually, however, the words on the pages began to blur, and I couldn't seem to keep my eyes open any longer. The book fell with a thud from my hands. I was asleep almost instantly. Only, somehow, I had the sense that I was also awake at the same time.

I began to get the sensation that I was falling, falling deep into a dark abyss that would swallow me whole, with not a trace left to be found. In the dream, I tried to open my eyes but found I couldn't. I couldn't hear, I couldn't speak. I felt a cold sensation enveloping me, and I imagined myself sinking through a strange black liquid. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. I opened my mouth to scream and the liquid flooded inside it, choking me. It was tasteless, but the texture of it was enough to make me want to hurl.

Then, as soon as it had come, the liquid began to dissipate, and I could breathe again. The coldness left me, and I opened my eyes. I was falling. Through space.

Bright stars twinkled around me, the brighter ones like priceless jewels. I found myself wanting to touch one of them. I couldn't see any planets, nor was I close enough to one of the stars for it to seem like the sun, but I didn't care. This dotted sky was enough for me.

I caught my breath as I spotted something new. A nebula, glorious and red, seemed to stare at me, like a giant. I felt small, incredibly small. And I was. How could I possibly compare to something like this? I wished I wasn't floating uncontrollably, so that I might bow before this vast god.

As I gazed at the nebula, I began to feel like I was being watched. I tried to turn, but it was like moving through molasses. After a few moments of trying (and failing) to move, I decided to resort to simply freezing in place. However, the feeling did not falter, and I suddenly wished to be anywhere but there.

***I like the way you think.*** It was more like a feeling than a voice. I looked from side to side, but still I could not see anything but the nebula. For a moment I wondered whether it had come from the nebula itself, then I decided against it. Somehow, I knew the nebula was just a nebula. ***You've managed to spark my curiosity. That's more than most of the others could accomplish. I can't wait for you to be mine. We will have fun, yes, so much fun.***

*Who are you?* I tried to ask, but my mouth could no longer open. Fear replaced wonder as I floated silently through whatever the hell space is made up of. This was worse than the liquid somehow, and I prayed for it to be over so that I might keep at least some of my sanity.

I was a helpless bug. And whatever was watching me knew it, it just didn't feel like pointing it out, as if it were holding it in for a later date. I could feel it smiling, no, *grinning*, though it had no mouth. I closed my eyes. I wanted to beg for mercy, or at least hope for a swift death so that I might escape this beautiful place that had become a nightmare.

No. I thought suddenly. Rage began to boil inside of me and my eyes snapped open. I would not beg, I would not break before this being who grinned at me though it had no mouth. If I had to float through endless space for eternity, so be it, but I would not [i]ever[/i] give up to this thing.

***And that's why you're my new favorite.***

*Fuck you!* I screamed at it.

***So much fun. Whaddya say we start World War III together, huh buddy? We could do it. Bam. Done.***

*Get the hell away from me!*

***Just say the word and the world is yours. Hell, I could just make Paul kick the bucket right now if you like.***

I could open my mouth now. I started screaming in rage, my lungs feeling like they were going to explode.

The thing was laughing now, I could hear it echoing in my head. I wanted to kill it, to strangle the voice until I could no longer hear it, but I couldn't see it, I couldn't *find it!*

I felt a dull sensation of pain as I hit the floor. I had fallen off the couch.

I groaned, my head pounding as I stood up uneasily. Already the dream was fading slightly, but I didn't think I could forget it completely. After all, this was my first conversation with the Megaleioths.

I looked at my watch, yawning. My eyes widened. It was 10:43. "Shit!" I yelled as someone knocked on my door.

I hesitate a moment before opening it, sure it was someone there to yell at me for being late to my next meeting with Paul. Instead, it was a smiling Kumar.

"You ready?" He asked.

I stared at him in confusion. "For what?"

He laughed a little, as if I was joking, but stopped when he saw I was serious. "Oh! Did no one tell you?

There's a picnic scheduled today for every employee in here."

"Really?" I asked. I had heard of no such picnic, but I didn't really have reason not to believe him either.

He nodded. "I was going to offer to give you a ride, if that's alright."

"Sure, just ah, give me a few minutes to get ready."

"I'll be in the lobby."

I dressed, combed my hair and headed to the elevator. People were gathered in the lobby, much like the day I had gone to see the flying car. Annie, for once, wasn't at her desk. A few people looked at me, but not as many as before. I was old news, and that was just fine with me.

After battling my way through the crowd, I found Kumar standing by the door. He led me outside to a small dark green car that looked like it seriously need a car wash. While riding shotgun, I asked him what the picnic was for.

He shrugged. "Sometimes Paul just throws parties. I guess it's his way of giving back to the other workers." I decided to take this into account. If I was going to live up to Paul's reputation, I was going to have to work hard.

The picnic was being held at a local park near the edge of town. The park was green, despite the recent lack of rain, and dotted with trees. A walking path wound its way through the area, and a jungle gym resided near some picnic tables. The tables were heavily decorated, and food was piled on top of them. The crowd was even larger here than it had been in the lobby, and I noticed more than a few children running around. I wondered whether everyone here actually worked in The Lab, or were just close friends of Paul.

I followed Kumar past a large gazebo where music was playing and people were dancing. Kumar appeared to be simply wandering without aim, but I was looking for Paul. I spotted him laughing with a pair of older women, but before I could go to him a voice stopped me.

"Well well, if it isn't Captain Kumar and his sidekick Coffee Guy." Annie winked at me. I smiled, and Kumar burst into loud laughter.

"And what a pleasure it is to see the both of you." My smile faded. Dawson had walked up beside Annie, a plastic cup in his hand. "You must be Todd." He held out his hand for me to shake. I looked at it, and hesitated before I shook it, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Yes. You must be Mr. Dawson." My voice held virtually no emotion. Annie appeared not to notice.

"I thought you said you were going to help set up." She said accusingly to Kumar, though the humor never left her eyes.

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Kumar stopped laughing and nervously cleared his throat. "Well, you see I had to-"

"Yeah, sure. Come on. You get to help bring in the desserts." She looked at me and Dawson, apparently oblivious to the starring match we had started a few moments ago. "You two should get to know each other while we're gone." Then, she was dragging Kumar off to a group of people who were unloading a large van. We stood there like rival tom cats, waiting for the other to make the first move. "I thought I told you to get lost." Dawson said, his dark green eyes gleaming.

Surprisingly enough, a smirk formed on my lips. "And I thought you actually had a sense of fashion." I gestured to the blue suit he was wearing and his shit-brown shoes.

My smile widened when I saw the frustration flood his face, as if he couldn't believe his methods of intimidation hadn't worked. "You better wipe that smile off your face before I do it for you." He was visibly angry, but he kept his voice low.

"Whats the matter?" I asked. "Worried your girlfriend might hear you? Have you done this to one of her friends before I wonder?"

"You shut the hell up!" He reminded me of an animal on the end of a chain, ready to break free at any moment, but I was having too much fun to care. I had promised myself I would tolerate him, but nothing had been mentioned about a little teasing here and there.

As I looked at him, I suddenly noticed that Paul had moved away from his previous spot and was watching us. "Watch it." I said, walking past Dawson. "This is your future boss you're talking to."

"Not for long." I heard him mutter, but still I found a lack of caring within myself.

Paul gave me a friendly wave, and I returned it. As I neared him, he said, "I see you're getting to know your employees. I'd be careful if I were you though, not all of them can recognize humor." He was smiling, but I caught a hint of seriousness in his voice. *Don't get too cocky.* Was what he was really saying.

I nodded in understanding. "Sorry I didn't stop by your office this morning, I slept in a little."

"No problem. I wouldn't have been there anyway. Also, sorry I didn't tell you about the picnic, I was so busy planning I guess I just forgot. But have you seen the buffet yet? The hamburgers are fantastic!"

And so, that was where we headed. Occasionally, we stopped so Paul could shake hands and exchange a few words with some people, as well as introduce me. Again, it was like that day in the lobby, but I felt far more confident and less like... well, a dog on a leash. I tried to make the best first impressions I could, especially with people who looked like I'd be seeing them again. One of these people, whose name I had once heard mentioned before, was Morgan Walsh.

Morgan was the main supplier of anything metal or rubber for The Lab. He was tall, muscular, and had a few teeth missing. He was also half blind in one of his eyes. He gave me the impression of someone who would have been hired as a body guard in his youth. Or a bounty hunter. He shook my hand with an iron grip, his crooked smile framed by a salt-and-pepper beard.

"Well lookie here! This young chap looks promising! And boy-howdy does he resemble you Paul! If I didn't know any better, I'd think this feller were your son!" Morgan seemed incapable of turning down the volume on his voice, but I liked him. He was like a cuddly gray haired grizzly bear.

Paul laughed. "Na, we ain't related. By the way, have you seen Thomas anywhere around here?"

Morgan scratched his head. "I reckon I haven't! You should try down where the alcohol is though! Knowing Tom, he's probably guzzled more then anyone else here combined!" He and Paul laughed. Suddenly, Morgan's head did a little snap upwards, as if he had just gotten an electric shock. Paul stopped laughing.

"You got something you need to tell me Morgan?" Moore spoke slowly.

Morgan blinked, standing as straight as a statue. He spoke in a voice that was monotone and quiet. "Albert's by the sweets." Paul sighed. Then, Walsh was back to his previous self, only now he seemed agitated. "I tried to tell him to get lost, you better believe I did! That son of a bitch ain't no good, no good at all!"

"No problem Morgan, I'll take care of it." Paul thumped him on the back and we changed direction, Morgan shouting a farewell behind us.

"What was that? He looked like he was about to have a stroke or something..." I kept my voice low, trying not to draw attention.

"It's his twitch. He's had it ever since some idiot dropped a cinder block on his head. When he gets an idea about something, or a secret he can't hold, he blurts it out. It's nothing serious, he's lived with it for years, but



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it can get him into trouble." The old man shook his head as we walked through the never ending crowds of people.

I could see Annie organizing cookies at the dessert table as we walked towards it. Kumar was struggling to carry a large, multi-layer cake over to the table. I wondered briefly where Dawson had wandered off to.

I remembered Albert's picture in the newspaper, and tried to spot him without success. Paul paused, surveying the scene. "Guess he took off. Good." We continued. Annie spotted us.

"Hey guys! Just finishing up over here." She set down a small clipboard and headed over to us.

"Your ability to complete something like this in under thirty minutes astounds me Annie." Paul said, looking over the pastries. I nodded in agreement.

"You guys should try the brownies. Mrs. Ward made them." I'm pretty sure both mine and Paul's stomach growled at the same time. I realized that, once again, I had gone almost an entire day without eating. In fact, I had barely eaten anything since the day me and Paul met.

"I think we'll try the buffet first." Paul grinned.

We took another long walk through the park, saying 'hi' and shaking hands as we went. I felt relaxed, more than I had in years. Here was a place I could wander without people looking at me, clutching at their purses and quickly walking away. The sky was a clear blue, and the horizon was beautifully outlined by a line of trees. Balloons and streamers were everywhere, and everything felt just right. Normally, I'd take that as a bad sign, but that day was one of the few where nothing truly terrible happened.

I realized, as we approached it, why the buffet table was so far away from the dessert table. The long walk in between would burn off some of the many calories the various things on this table would readily provide. Hot dogs, hamburgers, mashed potatoes, steamed carrots, fruit salad, potato salad, bread rolls, beans of every color, and pickled beets were just a few of the dishes that had been lovingly made by friends, neighbors and employees. I had to refrain from drooling.

As I heaped things onto a paper plate, Paul said, "ain't nothing like homemade food, that's for sure!" I couldn't have agreed more.

## Chapter 10

About an hour later, I found myself in the gazebo, watching Paul dance to old country music. Kumar was standing next to me, nibbling on a cookie. Dawson had re-appeared some time earlier, and was now dancing with Annie, though he didn't really look like he knew what he was doing.

"Ain't this a party?!" I jumped as Morgan shouted in my ear.

"Yes?!" I shouted back over the music while trying to figure out where he had come from.

"Albert couldn't throw this kind of shin-dig if he tried!" Walsh laughed and disappeared back into the crowd.

"He was awfully friendly!" Kumar said, trying to keep his voice above the music so I could hear him.

"Yeah! He's one of Paul's friends!" I shouted back.

"We should probably get out of here before we go deaf!"

"No kidding!"

We made it outside with little trouble, since most of the people were in the center of the structure. As we walked, we talked. About small things mostly, but eventually, somehow the conversation turned to Kumar himself.

"My parents were born in India." He smiled. "I was born in America." We stopped by a blue cooler and a man handed us two sprites. "I lived in Florida for most of my life before I moved up here two years ago." He continued. "I was fresh out of college, and I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It was pure chance I walked in to The Lab." I noticed he used Paul's nickname for it. "Mr. Moore gave me a job as... well, an errand boy." He chuckled, a little embarrassed.

I thumped him on the shoulder. "Nothing to be ashamed of! Its better then being a human test subject anyway..."

"Fuck you." We both laughed.

We wandered the picnic, watching kids play with each other while their parents raided the dessert table. I learned more about Kumar's job, as well as more about The Lab. Kumar had an office on the 5th floor, near the break room I had met him in. Anytime anyone needed something, they pressed a small intercom-like button that was found throughout The Lab, often in odd places. The person would then talk through a speaker, either to Kumar or one of the other people who ran errands. Apparently the people in the laboratories needed a lot of them.

Kumar knew every inch of The Lab like the back of his hand. When I asked him about the lowest levels of the building and the red haze I had seen, he shuddered a little. "I hate it down there. That's where they make chemicals and materials that shouldn't even exist. The red light is so people know to be careful; there's a lot of dangerous stuff down there. Most of that area is powered by steam, so that was probably a leak in one of the pipes you saw."

I nodded and gulped down the rest of my sprite. "How far down is it?" I asked as I walked over to a small trashcan.

"I don't know. The bottom floor of the building is a long way down there though. The place is huge! Its kind of like a hotel/office building/mansion/laboratory/factory/space ship."

I chuckled a little. That was the best description I ever got of The Lab. Suddenly, the sound of a microphone screeching sliced through the air. I saw more then a few people duck their heads and cover their ears. When the sound stopped, there was a muffled "sorry."

It had come from a small stage that was downhill from us. People were gathering around it. Me and Kumar shrugged at each other and joined them.

The stage had been decorated to match the rest of the park. **Long live Paul!** a banner across the top of the stage proclaimed. A thin man in a black suit was standing behind a microphone. I didn't have to get any closer to know he was drunk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know about you, but this is the best time I've had in weeks!" The man laughed, and was joined by the majority of the crowd. I had a feeling this guy was well known, both for who he was, and for being intoxicated. I wondered whether this was the 'Thomas' Paul had mentioned earlier.

"And both you and I have one man to thank. Give it up for Paul Moore!" The man stumbled away from the

mic as people applauded.

Paul stepped up to the mic, shaking his head and laughing. "Now now, Tom you know perfectly well I couldn't have done this without help! How about we give a round to those who helped set up, organize, and, of course, brought food!" This was followed by cheers and more applause.

"As always, thank you everyone for coming. Now, some of you may have heard I won't be here much longer, and, though this may or may not be true, I think it's best if we all put that out of our minds and enjoy the picnic instead. Am I right?"

"You're damn right!" Morgan shouted from somewhere in the crowd. People nodded their heads and clapped some more.

"Now, first of all, I want to say that-" He stopped suddenly, his smile fading. I tried to follow his gaze, but the crowd was too... well, crowded. Then I realized I could hear someone laughing.

"You really draw an audience in, don't you Paul?"

Thomas, who had been tottering dangerously close to the edge of the stage, looked around, his eyes wide and wild. "Where are you?! I know you're there! Show yourself you, uh... uh..." He blinked in confusion, and promptly fell back on his butt.

"Hello Albert." Paul narrowed his eyes. The crowd parted to reveal the man I had disliked before I'd even met him.

He walked forward, his mouth spread in a wide, arrogant grin. He wasn't as 'large' as I had first assumed, but the picture in the newspaper hadn't done his ugliness justice. He seemed to have lost more hair since then as well. Albert Campbell stopped at the stage, staring up at Paul.

"What's the matter?" He asked. "Was I not invited to this little pow-wow of yours?"

"Get the hell out of here you chickenshit!" I was pretty sure that was Morgan again.

Paul's hand twitched. "How about you just turn around and walk the other way so we can keep things civil." It wasn't a question, it was a command. Paul showed no anger in his face, instead, he seemed to tower over Albert like an alpha wolf. Everyone knew he was in charge without having to be told so.

Except, perhaps, Albert. "I heard you caught yourself a bit of a cough. Down right shame isn't it? That we should lose our beloved Paul Moore after so many years. Tell me, Mr. Moore, where is this famous replacement of yours? I'm dying to meet him."

Then, everyone's eyes were on me. No one spoke. I couldn't even hear the music from the gazebo anymore. I swallowed, all of my confidence gone. Kumar didn't appear to know what to do either, seeing as he just silently stood next to me. I spotted Annie and Dawson through the crowd. Dawson was grinning at me, while Annie offered a thumbs up. It didn't help much, but there was no time left for anything else.

Albert followed everyone else's gaze and spotted me; the twenty six year old wearing a rented suit and the only tie he owned. "That's him? He's just a boy!" He turned back to Paul. "You're going to hand over a million dollar company to some *kid*?" He scoffed. "Maybe your judgment isn't as good as it used to be."

Now people were whispering. Paul suddenly looked defeated, weak. He wasn't looking at me. I looked at Albert, and felt angry. How *dare* he talk to him like that! I stepped forward, my head held high.

"He wasn't much older than me when he started." Everyone else stopped talking. Campbell looked back at me, his eyebrow raised. "And besides." I continued. "I think he'd rather hand the company over to someone young, rather than someone old, someone who won't last much longer." I narrowed my eyes. "Someone like you."

There were a lot of "ooo"s and "uh-oh"s from the crowd. We were glaring at each other now, and I was barely aware of anything else. He looked like Dawson had before, frustrated, but holding back. Then, he smiled, but it wasn't a kind smile.

"You're certainly something, that's for sure. Maybe you won't be a complete failure after all." He shrugged.

"But who really knows." Albert began to walk away in the same arrogant style as before, his large belly swinging a little. Just before he left completely, however, he turned back to me. "Oh, and, if and when you realize that taking care of a research facility is no cake walk, just come to me. I'd be happy to rid you of it."

"Never." I said simply. He shrugged again, as if I had no idea what I was talking about, and disappeared behind the crowd of people.

Another applause was started. I looked back to the stage, and Paul was smiling at me. That smile was all I needed.

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"That was bad ass my friend." Kumar said next to me. I couldn't see Annie, but I had a pretty good idea she'd have some witty comment about how silly the two of us looked; a blond and a fat guy starring at each other. That was alright. That day would be a day I'd never forget.

## Chapter 11

I walked into the lobby, humming, without realizing it, the jazz that played in the elevator. Annie was at her desk, but there was something different. As I walked closer, I realized what it was. I opened my mouth, closed it, and checked for coffee cups. None. Good.

"Where'd your glasses go?" I asked, putting my hands in my pockets.

"My dog ate them. Guess I'll have to bring my homework tomorrow." She was focused on her computer, but she was smiling.

"That's no excuse!" I said in a fake stern voice. "Either you bring it in or you get a zero!"

"Alright I was lying, I don't have a dog." She chuckled, but there was something off about it. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I decided it probably wasn't important. A day had passed since the picnic, and I was somehow still in good spirits.

"Moore need me to head anywhere in particular or is it just his office again?" I asked.

She frowned, looking up at me. "Oddly enough, I haven't heard from him all day. I'll try calling him-"

"No need." We both turned to see Paul standing behind me. He was looking at Annie. "I need you to call Mary White and tell her to be here in about thirty minutes or so, ok?" Annie nodded, catching the seriousness in his voice. He turned to me. "Follow me."

## Chapter 12

Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. did human research. It was no secret, and it was just like every other part of The Lab; scientists did things, stuff was discovered and then it was all hidden away so it could be released at the proper time. Though, unlike all the other parts of The Lab, this one was focused on humans. Volunteers. This didn't sit particularly well with the public.

The volunteers were actually more like paid temporary employees, seeing as we gave them a hundred bucks mostly just for showing up. No one volunteered unwillingly, and, surprisingly enough, we were never in short supply of them. Most of the people we got were extremely poor, but that was alright. Paul would have given them the money if he'd just met them on the streets.

The human research section was actually one of the safest areas of The Lab. No one was allowed in without identification cards, especially if they were escorting volunteers. Dangerous chemicals and other such objects weren't aloud to really even be on the same floor.

All volunteers were treated with respect and often given free meals. All tests and experiments were not preformed without the volunteer's consent. Nothing was terribly harmful to them, though not all the experiments were pleasant. However, injuries were slim and casualties even slimmer. Paul held himself responsible for anything that happened to any volunteer (or anyone at all for that matter) that stepped through the glass doors of the lobby. I later took this same oath.

As always, however, there are people who can't read past the words Human Research. Someone was always complaining that there were people being tourcherd in the basement of the facility or that we were turning people into animals. Every single leader (as far as anyone can remember) of Heisenberg Labs has had to calm a group of protesters or prove again and again that "No, we're not making cyborgs down there."

A group who called themselves HoH (Helpers of Humanity) had formed in one of the northern states and grown to such size that they were almost as recognizable as PETA at that point. Apparently, while visiting the state The Lab is located in, they had heard tell of a place that did strange things. Then, they heard the words Human Research, and that was it.

Moore had previously explained the human research part of The Lab to me, and I thought it sounded perfectly reasonable. Why not give money to the less fortunate and discover things at the same time? But, there will always be whiners.

They had scheduled an appointment with Paul to 'talk' as they said, but he had been around too long not to smell an obvious trap like that one. So, he had a few employees file the right paperwork, contacted a few of his more consistent volunteers, and planned on bringing both me and Mr. Harrington with him to the meeting. "Harrington's just there to intimidate them. Plus, he knows how to talk. You're just there to learn." He smiled at me. We were headed to his office, but we had stopped on several floors to pick up the paperwork Paul needed.

Harrington was waiting for us. He opened the door for us and we slipped inside the dimly lit room. HoH wasn't there yet, something I considered a relief. I had been instructed not to talk throughout the meeting, and I was pretty sure I was about to have a sneezing fit. While Paul and Harrington spoke to each other and looked over the paperwork, I walked over to his desk and the tissue box that resided there.

After blowing my brains out in a tissue, I tossed it in the trash and looked towards the window. Sunlight reflected off of everything outside, momentarily blinding me. When my vision returned (though now a bit purple) I spotted a familiar looking car parked across the street. A man who looked like Dawson had his back turned to me, and was talking through a cell phone. After a few seconds, he suddenly whirled around and threw the phone on the sidewalk. Then, he got in his car and drove away.

"They're late." I nearly jumped out of my skin as Harrington spoke next to me. Paul shrugged.

We waited. Paul occasionally paced around the room, looking more and more frustrated. I leaned against the wall, biting my lip. Finally, Annie called from the lobby. Mary White couldn't come, and HoH were nowhere in sight.

Harrington scoffed. "Call me if they decide to show up." Paul watched him walk out of the room and sighed.

"Bastards. Probably trying to make some kind of statement or another." He sat down in the chair behind his

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desk and looked at me. "Guess you can go hang with your buddies for a bit then."

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" I asked. I didn't like how exhausted he looked. How exhausted he'd been looking for awhile.

"No, no. I'm fine." He attempted to smile, but it was small and weak.

I stood there for a moment, wanting to say more, but I knew it would do no good. The reality that Paul was going to die hadn't quite washed over me yet, but it was getting there. I took the elevator to Kumar's floor, wondering whether he was on break. If errand boys had breaks that is.

I had actually walked in while he was preparing to run something down to the lower levels. It was a small box with the word **Dangerous** printed in large red letters on top of it. He looked up as I walked into his small office, and smiled.

"Sorry I can't talk, gotta run this to Dr. Gilbert. Who *knows* what he plans on doing with this!"

I shrugged. "I got nothing else to do. Mind if I come with you?"

"I almost begged you to."

## Chapter 13

It was actually the custom of the Errand Runners to use the stairs. I followed closely behind him, trying to resist the urge to look over the railing into the red abyss below. Something about the sheer drop seemed to fascinate me. It felt like a matter of minutes before we reached the lower levels, and it wasn't that hard to tell when we did.

The air seemed to change, becoming thicker, warmer and more humid. Red lights on the wall shone in our faces, extending shadows and making me occasionally see things out of the corner of my eye. A headache began to form just above my eyes, and my pace slowed a little. I could hear hissing, clanking and a variety of other noises that weren't exactly welcoming. Metallic smells invaded my nostrils, making me think of thick rivers of blood. Normally, the thought of blood doesn't bother me, but at that point I just about puked. I didn't know whether Kumar was experiencing the same effects, but he continued walking normally until we reached a door on one of the landings of the stairs. He opened it without hesitation, and all the smells and sounds were amplified times twenty. I coughed in momentary agony, and my friend looked at me in sympathy.

"It takes some getting used to. Just like everything else around here." As we walked through the door, I heard him mutter, "though they could at least put up air fresheners."

There were a lot of hallways in The Lab. This one was the color of rusted metal, and had pipes running along the walls. Occasionally, there would be a loud hiss and one of the pipes would spew white clouds of steam at us. Kumar said something about hiring a plumber just before another went off right next to me. Luckily, I was just far enough away not to get burned, but I still sensed the searing heat that came with those leaks.

"Why the hell do they power stuff with steam down here?" I finally asked as we approached another door. The door reminded me of one from an old submarine, with a wheel looking thing for the handle. What? I don't know the proper name for everything you know!

"Something to do with how the electricity might blow something up I think." Kumar turned the wheel with a grunt. The submarine-door opened with a squeak that was of the eardrum puncturing sort.

"Whoa." I said as I looked out the other side of the door.

Another thing about The Lab is that it has a lot of ridiculously huge rooms. This one, was bigger than the lobby. It stretched on for a quite awhile in fact, though at that moment I was more concerned with what the room held. Metal catwalks with railings that were considerably better than those on the staircase wound around the room, making it so you could walk above all of the experiments and everything else they were doing below us.

I could see both scientists and engineers again, though this time the scientists outnumbered everyone. Large machines whirred as they did whatever they were supposed to do, and smaller machines moved around the vast pit-like room, carrying metal pieces and other such objects. Huge vats of colorful liquids rested in the middle of the room in one straight line below the longest catwalk that went to the other end of the room. The combination of the red lights and the lack of light coming from the ceiling made it difficult to tell exactly where you were going, so I kept pace with Kumar, seeing as I wasn't too interested in getting lost in this place. As we walked across one of the catwalks, I looked, for just a moment, down.

Something exploded as I did. Suddenly, bits of hot metal were flying around the room, and an alarm was sounded. I looked at Kumar, but he just kept going. This didn't improve my opinion of the place. If this was normal, I'd just as soon hang out in a alligator-infested swamp.

We reached a metal flight of stairs leading down to the scientists below us, who appeared to be studying the contents of one of the vats of liquid. I had a pretty good feeling that if I touched that stuff, I would be greeted with instant death, or something similar. We reached the metal floor (pretty much everything was made out of metal down there) and a man with thick glasses and no hair walked over to us. I noticed he, and everyone else, was wearing safety goggles, and couldn't help but wonder why me and my friend hadn't taken those same precautions.

"Ah, thank you Mr..." The bald man trailed off as Kumar handed him his package.

"Jain, sir, it's Kumar Jain. Remember?" He rolled his eyes.



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"Right!" The man nodded, as if he'd known all along. "And you must be..." He turned to me.

"Todd Anderson." Kumar answered for me.

"Good god! What in hell are you doing in a place like this?! Never mind, never mind, I'm Dr. Gilbert." He held out his hand for me to shake it. I did, though albeit warily. "Anyways, gotta get back to work, boys. This stuff doesn't stay 'happy' for long." He grinned, holding the box.

"Right..." I said nervously, looking at the thing Kumar had carried with us.

As we were walking along the catwalk again, I asked "did you know what was in there?"

He shrugged. "Probably something that could kill us in small doses."

"I think this place scares the shit out of me."

"Welcome to the club."

We reached the stairs in a seemingly shorter amount of time, but climbing them felt longer. "Couldn't we have just taken the elevator?" I asked, breathing a little more heavily than I should have.

"Try to keep up, fatty." Kumar answered from a few steps above me.

"Fuck you, Indian." I smiled.

"Aryan bastard." He grinned.

"What?"

"You know how Hitler was trying to create the perfect race with the blue eyes and blond hair?" We had reached the door that would take us to the lobby. Kumar looked at his watch. "Well, it's my lunch break.

Fancy a burger or two?"

I didn't see why not.

## Chapter 14

HoH figured we'd let our guard down and they could hit us with a sneak attack. It worked, to some extent. While I was eating tasteless, greasy burgers at a Grade C restaurant, a group of men in brand new suits arrived at The Lab. Harrington was inspecting one of the newest projects, so, for the first few minutes, Paul had to face them alone.

They practically barged in through the glass doors of the lobby and demanded to be told where Paul's office was, as Annie later told me with plenty of insults thrown in. They were rude, snobby, and had little to no regard for anyone that worked at Heisenberg. One of them had spotted Annie flipping them off as they entered the elevator, and he shook his head as if she simply didn't know any better.

I don't know exactly how it went when they were alone with Paul, but I can guess that it didn't go well.

Luckily, Annie called both me and Harrington before they were in there for too long.

I left Kumar at the restaurant, took a taxi and almost sprinted to Paul's office. Harrington was already in there; I was the last to arrive. I could feel the tension in the air as I walked in. There were either four or five of them, I can't remember which, but all of them turned to look when I went around the desk and stood on Paul's right.

"This is Todd Anderson, the man I mentioned earlier-" Paul began, his voice steady.

"Yes, yes, but you still haven't answered my question." The leader of the group, who was sitting in the chair I normally sat in, had short black hair and a pointed nose. If I were a dog, I would have had the urge to bare my teeth at this man who, like so many others, was looking down on people I cared about.

"Yes, he did. Several times actually." Harrington didn't bother to hide the annoyance in his voice. "All volunteers are *volunteers*. We're not forcing anyone into this."

"Slow down, Robert." Paul said calmly.

"But are you telling them exactly what kind of dangerous experiments these people are signing up for?" The pointy-nosed man sneered.

"Yes, we tell each and every one of them exactly how it's going to go, and we make sure they're comfortable with it before proceeding." The old man smiled a smile that suggested he had nothing to hide. The men from HoH took it as a smile that meant he was lying to them.

"It doesn't matter how comfortable you are when someone starts injecting you with some kind of acid or another!" The man narrowed his eyes at Paul. Both me and Harrington tensed.

"We don't inject them with acid, Mr. Barnes, we just do simple tests."

"What kind of tests?"

"Medical tests mostly. We've also recently started researching allergies-"

"So you're using drugs that haven't been approved?"

"We're the ones who approve them. Now, as for their pay-"

"I don't give a shit how much you're paying them!" The man was standing now, his hands on the desk.

Harrington frowned. "Sit down or I will have to call someone to escort you-"

"I know you're hiding something!" The man finally screamed. His colleges were nodding in approval. I took a step forward. I was enraged. He had interrupted both Paul *and* Mr. Harrington. But, one look from Moore and I remembered I wasn't supposed to do anything. "You think this is a game?!" The man continued.

"No." Paul said, completely relaxed. "But apparently you do."

The man sneered again, his wrinkled nose almost comical. "You, your son and your nigger friend are going to know what hell really is when I'm through with you!"

"Thanks, but I already know plenty. Oh, and he's not my son." Paul smiled. I felt a new burst of respect for him.

The man suddenly went from commanding to flustered. One of his buddies spoke behind him. "No problem boss, it's an honest mistake. They do look a lot alike after all..."

"That's not what I'm-!" The man stopped mid-sentence, frustrated. He looked back at Moore. "You haven't seen the last of us." He muttered. Paul waved at him as he turned towards the door, closely followed by his companions.

They left, and, as Annie recounted with a grin, they looked a lot less like the uptight business men who had

## Megaleioths

walked in, and more like children being sent to their rooms as they trudged back through the lobby.

"That was completely unprofessional." Harrington said in disgust.

"As was expected." Paul was still smiling.

"I don't think I'll be able to keep my cool in front of people like that." I admitted.

"No problem. You'll get used to it." If I had a nickle for every time I heard that one.

## Chapter 15

Of course, HoH weren't done with us. It wasn't long before a rumor was started that, not only were the employees torturing people for 'research', but we were all apparently using drugs as well. This was no major problem, and it certainly didn't last long. HoH weren't too satisfied that their first plan hadn't worked, however. Three days passed, and, finally, a member of HoH broke into The Lab and discovered... nothing. They found exactly what Paul had told them we had. Disguised as a volunteer, they had accepted the free meals, the money, and watched everything that happened to the other people who had signed up. They ran off before they could actually participate in any of the experiments, though they hadn't gained any of the information they had been hoping for.

Paul was only upset that they had taken the money with them, thus stealing it away from someone else who might have needed it. Of course, by that point, the majority of Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. were no longer concerned with Helpers of Humanity.

Paul's health was failing drastically. He refused to go to the hospital, however, and continued to carry out his duties as if nothing was wrong. I wished there was something I could do, but Paul's time was running short, and, whether I liked it or not, the Megaleioths would make sure he died soon. I also began to realize that I was on the brink of inheriting an *entire company*.

Annie was particularly upset. I learned over those three days that Paul had acted as a sort of replacement family for her, seeing as her single mother died of a stroke only weeks after Annie applied for her job at the age of eighteen. She was twenty three now.

"I don't know." She had sighed as we sat in one of the many break rooms. This one didn't have the vending machines. "It's hard to believe he might actually... leave."

Kumar felt bad, but, being not as emotionally attached to Paul as Annie, his feelings mostly stemmed from sympathy for his friend. I began to notice some of the other employees whispering to each other and wearing mournful expressions, as if he were already dead.

I wasn't sure what to feel. In the past few days (I couldn't even remember how many) Paul had been almost like a... well a father to me. More than my real one had been anyway. I didn't want him to die, not then, not ever, but I knew it was beyond my control. Besides, I wondered if it might be best. He had been looking more and more tired as the days went on, and his cough wasn't getting any better. Maybe he deserved a little peace. I didn't voice this opinion to anyone though; I'm not that stupid. But, from the looks some of the older workers were giving me, I began to get the feeling they suspected I wanted him to die, as if I were glad to have The Lab all to myself. I tried to keep myself uplifted, to ignore the looks and the emotions that were spreading through the building like a fire, but it became increasingly hard, and, when the news reached me that a contaminated substance had spread a toxic disease to over fifty workers, I nearly broke.

Some idiot (who we never found) hadn't properly secured a strange material that had been sent from some of our outer space friends, and it had killed everyone it touched. It also released a poisonous gas into the air, which killed and injured even more people. There was to be an investigation from the police, though the material had somehow managed to disappear into thin air.

I was scheduled to be interviewed. Giving Paul's current state, the police had pretty much officially considered me to be the owner of The Lab, and thus, partially responsible. The interview had been originally planned for that morning, but they'd moved it to noon after, and I quote, "something came up."

I was in my miniature living room, drinking a glass of water and pretty much doing nothing while I waited for it to be noon. I sighed as someone knocked at the door, but my attitude immediately changed when I saw it was Annie. I let her in without hesitation.

"Nice place you got here." She was smiling, but her voice was shaky, abnormal.

"You alright?" I asked, setting my water on one of the counter tops between the kitchen and the living room.

"Fine." She answered quietly.

Silence. I took a step towards her, forgetting all about my interview, Paul, and everything else. The only thing that mattered to me then was helping my friend, because something, *something*, was obviously very wrong.

"...You want to watch a movie?" It was lame, but I didn't know what else to do. Thankfully, she nodded and

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we walked over to the couch.

Just as we sat down, however, there was a knock at the door. I noticed Annie flinch as I got up. When I opened the door to reveal Kumar, he whispered "can I talk to you out here?"

"What's up?" I asked, closing the door behind me.

"I don't know. She won't talk to me."

I kept my voice low. "You think it's about Paul?"

He shook his head. "She hasn't been wearing her glasses for the past few days either." He sighed, rubbing his brow. "I just don't know what to do. I feel helpless."

"We were about to watch a movie. Maybe you should stay. You've known her longer than I have." I smiled reassuringly.

Kumar looked back at me, and, after a moments hesitation, he nodded too. And so, the three of us piled onto the couch; me, Annie, and Kumar. Later, Annie joked that if someone were to take a picture of all three of us, they would title it 'The Most Awkward Three-Way Ever'.

We watched an adventure movie, you know, pirates treasure, guy-gets-girl, that sort of thing. I couldn't help looking at Annie every five minutes though, worried she might either pass out or burst into tears. I didn't think she was really watching the movie. Her eyes were dazed, and every now and then she would rub the engagement ring on her finger, as if trying to draw some kind of comfort from it. I noticed Kumar biting his lip and shifting uncomfortably at various points in the movie.

When the movie was over, it felt like only a few minutes had passed. We started another after a few seconds of unbearable silence. This one was a mystery movie, starring one of those actors everyone but you recognizes. As time ticked on, I began to realize it was almost time for my interview.

"Annie." She jumped a little. "I have to go talk to the police about what happened with that alien goo. You think you'll be alright with Kumar?" I felt like a parent talking to his three year old. After another few seconds of silence, she nodded.

"Good luck." Kumar said as I left.

I did eventually find out what was wrong with her, but that part of the story is quite a ways away. Guess you'll just have to be patient.

Ha ha.

## Chapter 16

The police station resembled one you might see in a cartoon. A square, grey building with the word **POLICE** painted across the side and what looked like a single window on the front next to an extremely heavy door. It sat there like a large toad trying to decide whether you were tasty enough to eat. Police cars surrounded the building, as if they were ants drawn to peanut butter.

The day was hot, but a light breeze kept it from getting too hot. June was drawing to a close, and July was threatening to be a dry, unforgiving month. After spending the majority of my money on a cab ride over there, (the police station was on the other side of town; why they didn't just come to me, I didn't know) my mind was made up quickly to walk back to the lab and enjoy the weather while it lasted. Besides, I needed the exercise.

Behind the extremely heavy door was a scene that was both alike and different from the lobby of The Lab. There was a desk with someone behind it, but this someone was male, and he didn't look too excited to be there. The desk itself was big, grey and smothered in papers. More papers covered the wall and a large tack board behind the desk.

The room was small with a hallway leading off to my right. The floor below my feet was navy blue, though the man behind the counter spotted me before I could tell what it was. He had a light bulb shaped head and a permanent frown. He blinked, his brown eyes glossy and dark.

"Can I help you?" He droned, tapping a pencil on the desk.

"Uh yes, I'm Todd Anderson. I'm here for the-"

"Down the hall, first door on your left."

I blinked. "Oh. Thank you."

The walk was short, though the fact that there was virtually no sounds in that building made me wish it was even shorter. I was beginning to feel uneasy. It hadn't occurred to me until then whether Paul had been informed of this interview, and I had no idea what to say. I swallowed, my hand on the doorknob. *Calm down.* I told myself. *Just answer the questions. You're not a criminal.*

"This time." I muttered quietly and opened the door, stepping into a room with a table and two chairs across from each other.

A man in one chair looked up from a file he was reading. "Didn't expect you this early. My name is officer Owens. Please, sit down." He gestured and I followed his command. There was another man standing next to him, with broad shoulders and a blank face. "You are Mr. Anderson, owner of Heisenberg Laboratories Inc., correct?"

"Well, not exactly, you see Mr. Moore-"

"I'm well aware of the situation." Seemed like everyone was talking over me that day. "Although I sympathize with those who know him, Moore's health is obviously falling drastically. In the eyes of the law, or at least these laws, you're the guy we turn to when something like this happens. Speaking of which, what exactly did happen?"

"Um..." I choked. Suddenly, my wrists ached, as if there had been cuffs rubbing against them only moments before. Officer Owens was gone, replaced by a man with a sneer on his face and several other police men standing behind him.

"Tell me, did you shoot him before or after you stole his wallet?" The man laughed, and the laughter was echoed by his colleagues. This was back when I was still in Chuck's gang, after a scheme that hadn't gone so well. The police in that particular area hadn't been the heroes everyone cheered for at memorial services, no. In fact, Chuck had bribed them to let me go. I knew Owens probably wasn't like that, and that I was only imagining this scenario, but panic still began to rise in my chest. After all, why had they called me to the station for questioning?

***Shut up already. They just want to know if they can trust you.***

*What?* I knew that voice, hadn't I had a dream about it or something?

***You're the owner of Heisenberg Labs, dummy. Remember what Paul said? The government knows something's up, they just don't know what. Same with these guys. They're curious and they want to make***

*sure you're a 'friendly'. Just follow along with me.*

I didn't trust this newcomer who had invaded my thoughts as if he owned the place, but too many seconds had already passed. Owens was waiting.

*A test went wrong, simple as that. They don't need to know about the aliens.*

I cleared my throat. "You see, Heisenberg Laboratories undergoes hundreds of experiments each day. In this one, we were testing a recently discovered biological substance that got out of hand." I was forming the words, but I wasn't the one speaking. I went on to talk about how we had come across this substance and how it had affected the employees who were working on it, though half the words I said didn't make much sense to me. I felt like a puppet, dangling by a few thin strings and dancing like a fool before the two officers.

Owens followed me, word for word, and as I spoke I wondered how this could possibly work, seeing as he had probably already questioned someone else before me. But, he seemed convinced, and by the end of it the story created was this: an unknown object had poisoned, killed and spread disease. Surprisingly enough, as I later found out, this was a common scene, and because of the contracts and the insurance all the dead or dieing scientists had, I didn't even need to worry about lawsuits.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Anderson. I hope we can sort all this out soon enough." He smiled and shook my hand as I left, and I actually felt pretty good about myself. I had survived.

*Just remember who helped you, got it?*

*Sure. Alright.*

I had, of course, already recognized this voice to be the Megaleioths. My former oath of defiance still stood, but it seemed wise to at least accept its help every now and then. Besides, I had actually felt a sense of arrogance while under its rule, a feeling that I was above the man who had sat in front of me. I suppose I should have been frightened, but instead I felt intrigued. Who knew what you could do with this kind of power?

## Chapter 17

Annie and Kumar were gone. Don't ask me how I knew that, I just did. The lobby was empty, and there appeared no one else in The Lab when I returned from the interview. The sky had changed drastically on my walk, going from pleasant blue to frightening grey. The previous zephyr that had ruffled my hair was gone, replaced by a wind with little regard for anything not tied down. Thunder rumbled quietly in the distance, and I felt a few drops of rain before I walked through the large glass doors in my solitude.

The quiet was nice, unlike the past few times that day where I knew silence signaled grief and danger. I let it wash over me as the elevator doors opened. There was no jazz music, though this didn't bother me in the slightest. Nothing did, not the silence, the storm, nor the absence of everyone else. Afterwards, that strange sense of calm was what scared me the most.

I wasted no time in getting to Paul's office, a small bout of guilt forming in my stomach. Surely he knew I had gone to speak to the police? There was no real reason to feel guilty, I mean, I did need the experience and it wouldn't be long before-

Damn. I felt evil just standing outside the door, wondering if I should knock, or if he was even there. My mouth became dry, though I could still feel the relaxation flowing through my veins like the opposite of adrenaline. Did I really need to see Paul? It was a dumb question; of course I needed to talk to him, about the interview if nothing else. But the longer I stood there, the more logical it seemed to just turn away slowly and go quietly down to my room.

I almost did, but before I could a thought came to me. Suppose something *wanted* me to turn away? Something like a mysterious force... or a magic that kills?

I gritted my teeth and opened the door. The room was warm, with the golden light of the lamp disguising the blood red color of the walls. Rain tapped lightly on the window, and the thunder still had not grown to threatening booms. It was dark out, darker than it should have been.

Paul's chair faced the window, and I could just see his white hair rising above the back of the seat. The calmness was leaving me, as I instead felt like a humble servant, one who was intruding on his master's business.

"Sir?" I said timidly.

He swiveled the chair to face me. I had to refrain from gasping in shock. He had aged, if that was even possible. Instead of his shoulders being squared and his head held up with pride, he was slumped in his chair with what looked like the bare minimum of strength left in him. Wrinkles framed every inch of his pale face, and his hands were like that of a skeleton's. It was his eyes that convinced me this was the same Paul Moore I had known for the past week-and-a-half or so.

"Todd." He smiled, his voice ancient. "I take it your little talk went well?"

"Y-yes, but... are you okay?" My voice came close to cracking with concern.

"I'm alright." He laughed a little before being interrupted by a cough that came from deep within his chest.

"Gah, can't even talk right."

"Maybe you should go home, sir." I was by his desk now. I stood there like a visitor at someone's death bed, wide eyed and unsure of what to do next.

"Na, I told you, I'm fine. Oh and uh... hey Todd." He blinked, his smile fading a little. "You didn't push it did you? You didn't tell too many lies?" Before I could answer, he sighed. "No, of course you didn't. What am I thinking? Oh well, can't help a man my age."

"Mr. Moore, I-"

"Dark out there, isn't it?" Paul seemed to be speaking to himself, rather than me. "Gonna be a hell of a storm. Lots of lightening. Storms can be dangerous though, powerful. It wouldn't be wise to go against it." He looked back at me, just as a loud crash of thunder shook the building. "Right, Mr. Todd Anderson?"

I gave a small nod. Whatever was left of the opposite-adrenaline was gone. What was he talking about? Did people always ramble like this before they... I couldn't even finish the thought.

"Can't control a storm like this one. Better to just roll with it, eh?" He cough-laughed some more.

"Paul, I really think we should call someone. You don't look so-"



## Megaleioths

"But you can't let it control you. Not entirely." The humor was gone in a flash. "You gotta balance it. You hear me Todd, or am I just talking to myself?"

Then it hit me. I had been so goddamn blinded by the fake sense of calm that I had missed all signs that some of the most recent thoughts I'd had weren't even mine. "I hear you." It was more of a squeak than an answer. "Good." He leaned back, interlocking his fingers. "I think it's time for you to go home, Todd. Downstairs I mean." He smiled.

Again, I had the feeling that that was the most logical decision, what was I doing up here anyway? I was almost being driven towards the door, but I couldn't leave just yet. "Will you be here when I come back?" Paul looked at me for a long moment. I was unaware of anything else. Hours could have passed without my knowing, and still we stared into each others blue eyes that were so alike and yet so different. He opened his mouth, but the both of us already knew the answer, and what came out was only a watered down version of the truth.

"Maybe."

## Chapter 18

Seeing as the Megaleioths was going to force me back to my room whether I liked it or not, I decided not to resist. It wouldn't do Paul any good. I could hear the wind howling and the rain attacking the outside like a large group of killer bees. Thunder had finally made its presence, but it seemed Zeus was holding back on the lightning bolts for the moment.

My bed was as cozy as ever, but it didn't feel right, laying there while Paul was most likely dying a few floors above me. I did eventually fall asleep, but it was a restless sleep, full of nightmares. The one I remember most vividly is this:

I was back in my old neighborhood, though the same raging thunder heads rolled above me. The background was fuzzy, just as it always is in dreams, but I could see my childhood home almost clearly. There was the same unmowed grass and broken water hose that lay like a dead snake across the sidewalk. The same trees with gnarled branches that looked like fingers coming to grab me.

And there, standing on the porch, was my sister. Patricia looked across the lawn at me, as if shocked at my sudden appearance. Without a word she leaped effortlessly off the wooden railing of the porch and ran towards me, her arms outstretched.

Time slowed a little. I couldn't move, but I had no desire to anyway. She was coming closer, with the seconds dragging on and on. Finally, she was only a few feet away from me, and I found I could reach my nine-year-old arms out just enough to embrace her, when there was a sudden noise, almost like a popping sound.

Blood sprouted like a rose from my sister's head, and I thought for a crazy moment of Daisy-Head Mayzie. She tumbled to the ground before me, one eye rolling back into its socket while the other, the one on the side with the blood, appeared to have disappeared entirely, replaced by a black hole leaking blood and a white fluid. I could actually hear her skull cracking as it struck the pavement, sending shattered pieces of bone into her already useless brain.

I mildly took a step back as the rest of her flopped to the ground like a dead fish. My arms were still out, waiting for the hug that never came. Blood and bits of gray matter were lapping at my blue shoes, turning them a morbid violet. I was much shorter in this dream, due to the age difference, so I had no trouble picking out every detail of the hole in the side of Patty's head.

*"You killed her."* Rodney was there, though he hadn't been before. His eyes, brown like our father's, were now as red as the blood. *"You killed her and now everyone's going to die."*

I tried to explain to him that it wasn't my fault, that I'd only wanted to hug her, but I knew it was a lie. In my dream, I had killed her, and somehow by doing so I had doomed everyone.

*"Gonna start World War III doing shit like that."* Gary, who I hadn't known at that time, was there too all of the sudden. *"Gonna start World War III and then what? Everyone gets cancer that's what. You can't cure cancer, nobody can!"*

*Yes I can!* The words wouldn't come.

*"You're a criminal and She hates you for it."* Rodney jeered. Who was 'She'? I knew it would do no good trying to talk to either of these ghosts, and that was what frustrated me. I bared my teeth, a glare in my eyes.

*"Yeah, why don't you get mad, bro? It makes it so much easier."* Gary smiled with a mouth full of shark teeth. *"It tenderizes the meat."*

I awoke screaming. I didn't fall this time, but I might as well have. My back ached for no good reason and I must have hit my head on something because it hurt like a mother fucker. Pardon my french.

I could hear the lightning now, hear it slicing through the air and igniting everything it touched. An endless stream of thought

*(No no no no no no no no no no no no-)*

ran through my head like a freight train. I needed to get to Paul, immediately. The Megaleioths must have heard me or something, because it took forever just for me to get out in to the hallway. The lights had taken the night off and it felt like the temperature had dropped at least fifty degrees. I bumped my knees on everything within reach and somehow managed to nail my crotch with an end table by the couch.

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Pain coursing through my body, particularly from my elbow (which I had nicked just in the right spot) and my balls, I escaped and went for the elevator. Of course, I remembered only when I got there that the power was off, and I had to run to the other side of the building. I didn't trust the stairs, but there weren't many options left, seeing as I didn't have a grappling hook or a pair of plungers at my disposal.

I decided on my way up the endless steps that I was going to start working out. I looked pretty pathetic as I reached the 13th floor, holding my elbow and shuffling like a cripple down to room 124. **The Boss** seemed to grin at me as I turned the door knob. *Not for long*. I tried to push the thought away, but it stayed, laughing and dangling before my eyes.

The first thing I heard was the breathing. Or, rather, wheezing. The light of the lamp was gone, though the flashes of lightening from the window were all I needed to see. Paul was on the floor, face down and covered in shattered bits of glass. He'd knocked over the lamp on his way over, apparently busting the bulb as well. "Paul!" I rushed over to him, kneeling by his side.

He looked up at me, that same wide grin on his face, though there was a touch of sadness to it. His eyes were losing their icy stare, and they were beginning to look like marbles. He reached out with a slow, steady hand, grasping mine and holding it tightly, like a life-line.

Unlike all the other important moments in my life those past few precious days, time didn't slow down. I could feel his pulse kicking and then finally fading as he smiled at me. Just like in my dream, I was frozen. This was it, the end of the ball game. For Paul Moore anyway.

He covered my hand with his other one, unmistakable pride in his face. "Almost makes me wish you were my son."

Then he was gone. I held on to him for a just a minute longer, mentally begging him to come back, willing it to not be so. But it was so. Paul, the owner of Heisenberg Laboratories Inc., everyone's best friend, Annie's adoptive grandfather, the man you trusted with your life, the closest thing I ever got to a father figure, was dead.

(A/N: ...I liked Paul...)

## Chapter 19

The next few hours were a blur. I think the power came on about thirty minutes after Paul... left, and I must have called 911, because the paramedics got there at lightening speed. I didn't sleep at all. In fact, I think I just paced around the lobby until everyone else got there.

My memory is even worse after that. I remember holding a sobbing Annie, and Kumar trying to comfort the both of us without much success, but other than that it just jumps right to the funeral, which was held the day after.

The bulk of the storm had long since past, but a light rain still fell persistently on the white flowers and black umbrellas clutched tightly in the hands of mourners. The grass was as green as it had been at the picnic, though when I observed this I felt a pang of sadness. How happy Paul had been, how delighted his audience as he addressed his thanks. Now, I was beginning to believe it was us who should have been thanking him. I could see the long black box in front of the crowd. I couldn't count the number of people, but it didn't matter. Paul was a legend; of course he was going to have more than a few visitors. What concerned me the most was that I hadn't shed a single tear. Not one. Was I some kind of emotionless dick head? This thought only made me feel worse, and still my eyes yielded nothing.

Annie was standing off to the right of me, Dawson holding her in much the same way I had. I was glad. If anyone deserved to feel better, it was Annie. She was looking at the ground and shivering slightly. Her hair had grown much longer since I'd first met her, and though it was soaked it still added that extra touch of plain, sad beauty.

I was wearing a black tux, one I had bought with money I'd saved from The Lab's 'paychecks', and there were dark circles under my eyes. My hair desperately needed a trim, and I hadn't shaved. More than a few people casted me a second glance, either because of my appearance or my status. I didn't care. They could think what they wanted.

A woman was speaking at the front, but their words fell empty upon my ears. Someone else had set up a memorial table behind me, one with pictures of a younger Paul and vases with flowers that made it even more depressing. I couldn't look at those pictures for more than a few seconds without feeling sick. Why the hell did he have to look so much like *me*?

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen." The person speaking said solemnly before stepping back as they prepared to lower the coffin. Tears mixed with rain among the spectators. I remembered looking into it when it was open, how much like a wax doll Moore had looked, how unreal.

Someone was screaming. I frowned in annoyance. Who the hell screams at a funeral?

Then the vase beside me exploded. Someone was yelling "he's got a gun!" and someone else was speaking bible verses. The bible sayer was in the crowd ahead of me. I hadn't even noticed him before, and I barely registered the pistol he was aiming at me. I couldn't quite catch what he was saying, but I'm pretty sure he'd associated me with Satan.

"Die, heathen!" Was the last word he got out before being tackled by several other people, including, oddly enough, Dawson.

"That's enough outta you." Annie's fiance spat before dealing the man a blow to the face much like the one he had given me.

The man was dragged off before he could do much else, his gun laying discarded in the grass. I stood there, staring at the gun like I couldn't believe what had just happened. Someone, Annie, was talking to me, her hand on my shoulder, but I was no longer there.

I was in space again. Floating, floating, floating.

***Wake up. Paul's gone, nothing you can do about it. Stop acting like a zombie and get back in there. You almost got yourself killed.***

*You changed it, didn't you? You made the bullet miss. Why shouldn't I have just stood there? You probably would have dropped a safe on his head if that's what it took.*

***Sure, fine. But don't get so cocky my friend. I can move the bullet, but I sure as hell can't stop the pain.***

***Now, how about you get the fuck over your little depression there and say something? People are staring.***

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Then I was back again. People were staring indeed. Now Annie, Dawson and Kumar were all talking to me, trying to get a response.

"I'm alright." I said at last, my words slurred as if I were drunk. There were a few sighs of relief, and the crowd slowly began to direct their attention to the hole in the ground that was now slowly being filled in.

"Are you sure? You looked like you blanked out there for a second." Kumar frowned.

I shook my head. "Really, I'm fine. Just a little shaken, that's all." I attempted to smile, though my efforts were wasted on Annie.

"Come on." She said with a grimace. "We're taking you home before something else happens." Dawson scoffed but didn't argue. Neither did I.

"Hold it." We were stopped, however, by none other than Robert Harrington. His face held the same, stern look it always did, with little pity and certainly no sympathy. "Can't leave just yet."

"And why not?" Annie, defiant and annoyed, returned his gaze.

"That man wasn't just anyone. Bob Lane. He used to work for us. Lost his mind awhile back and disappeared. This is the first time anyone's seen him in years." He looked back at me. "You look terrible." Harrington turned away from us, either not noticing or not caring about Annie mocking him by mouthing his words behind his back.

"I can't stand him. No humor whatsoever!" She snorted. Kumar raised his eyebrow and said nothing.

I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said as we climbed into Dawson's black mustang. Annie, sitting shotgun, went on to talk about all the reasons she disliked Harrington while her fiance nodded his head occasionally. Kumar fell asleep within a few seconds. Figuratively, I was alone.

A man who used to work for The Lab had tried to kill me. Mr. H. said he was crazy, and that was probably true, but I couldn't shake the bad feeling that there was much more to it. Thinking about Bob Lane also began to make me see that I was almost a completely different person back at the funeral. Sure, I'd just lost someone close to me, but when Bob had shown up and a person screamed I was annoyed rather than concerned. I hadn't even cared that I was within a few feet from death. I'd already known the Megaleioths was at play, and not even that fazed me.

I shivered quietly. I was beginning to sound like one of those stone-cold cops from movies that didn't give a fish and killed anyone in their way. The fact that we'd left the funeral early didn't help much either. I sighed, already feeling a headache forming above my eyes, and looked out the window.

Apparently, I picked a lot of the right moments to look out windows, because this time, instead of Dawson smashing a perfectly good phone, I saw Gary. He was walking fast, looking over his shoulder and wearing clothes that were more like rags. He looked worried, as well as paranoid. What could have been chasing him? This question remained floating in my pounding head as we passed him.

*I had a dream about him.* The thought was as casual as if it had been *'I want a cheeseburger'*. Sure, I remembered the dream, but it had seemed so unimportant compared to, oh, I don't know, Paul dieing.

Now, however, I wondered whether it was trying to tell me something. It was probably just a dumb dream, I mean, I'd never actually seen my sister die, but lately nothing really made that much sense.

We pulled up next to The Lab, and I got out with a yawning Kumar. Annie stepped out too, but only to tell us she and Dawson had 'things to do'. The brown haired man was on his phone (a new one, I assumed), and he didn't look pleased. They drove away and left the two of us in the freezing rain.

"You stayin'?" I asked my friend as he swayed a little on his feet.

"Nah. Sorry but, I think I drank a little too much." He yawned again.

"There was beer?"

"Maybe."

"Well, why didn't you ask Annie and her pal to take you home?"

"Didn't want to inconvenience them."

I sighed. "Well, you're not leaving unless you plan on taking a cab."

"I'm tired." He complained.

"Then you can sleep in one of the rooms for all I care." I didn't want to sound mean, but I'd been hoping for some time alone. I got that time, however, after Kumar went ahead and fell asleep on my couch.

I looked down at him, a little annoyed. I shook my head, scattering tiny rain drops across the room, and,

suddenly, I realized I wanted to go to Paul's office. This wasn't actually my idea of course; the Megaleioths was playing with me again.

"Fine." I said aloud. "Have it your way."

***You know I will.***

The elevator music had returned, but it did little to lift my spirits. For the love of god, Paul was [i]dead[/i]! This is what my thoughts were always coming back to, and what they would be coming back to for the next week or so. My skin crawled with dread as I walked down the hall and through the door of Paul's, I mean, [i]my[/i] office.

The lamp had been replaced, but it was off, and the shadows of the room seemed to stretch towards me. I looked towards the chair the old man used to occupy, and decided to have it thrown out before I even considered taking over the wooden desk. I sat instead in the chair I usually did, the one that wasn't all that comfortable, but not too bad either.

"Alright, what is it? What do you want?" I couldn't hide the anger in my voice. Moore had been sick and his fate all too obvious in general, but the moment I'd appeared, the Megaleioths had sped it up.

***To talk. And to clear some things up. First of all, Paul's death is as much my fault as it is yours. Second, try not to be an idiot all the time. It's not good for business. And third, you better listen to every word I say. Because I will make you pay, and you will regret it.***

"I don't care if you make me stab myself in the eye! If I don't give a shit about what you have to say, I won't listen." I could feel the air in my lungs thicken, and tension felt as abundant as helium. The red walls of the room appeared to almost glow, the colors popping out at me at strange intensities. Either it was playing with me again, or I'd touched the right nerve, because the Megaleioths seemed to be getting more pissed by the second.

Then, everything quieted again, and I could feel an invisible sneer watching me. ***Okay tough guy. You can find out the hard way.*** It paused, as if deep in thought. ***You know, Paul never really tried to defy me. Maybe you guys aren't that alike after all.***

"Will you stop talking about Paul?" I muttered, glaring at nothing.

***Sure. Let's talk about you.*** I groaned. ***You get a little angry sometimes, don't you? A little pissed every now and then?***

"What's it to you?"

***Everything. Because, Toddy, we're going to be spending the rest of your life together. Kinda like marriage, but with only a few benefits towards you. Sorry about that.***

"I think I want a divorce."

***Nice try. Anyways, you don't seem like a very social guy, but you get along just fine with Annie and whoever that other guy is. Why is that?***

"His name is Kumar, and I like them. Not much else to it."

***Same way you liked Gary? Oh wait, I forgot.***

"Shut up."

***Nope. Do you like video games? I like video games. You should play some. I wanna watch.***

"You sound like a kid."

***You sound like your mom. Hey Toddles, we should go check out the Animal Research section. There's glowing kittens down there.***

I raised an eyebrow. "Uhâ ¯ You sure you're the spirit thing Paul's been talking about?"

***Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?***

"I'd have thought you'd be moreâ ¯ threatening."

***What are you talking about?! I'm plenty threatening! I could kill you right now if I really wanted to.***

I stood up. "Then what's all this crap about kittens and video games?"

***I happen to like kittens and video games. Kittens are fuzzy. And sometimes they glow. How can you not like them?***

The situation had changed drastically. One minute, both the Megaleioths and I were angry, then, we were talking about baby cats. I wasn't entirely sure how to handle the conversation at that point.

"If that's all you called me up here for, then I'm leaving."

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***Wait! ...umâ ! Oh! I know! We should do some business-y stuff.***

I highly doubted the Megaleioths would know what it was doing when it came to whatever 'business' it was talking about, but it turned out it was smarter than I thought. A lot smarter. It drove me down to one of the laptops on a lower floor and, before I knew it, I was paying off some of The Lab's dept and ordering materials for some project labeled #2487368H. Whatever it was, it sure needed a lot of carrots.

I had absolutely no clue how to do any of the things I did, and it felt almost relieving to know I was being guided by a spirit that had probably been doing this since before cars were even thought of. When I was done doing those things, I called up a man apparently named Ralph Ruiz and told him I needed 600 pounds of bees wax. He agreed to have it sent over by Monday (I couldn't even remember what day it was) and said he'd pray for Paul's spirit. I thanked him and hung up.

The last 'business' thing I did was give a woman named Carla Greene a raise. She was one of the engineers, and looked like she'd lived with the dinosaurs.

"What for?" I asked, curious.

***She's been working her ass off all week.***

"Didn't know you had a heart."

***I just don't want her to retire yet. That, and if she gets injured hopefully she wont sue us.***

"That's what I thought."

I got up, and my body realized I'd been sitting in the same position for about two hours or so. My back and knees popped like firecrackers. My hands felt like dead weights, and I almost couldn't turn my head all the way. Damn, it'd only felt like a few minutes!

***Let's go walk in the park. I like the park.***

So I went to the park. And I walked. And we talked.

## Chapter 20

The house was about as big as the one I'd lived in before my dad got fired. It had a clean, suburban look to it, with a perfectly cut lawn and a bed of flowers out front. It was pastel yellow, nicely outlined by an off-white that went around the windows and colored the door. The front porch was floored by concrete and extended to the bottom of the second floor, with pillars of brick and wood holding it up. There were three second story windows, with the middle one jutting out in a way that made the house look like it had a nose and eyes. The gray shingles of the roof gleamed in the light of the summer sun, and a few long dead leaves were moving around in the gutters, trying to escape without much success, seeing as there had been no wind all morning. A green hose lay like a dead snake among the tulips and hedges on the left side of the house. A garage, no doubt soon to be filled with old tools and forgotten possessions, sat just beyond it, with a gray, uncracked driveway extending to the street. I could smell mulch and the faint hint of barbeque smoke as I walked up this driveway, using my hand to shield my eyes from the sun.

Kumar walked behind me, taking in the scenery. We said nothing, for there was nothing to say. This was a beautiful house, one that would please even the most picky of home owners. I felt comfortable just standing under the porch, despite the knowledge that I was about to be forced to pretend to like Keith Dawson. Yeah, that's what his first name is.

I knocked lightly, wondering if the casual T-shirt I was wearing was good enough. Annie opened the door within a few seconds, not even bothering to hide her excitement.

"Hey guys!" She threw her arms around both of us in a bear hug. I could feel her new purple rimmed glasses on my cheek. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"Glad to be here." Kumar chuckled.

She let go, but there was no changing the smile on her face. "Come in! I wanna show you around."

The interior of the house was mostly made up of pieces of boxed and plastic wrapped furniture. The room to the left of me appeared to be the living room, while the one on the right had nothing in it. They were separated by a staircase that lead no doubt to a bedroom on the upper floor. The living room was connected to the kitchen by an arch-like doorway, and the dining room followed, making a complete circle of the house. My female friend wasted no time in showing us absolutely everything on the first floor, from a coo-coo clock that had been handed down in Dawson's family to a stain in the corner they weren't sure what to do with.

It was really happening; Annie and Keith were settling down with a house, and soon, boyfriend and girlfriend would turn into husband and wife. I was happy for them. Dawson hadn't done much more than glare at me since Paul's funeral, and I was beginning to be able to stand being in the same room with him. Anna was obviously overjoyed to have him, anyway.

July was nearly over. Talk about time flying. I hadn't done much other than meet a few more people and settle into my position as owner of The Lab. I'd given promotions, ordered things and watched employees do other things. I had even had a short conversation with a peculiar looking creature from a neighboring galaxy. At one point I'd made the mistake of offering Annie a raise after she stayed overnight for two full days. Let's just say she chewed me out and threatened to skin me alive if I ever tried to help her again.

She and her fiance purchased this yellow house with money they'd both saved after the official date for the wedding was scheduled. Of course, with things being the way they were with Dawson's family (I'll get to that later), the 'official date' had been placed all the way into next year. This did little to dampen the love birds' spirits.

They'd invited me, Kumar, two of Annie's girlfriends and a couple of Dawson's buddies over for dinner. Judging by his expression as Annie paraded us around the house, Keith wasn't too excited about us being there.

"The upstairs doesn't really have much yet." The long haired girl waved her hand as we stood next to the stairs. "Might as well stay down here."

"This is a hell of a house, Ann. How'd you manage to afford it?" Kumar asked, looking at her.

She put her finger to her lips, laughter twinkling in her pretty eyes. "Shh... it's a secret. Oh, hey Todd, you're not allergic to anything are you?"



I shrugged. "Just a few types of fish."

"Good. We're having chicken." The doorbell rang as she said it.

It turned out to be Annie's other friends. The first girl was one of my fellow blondes, but her hair wasn't what I was paying attention to. *Holyshitboobs*. Was actually my first thought.

***Yeah, no kidding.***

*Wait. I thought you didn't have a gender.*

***That just means I get to be bi. You're awfully cute you know.***

So, with this disturbing idea running through my head, I completely missed the blonde's name.

"And I'm Cheryl." The girl behind her, a ginger, said with a yawn.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kumar." He grinned.

"I love your accent." The blonde girl giggled.

Cheryl rolled her eyes as they stepped inside. "You'll have to excuse Miss Stereotype over there." She said to me while the others wandered off towards the kitchen. "She can be a little dim at times. What's your name?"

No wait, let me guess, Tim right? Anna's new boss?"

"It's Todd actually. And yeah." I gave her a friendly smile, and she returned it, a little.

"I'm assuming we missed the tour." We walked into the empty room, and I noticed she was wearing clothes that might be found in a store for gothic teenagers. *And you're not a stereotype?* I wondered. "She was practically begging us to come. I'm not saying I wouldn't have, but dang. She's like a kid on Christmas."

I shrugged. "Well, she is about to get married."

Cheryl snorted. "Yeah, in like, six months." I wasn't entirely sure if I liked or disliked her yet. She looked back at me, and something in her eyes changed. I knew the question she wanted to ask, and, rather than allow myself to get caught up in an awkward conversation about whether or not Annie was cheating on her fiance with me, I started a different one.

"How long have you known her?"

"Awhile. We met sometime after high school." I found this strangely amusing, seeing as the two of them looked like they were still in high school. "I'm closer to her than Gloria is though." I assumed Gloria was the blonde.

"How come you never met Kumar?"

"She likes to keep her work and personal life separate. Or at least she used to. Now she talks about you two all the time." The look was back, but I didn't need to divert her attention on my own this time.

"Food's done!" Annie called.

There was an immediate migration to the dinning room. Kumar was on one side of the table, next to Gloria. I rolled my eyes as he grinned at me. Annie and Dawson sat on the other side, leaving me at the end of the table that had the two girls, and Cheryl to sit on the opposite end.

There was no prayer, seeing as the majority of us weren't religious, and for a little while there were no words either. I realized as I ate that none of Dawson's buddies had shown up.

"This is awesome." Kumar said, practically shoveling the stuff into his mouth. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

Annie put on an adorable modest face as Gloria spoke. "So I heard there was, like, something going on at that one science place."

"She means Pasteur Labs." Cheryl muttered, not really eating.

Kumar nodded. "They discovered another element. Third one this month." He looked at me, and before either of us could stop ourselves we were snickering quietly.

Suddenly, Dawson's eyes were on me. I returned his glare, but with a spark of humor and teasing in mine. I was aware of everyone except Gloria (who was now more interested in her nails) watching me and him, waiting for something to happen.

"I think it's a great accomplishment. Certainly more than Heisenberg's done in awhile." Annie's fiance kept his voice calm, carefully placing his words.

"Sure. If you're really interested in an element found in chicken shit." I saw Cheryl raise her eyebrow out of the corner of my eye. Annie looked back and forth between the two of us, not sure of what was going on or what to do.

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"It was found in the intestine, not the feces. And it's better than nothing, which is what you've been doing ever since you got this new little position of yours."

"And you know this how? You're not stalking me, are you?"

"I don't need to. I work there, remember?"

"Oh yes, I forgot, you're one of the wood guys, aren't you? How many birdhouses have you made so far this year?"

"None, not that it's any concern of yours."

"Ah but it is. I hold your paycheck in my hand, buddy."

"And I hold your reputation. How would everyone feel if they found out you were a murderer?"

I shrugged. "If I were them, I wouldn't be surprised." All throughout this, I had continued eating, while Keith refused to touch anything on his plate. It was easy to see I was breaking him, and quite effortlessly at that.

"You think you're smart, blondie? I could ruin you in a day."

"I triple-dog dare you."

His eye twitched and he stood up suddenly, his hands clenched into fists. Annie got up as well and put a hand on his shoulder. "How about you help me clean up?" She asked nervously. He looked back at her, and for just an instant, something passed between them. Something that I found unsettling.

"Fine." He picked up his plate, with half of the meal still on it, and walked into the kitchen with her.

"Wow, you guys really hate each other." It took me a few seconds to realize it was Cheryl speaking.

"We just don't get along too well." I picked up my empty dish and was followed by Kumar.

"What was that all about?" I heard Gloria ask as we passed into the kitchen.

Dawson was leaning on one of the counters, watching as me and Kumar scrapped what remained of dinner into the trash. Annie was scrubbing the plate in the sink with a soapy sponge. She didn't turn as we stacked our own dishes next to her, and I began to feel guilty for ruining the mood. I was about to offer to take over for her when Keith began to speak again.

"I have to admit, though, you do more than Paul did. Lazy asshole hardly ever left his office."

I immediately tensed, barely noticing the fact that Annie had paused. Slowly, I turned to him, my breathing turning into a fast, steady rhythm. Dawson pretended not to care, flashing a crooked smile that made me grit my teeth and form fists with my hands. Kumar noticed immediately, no doubt remembering a few days ago when I had blown up at him in anger. I'd apologized afterwards, but it was obvious neither of us would be able to forget it.

"Oh, gee, would you look at the time." My Indian friend looked at a non-existing watch on his arm.

'Ding-dong!' Went the doorbell.

"I'll get it." Dawson said, cheerful now that he'd manage to piss me off.

***Punch him! Do something!*** The Megaleioths demanded.

"I'm sorry." Annie whispered from behind me.

Almost automatically I calmed down. "No, I'm sorry." I turned around, wishing I knew what to say.

Thankfully, we both seemed to reach an understanding just by looking at each other. Annie loved Dawson, and I disliked him, but I could get over it, and she would stay my friend regardless. This made me feel a little better.

Dawson stormed back into the room, jacket in hand. "I have to go."

"When will you be-" Slam! He was out the door before Anna even finished her sentence.

Cheryl and Gloria walked in, and all four of us were standing in the kitchen now, not speaking and barely moving. Finally, someone (I don't remember who) suggested a board game of some kind, and everyone readily agreed.

We played for a few hours, and things improved. We spoke, laughed and shared stories while Annie kicked everyone's ass at whatever game we were doing. It wasn't a grand moment, but it was enjoyable, and it certainly lifted our spirits. I left that yellow house that night with the idea that maybe Dawson and I just shouldn't talk to each other. Ever.

## Chapter 21

Things were pretty darn okay when it came to The Lab those days. I did what the Megaleioths affectionately referred to as 'business-y stuff,' and got to see some pretty neat things. We'd indeed made kittens that glowed, along with a full grown cat that spoke, though the majority of what he had to say was filled with swear words. There were gizmos that looked like they'd come straight from the future, and several variations of the flying car I'd seen before. There was food in the form of pills and liquids that could eat through almost everything. Needless to say, I was fairly entertained with the things the scientists and engineers were eager to share with me. I noticed they seemed to be looking to me for approval almost constantly.

I received less dirty looks than I did when Paul was alive, but there was still a touch of uneasiness in everyone's face. I was new, foreign, unknown. An intruder of sorts. But, I was also **The Boss**, and that made a lot of difference.

The Megaleioths and I talked and talked, about almost anything. It was practically starving for information about me, and I wondered whether it could feed off whatever it learned. As Paul had foretold, I spent most of my time in my office, staring at the wall or out the window at the world below.

Kumar appeared to notice a sudden change in me, and he often asked whether I was sick. I actually felt really good those days, but to try and explain it to him was an impossible idea. It was almost as if I was high on the pure power of the Megaleioths. I could do whatever I wanted (so long as the Megaleioths approved) and receive little to no consequences. That can get to a person's head pretty quickly.

In fact, I might have just saved myself from utter ruin by doing what I did next, which actually *did* have consequences, and acted as a sort of wake-up call. Towards the middle of October, only a week or so away from Halloween, I defied the Megaleioths.

Down, deep in the forgotten areas of South America, a sickness was born. Not just any sickness either. This one ate away at a person until there was nothing left. On the outside, there was no visible sign of trouble aside from dark shadows under a person's eyes and a sudden loss of weight. But on the inside, everything was at war.

This disease had little trouble finding its way to the United States, though it only became big news on the first of August. The news papers and reporters proclaimed that there was mass death thanks to what they called 'yawning sickness' because of its tendency to make a person extremely exhausted. That was around the time the Megaleioths began to whisper in the ears of the doctors of The Lab, as well as my own.

Pasteur quickly took up the challenge, though they were less skilled in the ways of medicine. None the less, they made it out to seem like we were neck and neck in this race to find something to at least slow the yawning sickness down. Heisenberg eagerly went along with it, for fun if nothing else.

The weeks went by with little success from either side. I was beginning to lose faith in the Megaleioths just when one of our top scientists made a break through. It wasn't a cure, but it set us one step ahead of Pasteur. And, somehow, the public found out.

This did not trouble the 'friend' of mine who sometimes gave me nightmares for the heck of it. ***Let them have some hope.*** It said. ***Hope keeps us in business.***

So I let the doctors unveil the news to everyone every time we found something new about this sickness. And people really did start hoping. Letters were sent from around the globe just to tell us how much everyone appreciated the work we were doing. Pasteur faded into the background by the end of August, since now everyone's attention was on the lab that was finding a cure faster than you could say coulrophobia.

September came with a vengeance. Storms of enormous size and hurricanes on the coasts were plentiful. An earthquake struck California with devastating effects. And I got a letter.

<http://mosstalonwoodadrian.deviantart.com/art/Jamie-363549640?q=gallery%3Aamosstalonwoodadrian%2F38297802&>

It was silly, but in a nice sort of way. There was a side note from the little girl's parents explaining everything to me, but I personally preferred Jamie's. It looked like she'd put a lot of thought into this particular letter,

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perhaps even taking days judging from the state of the paper. The note from her parents claimed she had a slight mental retardation (information I didn't find necessary), and she was far enough behind in 'shool' without the yawning sickness.

This put a new goal in front of my eyes, dulling all others in contrast. I was going to get Jamie back in school, and nothing could stand in my way.

## Chapter 22

The rain the previous night had left a humid feeling in the air to go with the sudden intense heat that September morning. I could've sworn summer was over, and spring long gone, but that's Mother Nature for you. The sun had yet to really appear, however the faint blue light against the fading storm clouds seemed more peaceful than a sunrise. I was in the lobby, which, for once, did not contain anyone named Annie. I was alone, tired, and leaning against the wall near the picture of Paul.

A favored story of my childhood, as well as hundreds of other children who grew up in my generation, was *The Adventures of Pooh*. I watched all the movies over and over until I'd had them memorized. This was mostly because, at the time, there was little else to do but listen to my parents argue and get teased by my older brother. My favorite scene, one I remember to this day, is when Christopher Robin explains to that silly old bear what 'doing nothing' is. For some reason, this fascinated me to no end, and a lot of what I did during those days was stand around doing 'nothing'.

So it was no surprise to me then that when Kumar walked through the glass doors and asked what I was doing, the answer that came to my mind was "*oh, nothing.*" What I actually said was "chillin'," to mock those darn teenagers, but it sent the same message either way.

"You might not be chillin' here in a minute. I've been eavesdropping." He wiped the dewy, newly cut grass off his shoes before venturing further towards me. I noticed a stack of papers in one hand and a coffee cup in the other.

"Careful with that." I stopped leaning and followed him to Annie's desk. "I'm pretty sure coffee and I are confirmed enemies."

"Albert's up to something, I can feel it." He moved a picture of Dawson (which didn't exactly flatter him; if flattering Keith was at all possible) and laid the papers out on the desk so I could see them. "See here?" One of the papers was a receipt from some place that had a name spelled out in a kind of Asian lettering. Pasteur'd placed an order for a lot of fish.

"And this proves...?" I looked up at him.

"I'm not sure. But it feels suspicious to me."

"Liking sea food isn't exactly a crime we can pin on them."

"I know, I know. But it's not only that. There's been no word on how far they've gotten in this little race of ours. It's almost as if they've given up on finding their own cure for that sneezing sickness."

"Yawning sickness."

"Whatever. Pasteur doesn't just give up, Todd. They're like the fly who always shows up at a barbeque. No matter how many of his buddies you kill, he keeps coming back for more of your hot dog."

"Nice choice of words." I sifted through more of the papers. Most were receipts for things like steel, wood and a few things with names I couldn't pronounce. Other papers had to do with various awards both Pasteur and Albert had won, as well as a few photographs. What caught my eye was a small pink paper hidden under the rest of the pile. I pulled it out. "What's this?"

He smiled. "That, is where it gets interesting. Apparently Pasteur was involved in a little 'missing persons' case awhile back. I couldn't find anyone who knew the full story, but it got bad quick. Albert almost lost the company."

I looked at the paper a little uneasily. It wasn't like I didn't appreciate him going out and keeping tabs on our 'pals'; I just wasn't entirely sure where he was going with this. Pasteur and Heisenberg weren't on good terms (hell, that was an understatement) but I wasn't in the mood to start something. Especially since we were finally getting the recognition we deserved. I'd almost fooled myself into believing we'd get to keep it.

"Uh... thanks?" I could get real creative with my conversations sometimes.

"Just wanted to make sure you were aware of all this in case my little hunch is right." Kumar gave me a friendly pat on the back just as Annie walked in.

"You better not be snooping through my stuff." She scoffed as she came up next to me.

"Nah." I said. "We're snooping alright, but through other people's stuff. Well, Kumar's the one who did the snooping."

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He shrugged. "I just know the right people."

The chilled air of the lobby combined with the humidity Annie let in and created a strange sensation as I forced the loose papers back into their original pile. I looked at the pink piece of paper for a moment, wondering what exactly had been going on on the date in the corner (almost ten years ago), before stuffing it in my pocket. I'd probably just shred it later.

Annie was wearing her usual green outfit with the silver name tag, along with her purple rimmed glasses. She'd tied her hair back, and some of the strands danced gracefully as the outside air battled with our own icy warriors. She set her purse down with a yawn, noticing the coffee in Kumar's hand. She looked at me, and we shared a private smile.

"God it's early. I'm going to see if I can catch a few winks before everyone starts yelling at me to hurry up."

My male friend turned away from us and headed towards the stairs.

"I'm going up too." I began to walk in the other direction. "And I'm taking the elevator, thank you!" I added.

"Fat-ass Aryan!" He answered from somewhere behind me.

"Get out, Indian!" I turned and called back. Annie raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

The trip to my office involved nothing in particular other than me almost tripping over a trash can someone'd left in the middle of the hallway for some reason. I felt calm, relaxed, and pretty much at peace with everything. I never would've thought I'd miss feeling that way so much.

The phone was already ringing when I opened the door with the golden lettering that proudly proclaimed my title. I picked it up, unsure of whether I should be surprised that it was Albert Campbell.

"Evening." He said in response to my 'hello'. "It's Al. How are those pills of yours coming along?"

He sounded friendly enough, but there was something smug about it. The kind of smug that says 'I know something you don't.' I wouldn't have trusted him even if he wasn't being suspicious, however. I mentioned before that I didn't want to start anything, but that didn't mean he didn't want to start something. "Fine. Just fine." I said simply. We were actually nearly there; only a few more details to work out, but I wasn't going to tell him that just yet. Boasting was being reserved for a later date.

"No doubt everyone's excited over there, eh? For once, Harrisonburg Laboratories is actually doing something."

"Heisenberg." I corrected automatically. If he was trying to push me, he wasn't doing a very good job of it. Still, I was curious as to why he'd called in the first place. And there was that smugness. It did not escape my mind then that maybe Kumar was right about something.

"Sure. Well, Anderson, I suppose I owe you an apology. I underestimated you, hell, that's an understatement itself, and maybe I was thinkin' too much about Paul when I saw you last. I knew him back when we were both a lot younger, and I gotta say, you're the splitting image. But you ain't like Paul, and Paul ain't like you."

"Is that a compliment?" The last time I'd seen him was at the picnic; the last time I'd spoken to him was right after The Lab first released what it'd discovered about the yawning sickness. I didn't know which instance he was talking about, but I didn't think it mattered. Either way, we'd gotten off on the wrong foot each time we interacted. This conversation was actually turning out to be almost friendly.

"From me, yeah. I ain't gonna lie to you; Paul was an ass. Believe what you want, but that there's the truth. Oh he looked like a regular Santa Claus to most, but once you got to know him, once you *really* spoke to each other..." Albert's voice turned bitter, probably calling up a past feud or something. "Anyways, I know we're not on good terms, Anderson. I'm not blind. But as far as I'm concerned, we ain't enemies. Not yet."

*I find that hard to believe.* I thought, and somehow I knew that somewhere the Megaleioths was nodding its head in agreement. If it had a head. "What do you want, Albert." We hadn't even been on the phone for five minutes and I was already losing my patience.

"You better watch yourself, kid. You don't want to mess with us. I'm talking about all of Pasteur and our buddies. One slip, and we'll send you over the edge, is that clear?"

"That sounds like a half baked threat. Call me back when you have something to say that's worth my time."

"Those pills belong to us." Ah, so that was it. This was beginning to sound like the phone call we'd shared that last time we spoke. Albert had gotten it into his head that, since Pasteur were oh so much more experienced and better than us, they should be the ones to find the cure first. Heisenberg getting in the way was like us sticking our tongues out and going 'na na!'

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I was no longer in the mood to deal with him. "Whatever floats your boat." I hung up, which was probably a bad idea. I knew Albert wasn't kidding, but pride kept me from really admitting it to myself. What could he really do, anyway? Most likely nothing, although my paranoia didn't see it like that.

I sighed and sat down in the chair that had replaced Paul's. Ever since the funeral, when I had nothing else to do, my thoughts almost always returned to Paul, along with other thoughts like: What if all of this was too much for me? What if the Megaleioths suddenly grew bored of me? What if I became so incredibly anti-social no one wanted to speak to me? Questions like these felt stupid when you said them out loud, but when they rattled around in your brain, that was a different story.

I knew there were side affects to the Megaleioths, as well as the power I now had. Those side affects hadn't really scared me until the yawning sickness had appeared, mostly because now the Megaleioths spoke to me more than ever, and I was beginning to notice subtle differences.

I'd never been one for appearances, but now it seemed I was better looking than I'd ever been, and my face looked more... trustable. It was easier to deal with things I didn't understand with that invisible friend of mine (who could very well have been a figment of my imagination) guiding my hand. When I talked to people, I no longer felt quite as awkward during long pauses. I felt in control of everything. That same feeling I'd had with Officer Owens, the one where he was below me, returned often. And, this one I was probably making up to scare myself, my eyes looked like they had changed color a little each time I looked in a mirror.

Another gift I'd received since the funeral was the blessing of reoccurring head aches. A large one just so happened to swing by when the Megaleioths barged its way into my thoughts.

***Albert's nothing. You and me can take him any day.***

I yawned, my eye lids drooping a little. *I don't feel like taking him anywhere. Plus, I don't think he was bluffing.*

***I say somebody ought to hit him so hard his head spins.***

*Well, it wont be me.*

***Why not? Remember what Paul said? You can get away with almost anything when you got me.***

"Is it just me, or does Paul show up in every conversation I have?" I muttered aloud. My head pounded in response.

***He was like the captain of the football team around here. People are probably going to associate him with you 'till you die. Or until you somehow manage to impress them more than he did.***

"...Whatever..." I yawned again.

***I'm serious. That dude was pretty much considered better than everyone else. That might be why Albert over there didn't like him. Or it could be because of the whole thing with the- Todd? ...Todd?***

But I was already asleep.

## Chapter 23

It became increasingly hard not to blurt out anything about the Megaleioths as each scientist and doctor in the lab came up to me with 'their ideas'. I praised them and let them do their own thing, but the fact that those ideas were just being planted in their heads nagged at me. How proud they always looked, how excited. Part of me actually wanted to see their reaction when I told them all they really had was a pile of ash in their hands, er, heads.

We were inching along at a steady pace, with little to no dry areas in our research. Things were constantly coming up, it was almost unbelievable. If the Megaleioths hadn't told me everything five minutes before one of the employees was running up to me, I might have been surprised a few times. I didn't understand half of what they said, and had no clue what was being made in the Tech Medics area in regards to the cure, but I had a feeling it was all going well.

I heard nothing of Albert or Pasteur Labs as the days went on in a repetitive pattern, and that was just fine with me. However, there was one thing at the back of my mind that made me feel like I was forgetting something. Two things in fact. The first, was all the information Kumar had collected. What did it all mean, and where had he gotten it in the first place? The second, was more tricky. All I could determine was that it had something to do with Gary.

At least one of these things is probably a clear as water to you, but I had other things and other people badgering me. Why waste time on something so utterly insignificant? This principle kept all of those troubling thoughts away, and they were shoved to the back of my mind like old possessions when Harrington told me we had a peculiar problem a few floors down. He lead me out of my office that afternoon, wearing his pink suit that somehow made him more threatening. I followed in my usual dark blue tie that was now matched with a clean white suit. I thought I looked pretty good in it.

We took the elevator down to the floor that specialized in human and animal research. Volunteers passed me in lines along with creatures of every shape and size being held in cages or tanks. We walked past a room where a group of lions were roaming freely, with the door wide open. One yawned at me, apparently preferring to eat four-legged lunches.

Harrington seemed full of strange energy and urgency. He walked at a quick pace and stopped for nothing, not even when someone had dropped a jar of lizards right next to a line of volunteers. Needless to say, hilarity ensued. The hallways became less crowded as we continued. I figured we were probably heading towards the crazier stuff, the things regular people weren't aloud to see.

"We've got quite a problem, Mr. Anderson." Mr. H looked back at me, walking a little slower now.

"Has our zoo permit expired?" I asked. He didn't laugh.

"We've recently been having technical dificulties with one of our oldest residents. A unit of artificial intelligence."

"A robot?"

"If you wan't to call him that."

We turned the corner and came into a much older section of The Lab. The room in front of us was circular, much like the one that contained the flying car, but it was also a lot larger. Most of the people were scientists (I assumed) with only two people I could see wearing the blue engineer outfits. There were computers along the walls, and the middle of the room dipped down about a foot or so with miniture staircases on two sides. The middle section was surrounded by sections of what looked like bullet-proof glass. Inside of it was a small bed, a nightstand with a lamp and an alarm clock, an old-fashioned TV in front of the bed, and a cage with a hamster running wildly on it's wheel.

Standing next to one of the glass sections, apparently speaking to one of the scientists, was a metal man. From far away he might have been mistaken for a normal person, but it was easy to see from where I was standing that he was anything but. He was a hybrid between a junkyard and the latest car model. Parts of him were old, black, and rusty, their inner workings coughing and sputtering weakly. The rest of him was gleaming metal, ranging from a yellow-gold color to silvery white. He was both the silver platter and the paper plate.

I looked to Harrington, wondering what I was supposed to do. He gave me a tired, slightly annoyed look



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before pointing towards the bot. Ok, so me and Mr. Roboto were going to have a little chit-chat. I rolled my shoulders and walked towards the center of the room, ignoring the looks my employees gave me, ranging from excited to suspicious. I was used to them by then; the real mystery was how long it would take them to get used to me.

"Good evening, sir." The robot looked away from the scientist (who was eying me in a particularly strange way), and turned to me, his voice sounding like he was underwater. The metal pieces that made up his mouth began to move, some turning and others sliding to the side, briefly revealing a cog or two. He was smiling at me. His eyes were metal balls with white light shining through slits, making me wonder whether he could really see me, or if he had picked me up with some other sensor.

"Good evening. You think you can tell me why I'm here?" I, of course, had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, but that was normal those days.

"I think I can do just that, sir." He looked to the scientist. "A piece of me is malfunctioning, correct?" The dude in the lab coat nodded slowly, still giving me a 'who the hell are you' look.

"What kind of piece? And uh... how is it malfunctioning?" *And why does it concern me?* I thought in a rather cruel way. *Why isn't some tech guy down here instead?* I dismissed both of those thoughts with minor disgust towards myself. Harrington wouldn't just bring me down here to do something I'm obviously incapable of doing (in this case, fixing an AI), and I was the one responsible for anyone who stepped into The Lab, human, animal, or robot.

"The piece is located within my brain. As to why it is no longer performing its normal duties, it is simply too old, I think. It was a part of my original design, this piece." Two pieces of metal slid over his eyes, giving the appearance of eyelids. "...You are Anderson, not Moore." His voice was quieter now. It was a simple statement, yet I could feel some kind of emotion behind it, or whatever passed as emotion for a robot. He seemed... sad, almost. "Paul is dead, correct?"

"Well, Yeah. He died about three months ago." I frowned. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

The scientist had somehow managed to disappear at this point. The robot slowly opened his eyes again and looked at the ground, a kind of mournful expression on his face. "No. News rarely makes it this far down. I have heard your name a few times, however. Todd Anderson, the new heir of Heisenberg Laboratories Inc. It makes sense now, why you should be down here instead of Paul."

I sighed. Earlier that morning I had wished I would no longer hear so many remarks about how I was only like Paul in appearance, or how I would never live up to Paul, or how Paul was so much better at everything. Now, as I looked at this robot, who had probably lost the only person who didn't just look at him as if he were only a hunk of metal, I realized the Megaleioths had been right. I would be lucky to come anywhere close to a man like Paul, who would have done anything for anyone. Or so I believed at the time.

"They want you to find another piece for me, in a place where bad things happen." The robot brought one arm up and touched his chin. I could hear things whirring and clicking inside of him, as if he were an old clock.

"They are convinced the piece can be found no where else, by no one else."

Well 'they' sure looked at things in a cheerful manner. "Alrighty then. No problem. Where is this place?" I was strangely enthusiastic then.

"That's classified." Harrington spoke from directly behind me, making me jump a little. "You will have to be personally taken there by someone who has had experience with the location."

"You'll never guess who it is." Behind Harrington stood a familiar face with a familiar smile.

"How the hell do you know about anything classified?" I raised an eyebrow at Kumar, who only shrugged.

"That just so happens to be classified, too." He winked as I turned back to the robot.

"You hear that?" I asked. "Now they're not telling *me* anything."

The bot smiled again. "I am sure they have a sufficient enough reason not to relay such information. I bid you good fortune on your travels, sir. But before you go... may I suggest another companion for you to include?" Harrington looked suspicious, but he gave a little nod. "So long as they are capable of being useful."

"I believe they will prove almost vital when the time comes." He turned to me. "When you exit this room, there is a small corridor with two doors on each side and one at the end. Go through the final door, and you will know of whom I speak." With that, the robot began to walk away from us, apparently to go watch his hamster for awhile.

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Harrington informed us that he was going to go make sure a time travel experiment wasn't creating too many paradoxes. "In the meantime," he said, "you two go find your third party member and be on your way." He sighed. "We don't have as much time as was originally thought..." I nodded in understanding, and he was gone.

"Well, let's go make a friend." Kumar clasped his hands together as we made our way towards the previously described corridor. The final door had nothing written on it, but there was a camera eyeing us from the ceiling. "I feel so welcomed." He opened the door, and there was a sudden hissing noise almost immediately.

"Well isn't this just fan-fucking-tastic! So what's your job, jackass? You here to take some more blood or are you just going to stick a thermometer up my ass while your buddy holds me down like I'm his fucking girlfriend?"

The room looked like an animal shelter of sorts, with cages stacked across the walls and pet accessories like leashes and mousey toys laying scattered in odd places. Most of the cages were empty, but the occasional pair of yellow eyes would stare out at us from behind a set of bars. Directly to our right, was a large tom cat sitting with his tail curled round his paws. His ears were pinned to his head, and his furry mouth was curled back to reveal rows of pointy teeth, but the enormous amount of fluff this cat had took away almost any sense of him being a true threat.

The two of us stared at him for awhile, until he licked his lips and began to speak again. "Well? What the fuck are you two staring at?"

"This is him?" Kumar looked at me, waiting for my judgment.

"I suppose so. The robot back there said we'd know him when we saw him." *Or her.* I thought briefly.

"He's actually an android, not a robot."

"Does it matter?"

"Hatchet sent you?" The cat broke in, relaxing a little.

"His name is Hatchet? Who names their robot Hatchet?" I asked.

"Android." Kumar corrected.

"Enough of this pointless shit! What the hell are you two here for?!" The cat hissed.

I shrugged. "Apparently 'Hatchet' needs a new part and me, Kumar and you are supposed to go looking for it." The cat blinked, thoughtfully. "I see." He sat there for awhile, looking down at his large paws, as if trying to determine whether one was bigger than the other. When tilted his head back to us again, I saw less hostility in his eyes and more wisdom, as if he knew things I didn't. He reminded me of Harrington around Paul's last days. "I assume we are heading to the Graveyard?"

"The what now?" I already didn't like the place. On a side note, I noticed how many generic place names I was running into; 'The Lab', 'the Graveyard'. What was next? 'The Temple'?

"It's the place Heisenberg Labs dumps all of their old experiments. It wasn't too bad until the rats took over and started turning random things on." Kumar looked at the tom. "Guess that's why we need you."

"No shit Sherlock. Who else is going to take care of those scumbag rodents for you?" He leapt neatly off of the counter he'd been sitting on, his grey and brown fur rippling majestically.

"And you could probably hear things coming before we could." I added, hoping I was being helpful. I already had the impression that this feline was looking down on me.

"Well aren't you just fucking brilliant?" He huffed and padded towards the door. "Come on, shit heads, we got work to do."

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