



SWE's McLaughlin City's Stories

Archan

Book 3

Written by B.A. Savage

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Chapter One

Staring into the desktop mirror, the man lines up his fake moustache with his upper lip, “Never can be too cautious” thinks the man.

Geared from head to toe in black, he sits in his black leather chair finishing the last minute touches before his big night on the town.

Even though he has done similar jobs before, his nerves are bothering him more than usual. After finishing his fake facial hair, he stands up and grabs a bag of bird feed.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this job. I mean a friend of a friend. I must be desperate.”

As he feeds his pet parrot, the bird says, “Archan, Archan, squawk, he’s our man, squawk. If anyone can do it, Archan can, squawk!”

“Man, I’m starting to regret teaching you that Snickers.”

“Aw, shut up, squawk!”

“And that too. You know, Snickers, you don’t have to be the only non-extinct species in the house, right?” says Archan with a big grin.

“I’m sorry, squawk,” says Snickers in a sad tone.

“Sure you are.” Then Archan goes to the next birdcage, “here you go, Lady Jay.”

After feeding her, he heads to the last remaining cage, “And I didn’t forget about you either, Petey. If it wasn’t for you two being the last of your kind, I wouldn’t be feeding you two so good.”

“What about me? Squawk! What about me?” asks Snickers.

“Yeah, and you too, Snickers. You eat more than those two together.”

“Thank you! Squawk!”

“Yeah, yeah. If I wasn’t hurting for money, I would never have taken a job like this.”

Thinking back a few days prior when his friend approached him with a job, he said he had a friend who had an idea stolen from him and was fired as part of a cover up. It seemed like a simple job. The man had given him a detailed map of the building, along with security details, which seemed a little high-tech, but it was a camera corporation. With all the information the man gave him, it would be a simple “get in, get out” job with great pay, and maybe this is what bothered him.

There is no such thing as easy money. Being a professional thief, he knew he needed to bottle up these emotions; a job is a job. Archan did ponder why the man simply didn’t take legal recourse, but the man said it would be tough to prove without the disks and would take years in the legal system. “Damn big business” thinks Archan as he looks back on their conversation.

He sits back at his desk. “Man, I’m sounding more and more like my old man.” And he knew in his heart this was his feeling too. But if there was anything Archan inherited from his father, it would be his distrust for big businesses. Archan believes that’s why it’s so hard for him to maintain a regular nine to five.

Archan’s father rarely sets foot on civilized soil and missed most of his childhood because of this reason. Archan’s mother had fallen in love with the scenery of a tropical vista during a company get-away. The tour guide and she had the time of their lives that weekend, and little Dallas Babukas came nine months later. Once Archan’s mother passed away, he decided to look up this mysterious man of adventure who was his father. It took him years to track him down and ever since that day, his father tried to make amends for the missing years. Just last year, his father made his first trip to the States in a decade and brought with him both Lady Jane and Petey, both birds believed to be extinct. He did this because during Archan’s trip to Egypt to visit him, he mentioned his parrot Snickers and his love for birds and animals in general.

On Archan’s desk, at which he’s seated, is a ring, which is father mailed to him last month. He never bothered to put on the gawky jeweled thing; he just tossed it on his desk amongst the clutter.

While he searches the desktop for his keys, he notices the ring. He picks it up. Feeling the need for some extra luck, “With the way my nerves are tonight, it couldn’t hurt.”

He slides it on. It’s a perfect fit. “It’s kinda ugly, but it’s not like I’m going to a party.” He puts on his cloth gloves, which are a snug fit with the ring, then looks around the room one last time. “Well, I guess I’m ready.” He then grabs his bag of thieving accessories.

“Be careful! Squawk! Love ya! Squawk!”
“And I shouldn’t have taught you that either.”
He then leaves the apartment.

Chapter Two

Only dim lights illuminate the empty hallway. A thin periscope-like device slides out of the vent on the ceiling. It peers in all directions, surveying the hallway, then slides back into the vent. The cover of the vent slides back slowly until it's completely removed. A dark figure in complete black, sporting a ski mask and black lensed goggles drops like a shadow, while making a barely noticeable sound. Staying low, Archan surveys the hall. Once he's determined it's clear and safe to proceed, he does.

"Man, this is way too easy. I thought being a Japanese company, they would have better security than this. That's what I get for stereotyping." He continues down the hallway until he arrives at a door with a name bar titled "Katsuya Sr."

"So this is the room." He opens the door and peeks inside. He looks around. No cameras, no noticeable security devices, nothing.

"Just like he said, 'piece of cake'. Now all I got to do is pick his desk lock, get the stuff and I'm outta here."

Archan heads around the desk and scoots the office chair out of the way. He kneels down and starts to work on the lock. Unnoticeable to Archan, who's hard at work at the desk drawer, a doll sized figure creeps out from behind some books on the top of a high bookshelf behind the desk. It leaps onto the ceiling fan above the desk and starts to lower itself by its tail. Archan cracks the lock, "Open sesame."

"How about 'Busted Criminal'?" asks the figure hanging.

This comment startled Archan, who looks up into the darkness to find what appears to be a talking teddy bear. The room's unexpected occupant pulls the chain on the ceiling fan causing the room's main lights to come on, lighting the whole room.

Archan can't believe his eyes, "What in the world are you?"

Visibly upset and insulted, the hanging creature replies, "What am I? What are you? Let me tell you. Me, The Imperial Chee-Chee. You? Idiot!"

"Why you little..." says Archan until he is cut short by a man clearing his throat at the doorway. Archan turns his attention away from Chee-Chee to the men in the doorway. There are two men standing side by side, both Japanese; one slender and younger, the other huskier and older, but both are obviously related. The younger of the men draws a gun and aims it at Archan. Chee-Chee swings from the ceiling fan over to the doorway where the men are standing. "No stray bullets for me, gentlemen. Chee-Chee will pass." Once stationed between the two men, Chee-Chee looks back at Archan and sticks his tongue out, then yells, "Idiot!"

"Enough!" says the older man. "Caught in my office. So, you were right, son, to suspect this."

"I assured you, father, I was correct" says the younger one.

Archan is kneeled down behind the desk but in path of a clear shot from the gun.

Katsuya Sr. says, "You're probably wondering how you got caught, as most thieves do when they are, as you American's say, 'nabbed'. Well, you were caught because of a not so silent alarm; well, at least not so silent after we almost beat the life out of him."

A third man, a black male in a well-tailored suit, throws effortlessly a bound, blindfolded and gagged man into the room in front of Archan. Archan recognizes that this half-naked and less than half conscious man as his friend's friend. Archan mumbles in disbelief.

Katsuya Sr. continues, "Don't blame yourself. You're nothing but a common criminal who happened to be hired by the wrong person. You should've come to us for employment. The skills you used to gain access to the building were quite remarkable."

"Thanks, I guess."

"It's gonna make for good watching; we got it all on tape. Too bad you won't be around to see it. Can I kill him now father?" asks Katsuya Jr.

"No! How many times do I have to tell you? No killing inside. Leave's too much of a mess. Remember son, we have a team for the mess if it's done properly. Understand?"

"Yes, father."

Katsuya Sr. motions for the black man to go attain Archan. Realizing that he's probably minutes from his death, Archan decides that his best chance of getting out of here alive is taking this approaching man hostage and using him as leverage or a shield at worst. He figures it's time to put his second-degree black belt to work. As the man blocks the aim of the gun and extends his hand to grab Archan, Archan delivers a thrust punch to the oncoming man's throat. Even though he used maximum force, the man is unaffected by the punch as if it never happened. Archan, on the other hand, lets out a loud scream of pain. It feels like he broke his hand on this man's neck. The man easily takes him captive. Katsuya Sr. asks, "Brick, why do they always try something like that?"

Brick replies, "Don't know, Mr. Katsuya."

"I know! 'Cause they're all idiots! All idiots! What am I? What are they? Idiots!" says Chee-Chee. Once Brick has Archan tied up, Katsuya Sr. says, "Well, I have more pressing issues. I'll see you in the morning son."

"Yes, father."

Katsuya Sr. leaves the room.

Chee-Chee leaps up onto the shoulder of Brick, who asks, "What now, Jin-Jun? To the roof?"

Jin Jun Katsuya answers, "No, not yet. I want to see his face. I like seeing the face of a dead man." He snatches the mask off his head.

Chee-Chee yells "Idiot and ugly! No wonder you're such a loser! Idiot! What am I? What are you? Idiot!"

Archan thinks to himself, "He's starting to sound like my stupid bird. If I have to listen to this Chee-Chee thing much longer, I might volunteer to throw myself off the roof."

Jin-Jun still frustrated at what he perceived as disrespect by his father, rolls up his sleeves, "I'm tired of my father disrespecting me in front of others. Even if you two don't work directly for the company, it still bothers me. One day, just wait and see I'll get the respect I deserve, but right now I'm gonna let out some of my frustrations on your face buddy."

Archan quietly regrets taking this job more and more by the minute. While Katsuya beats a tied up Archan, Brick calls on the office phone to downstairs.

"Yes." answers a voice on the other side.

"Get the SDCC ready."

"Again? It's the third time this week."

"Get the SDCC ready," repeats Brick.

"Okay." then both parties hang up. Brick turns around toward the haggard Jin-Jun and asks, "What does SDCC stand for?"

"Swan Dive Cleanup Crew. My father enjoys watching the videos of the impacts."

Chee-Chee says, "Clever name. I like, I like."

Archan is almost out; his body is trying to shut itself down because the pain has become unbearable. Katsuya had even taken off his belt and was hitting Archan in the head and the face with the buckle end.

Trying to catch his breath, Katsuya tells Brick to carry both men to the roof. Chee-Chee jumps off Brick's shoulder to the ground and Brick effortlessly tosses each man on separate shoulders. Archan blacks out as they head down the hallway toward the elevators.

Chapter Three

The cold night air brings Archan back to a slight consciousness, but he still finds it difficult to stay awake. He finds himself laying on the rooftop with Chee-Chee's back to him. Brick and Jin Jun are near the edge of this hundred-story building along with the other bound man. Even with death seemingly unavoidable, Archan finds his mind preoccupied with trying to figure out just what exactly is Chee-Chee supposed to be. He's the size and build of a two-foot teddy bear but has a monkey like tail that behaves like a cat's tail.

Chee-Chee turns around to see Archan staring at him. Chee-Chee's eyes are almost completely black and seem twice as big as they were inside the building.

"You're dead! Since you're probably still wondering what I am, I decided to tell you what you are. Dead! Idiot!"

"So our visitor is awake, huh?" says Katsuya. "Good, it's your turn."

Archan then notices, that the other captive is nowhere to be found. Katsuya notices him looking around the roof, "Oh, your employer? He's waiting for you downstairs. Don't worry you'll be joining him soon enough. And with the impact your body will land, you two will be 'joined' pretty good." Katsuya laughs and Chee-Chee joins in.

Realizing this is the end of the road, Archan tries to muster a fight but the combination of the broken bones, blood loss and a bout with dizziness renders him pretty much helpless, but Brick delivers a backhand for good measure. Archan can barely keep his eyes open as Brick lifts him overhead and carries him over to the edge of the roof where Katsuya is standing. On Katsuya's cue he tosses Archan off the roof.

As he falls, he thinks to himself, "at least the pain will stop on impact, especially from this height". Archan zones in and out of awareness, when he manages to open his eyes he notices that his hand seems to be glowing. "A white light this soon? Not exactly what I expected." Archan closes his eyes involuntarily; he manages to open them once again. Now he notices the rooftop is no longer visible but something seems to be approaching fast from above. It appears to be a white dot getting bigger. The wind and pain makes it tough to focus.

Archan closes his eyes in effort to fix his vision but finds it extremely difficult to re-open them. He thinks to himself, "Two white lights? Is this really happening?" He uses his last strength to open his eyes and what he sees manages to scare him and unbelievably takes his mind off his certain death. With his vision still blurred, he can make out wings at least 8 feet wide, fangs that look like a bear trap and a tail. "What in the world?!" is his last thought as he finally slips completely unconscious.

Chapter Four

It's a nice sunny day at McLaughlin City National Park and Wildlife Reserve. Birds are chirping, squirrels scrambling around and children are at play. In the bushes, a few feet away from the main walking trail is a mound-like growth of grass. It is shaped similar to a human body.

Archan sits up suddenly emerging from the inside the grass mound. He easily rips through the grass that had grown over his body like a grass blanket.

Disoriented and confused he says, "Huh? Where am I?"

As he rests back on his hands he realizes that his hand doesn't hurt. He quickly pulls his hand in front of his face to examine it. No signs of injury. He does a quick bodily damage check and finds no bruises, scrapes or pain from any part of him. Even his fake moustache is upholding.

"What in the world? Did I dream all that? But it seemed so real and how'd I end up here?"

He stands up and walks to the main path beyond the bushes. As he walks he tries to gather all of his memories or at least what he wonders are his memories.

"A bird-like flying creature, a talking teddy bear thing, a rock-man, and a glowing ring? What did I drink last night?"

He looks at the ring and to his dismay it's still the ugly thing it was when his father first gave it to him. No glow.

"What a night. I must have been drugged but by who?"

The park is only two miles from his apartment. He had always wished he lived closer because he loved checking out all the animal exhibits when they first arrived. He must've seen the endangered bird exhibit twenty plus times in the 6 months it's been there. Being such a short distance he decided to just walk home instead of busing. Also, he feels so rejuvenated as he walks he starts to ponder, "If I was drugged, shouldn't I be feeling the after effects? Instead, I feel like a million bucks. Maybe I'm still drugged."

Making it back to his apartment in extremely good time, he opens the door and thinks, "Man, that was the fastest I've ever walked back from the park."

"I've been worried. Squawk. Loser. Squawk."

"Not now, Snick." Archan said as he approached Snicker's bird cage. He notices that the bird dish is nearly empty. As a precaution, he always has tried to keep the dishes full before a job in case he was ever arrested. So the birds would be okay until he made bail.

"Wow, you little pig you. Let me get you some more, but you got to make this last. I don't know what happened last night and my pockets are empty, so it's probably safe to say I didn't get paid."

As he passes the other two cages, he notices their dishes are almost empty also.

"What? Did you three have a party and not invite me?"

After he refills each dish, he sits down at his desk and starts to try to figure out what happened last night, if anything. He removes the fake facial makeup and moustache. To his surprise there's not one scratch or bruise on his face. No chipped tooth or any signs that he was almost beaten to death.

"Who would have drugged me? And with what? When? Man, it seemed so real." He stares into his mirror perplexed.

The message recorder on his phone beeps twice indicating he has new messages. He reaches over and pushes play.

"Beep. This message was left May 20th at 1:05 pm. Son, this is your old man. I was hoping that you were there. You know how much I hate these infernal machines, but something fishy is going on over here, I just know it. It's related to some damn capitalist corporation based in your city. Well, at least that's what some of the people over here are saying. Anyways, you can reach me through this pansy big city tourist. Damn things we got to do for money sometimes. Anyways, call me ASAP at"

Archan writes down the number. He started to check his watch but then realized that knowing his dad, he could be anywhere in the world literally.

"Well, at least I can guesstimate he called within the last twenty four hours."

The next message starts to play, "This message was left May 23rd at 2:34pm."

Baffled, Archan asks himself out loud, "What's going on?! Today is the twentieth. Isn't it?"

The message plays,” Son, what the hell is the hold up? Are you mad at me or something? We don’t got time for all this now. Something big is going down here. I’ve never seen so many armed men in this part of the jungle, especially ones in business suits. You need to call me son.” His father repeats the number again then hangs up.

“What’s happening? I couldn’t have lost three days, could I? What happened to those three days?”

The answering machine continues, “This message was left May 24th at 11:47am. Yo, Babukas where you at man? I haven’t heard from you or my friend you were supposed to work for in a few days now. I’m starting to get a little worried. Yo, call me at work. Later.” The machine cuts off.

“Four days? No wonder the bird food was almost completely gone.”

He turns on the television and immediately turns it to the weather channel. The date and temperature are stationary on the bottom of the screen. May 24th and 75 degrees.

“So, I lost four whole days. This is too weird. I better call pops.”

He picks up the phone and dials the number he jotted down. A man picks up whose voice Archan doesn’t recognize.

“Hello?”

“Yes, can I speak to David Babukas?”

“Who?”

Archan remembers that his dad doesn’t ever go by his real name. Instead, he goes by his nickname. He told Archan chicks dig it.

“Can I speak to Rugged?”

“Oh, sure. Hold on.”

A man with a raspy voice speaks on the other end, “Rugged here.”

“Dad, it’s me.”

“Dee? About damn time you called. I was getting worried, you okay?”

“I hope so.”

“What do you mean son?”

“Never mind, I’ll figure it out. So, what’s so important?”

“Oh, it’s almost too late to mention, but some camera corporation came over here armed to the teeth…”

Archan interrupts, “The Katsuya Corporation?”

“Yes, but how did you know?”

“It’s a very, well let’s just say, well known company. Sorry, go ahead.”

“Anyways. Rumor is that they were here looking for the legendary Shelto, a man-like creature named after the first person ever to see it. Well, claimed to see it. You know how that goes, damn wackos. Anyways, this creature is said to be more beast than human but there are no photos or any real proof besides some footprints and a few so called eye witnesses. I personally don’t buy any of this bull, but obviously the Katsuya people must have. Also, seems that they caught something by what the local natives say. Well, the corporation has closed up camp and headed back overseas anyways, I guess.”

“And why does this concern me?”

“Cause if they did find it and you get proof, we’d be famous. And of course you would share some of the fame with your old man right? But you can keep the fame and give me a little of the dough. Most important is the prestige of making a discovery like that. And if anyone can snoop around and not get caught, it is you son.”

Archan thinks that if what he vaguely remembers is true, then no he can’t. “But it can’t be true. Where are the bruises? Or the information that I was supposed to retrieve?”

Thoughts of that building and what he feels in his gut happened sends chills down his spine. Then he starts to wonder if this was some kind of foretelling of events that are going to happen if he “snooped” around that building? Was that Chee-Chee thing the Shelto creature his dad was talking about? And what happened during those four missing days?”

Being on the phone with his father made another question pop up, “And what about the ring?” He looks down at it. It’s glowing like he remembers it did when he was free falling.

“Hello? Dee, you there?”

“Yeah...hey dad. What’s up with that ring you gave me?”

“What’d you mean? It was supposed to be some kind of mystical ring but it was proven a fake. I thought you might like it. I had heard that in the big city, big jewelry was in, so I gave it to you. What, you don’t like it?”

Puzzled and looking at the brightly glowing ring, “Naw, it’s not that it’s...”

Rugged cut him off, “That’s good, but I need to get off city boy’s phone. I don’t wanna lose what I getting paid for right? Well talk to you later boy. Love ya.”

“Yeah. Bye Pops.” They both hung up.

Archan is staring at the ring; it’s still glowing. “Wow, what is really going on here?”

A deep voice startled Archan, “I am here to answer that.”

Archan turns to find a griffin sitting in his living room. It’s the same creature that appeared when he was falling.

“My name is Cana.”

Chapter Five

Archan looks at this massive creature in his living room; it must be at least 7-8 feet long. It appears to be half-bird, half-feline.

“You’re... a griffin?” asks a bewildered Archan.

“Yes, you are correct,” answers Cana.

“But, I thought you were a myth, a made up creature.”

“You thought wrong.”

“What are you doing here? Wait, did you save me from the fall?”

“Yes.”

“And the bruises and injuries?”

“Let me explain. Adjust yourself, master, it will take a while to explain, hopefully not too long.”

“Master?” asks Archan as he sits down.

“Yes. Now, you are wearing the ring of Windloam’s Array. The wearer of that ring becomes my master. I am the champion of the guardian of all creatures in the air and walking the earth. Your responsibility as the guardian is to help prevent the destructions and abuse of creatures great and small.”

Archan can’t believe his ears or his eyes, “Wait, wait, wait... me some kind of guardian?”

“Yes.”

“What if I don’t want this responsibility? I’m nobody’s hero, I’m a thief.”

“And so was the guardian before you. Also, you are a lover of animals.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have become one with your thoughts and emotions, and I know you care more about the three birds in this room than for yourself. Have you not noticed that during our conversation I have not moved my mouth?”

It dawns on Archan that he’s right. While Archan has been speaking with voice, Cana has been speaking directly to his thoughts.

Then Archan thinks, “So, you can read my thoughts?”

“Precisely.”

“This is too much,” Archan gets up and goes to the window for some fresh air.

Cana asks, “Why is this so hard to understand? Never mind, after all these years I should remember that humans have a tougher time than others, understanding the simple.”

“Hey now! Put yourself in my shoes.”

“Trust me, master, I have been. I was once human like you. That was a long time ago and a long story which we don’t have time for right now, cause we need to get you up to speed on your new abilities.”

“Wait a minute, I never said I wanted to do this.”

“But your heart does. You strive for a purpose. Stop fighting it.”

Archan knows Cana is right, he’s been looking for a purpose. He walks back to his desk. He looks into the mirror and is shocked to not see the griffin in the mirror. Archan turns around immediately to find the griffin still in his living room.

“So, you’re a figment of my imagination? I’m still drugged up aren’t I? That would explain a lot of things.”

With a tone of disappointment and frustration Cana answers, “No. Only the bearer of the ring can interact with me, no one else can see, hear, or touch me. And neither can I with anyone but you. Well, there are a few exceptions, but I will tell you those later. We need to get your abilities honed.”

“Why? What’s the hurry?” asks Archan.

“The company your father talked about did capture the Shelto, and they’re bringing it back to the States to experiment on it.”

“Man, I can’t avoid that company, and how do you know they caught it?”

“The Shelto told me.”

“But I thought you couldn’t interact with anyone but me?”

“I said there are exceptions. Anyways, we need to go to the park that you woke up at. Meet me there soon master.” Then the griffin vanished in front of Archan’s eyes.

He scratches his head as he tries to figure out everything and realizes that during all this excitement he still doesn’t know what happened to those missing days, but he knows this ring and Cana, the griffin, holds the answers to that question and a whole lot more. He grabs his jacket after a quick shower and change of clothes and heads to the park.

Chapter Six

The lush green scenery of McLaughlin City National Park and Wildlife Reserve has never seemed so beautiful to Archan as it does today. Maybe it's some unknown effect of the ring or the fact that Archan by all rights should be dead. No matter what the reason is, Archan enjoys it. Cars and other vehicles drive through the designated driving area and children are at play enjoying the last days of summer.

Archan heads off the main path toward the area in which he woke earlier that day. After searching to find the exact location and not seeing anything that seems familiar he thinks, "It all looks the same, beautiful, but the same."

"Close enough," says the griffin.

Archan turns around to find Cana standing in an open field close to the main path.

"Hey, what are you doing there?! Someone might see you!" barks Archan.

"You're the only one who can see me, remember master?"

"Oh yeah... wait, didn't you say something about there being an exception or exceptions?"

"There are certain situations, such as if I choose to reveal myself. Certain near extinct species and the other can see me also."

"The other? What other?"

"There is one like you and there is one like me but they serve the land and the sea."

"Huh?" questions Archan.

"Nevermind, we don't have much time, master. The Shelto will be here soon, it's already in flight."

"How do you know that?"

"It told me. It's a unique and extremely rare species. It's a living oddity to this world. It was never meant for this world."

"It? Why do you keep calling it an it? That's kinda rude for a so-called protector of nature to talk about a rare species."

"Well, master, how should I address the Shelto?"

"Well, you could maybe give it, the Shelto, a name instead of calling the poor unfortunate creature an 'it'. Or even the 'Shelto'. Both are too laboratory-like to me."

"Oh highest Zardan, you have chosen wisely."

"Huh?"

"Nothing, master. What would you like to call it....the Shelto? But after this little naming venture, master, we must start your training. Time is short."

"First, please stop calling me master."

"And what would you like me to call you?" Cana said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Archan will do just fine."

"Yes, Archan."

"Thank you. No problem. Well, first, what gender is this creature?"

"Both."

"Androgynous?"

"Let me give you a brief description, then can we move on?"

"Sure, once we name him...well, you know what I mean."

"Yes I do. The Shelto is what man would have evolved into in a different realm. A realm from which I come. But there humans, as you know them, ceased to exist centuries ago. In my realm creatures, well, the simplest way to explain without taking too long is that they evolved into the state in which humans are in your realm presently. Well, without the bickering of course."

Trying to crack a joke, Archan says, "So, you mean like jackal comedians?"

"No. I knew you would not be able to truly grasp the world in which I live. Ages ago the last of the Shelto was sent here. Similar to how your world has set up wildlife reserves. We knew the Shelto would be safer here. Since it breeds internally without the need of a mate, it could repopulate here. At the time your

world was still very primitive. But something went wrong, the offspring's started to develop characteristics that varied extremely from one generation to the next."

Cana paused for a moment to let some of this sink in to Archan. Then Cana continues, "Eventually the natives figure out how to capture some, while others died of the natural effects caused by these genetic imperfections. Most of the species went into hiding and slowly became a myth. This particular one is the last living one."

"So, are you guys responsible for Big Foot too?"

Cana's tone expresses his frustration, "No. That has nothing to do with us, but you need to think and not speak."

Offended, Archan fires back, "Hey, you don't have to be so rude. I wouldn't have asked if I knew the answer. And aren't we on the same team?"

Cana, who had been speaking to Archan the whole time telepathically, tells him by the same manner, "I simply meant you should address me through your mind and thoughts, not your mouth because you have on-lookers."

Archan looks to his side and finds that a small crowd is watching him. To them he is standing in the field by himself and apparently talking to himself. He's embarrassed and at a loss of words.

One of the men in the crowd asks, "You okay, buddy?"

"Um...yeah...um just rehearsing for a play. Yeah, the fresh air and nature's beauty helps."

The people in the crowd seem to buy this excuse as they start to fan out. With his thoughts Archan apologizes to Cana. Cana accepts.

"Are you ready to train now?"

Archan thinks but still mouths the word. "Yes."

"Good, first, let's start with something you can't control."

"Huh?"

Cana asks Archan to stretch out his hand. When he does Cana claws him drawing blood.

Even though he felt no pain, out of instinct Archan says "Ow...wait a minute. That didn't hurt. What gives? I'm bleeding, but no pain?"

"You are not invincible or immortal, but the ring numbs all pain. Now, touch your palm to the ground."

He does and when he lifts it after a few seconds there is no sign of the cut. It's completely healed.

"The more serious the injury, the more time the healing process takes as it takes more out of the Earth."

"That would explain the missing days."

"Yes. You were near-death, with multiple life-threatening injuries when I rescued you."

"Wow, really?"

"Yes. Anytime you have an injury or illness, Mother Earth will heal you. She is the only thing consistent throughout the realms."

"Oh, I see."

"Now on to your ability to talk to this realm's creatures. Once your powers are fully mastered, you will have the ability to command all creatures great and small, in the air and on land."

"What about the sea?"

"No. There is another"

"Well two out of three ain't bad."

The griffin gets straight to the point, "Let's try it on that bird in the tree over there. All you have to do is focus on the bird. Go ahead. Command it with your thoughts to have it come over to you."

Archan can hardly believe any of this is happening to him. It still seems like a dream, but he figures he'll give it a try. He looks at the bird, "Bird. Come over here."

The bird doesn't move.

Cana tells Archan to try again.

"Bird, come here."

Nothing again.

Frustrated Archan thinks, "Crap, this is not working."

Cana tells him, "You need to focus on that particular bird. You need to let the bird know who is the master."

Archan turns back toward the bird with a more determined focus until bird droppings landed on his shoulder.

“Yuck, what in the world?”

Cana shakes his head. “Birds do seem to have a weird sense of humor and you did say ‘crap’ correct? Your command was not focused on any particular bird as you thought. So, any bird could hear you and one chose to answer your command.”

Again frustrated, Archan thinks, “I don’t get respect from birds anywhere, not at home and not out here either.”

He turns back toward the original bird, “Bird! I command you to come here now!”

The bird flies over and lands on his shoulder.

Cana replies, “Good job but we still need to keep working.”

Archan smiles, “Okay, what’s next?”

Chapter Seven

Inside the lead helicopter of the Katsuya Corporation's private armada, returning home with the Shelto in tow, sits Brick Johnson with The Imperial Chee-Chee on his shoulder. Both are silent, both are sporting jet black shades. Sitting across from them in the sound proof compartment are Jin Jun Katsuya and Baino. Baino is the second highest ranking official on the company's board. Baino can't seem to divert his attention from Chee-Chee.

Chee-Chee notices and is about to start his usual outburst when Jin Jun breaks the silence before he can. "Brick Johnson, the Imperial Chee-Chee. Do you mind if I explain to my colleague how your master The Host created you two very unique individuals? Mr. Baino wasn't fortunate to be there."

Brick nods in acknowledgement, while Chee-Chee fumes silently.

"Thank you, gentleman. Well, Mr. Baino. Brick Johnson here was paralyzed by an explosion at his college dorm planted by a rival competitor with an explosive temper. After a year of being a living rug, he decided to undergo a secret experiment conducted by The Host. Not only was Brick able to walk again but he was able to harden his body to a rock-like form, therefore he became known as Brick. Unfortunately, just to walk, he has to solidify some of his molecules which caused an unexpected side effect that requires him to undergo some kind of daily treatment, which I was not told too many details about."

Brick sits motionless and Chee-Chee appears restless.

Appealing to Chee-Chee's vanity, Katsuya continues "And now on to the Imperial Chee-Chee. The Host also didn't go into too much detail about him; except for the fact that he was his personal creation built from scratch and that he was made from, and correct me if I'm wrong, feline, owl, monkey, flying squirrel and Koala bear DNA with a modified human brain."

Chee-Chee says nothing.

Katsuya once again continues, "But sadly, with him being a first generation creation there was an unexpected side-effect. He's slowly going insane."

Chee-Chee glares over at Baino, "Yeah, so don't piss me off, idiot!"

Brick smiles, so does Katsuya. Baino shrugs it off, and then asks Katsuya could they speak in private inside the storage compartment. They excuse themselves and go into the compartment holding the Shelto. Once the door is shut Baino turns to Jin-Jun and asks, "Why again are we working with those two circus side shows? I understand the 'why' but what is the real reason? You and your old man must talk at the estate."

"What my father and I talk about at home stays at home, but I assure you that you know all there is to know. I myself, on the other hand, am the one who is usually left in the dark."

"Please spare me the poor me story. We both know that once your old man is gone you'll be running the whole show."

"That's beside the point. I don't get the respect I deserve from my father or anyone in the family either. But that's okay cause one day. Well, like you said, one day I will be running the whole show."

The Shelto, inside the enclosed and reinforced cage, starts kicking and scratching the walls.

Baino asks, "And, why again are we getting involved with all this DNA and genetic engineering crap anyways? I would rather use a traditional ninja assassin or shogun warrior any day."

"I agree. But we are entering a new day and age. A time where genetically created warriors will dominate and pump fear into the hearts of people around the world. The perfect warrior, the perfect assassin is right around the corner. With the help of The Host, we will achieve it before any of the other families or governments around the world."

"You mean with the help of Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Call him what you want but the man is brilliant..." The gleam in Katsuya's eyes disappears, "... and kinda creepy."

"Because of some personal business I had to take care of, I never got to meet him"

"And that's probably good. There haven't been many men who have the aura that puts the fear of death in my mind just from being around like he does."

"Explain."

“That’s just it. I can’t. He’s just...creepy. Anyways, he created Brick and Chee-Chee and believes he can create a non-defective brand of super human-like warriors using the DNA of the Shelto.”

Baino kicks the cage, “What’s so special about this thing anyways?”

“I’m not completely sure, but you do remember what it looks like?”

“Yes.”

Katsuya asks with a smile, “Would you want to be in that crate with it?”

“Hell no.”

“Exactly. Plus if The Host can make creatures like the two upfront, imagine what he could do with the DNA of that beast. We could have our super warrior soon.”

“I don’t know but all this creeps me out. I think we should just continue our focus and efforts on human subjects, robotics and weaponry.”

“That will always be open for debate but not here. Let’s not continue to be rude to our guests.”

They both return to their seats. Brick and Chee-Chee are still in their same spots.

An hour later and after the rest of the Armanda has broken off, the lead helicopter lands on top of the Katsuya corporate skyscraper. Katsuya and Baino exit first and after a few steps Katsuya realizes that their guests are not exiting the helicopter. The doors of the copter open and both the pilot and co-pilot are tossed out. Baino yells back, “What the hell’s going on?”

Brick is now in the pilot seat. Chee-Chee is in the co-pilot seat. He yells, “Plans have changed, idiots! Master will experiment back home where he has good equipment, not Katsuya junk. Don’t worry, idiots. Master will still deliver the finished product.”

Katsuya stands smiling and saying nothing. Baino on the other hand, “That was not part of the agreement. You can’t just change plans like this! This is unacceptable!”

“We just did, idiot! You’re lucky master said that we can’t kill you. He still honors the deal, idiots!”

Chee-Chee shuts the door. Baino runs up to the co-pilot door as it starts to ascend. Chee-Chee kicks the door open violently nailing Baino in his face and sending him to the ground. Chee-Chee is hopping up and down in the seat like an excited monkey. Brick can be seen smiling too. The helicopter leaves the roof and soon is out of sight.

Baino’s face is bleeding from a small yet deep gash. He turns toward the cool and calm Jin-Jun, “Can you believe this? And why are you just standing there smiling?”

Katsuya reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small device that looks like a compass. “Because of this. A homing device. Just in case this happened and with the probability that they will probably destroy the helicopter, I had one of the technicians plant one inside the casing of the cage holding the Shelto.”

“Then let’s go get them!”

“No, not yet. We have to make sure they are inside The Host’s lair, which he would not reveal the location of. This is what made me be a little more cautious. Don’t worry, I planned for this. The armada is on stand-by as we speak.”

“Did you plan this with your father?”

Confidently Katsuya answers, “No.”

Baino snaps, “What are you thinking? You can’t do this without his permission. And if you thought this could or might happen, we could have been prepared to prevent this. We just lost that Shelto thing.”

Katsuya is visibly frustrated with Baino’s lack of confidence, “Well I did! And it has happened, so let’s go get ready. We leave tomorrow morning.”

Baino mumbles under his breath, “Arrogant little brat.”

Chapter Eight

Exhausted and sprawled out on his bed, Archan is awakened by an unfamiliar voice, “Get up sleepy head.”

A second unrecognizable voice says, “Yeah, we’ve been waiting all day to talk to you.”

Startled, Archan sits up immediately to find himself alone. “Man, I must be tripping.”

Referring to his rough and long day of mental training the day before at the park, “Ugh...I’m so tired.”

“Squawk. Stupid. Squawk, they were talking to you. Squawk.”

As he gets out of his bed, Archan thinks, “I never taught him that.”

Once he enters his front room a flood of voices hit him from every direction. Sounding like several people are trying to talk to him at the same time, he covers his ears and yells, “Enough! One at a time please!” He looks around the room and finds himself alone.

“Squawk. You don’t have to be so rude. Squawk.”

“Who the heck has been teaching you this?”

“Squawk. Not you, Sherlock. Squawk.”

The two voices from earlier, one man and one woman, can be heard laughing under their breath.

Archan looks around the house suspiciously, “Okay, who’s there? Where you hiding at?”

The man’s voice says, “Should we tell him or mess with him a little longer?”

The lady replies, “I don’t know. It is kinda fun.”

Then they both start laughing.

Archan turns suddenly and looks at Lady Jane’s cage. “Oh sheez!” said the lady’s voice.

“Ah ha! Caught you....Wait, you can talk too?” Archan has a very puzzled look.

“Always could. You just couldn’t hear me.”

“Squawk. Yes, not until now, beast master. Squawk.”

The man and lady laugh again. Archan turns toward Petey’s cage, “And you too?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, all three of you can talk?”

“Squawk. Give the man a prize. Squawk.”

Archan snaps at Snickers, “And I thought I had taught you to be such a smart ass.”

“Squawk. You thought wrong. Squawk.”

Petey and Lady Jane can’t contain their laughter. Petey says, “He’s been cracking us up since the first day we got here.”

In his best Elvis impersonation, Snickers says, “Squawk. Thank you. Thank you very much. Squawk.”

Archan asks, “If you can say more words than I thought you could and can talk like a human. Why do you still ‘Squawk’?”

“I guess it’s just a habit.”

“You didn’t just then.”

“Squawk. NSS. Squawk.”

“What? NSS?”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

All the birds get a good chuckle out of that one. Lady Jane says, “We would’ve said hi yesterday, but Cana told us not to.”

Petey adds, “And who wouldn’t listen to a creature that size?”

Archan asks, “So, you could see him too?”

“Yes, we could but Snickers couldn’t. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we are near extinction and he’s not.”

“Squawk. At first I thought you had laced their feed. Squawk.”

Archan shakes his head as he heads into the kitchen to make something for breakfast, “I’m starting to wonder if someone laced something I ate. This is just too weird.”

“So, what does the big griffin want you to do?” Petey asked.

“Break into the Katsuya building. The same one-hundred story building that I was tossed off of. But this time in broad daylight to save some endangered species.”

“You’re so brave.” Lady Jane said in a charmed way. Archan notices her tone and raises one eyebrow. Petey says, “Oh knock it off, Lady J.”

“Squawk. Somebody knocking the boots. Squawk.”

She fires back, “You two can really be jerks sometimes.”

Archan can’t believe that his world has been turned upside down. “I have a daytime talk show in my living room.”

Petey asks, “Oh yeah, speaking of that. Can you start leaving the TV on when you leave. It gets kinda of boring sometimes. There’s not a lot for us to do.”

“Yes, please. Pretty please.”

“I guess I could but which channel, since you’ll be stuck watching one channel all day.”

“Not if you leave the remote in my cage.”

Again raising his eyebrows, Archan asks “You can change the channel? With the remote?”

Doing his best James Brown imitation, Petey says, “Watch me!”

Archan shakes his head again in disbelief. “That’s what I get for leaving the radio on at night.”

“Squawk. Just watch him poop on it. Squawk. Just like his food dish. Squawk.”

“Hey you stinking green-go! That was one time!”

Archan yells, “Stop it! You guys are acting like little kids.”

Lady Jane says, “Well, none of us are over five years old. What did you expect?” All the birds laugh.

Archan doesn’t reply. He continues making his bowl of cereal. Once he’s done, he sits down at the table with his Dink-o’s cereal.

“Squawk. So tell us what’s going on tonight, big guy. Squawk.”

Lady Jane adds, “Yeah, we wanna know.”

Sitting down and still kinda not to knowing what to make of all this, he admits, “I can’t believe I’m about to explain my day to my birds. And they are going to comment back.”

Petey says, “Well, get used to it. Snickers talks all day long.”

“Well, Squawk you too!”

Archan even laughs with the birds this time.

“Okay. This is what’s supposed to happen.”

Chapter Nine

Archan pops open a vent and enters once again into a hallway inside the Katsuya corporate building. He thinks, "Man, here we go again. I need to be more alert this time."

He surveys the hallway, every so often ducking down into a hiding position, when he thought he heard someone. Finally, he makes it to his destination, Jin-Jun Katsuya's office.

"I never had to interrogate anyone before, but I just hope junior boy has the nerve to play stupid." Thinking back to the major beating he received at the hands of Katsuya Jr. during his last visit to the building, Archan slowly opens the door revealing Katsuya Jr. talking on the phone with his back to the door. Katsuya says speaking into the phone, "I assure you the situation has been completely resolved. Thank you for your patience. And you too, have a nice day."

At the same time he hangs up the phone, Archan shuts the door behind him. The usual casual smile on Jin-Jun's face disappears as soon as he turns around to find himself facing an unexpected visitor dressed in black.

"What is the reason for this intrusion? Wait...don't I know you?" referring to Archan's outfit, similar to the one he wore during his first visit.

Archan barks, "I'll be the one asking the questions here. Where is the Shelto?"

"I assure you that I have no idea what you are talking about," states Katsuya coolly.

This is music to Archan's ears, "I was hoping you would say that."

Archan slams a lightening quick right cross to Katsuya's chin sending him to the floor after a slight spin in mid-air. Archan didn't think he hit him that hard, but the pause Katsuya is taking is proof. Archan didn't notice that Katsuya pushed a button on his watch as soon as he hit the ground, alerting his personal security that something was wrong. Katsuya manages to get back to his feet, "That voice and the outfit; you're the guy..."

Archan cuts him short by leaping effortlessly across the desk landing a solid kick to Katsuya's chest sending him falling into the adjacent wall. Archan smiles and thinks, "Man, this is too easy but a lot of fun too."

Cana's voice echoes in his head, "Please remember we need information also."

"Yeah and remember this guy beat the hell out of me and tried to kill me!"

"Yes, I remember, but there is a bigger task ahead."

"And your point?! I'm nobody's hero."

Cana doesn't reply. This pause in action gives Katsuya time to catch his breath and stand up. Archan visibly upset, asks again this time with more bass in his voice, "One last time or this time I'll be the one calling the SDCC!"

Katsuya realizes two things at the same time. One, this is the man from before and he's hell-bent on revenge; two, it's only a short matter of time before this lunatic becomes Swiss cheese thanks to his bodyguards destined to arrive shortly. Time to stall.

"The Shelto creature was stolen from us."

"What?! You're full of shit! Where is it?"

"I'm not misleading you. Other parties involved in this venture double-crossed us."

"Then you're useless. Time to die," says Archan as he approaches Katsuya.

"Wait! I know how to find them. I have a tracking device."

"Where is it? Now!"

Referring to the jacket he's wearing, Katsuya says, "in my coat pocket."

Archan tells him to slowly pull it out and no funny business. Katsuya starts wondering, "What is taking those idiots so long to get here?"

Cana is sitting at the end of the hallway on the floor of Katsuya Jr.'s office. An elevator door opens and three armed men emerge and head toward the office and the undetectable griffin. As Katsuya pulls out the device, Cana tells Archan, "You'll have visitors in mere seconds."

"Who?" says Archan out loud. Katsuya wonders what Archan means.

“Some of Katsuya’s men.”

Archan comes to two quick conclusions: Katsuya must’ve called these men somehow and that he was stalling. Immediately, Katsuya feels the impact of another lightning fast jab. Archan manages to snatch the device out of Katsuya’s grasp before he lands. The office door flings open and the three men appear with guns drawn.

“Shit, Cana, I’m trusting you, north side window!” says Archan out loud. He then heads toward the wall-sized window and dives at it as bullets from behind smack into the window.

Archan’s body shatters the already crumbling glass. Katsuya and his men run over to the now exposed opening and look downward expecting to see Archan falling, but instead see him gliding through the air as if on the back of an invisible flying creature.

Katsuya, a little bruised up, smiles through the pain and thinks, “Now I know the “Who” but now we must figure out the “What”.” Then he turns and goes back to his desk and uses the phone.

“Lab,” states the voice on the phone.

“This is Jin-Jun, get the EXO-5 ready for use.”

“But sir, that’s an antique that we never...”

Katsuya cuts him off, “Do you like your job?”

“Yes, yes sir, the EXO-5 will be ready.”

“You have one hour. Also, get a tech team ready. We might be acquiring some new technology.”

“Yes sir.”

Katsuya presses the button down to hang up, then releases it and presses a few speed dial numbers. While it’s ringing, Katsuya reaches into his desk and pulls out another tracking device identical to the one Archan took.

“Yes,” answers a man.

“Have the armada ready in one hour. We leave today to get back what is ours.”

“Yes, sir. It will be ready.”

Chapter Ten

Inside the massive underground cavern, numerous computers and high tech devices of all shapes and sizes outline most of the rocky walls. The center of this cavern is a 150 foot circular shaped lake connected to the outside ocean surrounding this remote island. Brick, with Chee-Chee on his shoulder, directs a group of uniformed soldiers where to put the stolen cargo containing the Shelto.

A dark menacing voice comes from above, "Over there will be fine." This voice would make most people tremble in fear, but everyone in this location seems to be accustomed to it. Without a hint of change in tone, the voice says, "Good job, Brick, The Imperial Chee-Chee, but what else should I expect from my two best creations?"

The last part of this statement was not a compliment but a boast of his own personal achievement. Walking down a stairwell that was barely distinguishable from the outer wall, the man continues, "So, how did they take the news that all experiments would be here?"

Chee-Chee answers, "Just like the Imperial Chee-Chee thought they would. Idiots! But I got one of them good, right on the cheek." Then the monkey DNA shines again as he starts laughing like a chimp. Brick smiles.

The Host, who's now at the bottom of the stairwell, doesn't react to the outburst. He says "Pity, they could have been useful. Oh well, fortunately for them, they must all die one day. Imperial Chee-Chee, entertain yourself. It's time for Brick's treatment."

Chee-Chee and Brick both reply, "Yes, master."

Chee-Chee dismounts and Brick heads toward a 10 foot high cylinder filled with a water like substance. This cylinder is connected to a nearby terminal by a series of wires and cords.

Archan and Cana approach a small remote island off the coast of McLaughlin City. Archan says, "So, this is the place huh?"

"I don't know. You are the one with the device."

"Yeah, yeah I know." He checks the device once they land.

Cana says, "The Shelto is here."

"How do you know? Let me guess, he told you right?"

"Correct."

"Then why can't I hear it?"

"Because you are not listening."

Getting annoyed of Cana's ever present attitude as Archan perceives it, "What?! Okay fine, shut up and give me a minute."

Archan focuses, trying to block out all the noises of nature which sound so lively. He attributes this to the ring. Then he hears it, not a voice exactly, but a being that is very afraid. Before he has a chance to ask Cana, he answers, "That is the Shelto."

"It sounds really scared."

"Wouldn't you be if you were hunted, taken from your home and stuffed inside a dark box being shipped to who knows where for who knows what?" says Cana in a tone Archan hasn't heard him use before. It was somber, yet filled with emotion, human emotion. Cana notices his change of tone and goes back to his non-emotional tone, "WE need to act."

"And later WE need to talk," referring to something Archan can feel Cana is holding back.

"Acceptable. There should be a tunnel leading to the Shelto about 200 feet west behind some rocks and bushes."

"How do you know that?"

"I asked some of the animals, but I must go now. We will be back shortly." As Archan starts to ask, "Who? What?" Cana disappears.

"Oh well, that's just great. Let's just hope they aren't expecting guests."

Archan heads toward that location.

Sitting aboard the lead helicopter of seven total, sits Katsuya Jr. and Baino.

Baino asks, “And exactly why did you mention to him that you had a tracking device in the first place?”

Katsuya explains, “Because I needed to buy time for the pathetic and now replaced personal security team. But it doesn’t matter. This attack was planned, we’re just executing it a little early.”

Baino complains, “This attack was supposed to be led by your father, to ensure its success.”

“He’s away on business.”

“Yes, and would have been back in time to lead this attack, if you hadn’t messed up.”

Katsuya glared at Baino with a look that was trademarked by a Katsuya, it meant “Shut up while you’re ahead” but Baino wasn’t about to be intimidated by his best friend’s arrogant, egotistical son. Luckily, neither needed to flex any more muscle, verbally or physically, as the pilot announced they had arrived.

The island is a vibrant green lush of tropical foliage that was common for this area of the world. There was no sign of the helicopter taken which Katsuya deducted must be at the bottom of the ocean somewhere. After doing a brief sonar search of the surrounding area, it was located. Also, members of the tech team used some imaging devices to find the nearby tunnel leading downward toward a massive cavern. The armada landed as close to each other as possible because of the trees.

Katsuya figures this must be the way to The Host’s lair, but what he couldn’t figure out was why there was no sign of any kind of security. Maybe deeper in the tunnel there might be, but their arrival without a welcoming party of sorts made him uneasy. Jin-Jun instructs the tech team to get the EXO-5 ready.

While he gets fitted into the outfit, he ponders if the stranger from his office has made it here yet. And also this creepy Host guy, “Is he as arrogant as people think I am?” He hopes not because he feels every ounce of his arrogance is backed up, and the amount of “Arrogance” to steal from any mob family and not be worried about the price, worries Katsuya.

Chapter Eleven

After traveling down the tunnel for nearly twenty minutes, carefully trying to avoid hidden security devices, Archan recognizes the sound of machinery at work. He slides with his back against the rocky wall, and peeks around the corner to see the huge underground laboratory. He carefully surveys the room and finds it unattended. He makes his way toward the little lake in the middle, "Man, this kinda feels like I found the bat cave."

He walks around the massive room looking for exits, doors, and storage places. Every so often he glances up at some of the high tech machines and laboratory equipment. He finds himself standing in front of the big cylinder of liquid and floating inside, hooked up to tubes and wires is Brick who is apparently sleeping.

"What in the world is going on here?"

He slowly walks up and touches the glass. Archan thinks how peaceful Brick looks, but then remembers this is the man who without hesitation tossed him off the top of the Katsuya building.

Archan tries to attempt to locate the Shelto by talking telepathically, "Keep on thinking so I can find you. Everything will be okay very soon. Help is here."

Seeing the big steel reinforced cage, he realizes that the Shelto must be inside. At the same time Archan passes the stairwell toward the cage, he notices someone walking down them. It's Chee-Chee still wearing his shades, with slippers on and a glass of hot chocolate. It's too late to hide for Archan as they both notice each other at the same time. Chee-Chee yells, "Ah! What are you doing here, idiot?"

Archan realizes he had better shut up this oddity before someone else discovers he's here. He dives at Chee-Chee with amazing grace but unfortunately Chee-Chee was a little more graceful. Dropping his cup, Chee-Chee runs, hops and screams all around the lab with Archan in chase. Archan can't trap this little annoying creature, "Come back here!"

"You won't catch me, idiot! Master! Master!"

Archan is not even coming close to catching Chee-Chee, then Chee-Chee leaps off the top of a computer terminal, spreads his arms and glides across the inside lake.

"You've got to be kidding." gasps Archan.

Once on the opposite side of the lake, Chee-Chee starts to celebrate, "Idiot! No one can catch the Imperial Chee-Chee. Idiot!"

This celebration was a little premature, as Archan starts trying to control Chee-Chee with his mind.

"What are you doing?! Get out of my head!" Chee-Chee, whose brain is a unique mesh of human and animal lobes, is trying to fight Archan's command.

"No way, idiot! I'm...not...feeling...sleepy," but Chee-Chee's tone gets quieter as he starts to lay down, "Not...fair...idiot."

"That's right. Go to sleep now!"

Suddenly, Archan is knocked across the room by a leaping kick from The Host. Slightly dazed, Archan stands up and looks at the man who just kicked him. Well over six feet and 250 pounds of pure muscle that even his monk style outfit can't hide, this huge black man stands still looking at him. Then with a voice that sends chills up and down Archan's spine, the bald, intimidating man asks, "Is this all they sent? One measly weak amateur? No insult meant."

Archan responds, "No insult taken." Then he charges The Host who easily catches his punch with his open palm, clenching his hand and delivering a solid punch to Archan causing blood to spew out of his mouth. Then still holding Archan's hand and with his other hand is his midsection, The Host hoists Archan over his head and effortlessly tosses him 20 feet into the outer wall. Without a change of tone or sign of interest The Host says, "I watched you enter upstairs on the monitor and waited until I was sure you were alone to come greet you. Well, at least you got courage and stupidity. This bores me, so I think I'll let Brick take care of you."

He then walks over to the computer terminal next to the cylinder holding Brick and presses a few buttons and Brick's eyes open. The liquid inside the container drains slowly.

"Yeah, idiot! You ain't worth the master's time, loser! Get him, Brick."

Archan's head had bounced off the wall and as he is still trying to gather his senses, he spits out more blood.

With no emotional change in his demeanor The Host changes his mind, "Actually, I have more pressing things for Brick and Chee-Chee, so I'll just kill you myself."

The Host turns back toward Archan, shakes his arms and two 2-foot long blades slide out from under the sleeve of each arm of the robe. As Archan tries to stand he is blindsided by a rock thrown by Chee-Chee causing him to drop to his knees.

"Ha! Ha! Idiot. "

The Host stands above the dazed Archan and says, "Don't worry. It'll all be over soon."

Cana suddenly appears to the side of The Host, growling and displaying a vicious side Archan didn't believe existed. Cana attacks The Host who barely saw him coming but The Host's reflexes are so well tuned that he used Cana's momentum to toss him into the wall beside Archan with a loud thud. What the naked eye missed was the deep gash that The Host put into Cana's hind left leg with his blade. The wound is so deep that Cana can't stand. With the first sign of emotion The Host's voice lowers to almost a whisper. "Cana? So you've decided to interfere once again? Better yet, you dare have the courage to show yourself again."

Archan realizes that Cana became visible to save him and it must be one of those "times" he was talking about, but how do they know each other? The Host's attention is now focused on the injured griffin. The look on The Host's face reveals that he's going to kill Cana, something he's been looking forward to.

"Disappear! Get out of here now, Cana!" yells Archan.

The Host stops for a moment and looks at Archan, "So, you have a new pupil and didn't tell him the drawback of becoming visible to the world? You see, "Protector", if Cana becomes visible, he can't go back to the other dimension for a short period of time. Also, he loses the ability to fly. I believe he made this choice to save your life by risking his own. Something he's not supposed to do. You see if he dies, you'll become the next griffin."

The look on Archan's face let The Host know Cana didn't tell him.

The Host continues, "I guess the fact that Cana sat back and watched me slay the last "Protector" didn't hold well with him." Remembering this brings an eerie smile to his face, and then he continues his death stroll over to the injured Cana.

"Goodbye my old foe, it's been worth the wait," says The Host as he lifts one of his blades.

"Oh no you don't!" yells Katsuya Jr., who with his group of soldiers are standing in the entrance of the tunnel. Katsuya is strapped inside some kind of exo-skeleton robotic suit. His body is completely covered inside this suit, only his head is not, but he's wearing a helmet with a face shield. At the same time Katsuya was yelling his objection, he fired a highly concentrated shot of sonic waves from his arm cannon nailing The Host, sending him into some of the machines on the wall. This proceeding impact drops several heavy machines on top of him. Some of these flying machine parts crack the glass casing holding Brick and when some of the liquid hits the electrical components the scene lights up like the fourth of July.

Chee-Chee runs and takes cover. Members of The Host's Menial Sentries run down the stairs and fix themselves into trenches of rock and machines. They exchange fire with Katsuya's men.

"Get the thief over there in black. He's the key to capturing that Cana creature!" barks Katsuya to his men. With bullets flying overhead, Archan checks on Cana, "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine in a short time, but I must go now, my wounds will heal faster in flux. But don't worry help is on the way; get the Shelto ready to leave."

"Thank you Cana." referring to Cana saving his life.

"Anytime."

"I'll be ready, but who's the help coming?"

"Fuduka," then Cana disappears.

"Fuduka?"

The gun fight seems to be fairly even until Katsuya starts destroying the hiding places of the Menial Sentries with his sonic wave gun. Brick, still wet and in his briefs, runs over toward Archan. Katsuya pushes a few buttons on the arm connected to his sonic gun. Now with the gun at maximum power he aims carefully at the unexpected Brick. Archan looks up to see Brick's body hardening to rock form approaching, and then he suddenly explodes. Archan shields himself.

Suddenly from underneath the machinery rubble, The Host violently gets up sending equipment flying. "Enough!" yells The Host, "Katsuya! Get ready to die!"

As he makes his way out of the rumble unscarred, he walks around the edge of the lake in open view towards Katsuya standing by the tunnel.

Bullets rip through The Host's robe but doesn't affect him or slow him down. Whenever one of Katsuya's men makes an attempt at slowing his inevitable advance, he is killed by losing his head or wounded fatally from The Host's extended blades.

Katsuya says, "What's this?", not referring to the approaching man of death but to the recently emerged whale looking creature in the lake, with a beautiful woman standing on top. She's wearing a skin tight ocean blue outfit revealing her beautiful physique. Archan, who's just finished opening the crate housing the Shelto, notices her too, but also notices the massive muscular man, wearing blue jean like pants, standing with her.

"Each day keeps getting weirder and weirder," says Archan and thinks Katsuya.

"I'm Fuduka. We will take you and the Shelto from here, but let's hurry, I don't want my friend being hurt more than necessary" referring to the creature she's standing on.

Looking into the dark crate, Archan tells the Shelto, "Let's go."

Archan had no clue what the Shelto looked like and no description would have prepared him for what he was about to see. Exiting the crate is a humpback man-beast that easily would be over seven feet standing straight upward. The creature had no hair of any kind on its body. The humped back had a hard shell texture. This creature is extremely muscular with hoofed feet and three fingers on each hand and claws that are physically capable of ripping a person to shreds, but has a face of a childish innocence. The Shelto is scared and it shows.

"It's gonna be okay. I promise," thinks Archan with assurance in his tone.

Katsuya turns the sonar gun to stun and aims it at Archan, who is busy trying to safely lead the Shelto to Fuduka. Most of Katsuya's men are now focusing on the approaching Host. Katsuya himself wasn't. A huge gash is cut into the EX0-5 suit sending Jin-Jun reeling.

"How in the world?! This is made out of titanium," asks Katsuya. The Host readies for another swing when one of Katsuya's men dive at The Host, who easily separates the man's head from his falling body. This little delay allowed Katsuya time to turn the sonic gun back to maximum. He nails The Host dead center of his chest sending him several feet through the air. The Host immediately rises and starts toward Katsuya again.

"That's...that's impossible! You should be dead!" Katsuya declares, and then realizes that after a maximum shot it takes two minutes to re-charge, and with it seemingly useless against this man, Katsuya yells to his men over his headset, "Retreat! Retreat!"

Katsuya activates his thrusters in his boots, lifts in hover-like form and takes flight exiting through the tunnel followed by some of his men and with an angry Host chasing after them.

Fuduka tells Archan that the only way out was inside the whale-like creature.

She says, "Trust me. It's safe. I sleep inside her often."

"Her?" asks Archan.

"Yes, her name is Lynn."

Archan looks over and after seeing The Host stand up immediately after the sonic blast and the shocked look on Katsuya's face, he decides that this just might be the safest way, "Okay, let's go."

He calmly coaxes the Shelto inside the beast.

The muscular guardian standing next to her dives into the water and so does Fuduka, then Archan notices a fish tail on the guardian.

"A mermaid?" asks Archan.

"Merman," corrects the guardian.

"We need to go," says Fuduka with tension in her voice.

Archan walks into Lynn's mouth, which closes, they all submerge.

Katsuya radios ahead to have the armada "Liquidate" the tunnel when he comes out.

"What about the men?" asks the head pilot.

"What about them? You have your orders."

Once Katsuya exits the tunnel, the armada fires several missiles down the tunnel causing massive destruction and closes the tunnel. Katsuya then lands inside the helicopter fitted to hold the EXO-5 suit. Bano who had been waiting with the tech team, looks over the damaged suit and with Jin-Jun being the sole survivor asks, "Well?"

"The Shelto project is done."

"Hmm..."

Katsuya and the tech team unlatch him from the suit as they fly back to headquarters.

For what felt like hours, Archan tries to sleep in the complete black odd smelling place he was confined to, but the fearful thoughts of the Shelto keep him from doing that. Realizing that the Shelto was nothing more than a massive child, he comforts it. When the mouth of Lynn opens revealing that it is night time and they are a few feet out from the coast of McLaughlin City, Archan starts to walk out with the Shelto, until Cana says, "No, the Shelto must stay with them. They will take it to a safe place. A place far from men." Cana stands on the shore. Archan assures the Shelto that everything will be okay, then exits the mouth. The mouth shuts and Archan swims to shore. Fuduka standing in the shallow part of the ocean says, "Thank you Archan."

"No problem. So, you must be the other?"

"Yes."

"And that's your guardian, huh?"

"Yes, that is Leander."

"Cool."

"Well, we must be leaving now. We have a long swim ahead. Good luck Archan. Cana, until we meet again."

"Yes, until we meet again."

Then they all submerge. Archan walks over and stands next to Cana.

"We will see them again," says Archan.

"Yes, Archan. Yes, we will."



BASHAN SAVAGE

“This was one of my good days”

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