



JOHN BALTISBERGER

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First Edition

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Dedicated to Edward Lee,

Who taught me that the only limit to writing a story was the limits I put on myself.

Chapter 1

Barbara laid her head against the wall of the bathroom stall and bit back the urge to scream, every day here was her hardest day. When she had first signed the papers to go to nursing school, she had imagined herself like a kind of graceful angel, sweeping into rooms to save lives, covering doctors' asses and being loved by everyone. When she finally started working, she spent the first three months crying herself to sleep every night. It wasn't the hours. She could handle that, she could even handle how brusque and rude many of the doctors were. She had grown up a petite blond in the South, she was used to men viewing her like a thing to acquire and serve them. She had not been prepared for the sheer malice of the patients. Or the politics of the nurses. She came to work because she wanted to do good, but she felt beaten down every minute of every day. That was before the politics of the hospital had

forced her out and she went to work for the methadone clinic. Here it was worse.

Here the patients actively hated her for trying to help them. She wasn't curing anyone or saving lives, she was just transferring one addiction into another, and trying to keep from getting any patient's bodily fluids on her. At least the doctors here weren't trying to sleep with her, but the patients could sometimes be aggressive. Over the course of her three years here at the clinic she had become as good of friends with Bruno, the security guard, as possible. He was a little full of himself, but he was also kind, and old enough to be her father, which he at least seemed to keep in mind. Barbara didn't know how much protection he would actually be, but she felt a little safer with him watching her back.

Barbara felt like she had thrown away her twenties. Swiftly approaching thirty with no social life outside of her loser boyfriend Owen, no career prospects and a deep and abiding hatred for her job, her biggest struggle now, was with depression. Reaching into her pocket she thumbed the little prescription bottle filled with anti-depressants. She didn't want to take them, she felt like she would be admitting her mistakes if she did, she would be throwing in the towel. She carefully wiped away her tears and reapplied her make up in a small hand mirror. She had become an expert in that, she would be damned if anyone would see her cracks.

"Hey Barb" Bruno called as she stepped back into the hall.

"What's up?" She asked looking up at the large man.

"We had to kick out Mr. Northrup, he was getting violent, and Ms. Sloan is getting a little restless because

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we're so back up today, do you think you could work her in a little earlier?" Bruno didn't have to play nurses assistant, and Barbara knew that several of the other nurses and doctors found his attempts at working above his job to be a nuisance, they had charts and a reason for everything they did. But Barbara drank in the kindness wherever she could get it.

"I'll check in with her, thanks Bruno. I..." She was interrupted by the figure of Carl Northrup kicking open the front door of the clinic, bright red blood splashed across the front of his shirt and face. Bruno turned in surprise and put a hand on his taser reflexively. Withdrawal didn't usually go this violently, unless he had snuck out to a drug dealer and taken something else which was driving him.

There was silent moment before Carl raised his hand, a hand that seemed massive and malformed, like more fingers were trying to burst out of the skin. The entire arm bulged with bizarre musculature and throbbed with veins that had long since begun to collapse from his heroin addiction. The silence was broken as Carl turned and swiped at a fellow patient, their head splattering against the wall with a sickening crunch. Bits of brain matter and shards of broken skull slowly slid down the wall as all hell broke loose.

Screams filled the air as Barbara fell on her ass and tried to pull herself away from the scene of carnage that was now unfolding. Carl let loose a scream himself, though it seemed impossible for a human mouth, a trilling multi-tonal scream that vibrated her skull behind the eyes. Carl was moving to the next nearest person when Bruno let loose with the tazer. It didn't seem to have any effect at all other than to get Carl's attention, but if he were on pcp it wouldn't even slow him down. He turned his eyes, pinpricks of bloodshot violence, towards Bruno and released another of his inhuman screams before dashing forward and slamming into the older, bigger man. Blood sprayed against Barbara as the wildly malformed hand of the addict pushed all the way through Bruno's chest. Blood, broken pieces of ribs and viscera fell to the ground and Carl let out an ear-shattering howl of triumph and turned towards another patient.

Barbara scrambled to crawl under the front desk and huddled there covering her ears and closing her eyes against the maddening assault happening on just the other side of the desk. Even with her ears plugged, she could hear the screams from Carl and the other patients that were unable to hide like she was. Several had made a run for the door, and she prayed they would be able to escape what was happening. Then there was silence, or near silence, as she lowered her hands and opened her eyes she could see mangled remains of a doctor that had been thrown over the desk to land near her. He was twisted and mangled so badly that she only knew who he was by the white lab coat and blood smeared name tag. The only thing she could hear was the sound of panting. She was sure it was Carl. He had killed everyone else in the waiting room, he would find her

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soon, and when he did she would die just like Bruno, messily and alone. Her entire life would amount only to what little she had accomplished so far; nothing.

After what felt like an eternity the panting began to recede, she heard the doors of the clinic open, and the only sound she could hear was full-throated sobs coming from somewhere in the waiting room. It took her several moments to realize that they belonged to her.

Laura sat on the toilet, staring straight ahead. He had stopped knocking on the door and calling for her about thirty minutes ago, but she was still angry. No, she was still furious. He had accused her of being an addict, but she wasn't doing anything illegal. She wasn't shooting up, or snorting anything. She was taking medicine. The *doctor* had given it to her. Of course her knee was healed, but she still had pain. Really she had even more pain now, her whole body ached, and times like now. There was a cold hand made of pistons and gears squeezing the life out of her heart, while her lungs refused to expand, robbing her of any breath. She was tired of his accusations. She was tired of the snide glances that he shot her, he thought he was better than her? She wasn't the one who still smoked pot with her high school friends like some washed up adolescent. If anyone was a drug addict it was him. He was suppose to be her husband, not this, distant judge who made her feel like shit. But she didn't have to put up with it. She could take the *medicine* that the *doctor* had prescribed her and she wouldn't fucking care. The pain, all the pain would just go away. She wiped at her

eyes with the back of her hand smearing salty tears and trails of mascara across her face.

When she looked at her face and saw the mussed makeup, eyes red from crying and the way her cheeks had begun to hollow, she pushed it aside. That pain would go away too. She didn't need to care, and if he didn't like it, that was his problem. He was suppose to be her safe place, her anchor. Her need for the Vicodin was as much his fault as anything else. If he didn't like it he should be better.

Ferdinand 'El Guapo' Sila stood on the edge of river watching the current carrying its debris towards the Gulf for several minutes. 'El Guapo' was not a terribly kind nickname. He was athletically built, and might be considered a good looking man if not for the ragged scar that ran from the side of his jaw, all the way to his hairline. A reminder of what happens when you piss off the local drug dealers that greeted him every time he saw his reflection. Still, here on the border of Texas and Mexico, he had gotten off lightly. There were plenty of men who had lost their lives or families to the Cartels, or to the scum that called themselves militias. He watched the waters of the Rio Grande moving and wondered how many were buried under these waters. Hopefuls who didn't make it across the water, either gunned down, or dumped here. A mass grave given anonymity by its very nature. These waters nearing 60 feet deep in places was murky along this stretch. The mud kicked up from the currents and disturbed by his team's equipment made it impossible to see more than a few feet down into the water.

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Several months ago, fish that didn't look right had been fished out of the Gulf. Normally a fresh water animal fished out in the gulf waters, healthy but aggressive. All the testing done had pointed towards contaminates here in the river. The fish that had been dissected had huge amounts of narcotics and opioids in their systems. Despite the memes about PCPisces and Meth-ladon fish, it was a serious problem. The cartels had always used the rivers to transport drugs and other illicit materials, throwing drugs and contraband overboard when authorities neared. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service had called in some of the best marine biologists and aquatic environmental scientists they could get their hands on to look into the cause of these mutations. Ferdinand and his team had been traveling down the Rio Grande River for two weeks, so far it had been a fairly fruitless search. The fish in this area seemed normal, though they were finding more than trace amounts of opioids in the fish, there was no sign of the serious mutation or adaptations they were seeing in the gulf.

Ferdinand always worried about this sort of thing, evolution's hand being forced by artificial means. When he had first heard of eugenics, it had blown his mind that so many species that man kind had domesticated over the millennia were nothing like those that had existed early in our relationship with the species. Selective breeding and cross pollination to create bigger and sweeter fruits. Hormones and chemicals to ensure that our beef livestock was massive and just the right flavor. The very concept is what drove him originally towards biological studies. Then upon realizing that the oceans were likely the final frontier of zoological study, he had focused into marine biology. He had

hoped to be the next superstar of science, discovering new species, pressing forward the bounds of scientific understanding and exploration.

Ten years into his career he now understood that the only people that became superstars were the people working on pop-tech. People like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk. He had published papers, made startling discoveries that had changed the way the scientist worked with animals in brackish environments. He had been part of teams that had delved deeper into the depths of the ocean than any other scientists before him. But at the end of the day, the only people who knew his name were other marine biologists and the people working under him.

“El Guapo! Hey, el Guapo! Come here quick.” Running up the bank towards him was a member of the hardware team. The group of men who were handling all of their equipment, roadies for scientists.

“Sila” He corrected gently, he hated the mockery of the nickname, it was one thing for people to call him that behind his back, but to his face was just an insult that he didn’t have to take,

“Doctor Sila...” The man was panting. “Come quick, the team has dredged some fucked up stuff up.” Ferdinand’s face remained carefully blank, warring between exasperation that he had to work with people with such disregard for the scientific process, and excitement that maybe now there would actually be something worth studying.

He hurried up the bank of the Rio Grande abandoning his nihilistic thoughts to the currents of the river to rejoin his team. As he approached he saw the entire team huddled around one of the specimen tanks they had set up outside their mobile lab RV.

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"Ok, we found something?" Ferdinand asked as he approached.

"Doctor Sila, yes, oh my god!" Morgan, one of the junior scientists answered.

"Yeah, holy shit." That was from an intern, Jordan. Ferdinand rolled his eyes as he tried to push his way through the crowd of chattering scientists, before he could his elbow was grabbed and pulled away.

"Ferdinand, this is it." He looked down into the excited face of his partner in this work and one of his oldest friends, Lisa Chibuzo. She was a brilliant scientist and technically his boss on this project, her knowledge and expertise lay in rivers and freshwater biology where as he had headed out into the great salty expanses of the world. If not for her, he probably wouldn't be here at all. He would be out in the gulf looking for more specimens if he was involved at all.

"You found adapted fish?" He asked as he continued to crane his neck to see into the tank.

"Siren, lesser siren, native to this area, but well..." her accent, colored by learning the English second hand in the schools of South Africa, was light and lilting but trembling with an infectious excitement. He couldn't wait any longer, and pushed his way to the tank. Siren are amphibians related to salamanders, and not at all uncommon in the water ways of Texas. But as he got close to the tank he was immediately taken aback. The thing in the tank was definitely a siren. Resembling an eel with short powerful front legs, no hind legs and frond-like frills just behind its bullet shaped head. That is where normalcy ended.

The siren in the tank was dozens of times bigger than an ordinary siren, Ferdinand glanced at the scale reading and saw that the creature weighed thirty

pounds and was at least five feet long. The largest lesser siren that had been caught couldn't be much longer than two feet long. This thing was tremendous, and glowing. It lay curled in the bottom of the tank, despite it's dark dusty skin, Ferdinand could easily see it's circulatory system which seemed to glow with some internal red light, causing the creature to pulse with every heartbeat. Ferdinand stared for several minutes as the interns and other team members chattered about this find. This was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before, this could be the discovery that mattered. He paused noticing something else strange.

"Are those scales?" He asked trying to get a clearer look in the tank, siren were amphibians, not fish or reptiles and their skin was usually smooth like an eel.

"Yes El Guapo," responded Jordan, too taken by the creature in the tank to realize he had used Ferdinand's hated nickname.

"We haven't had a chance to do a dissection yet, but they appear to be translucent scales, almost an armor plating. Which would make this, a completely new species of siren." Lisa stepped in to answer before Ferdinand could reprimand Jordan.

"Or something that looks like a siren, just one?" Ferdinand asked.

"No, there were four of them, and I think we'll find more." Morgan answered. "I have a team going through the collection nets now." He nodded at her answer and grabbed the handle of the cart that the tank rested on. "I think you should all get back to work, Doctor Chibuzo and I will study this specimen." He exchanged a meaningful glance with Lisa before wheeling the tank into their mobile lab. They would do a first dissection here, but they would likely need to

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take all of these specimens to the NOAA laboratory in Galveston to really do a deep dive into what was going on with this discovery, but in the mean time they could get some sort of start.

Mike sat on the couch, he felt hollow himself, the woman he loved was disappearing. When she was at work she was a dynamo who only cared about success, and then she came home, popped her pills and faded to not caring about anyone or anything. On his knee his 6 year old daughter bounced, her full attention on the gameboy in her hands, volume turned up as loud as it would go. He would normally wrestle with her to get the volume to a reasonable level while he watched the news. But he was spent, he didn't have the energy to argue or fight anymore. He reached down and wrapped her head in the crook of his elbow to give her a kiss on the top of her head. The news anchor was talking about how a young woman had suffered from seizures before being rushed to the hospital due to an allergy to opioids. Her local water supply had been tainted.. He turned off the TV, Mike was trying to distract himself from what was happening in his home, not dwell on it.

He heard the bathroom door open, she would either come out sober and swinging, ready to continue the fight even with Abby there, or she would be high and would sink into her recliner and stare at the TV, on or off, for the rest of the evening. He loved her, but what was there to love? Every minute with her was either conflict or nothing. There was no intimacy left, there was no kindness. He watched Laura come out from the restroom, she didn't make eye contact, her jaw was

relaxed. High it was.

"Hi Mommy!" Abby called, not looking up from her game.

"Hi baby."

"What's are we having for lunch?"

"Dinner, honey, dinner is the next meal." Mike corrected gently, hiding his heartbreak by parenting.

"Ask your dad, he's making dinner, I'm not hungry." Laura responded as she curled into her chair and pulled the fleece blanket around herself with a sigh of contentment. Mike didn't mind cooking, Laura's job had always been more demanding and had placed him in the house with time to make dinner while she was still working.

"How about hot dogs?" He asked Abby, his eyes on the woman that was his wife. Not a great dinner but he was too tired to dick around with cooking, he was emotionally exhausted from trying to explain to Laura that her habit was no longer medicinal, it was a leech on their family's life, killing any vestige of the relationship they once shared.

"Yaaaaay hot dogs!" Abby responded before leaning against him. Mike smiled at her, attempting to swallow the lead in his throat so that he could function. He would love to escape this place, get away from Laura and her empty-eyed looks of apathy. But he couldn't leave Abby, he couldn't trust Laura to care for her anymore, and besides that, he still had hope she would realize what was happening and get help. He stayed for his daughter and for the memory of the woman he had married. He relocated Abby to the couch and rose to go to the kitchen. Space was always good. Maybe with enough space Laura would realize what she was losing. He doubted she was capable of caring anymore. About

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him, about Abby, about anything.

Standing over the table Lisa watched Ferdinand work, he was a steady hand. He had seen some spectacularly weird things in his time out at sea, but in her opinion he had missed his calling as a surgeon. Lisa moved around the table now watching Ferdinand scrape the scales on the stomach with the fine edge of the scalpel, to no effect. He spoke calmly, for the audio recorder's sake but his voice trembled with excitement.

"The scales on the belly appear to be finer and thinner than those on the upper part of the body, and have the same translucent quality as those elsewhere." When they had come in Ferdinand and set up the dissection station and equipment while Lisa recorded all relevant data and observations of the living creature. Once they were both done with set up Ferdinand drained the tank, sealed it and pumped in carbon monoxide to peacefully and painlessly put the siren to sleep. As soon as the creature expired the glow of its circulatory dimmed and finally disappeared. Ferdinand, who had studied deep sea creatures was familiar with bio-luminescence, it generally wasn't connected to the circulatory system, but it made it an easy guess that there was some organ attached to the circulatory system that was producing luciferin within the blood, so when the heart stopped the chemical stopped being produced leading to the dying of the light.

Now with the legs and tail pinned on the table, the two scientists considered how they were going to manage a dissection when the thing's scales deflected their scalpels.

“The scales are hard enough to stop a reasonable amount of pressure with a scalpel, I would surmise this adaptation is akin to armor plating, giving the siren an extra layer of protection. As such we will need to de-scale the animal before proceeding. We will use some caution as it is possible that this species has the tetrodotoxin that is found in some salamander species.” Lisa orated for Ferdinand as he fetched the tools needed to dissect an armor plated animal.

Carefully Ferdinand scraped the scales of the underside of the creature away, until the ragged and torn flesh of the belly lay exposed and ready for the knife. He offered Lisa an easy smile, as if to say ‘No worries, just a new adaptation.’ Now then, they could get to the literal and figurative meat of the matter. Slicing open the belly, he looked over the insides of the siren, things seemed to mostly make sense at first glance, except. He reached over and grabbed a pair of tweezers to grip the small tendril of what looked like algae that was clinging to the intestines.

“What the hell?” He asked under his breath before clearing his throat and speaking into the recorder. “Subject exhibits thin membrane growths along organs that resemble algae on first inspection, purpose of growth is currently unknown” He used the scalpel to sever the connection and place the membrane on a petri dish before passing it to Lisa.

As Ferdinand continued to work on the dissection, Lisa began to study the pieces of the specimen that he was passing her, typing with one hand on her tablet. It was incredible, and unlike any lesser siren she had observed before. While there were fish that could live in fresh and salt water, she had never seen an amphibian that was adapted to both. Not quite as sturdy as a

tardigrade, but this thing could live in pretty much any moist environment.

The membrane that was wrapped around the organs of the siren seemed even more prelevant in the circulatory systems. At first she thought it might be some form of filter, something that leeched pollutants out the system, then they got to the lungs.

"Incredible, where the lungs should be seems to be there are two masses of the same material as the membrane that has been described earlier roughly five to six centimeters by three centimeters. The masses are sponges and I don't see any signs of traditional lungs within the specimen... Dr. Chibuzo?"

Lisa came around the table to peer down into the insides of the siren and nodded her agreement, speechless in her astonishment for a few moments. Then, rushed back to a centrifuge she had set up to look at the results that were coming up on her laptop.

"The membrane is structurally similar to algae, though definitely part of the animal, but it appears to contain a high amount of carbon, luciferins and...." Lisa paused and looked at the readout once again. "Freddy, this animal is producing lachryma papveris." She glanced at Ferdinand who was looking at her blankly, she was one of the only people he allowed to use his hated childhood nickname, but it was clear he was racking his brain for where he had heard that term before. "Opium, this siren is producing opium."

Ferdinand put his scalpel down and sat on a nearby stool, staring at the table. What they were talking about what, was no simple adaption, but a full fledged evolution of a species into something completely new. They couldn't call this animal part of the siren family, it had scales, and, a completely new form of respiration

never seen before. If what Lisa had discovered was suggesting was true, it meant that that this creature was as much a plant as it was a amphibian. And if the presence of raw opium in the animal, did point towards it being produced by the animal itself...

"Let's get as many specimens as we can transport and get back to Galveston, we'll need a batrachologist, maybe a mycologist and at least one geneticist." Lisa said coming to the same conclusions Ferdinand had come to. Ferdinand nodded and begun packing things up as Lisa fired off several emails. Within the next couple of hours they would be on their way east, back towards civilization.

Mike sat at the dinner table with Abby, in silence. Well he was silent, Abby was never silent, it didn't seem she had the capability to be silent. Every minute of every day she filled the air with talk about whatever weird stories she was making up about whatever game she had downloaded on one of their phones. Sometimes it got to be too much, sometimes he just needed a second to think without that second being filled with stories about a werewolf princess pony. Which is what she was talking about now. Werewolf princess ponies and the various rules of feeding them, they didn't like hot dogs you see. He nodded and offered the occasional affirmative to indicate that he was paying attention, and in fact he did care very much about the care and feeding of werewolf princess ponies. He sighed and rose, grabbing a plate he had made, he didn't know why he bothered.

From the living room a dull red glow lit everything,

Mike assumed Laura had fallen asleep watching some sort of documentary on serial killers, which is what she usually did. Once upon a time she had watched shows like *Intervention*, but those were probably a bit too close to home now.

"I made you a plate." He called, not expecting an answer.

"Hungry." Laura's voice sounded pained, like it was agony to talk.

"What?" Mike asked, feeling like a jackass as soon as he said it, he moved to the living room to check on Laura. But didn't make it to the door when something fast and strong slammed into his chest flinging him across the dining room and into the wall, knocking the wind and sense out of him. Abby started screaming.

"HUNGRY!" Laura screamed at him from the doorway, but it wasn't Laura, not really, her body was twisted, her limbs had too many elbows and joints, it reminded him of something out of a documentary about the world's scariest spiders. And she glowed, a steady pulse of angry red that leaked from her mouth and eyes and from under her skin.

Mike scrambled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his chest, the way agony stretched up from his ribs and into his brain screaming at him that he needed to stay still. His body didn't see what he saw. Laura was crawling over the table towards Abby, a jumble of angled joints and clacking fingers, her face twisted into a bony mandibled thing. He leapt over the table and crashed into Laura knocking her off the table and onto the floor while his own body slid across the wooden tabletop.

"Run Abby!" he cried, and was so grateful that she didn't argue, she just got up and ran. Mike was about to scramble to his feet to follow when he felt Laura's

fingers wrap around his ankle. He grit his teeth and instead reached for the nearest thing he could use in self defense, a fork. Thank god Abby liked to eat her hotdogs with a fork. He turned in her grip as she pulled him closer, her teeth and mandibles clicking with excitement as drool pooled under her gaping maw. Mike kept his arms up protecting his head from the blows that Laura's deceptively strong and scrawny limbs rained down on him. At the last moment, as he saw her head dipping to bite into him he jabbed forward, stabbing at her eyes with the fork.

Laura let out an inhuman shriek, scrambling back away from Mike, the fork still jutting from her eye socket. The blood that flowed from it pulsed, seeming to glow with an inhuman hate. Mike stood shakily, moving around the table to keep some distance between them. What had happened to his wife?

"Hunger..." Laura murmured, but even that was difficult to understand to make out with her mouth's new configuration. She was rising from the ground, she was growling and taking a step towards Mike. Mike didn't wait for her to get up, he ran and pushed through the swinging kitchen door on his way. He needed to get to the bedroom. He could hear her behind him, the clack of newly sprouted talons on linoleum as she followed him into the kitchen. Laura slipped and slid on the tile, it would have been funny if she wasn't a grotesque inhuman monster that was hungry for the flesh of his daughter.

Mike didn't look back, he just ran through the house to his bedroom, Laura hot on his heels. He stopped in front of the big dresser that Laura had inherited from her mother and reached up, his hands searching the unseen top of the dresser, every second she was getting

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closer. Mike shut his eyes, praying, hoping, and then his fingers closed around what he was looking for.

It was too late.

Something punched into his side, puncturing him and dragging him back from the dresser. Mike bit back a scream of terror and pain as he was spun to face the thing that was once his wife. The fork was still lodged in her skull, but new eyes had grown, they bulged with misshapen irises and blinked asynchronously. He could feel the blood streaming freely from his side where some limb had skewered him. He felt weak, his body traveling towards shock. But not while Abby was in danger.

"I'm sorry Laura... I love you." He lifted the gun he had grabbed from the top of the dresser, angling it under what was left of her chin and emptied the entire magazine into her head. Bone brain and blood sprayed the ceiling, and rained down on them. Mike staggered back away from the mutated and mutilated thing his wife had become. Clutching his side. He wasn't done. He had to check on Abby, had to make sure she was safe. He moved through the house, dialing 9-1-1 on his cell phone as he looked for his daughter.