

THE CHASE

THERE ARE PLENTY OF PATHS TO GAIN NOTORIETY in this world. There are honorable paths worth pursuing with steadfast determination and there are dubious paths deserving of healthy skepticism when they require epic leaps over daunting chasms. Starting an apocalypse handily falls into the latter category. No one plans to have their name plastered on that billboard, but sooner or later the distinction will be awarded, objections notwithstanding.

Blayde was happy working his day job and occasionally scoring extra paid vacation time but if notoriety came in another form, he hoped she'd look like Sam. Exhilarated, Blayde smiled as he looked towards her. She seemed timid, nervous as the thunder raged but guessed that wouldn't last long. He'd seen her with her friends. Charisma blossomed once she became familiar with someone. This was just a first date.

Tall but not lanky, she was probably less than three inches shy of his rounded six feet, standing barefoot. She was sporting a form-hugging shark-skin wetsuit that emphasized her particularly curvy figure. Paler than native Aleutians, she sported large, dark brown eyes, thick hair, and a charmingly round visage that made her both cute and siren-esque. Although unpretentious, her natural gait sent electric sparks through Blayde's spine as he watched her slink along the deck.

"Wow," he growled with brazen flirtatiousness. "You *own* that suit."

Sam grinned openly but cast her eyes aside and then upon her newly printed wetsuit. She ran her finger up and down her forearm, experiencing the unique texture, and grinned again. It felt real, Blayde knew. Thunderclap called their attention away from the suit and summoned a chuckle from Blayde. "Don't worry," he assured her, "once you're underwater, you'll barely notice the weather out here."

He gently placed a custom fitted helmet over her head, ensured it sealed tightly to her suit before offering her diving gloves. "Remember," he said, pointing to dozens of small cylinders lining the base of the palms. "Use the thrusters sparingly until you get the hang of it. The suits are tough but you'll feel pretty beat up if you shoot yourself into the rocks or out of the water." Blayde laughed. "It's fun to shoot yourself out of the water but too much is painful - best not to try it first time around."

Sam said nothing. Until his own receiver and helmet were fastened, her voice would be muffled. But she didn't need to speak out loud. Her eyes spoke clearly enough. She was excited. Blayde failed to hold back a smile as they sparkled.

He couldn't believe he'd landed such a hot date. Sam barely looked twenty and he was all but certain that was her true age. In reality, he didn't look much older than her but senolytic cocktails had been his regular mistress for decades. Blayde hadn't said anything and she hadn't asked. If the possibility of him being forty years her elder wasn't an issue for her, he certainly wasn't going to bring it up. She was old enough to know some older men played the field the same as their younger counterparts. Besides, he still felt twenty. And usually, that was how he acted.

Blayde threw on his helmet and offered a few last words of advice while he fastened his gloves. The latest-model transmitters allowed his voice to sound through her helmet as if there were no helmets at all. "You have plenty of crystals in your helmet so we can stay underwater until morning but if you start to feel tired or hungry, let me know and we'll bail whenever you've had your fill, okay?"

Sam responded nothing, smiled again. Unlike Blayde, she wasn't prone to squander words.

He smiled back. "When I went down the first time, I almost used up the crystals before going back to the surface." He didn't tell her old school crystalline breathing tanks he used as a boy only lasted a few hours. "Ready?" Blayde grabbed her hand and placed his left foot at the edge of the deck, traced his memory to ensure he'd properly anchored the boat.

"Yes." Sam put her left foot forward and prepared to jump. Although excited, her voice was soft, reserved. That was best anyway. Even the best underwater transmitters tended to echo underwater if one spoke too loudly.

Blayde fancied her a natural diver, hoped she would be. They dove in face first. Blayde inspected Sam carefully as the bubbles surfaced. On a whim, he'd programmed her suit to have ridges like a zebra shark and colored it much the same. It was a last minute custom modification but he decided it was destined to become a new fashion trend. With Sam as the model, he could make a killing off the code. It wouldn't be the first time a simple idea had gone viral.

"Alright," he called after the bubbles largely dissipated, "keep your legs just a little bent but flexed while you're learning. When you curl your fingers together while pushing your palm forward, your foot thrusters will engage at the same time. For now, use all four at once. You won't be happy the first time or two you only try two thrusters."

Blayde straightened his arms and legs, stretched his arms to face roughly the same direction as his legs, and alternated using two thrusters at a time. He moved through the water like a waddling penguin and laughed. The tide heaved and sparkled as heavy rainfall dotted the surface overhead and then flashed briefly under a nearby lightening strike. A school of fish, spooked by the light, raced to deeper waters.

Stormy conditions weren't exactly safe but Blayde wasn't the prudent, don't-take-risks kind of a guy. Life was meant to be full of adventure. Although Sam seemed somewhat reserved, Blayde sensed she felt the same. Still, his cheerful disposition dampened momentarily as he instinctually considered the unlikely possibility that lightening could strike the company boat.

Notwithstanding company policy, a strike wasn't any more likely here than at the dock. *No matter*. All company vessels were insured to the smallest screw. If necessary, he'd just claim he'd been exploring deeper waters for too long to notice the weather and everything would be fine. He was known for long dives. Catering to safety measures could wait for another time when he wasn't hanging with someone so exciting.

Blayde looked towards Sam, pointed to his left, and gently engaged his thrusters, looking over his shoulder to make certain she didn't get too far behind. Within a half hour, she was shadowing him like she'd been practicing for days. *A natural*, he thought with great satisfaction. For over an hour, he took Sam for a tour of the bay, taking things slowly to enjoy the coral reef and to point out places where fish were known to feed during storms. Dangerous or not, underwater exploration during a storm was the best: sea life was more active than ever.

Soon, they ventured into deeper waters. Blayde spotted a few fish he hadn't identified before, mentally instructed the helmet to take pictures, identify the new fish, and store the information for later review. This he did with little or no thought. It was all habit, part of his job. As the waters grew darker, Blayde illuminated his green floodlight and instructed Sam to do the same. Within a few seconds, a large school of fish became visible. Equipped with shark vision technology, Blayde's helmet illuminated the subtle glow of various flora and some fishes. The large school unitedly dashed toward Blayde and Sam in a sustained blitz that lacked the artistic flare they were known for.

"They're fleeing a predator," Blayde noted, immediately regretting his choice to say anything out loud. His helmet flashed red over the icon tracking Sam's emotions. Set up as a one way transmission, the icon kept track of Sam's heart rate, perspiration rate, and brain waves. Until now, he'd been satisfied

that Sam was happy to be touring coastal waters, excited to explore a new area of life, and increasingly interested in Blayde. Fear was the last thing he wanted to flash across her icon. Still, the ocean could be a dangerous place and pragmatic considerations couldn't be completely ignored.

His helmet audibly warned him in the sultry alto voice he'd pulled from a girlfriend decades earlier. "Unknown species, roughly 30 feet long, traveling roughly 35 miles per hour." Blayde cursed. Sam's helmet would be telling her the same thing. He'd never seen great whites swim that fast when attacking but he'd read reports relabeling recording these speeds. And he'd never heard of a great white longer than 23 feet before but helmet scanners were occasionally buggy so he ignored the detail. The suits came standard with various shark repellants but Blayde knew well enough that their effectiveness was sketchy at best. A hydrogel hagfish bomb might create a helpful barrier between them and the shark but it would likely suffocate smaller creatures faster than the mammoth beast chasing them. He quickly considered the odds, dismissed the thought, and determined he couldn't gamble Sam's safety given these circumstances.

"Curl your body and bend your legs like this," he instructed, as he mimicked fetal position and allowed his body to spin. As quickly as Sam followed his order, he gave her further instruction. "Blast five short bursts from your thrusters and then head back as fast as you can." She complied, spun a little off course, recovered relatively quickly. Hundreds of fish swarmed all around, bringing unwanted visual confusion as the green floodlights bounced off their silvery bodies. Blayde's helmet augmented that confusion by adding the subtle green-glow patterns near their dorsal fins.

"I'll be right behind you, he instructed. Put your thrusters on as fast as you can control them." Blayde quickly regretted those instructions. Sam began veering off course as she approached 40 miles per hour. Blayde rarely felt comfortable with speeds like that. If underwater currents pushed hard, the pressure could result in serious back injuries. He'd been laid up for weeks one time.

"Hold up a little," he instructed, worried she was going to take them too close to the northern underwater caverns where navigation was tricky and where they'd surely be unable to navigate away from whatever was following them. At least Sam was veering away from the large school of fish. Whatever the exact species of the unknown predator, it would likely follow the most promising, familiar dinner.

Sam slowed one thruster faster than the other, sending her into a sharp arch right back into the middle of the frenzy as the blitz of fish began catching

up to her position. Undoubtedly, the slower, less healthy fish were about to be shredded to pieces. “Your heart rate is quickly approaching an unhealthy rate,” Blayde’s helmet warned. “Shut up!” he blurted.

“I didn’t say ...”

“Not you,” Blayde answered.

“Predator is closing in distance,” the sultry voice warned.

“Blast it! Straighten up like a pole,” Blayde barked at Sam as he pushed through the swarm of fish. He’d be able to grab her without injuring her if her limbs weren’t limp. As soon as he got close, he slowed his thrusters but only momentarily. “Hold on and wrap your legs around my waist,” he instructed again as he pulled her close. He threw his arms down, straightened his body, engaged his thrusters and hoped he’d be able to navigate the waters with this imbalanced deadweight wrapped around his torso.

“Improved reading. Unknown species 40 feet long or possibly longer. Speed increasing to ...”

“Shut up!” Blayde blasted a second time. The words undoubtedly echoed in Sam’s ears but she said nothing in return. Her icon flashed brighter red and brain scan readings showed an alert Blayde had no time to review. His mind focused on continually adjusting his arms and legs to compensate for their combined, imbalanced weight. Soon, they were undulating in a pattern similar to dolphin play. Blayde and Sam soon passed the swarm of fish and gained enough distance to feel safe. He relaxed a little but left thrusters fully engaged.

“Predator within fifty feet.”

Blayde scowled at the red level warning, surprised and overly conscientious that Sam’s helmet would be offering the same warning. “Damn!” He consciously held back his voice, avoided yelling. Blayde engaged the navigation function of the helmet, gauged his distance from the boat, and briefly rejoiced. Now would be the best time to veer farther away from the swarming school of fish and that would set them on a straighter course to the boat. “We’re gonna make it,” he assured Sam as they veered away from the fish. He might have gained better traction with her had he not just sworn in response to the helmet warning but it didn’t matter too much: she held on tightly and said nothing.

“The predator is moving away from you,” the helmet’s alto voice chimed. “Clear reading. Unknown predator is 41 feet long and swimming at 33 miles per hour. Multiple appendages fail to match any known marine life. Closest land comparisons are reptilian.” Blayde slowed his thrusters, rotated his torso, and tried to get a careful look at the creature. It was too far away to see clearly.

He adjusted the floodlights, instructed Sam to turn hers off, and used the telescoping function of his helmet to get a closer look.

Although focused on its prey, the light briefly caught the attention of the predator who glared at the foreign lighting. As it did, the light reflected off its eyes and created a surreal reflection that mimicked the effect of glowing orbs. Blayde froze. As Sam began to loosen her grip and pull away from Blayde, he pulled her back towards himself, captured the beast's movements on video, and threw his arms back down his side. Undulating towards the boat felt less frantic than before but Blayde felt his heart pounding heavily against Sam. Soon, he slowed his thrusters until he could safely detach Sam.

"We're safe," he announced.

"What was it?" she asked. Sam didn't look fearful to Blayde any more. Her icon color morphed into an orangish-green. She held that look of gleaming excitement that comes when you get away with something you didn't expect to get away with, the glow of a teenager who just beat the odds and escaped a close call with the police.

"Uhhh ... I'm not sure," Blayde lied.

"Can you show me the video?"

"Mmmm ... yeah." He didn't want to share it, felt stupid for being so inarticulate. "You might not want to see it."

"Why not?" she asked, apparently sensing some tease that wasn't there.

Blayde was already transmitting the video to her helmet, fumbling for words to explain himself. "It looks like ..." The video started playing. Sam's icon immediately turned orange.

"A sea dragon," she finished for him. The image was blurry but the shape was unmistakable.