

## 3. CHRYSALISES

POV: BLAYDE

“I’VE BEEN PRACTICING.” SAM STOOD ON THE DECK, soaked and wearing the zebra sharkskin wetsuit Blayde had printed the week previous. Sporting a contagious grin, she pulled off her gloves one finger at a time and tossed them into her helmet. “I put in almost thirty hours diving in the past three days,” she added with a coy grin that begged for a compliment. She tussled her hair absentmindedly, offering it more volume, dropped her eyes to briefly inspect neatly folded nets resting at the side of the deck.

“Impressive,” Blayde beamed. At his age, he estimated that thirty hours practice plus a coy grin and an unannounced appearance equated to some serious mutual chemistry. He couldn’t have been more pleased.

Before he could say anything further, Sam proceeded with what sounded to be well rehearsed thoughts. “Any chance you’re tracking down that CGI sea dragon today?”

“I perceive you’ve been watching the news.”

“It’s not a habit,” she confessed, “but the whole town is buzzing.”

“Did you tell anyone you saw it too?”

Sam paused long enough for Blayde to notice she was choosing her words carefully. “I mentioned it to a couple of friends but they didn’t exactly believe me. I’m somewhat ... notorious ... for being a tease,” she added, biting her lip and fidgeting enough for Blayde to guess she had something more to say. “I’d love to bring home a selfie with the dragon in the background.”

Blayde lowered his head and gave Sam a squinting, sideways glance to see if she was serious. “You know that would be extremely dangerous, right? The thing swims at nearly 35 miles per hour and munches great whites.”

“I read your full interview. You think it doesn’t like bright lights because it’s a deep sea dweller. Using ... what did you call it? ... underwater night vision optics and better long range cameras, we could approach it without disturbing it ... providing we find it when it’s neither hungry nor eating.”

“Precisely, but ...”

“Besides,” Sam interrupted, “I’ve been *practicing*, not exploring ... and mostly, tricking out,” she boasted with her infectious smile. “Did you know that attracts dolphins when you’re further out?” Her mouth hung slightly agape but her smile remained.

Blayde guessed beaming expressions like that couldn't be feigned, chuckled. "Yeah."

"Duh. Of course you'd know that," she sputtered, subtly rolling her eyes with a tinge of embarrassment and snickering at herself. "Well, it's still pretty cool ..." Her gaze went out to sea. She drooped her head slightly to the side again, tussled her hair. "I—"

"You're awesome," Blayde answered with unmasked sincerity. "I'd love to do another dive with you sometime, but I wouldn't want to be responsible for putting you in danger like that. I get *paid* to take risks like that, you know?"

Sam pursed her lips, coyly scowled at Blayde before involuntarily breaking the tease by laughing.

"Do you like your job?"

"I love my job," he answered, unsure why it mattered.

"You'd probably be doing this even if you weren't getting paid for it then?"

Blayde saw where she was going. "Yeah ... Yeah, I would." He broke eye contact, contemplated his next move. He was too slow.

"I like it too," she answered. "I don't need to get paid to have fun."

Blayde grinned. He wasn't one to miss opportunities. "So, what if I made millions off of this and you just got a sidebar in a couple small-time articles?" he teased.

"Then, I suppose you'd owe me dinner in a five star restaurant and a few more dives." She barely smiled. She didn't need to. With odds like that, Blayde couldn't refuse. He bested her in a brief competition of who could smile the biggest. "Alright then. But let's make a deal: if things start looking bad for whatever reason, you jet to safety when I ask. Agreed?"

"I'll think about it," she answered with a sideways grin that hinted she wouldn't be too quick to follow overly cautious orders. Blayde squinted an eye until it nearly winked, smiled back, and shook his head as he headed into the cabin to suit up.

"You'll need to change out of your suit."

"What?"

"Your suit: I'll need to coat it with an artificial squid skin for camouflage. It will take an hour for the adhesion to fully bond so I guess we'll have to visit over some snacks and a drink. You game?"

"Deal," she agreed, smiling as if relieved she'd worn her most flattering swimwear underneath the suit.

Blayde broke a long, yet comfortable silence as they passed the wreckage. “I went back the day after. I took measurements, tried to retrieve equipment, and looked around, but it didn’t occur to me that maybe there might be some scales or perhaps a tooth close by.”

Blayde pat two of his pockets to verify their contents hadn’t fallen out. Only rarely did anything like that happen, but he was meticulous by nature, habitually checked anyway. He locked eyes with Sam. She looked puzzled. He sighed. “I know ... that’s really stupid for someone like me but I was still pretty unnerved so ... I’ll be keeping my eye out for anything like that today when we head down to the spot where I saw it resting. It may be pointless with ever-shifting sea sediment but ... I’ve gotta try, right?” His tone indicated he didn’t expect an answer. “It’s close to the same time of day so it might be worth checking out again. My last couple trips were in the afternoon. No luck. Hopefully, we’ll get that selfie. If we’re lucky, we’ll tag it.”

Sam responded nothing but Blayde thought he observed her eyes brighten. He estimated she was still a bit bashful, the type that was supremely gregarious once you got to know her but had to really push herself to talk with people she didn’t know well. *She’ll get over it*, he thought. If he kept showering her with compliments, she’d probably open up quickly.

“We’re getting close and this is a tight turn,” he instructed, slowing down a bit and gesturing for Sam to stop once they’d breached the corner. Significant water disturbance might attract attention. The suits were designed to minimize smells that might attract predators but that didn’t stop other senses from noticing the activities of potential prey. “Nice stop,” he added, pleased she’d been able to follow his instructions, but more pleased with the excitement revealed by her monitor readings. He noticed his heart beat a little harder, saw changes on his icon as well.

“Switch to night vision like I showed you.” He nearly whispered. It was an unnecessary precaution with inter-suit communications but instinct oft took over when he felt nervous. “Don’t be startled if everything goes black for a while. It can be a bit buggy ... and your eyes will take a moment to adjust.”

Sam’s expression waxed nervous but she nodded in agreement and followed instructions. Blayde silently castigated himself for not explaining that better. He didn’t want her feeling stressed in a dangerous place like this.

Blayde swam without using any thrusters, slowly led her toward the crevices where he'd first spotted the beast sleeping.

The night vision functionality wasn't as clear as he would have liked and that left him moving with more timidity than usual. Soon enough, he spotted the sleeping beast and silently rejoiced. Instinctively, he reached into his side pocket with tagging equipment. He pulled out a small canister, pressed a lever, and sprayed greenish goo onto the scales of the dragon, as close to the base of its neck as he dared.

The underside of the neck would allow for the best scans and the best chance for nanobots to invade the dragon's system to compile and transmit data. However, the underside of sea creatures was often sensitive to the goo. Direct application heavily irritated some species. Blayde wasn't interested in antagonizing one of these ill-tempered beasts so he played this decision conservatively. Had he been alone, he would have plastered the goo all along the underside of the neck and jetted to safety as quickly as possible. With Sam at his side, he just couldn't justify the risk. Besides, his reach was limited and this was the path of least resistance anyway. When he finished, he returned the canister to his pocket.

Blayde liked to tell friends how amazingly precise this technology could be, but the truth of the matter was, internal scans and imaging were pretty hit and miss. Chances that he'd get to see the innards of this beast were slim but at least he could bank on the possibility he'd be able to monitor its movement and some of its vitals. When he observed that the goo had bonded well, he sighed with satisfaction, pulled out a clipper, hoping to find a large scale that could be clipped without disturbing the beast. But before he could do anything, it edged forward and distanced itself enough to make collection impossible.

Blayde silently cursed, viscerally jerked his body as another, smaller sea dragon approached. It followed the same path as the first. Blayde was grateful they were on the other side of the crevice. He hadn't seen it coming and had inadvertently disengaged predator sensors when switching to night vision. He'd deliberately turned off Sam's sensors so she wouldn't be unnecessarily scared. It seemed wise to leave her following his directions without other interruptions this time. Now, he second guessed the wisdom of that decision - backups were always valuable. Still, there was no immediate danger so he turned the predator sensors back on and traded the clipper for the canister. As he began applying the goo to the second beast, he saw four icons appear on his helmet screen. Shocked, he took an involuntarily large breath.

“Four unknown species ranging from twenty-five to thirty-five feet long in dormant mode ...”

“Label unknown species ‘sea dragon,’” Blayde instructed. Sam furrowed her brow as she listened to Blayde, proffered an inquisitive expression. He responded with ought but a smile. She seemed oblivious to the change of dragons. He guessed she’d been distracted for a few moments, perhaps observing the very unique caverns they were exploring.

“Four sea dragons in dormant mode within 70 yards; possible predator.”

“Label sea dragon as predator.” Sam playfully crumpled her brow harder. Blayde played coy, offered another smile.

“Heart rates appear to be increasing. The largest sea dragon is moving toward a cavern opening a few hundred yards south by southeast.” As Blayde began processing helmet instructions, he thrust the canister back in his pocket and watched as the sea dragon’s eyes popped open, bright under night vision. Internal glowing made the eyes seem more surreal than anything Blayde had observed in the abyss. Perhaps that was only because they were reptilian in shape, with speckles and oddly shaped irises like a gecko. The dragon burst forward and threw a veritable explosion of sand towards Sam and Blayde. Instinctively, Blayde softly engaged his thrusters away from the billowing cloud and checked the helmet compass to determine south by southeast. He’d be exploring that area some other time.

“This way,” Blayde instructed, pointing the direction they’d come. Immediately, he felt foolish. Sam was in the middle of the mini sandstorm and unable to see anything. Her icon flashed, started turning orange. She was stressed but not panicking. Blayde smirked.

“You’re fine,” he assured her. Push yourself backwards a dozen feet and you’ll be able to see just fine. “They’re headed toward an opening a few hundred yards from here. I’d love to get you that selfie, but it looks like we’re out of luck.”

“No we’re not,” she chided in sing-song frustration and with thrusters engaged. She nearly ran into Blayde as she kept her gaze fixed in front of her rather than looking where she was heading. Blayde prevented the collision by cushioning her left shoulder and right hip with his hands, resulting in a spin that nearly put her in his arms. She beamed. “Let’s follow it!”

“Are you crazy? There are four of them.”

“Four? How do you know?”

“My helmet ...”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“All four are headed toward an exit the opposite side of where we came from.”

“My helmet said nothing,” Sam complained.

Blayde didn't want to have that conversation. Following the dragons would be dangerous. “Let's head back,” he insisted.

Sam looked at Blayde, the direction they'd come, and slowly engaged her thrusters to move her in the opposite direction.

“Come on,” she coaxed. “We easily outran one last time and I barely knew how to use this suit. We'll be fine.”

Blayde smiled, unable to believe his fortune. Part of him forbade imprudence, demanded he escort Sam back to safety. Part of him welcomed throwing caution to the wind and taking advantage of the perfect opportunity. He wanted better footage of what would undoubtedly be remembered as the greatest discovery he'd ever made.

Sam continued to slowly glide away from him, reminded him of siren stories he'd read as a child. The comparison was unnerving but the prospect of adventure proved more compelling. He engaged his thrusters and took the lead. Sam's icon showed heightened levels of happiness and excitement. Blayde smiled uncontrollably as he travelled south by southeast. Life didn't get any better.

A few moments later, Blayde and Sam were hiding behind a jutting ledge, wondering whether or not they'd been too slow finding the entrance.

“What's the status on four sea dragons,” Blayde asked his helmet.

“Moving slowly toward the opening. They'll be visible soon.”

“My helmet isn't on,” Sam noted.

“It's better not to have too many distractions in dangerous situations,” Blayde explained. Four predator icons appeared on his helmet screen. All were orange.

“Why ...”

“Shhhh.” Blayde pondered the meaning of orange icons for predators. He'd never seen it happen. Precaution finally got the better of him. He opened transmissions so Sam could hear his helmet. “Status.”

“Four predators stationary and side by side at the entrance. Heart rates elevated.”

“How does it know that?” Sam queried. “We only tagged one.”

“Two; but they don't need tagged if it gets a good reading.”

“What—”

“The question is why are their heart rates elevated?”

“Maybe they're excited.”

The icons morphed red.

“No. They’re scared,” Blayde said with disbelief.

His eyes glossed over the night vision and video icons. He was getting everything on tape. He’d trim it later. For now, he wasn’t willing to miss the slightest millisecond of footage. He couldn’t get a clear shot of the opening without exposing his position but he’d see them the moment they left the cavern. Blayde couldn’t be sure but it looked like the blackness on the other side might indicate an uncharted lower abyss opening. That discovery could make him famous in some circles, he mused, almost uninterested in the detail. More compelling excitement lingered just inside cavern openings.

“Predators moving.” An understatement to be sure. All four sea dragons shot out of the cavern opening with such explosive force that Blayde swore in discouragement. The footage would be too blurry to be of any value. But just when he determined to follow them, some creature of unbelievably colossal size smashed into the cavern opening.

“Unidentified species ...”

“Shut up!” Sometimes, Blayde was grateful helmet programming adjusted for human reaction speed and “need to know” details. This wasn’t one of those times. Blayde grabbed Sam’s hand and pulled to get her attention away from the billowing sand storm.

“Adjust your vision for clarity,” he instructed. “When the heat vision sets in, let me know.”

“Got it,” she responded seconds later.

A blur of movement sent Blayde’s heart pounding uncomfortably. He engaged thrusters, crumbled to the seabed as he pulled Sam down with him. Four sea dragons whooshed by, red icons flashing. Blayde and Sam bounced off of the rocky sea floor multiple times before water pressure stabilized. Sam rubbed her shoulder where she’d bumped something uncomfortably hard.

“Status.”

“Unidentified species retreated deeper into uncharted cavity. Four sea dragons heading to shallow waters at approximately 30 miles per hour.”

“Highest speed?”

“37 miles per hour,” the helmet answered with sultry allure.

“Wow.” Blayde engaged his thrusters to follow the sea dragons. “Follow me. When we get past the sand storm, tell your helmet to r-e-v-e-r-t and your vision will return to night vision. We’ll take our time following their trail,” Blayde instructed.

“Any details on unidentified species?” he asked the helmet.

“Total size uncertain. Multiple appendages scanned in at over 20 feet.”

“How many appendages?”

“Uncertain count; possibly a dozen.”

“Holy behemoth from Hades ... closest known species?”

“Nothing remotely close registers,” the sultry voice chimed. “References in mythology and lore are unhelpful. Database information suggests no such creature has been observed or imagined.”

“Any readings on the abyss opening size?”

“No less than 200 yards at its widest; no more than 50 yards at the smallest opening.”

“Review the footage. Is there any indication of the unknown species’ size there?”

“One moment.”

Blayde glanced at Sam’s icon, observed other vital details from her helmet scans and guessed she was feeling a little disappointed. No selfie. Not even a nice, clean view of the beasts apart from a small close-up through the crevice. He guessed she probably saw the eye so she couldn’t be too disappointed.

“Unclear girth, unclear length.” Silence prevailed for several moments as the duo retraced their way back to the surface. Blayde’s mind reeled as he contemplated his fortune in discovering two new species and a new deep abyss opening in one week. After forty years of experience, he’d never been so excited about his work. On the other hand, he’d have to tap into one of his lesser used commodities: patience. There was no way he’d consider tracking the behemoth in a wet suit and it would be weeks before he could even hope for a new deep sea vessel. He’d have to keep this discovery under wraps so someone else didn’t get the credit for providing the first good footage of whatever lay beneath that dark opening.

“At least we got good footage through the crevice,” he consoled himself out loud. “And that eye shot will be in history books for decades. If nothing else, that will silence naysayers.”

Same met Blayde’s comment with one of her killer smiles.

*Not too disappointed*, he concluded.

“Hold up.” Blayde motioned Sam to stop her thrusters and to hold still as he activated the video imaging unit and adjusted the settings. “See? Over there.” Sam’s icon flashed, numbers began modifying rapidly. She was excited.

“I see two,” she replied, already pulling a holo-comm out of her suit’s only pocket and holding it up for a selfie.

“Make sure to adjust your settings for focus at every distance,” Blayde advised. It seemed obvious but only experienced divers ever seemed to remember. It was a waste of time anyway. Blayde was getting everything on video. The sea dragons were resting in surprisingly shallow water only a few hundred yards away from his boat. Waters were clear. No one would accuse him of video alterations now, not with the equipment he had available to him. He slowly started moving in the general direction of the sea dragons. A direct approach might get their attention, even with camouflaged suits. He had no way of knowing how sensitive these beasts might be to smell, electrical pulses, or even echolocation. Meandering in their general direction wouldn’t attract much attention unless they were hungry and since their icons rested at a solid orange, he was all but certain they wouldn’t be hunting any time soon.

“It’s very unusual,” Blayde began. “Their icons are still orange, which indicates they’re still stressed from their earlier run-in with the behemoth.”

With raised eyebrow, Same teased as if he’d said something dumb. “Can you blame them? My heart’s still pumping hard and I wasn’t even getting chased.”

Blayde smiled. “Most animals don’t hold onto stress like we do. If you watch a deer in the forest, they will run from you out of fear and then go right back to grazing fifty yards away as if nothing happened. But these dragons – they’re *still* stressed. That could suggest a higher intelligence like ours or ...” he drifted in thought.

Sam allowed the pause but curiosity seemed to overcome her patience, “Or what?”

“They think they’re still being hunted.”

“You mean they don’t know that thing went back into the abyss?”

“I don’t know. It seems unlikely. Either way, I want a better look.”

It seemed mere seconds later when the duo found themselves cautiously approaching the sea dragons with barely one-hundred yards to separate them. The distance would have been enough to make a reasonable person nervous but what unnerved Blayde more had nothing to do with proximity: it was their movement and their number. The remaining two slowly trudged along the shoreline toward a nearby cavern, their bulky muscles apparently unaccustomed to moving on land. Apparently, the other two returned to the deep or lurked outside scanning ranges.

As soon as he could easily stand with his waist above the water, Blayde motioned for Sam to stand in front of him to pose for a picture. Her earlier

selfie undoubtedly got him every favor he needed with Sam but this one would be better. Sam's movement caught the attention of the smaller dragon who looked towards the couple. Blayde got it all on video; he'd pull the perfect still shot later. For a long while, all he could do was watch their painfully slow movements as they entered into the cavern, their bodies wearily disappearing into shadows.

He briefly contemplated following the dragons into the cavern but quickly dismissed the idea. Without a jetpack for quick escape, it seemed unwise to get much closer. His adventuresome side begged him to approach the beasts for closer observation. His pragmatic side demanded he consider Sam and head back to the boat. His eyes lingered on cavern shadows where the dragons were growing invisible. Only minor movements continued to identify the beasts with regular vision. Fixated upon the beasts and processing everything that happened, Blayde stared into the cave like a hypnotized scarecrow until Sam's movements snatched his attention.

She was examining large tracks, tracing her foot over what appeared to be the larger beast's nondescript footprint. Constantly shifting sands camouflaged the print but faint traces of a glowing outline approximated the shape. The subtly glowing pattern repeated itself along the shoreline. Sam bent over, picked some up. "Hey - what's this?" she asked, turning toward Blayde.

*Wow.* Sea dragons consumed his conscious thoughts, but Sam's eyes unreasonably tore his attention from everything else. He stumbled through an incoming wave before responding. "Could be dinoflagellates ... but it's the wrong time of day ... and the wrong color. And we don't usually have them around here so ... let me have a closer look."

Right arm gesturing for Sam to come closer to show him her prize, Blayde glanced up toward the sea dragons to make sure they didn't present any threat. They were essentially invisible. Probably still recovering. He kept their location in his peripheral vision out of caution; hippopotamuses walk slowly but when angered, they charge quite quickly. There was no reason to assume sea dragons would be any different. Sam passed the small, glowing jelly-like mass to Blayde who inspected it with great interest.

"Hmmm." Blayde looked up at the sea dragons, zoomed in as close as he could with the helmet imaging unit to see if he could see any glow coming from them. He only saw faint indications of coloring that could have been blamed on the sun's faint reflection on their wet scales. The substance in his hand was already losing its glow out of the water. He sniffed at it, scrunched his nose at the odor, placed some of it in a specimen tube he carried with his suit, and shrugged.

“No clue what that is,” he announced. “That’s enough diving for the day. Let’s get back to the boat.”

Sam answered with her ever-contagious smile. She wouldn’t be protesting any more today, Blayde estimated. They’d pull the best footage together and plaster her portrait all over the 5 o’clock news. By tomorrow morning, the cave would be crowded with reporters or blocked off by the Department of Sealife Services. While media attention focused on the cavern location, Blayde would track down the other two sea dragons with relatively little interfering traffic. Meanwhile, he’d have earned a bonus, some extra paid vacation, and at least a few more dates with Sam.

By the time Blayde awakened, he was sporting the worst headache he’d ever imagined. He vaguely remembered drinking too much, but not enough to merit a hangover like this. He barely remembered spending any time at the bar, couldn’t remember if Sam had been with him or not, and could barely navigate his way out of bed. His holo-comm blinked several times in a row, paused, repeated the process. Several messages awaited his review. *Reporters*, he guessed as he sat upright.

*Holy Hades!* Blayde held his hand against his head and waited for some semblance of normalcy to return. He waited in vain, fumbled his way to the refrigerator to get some ice. On the way, he noticed a gritty, mud-like-covering all over his face and upper body. Annoyed, he rubbed at it but found little success wiping anything off.

“Print a freezer bag for ice,” he ordered the 3D printer. “Quarter gallon,” he added. While the printer zipped through the motions, Blayde navigated his way through pouring ice water and trying to stand upright while he drank it down. A few minutes later, he was laying on his bed, holding ice to his head, unsuccessfully working at cleaning off the gritty slime, and barking orders at his holo-comm. After a few messages, Blayde came to the realization that he’d been asleep for at least a day, maybe more. Jaden from his employer’s lab had messaged a number of times, reporting a complete analysis on the glowing slime and a partial DNA analysis - nanobot transmission reporting on a female sea dragon had been successful. By the fifth message, Jaden had grown agitated and impatient, accusing Blayde of living up all the publicity to the detriment of scientific investigation.

Another message informed him that DSS had sealed up the cavern, prohibited any media activity around the cavern, and had been requesting Blayde's presence and opinion about subtly glowing chrysalises enveloping the sea dragons. A final message reported that nanobot transmissions were reporting decreasing bone density, fat loss, less dense musculature, two maturing internal organs, and two new appendages growing from an undetermined area near the shoulder blades of the female sea dragon.

While his mind reeled over the news, Blayde swore at the HCU, ordered it to stop playing messages for a few moments. Somehow, his mind had effortlessly processed all of the news but he needed a moment to consider the ramifications of what all this might mean.

And someone was knocking at the door.

"Show guest at main entry," Blayde ordered the surveillance screen. It was Sam but she wasn't looking as debonair as usual. She looked nearly as awful as Blayde felt. And she was wiping away some gritty, glowing substance off of her cheek.

The Darkening Next