

Eurich ripped open the package with unbridled excitement. It had finally come! He got the DNA Hologram for his birthday and had been saving his allowance to buy a slide for it. The outer packaging torn away, he started working on the box. His mind raced with the possibilities: lion, alligator, wolf, eagle, elephant. There were so many great choices he didn't know which he wanted more. He'd spent days memorizing the Ancient Latin names of his favorites, so he'd know which one he got right out of the box. Finally, the moment came when he ripped open the box and pulled out the smooth glass slide. His eyes, alight with excitement moments before, extinguished in pools of disappointment.

"Koo...koo...lus...Can...orus? What in all the Graces is a *Cuculus canorus*?"

"No swearing young man," said his father without looking away from his eye screen, his deft fingers punching buttons in thin air never missing a beat. "And it's a cuckoo bird."

"A cuckoo bird? What a bunch of dip."

"I said no swearing! Why don't you go try it out? It may be more blazin than you think."

"Whatever," Eurich clomped to his room and slammed the door behind him. He reverently pulled the DNA Hologram off his shelf and set it on the floor. He sat next to it and clicked it on. A holographic image of Curio, the built-in helpware, sprang up from the pedestal.

"Hello and thank you for your interest in DNA Hologram! DNA Hologram, bringing the lost past to life! Do you have a slide?"

"Yes."

"Blazin! Please insert the slide and let's bring the past to life!"

Eurich inserted the slide into the opening at the base of the projector and waited.

"Thank you! One moment while we process the DNA...Ah! I see you have a *Cuculus canorus*. Fascinating bird. They were a zygodactyl species. Your specimen is a female. Would you like more interesting facts on your animal?"

"No. Just show me the bird already."

"Alright! Let's get started." Curio's image disappeared and after a few seconds, another image started to take shape one strand at a time. The end result was a rather bland and unimpressive brown bird with a white chest striped with more brown.

"Bunch of dip," Eurich muttered as he returned the Hologram to its place and went to eat supper.



A dippin' week. That's how long he'd been staring at this stupid cuckoo bird. He knew everything there was to know about the Common Cuckoo. And he wasn't all that impressed. He was helping his mom bathe his brother in the kitchen sink when the idea came to him. The Replicator. Normally used to produce food and water in a society strapped for precious resources, the Replicator was an amazing machine. A small gelatinous cube was dropped into the slot and a few minutes later, four servings of water and protein mash came out the other end. It could work...

"I said to hold him, Rich!" his mom insisted, bringing him out of his mental daze.

"Sorry mom," he mumbled tightening his grip on his squirmy brother, but his eyes drifted to the Replicator.

Later that night when the house was quiet and everyone asleep, Eurich crept into the kitchen and stole the Replicator from its place on the kitchen counter. Then he snatched his dad's toolkit and barricaded himself in his bedroom, getting right to work. About an hour before dawn he'd finished his modifications and surveyed his contraption with an expert eye.

"Perfect," he mumbled to himself and switched on the power.

"Attention," said the Hologram immediately, "Unauthorized hardware configuration detected. Please power down and contact Customer Service."

"Service this," Eurich said as he accessed his eye screen. His fingers moved over the invisible keys more deftly than his father and in a few seconds, he grunted in satisfaction.

"Administrator Override approved. Thank you."

“No. Thank *you*.” Eurich slipped the DNA sample slide into the Replicator and turned on the machines. The Replicator hummed and clicked longer than usual as it processed the DNA sample. After a few minutes, the Holoovid clicked on and began building a 3D image one pixel at a time. The whole process took much longer than Eurich had patience for, but the end result caught his breath. As the final pixel was placed on the new image, it sprang to life and the first Common Cuckoo was born into the world in over 200 years. It chirped and fluttered its wings, trying to take flight.

Eurich squealed in surprise and delight and snatched the bird before it could fly off. “I’ll name you Margora. You like that?” He did. It was his mother’s name.

The bird chirped.

“Shhh, Margora. Nobody can know you’re here. I’ll bring you some food later.” He gingerly placed it in a glass container in the drawers beneath his bed and then hurried to dismantle his contraption so the Replicator would be ready for the family’s breakfast portions.

∞

“Eurich, come here.”

Eurich sat down in front of his father who was busy on his eye screen. “What is it, dad?”

“Mom says you’ve been helping out with Danich lately.”

“Yeah...”

“I’m proud of you for helping. ‘Drones are social not individual,’” he recited. “I have something for you.” Though he was looking right at him, Eurich knew his father wasn’t actually looking at him but at the computer screen projecting inside his eyeball. “It’s on the table. Why don’t you go and get it.”

On the table sat another box, identical to the one that Eurich had received the week before. “Blazin! Thanks dad!” He ripped into the package quicker than the first and held aloft his new slide. It read: *Androctonus crassicauda*.

“Androc...tonus...Crass...eye...cauda...”

“A scorpion,” said his dad. “A nasty one.”

“Blazin! I’m going to go try it out! You wanna come check it out with me?” he asked with a tone of childlike hopefulness in his voice.

“I’d love to son. I really would. But we’re down three hundred points in the Chinese market. And you know what HQ says.”

“The only good drone is a profitable drone,” they chimed in a monotonous unison.

“That’s right,” said his father. “Now run along. I need to get this done before dinner.”

∞

“*Androctonus crassicauda*, or the Arabian Fat-tail scorpion, was one of the most deadly species of scorpion in the world until its extinction in twenty-two twenty-two,” the Holoovid explained. “Though small, it was known to kill a man with one sting.”

“Blazin,” breathed Eurich, almost reverently. He’d spent most of the night absorbing all the information the Holoovid had on his sample, which was another female. When he’d exhausted the Holoovid’s encyclopedia entry he switched it off and checked on his cuckoo.

It fluttered helplessly against the container’s ceiling as Eurich pulled the drawer out. He’d snuck some grass and leaves in so it could build a nest and had scrounged up a few cockroaches for it to eat. Despite all this, it still looked sad and sickly.

“What’s wrong, Margora? Do you want me to make you a friend? I bet you’d like a friend, wouldn’t you?”

The cuckoo chirped pathetically and Eurich ran into the kitchen, returning with the Replicator. Rigging the machines didn't take half the time it took him the first time. Within 90 minutes he'd created a scorpion which he placed in his other container under his bed.

"Isn't it awesome, Marge?" he asked the cuckoo. "I made it just like I made you!"

It was while he was admiring his creations that his ultimate idea came to him. He took both slides, putting one on top of the other, slid them into the machine and turned it on.

Pixels flew from the hologram machine, building Eurich's new creation. It started out like a bird. With two bird legs and a beak and wings and feathers. But the body soon elongated, adding six more legs, and pinchers sprang from its chest. The tail appeared just as the Fat Tail scorpion's: black and menacing with a wicked stinger on the end of it.

"Blazin," breathed the boy, "This is so dippin awesome!"

When the process finished, the hybrid let out a piercing shriek and tried to take flight, only to fall to the ground in a clumsy heap.

"Where you think you're going, you squirrely monster?" Eurich corralled it into the same container as his scorpion. "That's what I'll call you. Squirrely," he informed it as he put the container back in his drawer and slid it under his bed. "You guys sleep tight. I'll see you in the morning."

The next morning, Eurich's room stank like bird shit. Margora had literally pooped in every square inch of her cage overnight. The smell wafted through the air holes in the container. His mom would kill him if she found out. He'd have to clean it up after Academy today. But until then...he opened his window a crack to let the smell out.

"Eurich! Let's go! You're going to be late!" his mom called from the living room.

"Coming!" he yelled back and took one last look at his creations.

Squirrely had eaten the scorpion during the night. Her venomous tail clicked against the plastic lid of the container trying to sting Eurich.

"Squirrely! Be nice! And quit scaring Margora!"

"Eurich!!"

"I'll see you guys after Academy." The boy slid the drawer under his bed and left for school.

∞

"Shut up you stupid homie, you did not!" accused Davich, the Academy's bully. He had made it a point to make Eurich's life a living nightmare because he lived at home instead of in the barracks like most of the other children.

"I did so! I made a monster! I named it Squirrely!"

"I said shut up!" Davich shoved Eurich to the ground, causing his other classmates to laugh. "You still have something to say about monsters?"

"Yes! And I'm going to let her loose on you!"

Davich kicked his prey in the gut and in the back a few times. "How about now? How about now!!" The bully yelled and the children gathered cheered him on until the bell rang, breaking up the crowd.

"Stupid human," Davich said with one final kick, then left for class.

Eurich climbed to his feet grumbling, "I did make a monster, you idiot."

∞

Dance opened the door to his big brother's room, ignoring the "Keep OUT DAN!!" sign written in bold red ink. It was his most favorite place in the world. It was a toddler's paradise, full of wondrous sights and nifty gadgets to play with. He went right for the drawer under the bed. Even at two, Danich knew that was where Eurich kept his best treasures. He pulled it out and wrinkled his nose at the smell. Something was squawking in one of the compartments. Dan couldn't see inside because it was all smeared with white. So he unclasped the lid and opened it.

Margora the cuckoo exploded into the air in a flutter of feathers and feces. She made right for the window and escaped through the opening.

Dan watched the entire process in awe and wonder. He'd only seen birds a dozen times in his life. What was his brother doing with one? The question was forgotten as soon as he laid eyes on the other compartment. Inside it was a monster. A real monster! It was easily the most hideous thing Danich had ever seen, even in the nightmares he remembered. Its tail clacked against the lid of the compartment and the pinchers on its chest opened and closed. He had to touch it! He opened the lid and the creature scurried up his arm. He giggled at the feeling. It crawled over his shoulder and down his back.

"That tickles," he giggled and then screamed as the burning pain filled his body.

∞

"I'm sorry Mrs. Dunhill. We really don't know what to do for your son." The doctor fidgeted with the clipboard ashamedly as he spoke.

"What do you mean you can't help him?" Marge was in hysterics. She was a rarity. In an age where children were raised by corporate institutions, she had chosen to keep her sons at home. This opened their family up to ridicule, not to mention internal conflict. She and Edrich had argued about it almost constantly for the first 2 years of Eurich's life.

It's stupid, Margora! The only good drone is a profitable drone! That's why we send our children off. So they can grow up to be profitable drones and we can drone on with our own profit making. It's just what people do.

To the graces with what people do! She'd insisted. *He's my baby. Mine. I love him and I'm not shipping him off to be raised by some damn corporation.*

Careful what you say, Edrich had warned her with a cautious glance at the televid. Its built-in camera was always watching, always listening.

Let them hear me. I LOVE MY FAMILY!! She yelled. *And I don't care how stupid or crazy that sounds!*

Alright, fine. You want to raise a house full of homies, that's on you. But if your production drops and you get reassigned, don't say I didn't warn you. He then turned back to his eye screen and that's the last she'd heard of it.

But she hadn't cared about all of that. Let people talk. Let them snicker and gossip. Humanity had survived with family units for tens of thousands of years. It was only in the past few centuries that parents started giving up their rights to their children so they could focus more on work. But something about it was unnatural. She knew that for certain once she'd laid eyes on her firstborn son.

The doctor cleared his throat snapping Marge from her reverie. "The tests. They don't make sense. We haven't seen anything like it, well, ever, to be honest. There are almost no diseases that modern medicine can't cure. Cancer. AIDS. Heart Disease. You name the affliction, it can be fixed. But this...this isn't a disease."

"Then what is it?"

"That's what's puzzling. The tests, and we've run them five times, they say it's a venom."

"Venom? From what?"

"A type of scorpion extinct for over 300 years."

"How is that possible?"

"That's what we wanted to ask you. Does anyone in your family have a living Arabian Fat Tail scorpion?"

Marge was dumbfounded. It was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard. Her son was dying beside her and this doctor (and she used the term loosely) was babbling on about extinct arachnids! "Are you serious?"

“Yes, ma’am. We are. As you know, the Hospital works closely with HQ. We could have an anti-venom in a day.”

“Well, we don’t have any dead scorpions.”

“Oh well,” sighed the doctor, “Not that it would likely do any good. Anti-venom was hard to come by during the scorpion’s time. But we’ve come so far since then so I hoped...No matter. With the poison reacting abnormally like it is there probably isn’t much time.”

“Abnormal? What are you talking about?”

“It’s not acting like venom should. It’s not affecting his neurological functions. It’s attached itself to Danich’s internal organs. It’s eating him from the inside out. At the rate it’s going, Danich will be dead within two hours. I’m sorry.” The doctor exited, leaving Marge sobbing into the pillow next to her son’s head.

∞

“Squirrely! Where are you?!” Eurich called as he tore his room apart. Stupid Dan! He wasn’t even supposed to be in his room, that’s what the sign was for, by all the Graces! It wasn’t his fault if his stupid baby brother didn’t read the sign and got hurt because of it.

“Signs point the way to success,” he mumbled the slogan while digging through his closet.

Not only was Squirrely missing, Margora was too. He figured the cuckoo had flown out the window, but the hybrid couldn’t fly. Certainly not. It was then he caught midair movement out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned to look it was gone.

“Oh dip,” he whispered.

∞

“No. Oh no.” Edrich’s fingers stopped in mid-type. **“I’ll get Rich and we’ll be right down...Are you sure?...O.K. We’ll see you when you get home.”** The call ended and Eddie sighed hugely and ran his fingers through his hair. **“Eurich! Come here please!”**

His son appeared flushed and out of breath.

“What have you been doing in there?”

“Push ups,” the boy lied.

“Uh huh.” It was this kind of thing that could’ve been avoided if Marge had chosen to send the boy to the Academy. But she refused, much to Eddie’s annoyance. Raising kids wasn’t worth the time and effort. They were a constant annoyance, always underfoot. There were trained parenting professionals to handle children now. He could use one right now. Especially when talking about the news he just got. **“I have some news about your brother, Danich.”**

“I know Dan’s my brother, dad. Is he better? Is he coming home soon? The doctors fixed him up real good I bet. That’s what doctors do. They fix things.”

Eddie sighed and ran his fingers through his hair again. **“No. He’s not better, son. And he’s not coming home. He...he passed into the Graces a few minutes ago.”**

Eurich’s eyes widened as he shook his head. **“No! No! No, no, no! Stupid monster! Stupid!”** He started beating his head with his tiny, meaty fists until he was restrained by his father. Once his rage was spent, he collapsed into Edrich, sobbing apologies.

“It’s ok,” Eddie soothed his son, albeit awkwardly. His embrace was stiff and his words without emotion. **“It’s not your fault.”**

“Yes it is, dad! I’m a dippin’ pisser!”

“Language!”

“Who gives a dip about my language? It’s my fault Dan is dead!” He then unburdened himself of his story.

Eddie was quiet for a while after his son’s confession.

“Dad? Are you ok?”

“Yes. I, well, I don’t know what to say.” He looked at the televid in the wall and back at his son with apprehension in his eyes. “Look, what you just told me, you can’t tell anyone else. Ever. You understand?”

“Why not?”

“Because if you do and HQ hears about it, your mom will be upset. She’s been through enough. We don’t want to upset her any more than she already is, do we?”

“No.”

“Good then. I’ll make you up a bed on the couch. You get some rest and I’ll go find Squirrely.”

“Dad no!” pleaded Eurich. “She’s evil! And I think she can fly now!” He clutched his dad tightly.

“Stay here, I’ll be alright,” said Eddie as he pried his son off and tucked him beneath the blanket on the couch. “I’ll handle it.” He grabbed the autobroom from the kitchen and burst through Eurich’s bedroom door like an ungainly ninja swinging the broom handle like a sword. Once inside, he slammed the door behind him.

“Squirrely! Here girl!” He whistled, hoping to draw out the beast.

It didn’t work.

“Squirrely,” he called again as he inspected the room carefully.

He checked under the bed.

Nothing.

He looked behind everything on the shelf and almost died of fright when the Holoivid accidentally turned on displaying a holographic image of the mutation. He had a good laugh and wiped the sweat from his brow before continuing the search.

He dumped out the laundry bin and sifted through the clothes with the broom handle.

They were clean. No hybrid bird-scorpion to be found.

He returned the clothes to the hamper and heard a chime inside his ear that notified him of an email. Thinking it could be from Marge, he switched on his eye screen and started scrolling through them. He’d actually missed fifteen emails since Eurich’s confession. His fingers typed in the air and he wandered over to the window, staring outside as he worked. He felt something land on his shoulder followed quickly by a burning pain in his back.

“Of course. The lip above the window,” he mumbled and then collapsed.

Eurich heard the thud.

“Dad?” he called in a trembling voice and peeked over the back of the couch.

“Dad? What’s going on?”

No answer.

He slid off the couch and crept slowly toward his room and eased the door open.

“Dad?” he whispered loudly.

“Rich...don’t...it’s...”

“Dad!” Eurich threw open the door and rushed to where his father lay. “Oh no! Not you too! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Eddie’s eyes flickered open and met his son’s gaze for the first time. “Such a beautiful boy,” he coughed. “How could I not see? So much wasted time...Don’t...tell them anything...son...only good drone...don’t tell them. Promise me!”

“I promise, dad. Please don’t die. Please don’t! I love you!”

“Good boy.” He patted his son’s cheek. “I...I called 911. Be a good boy and let them in. I love...” he mumbled and then went limp.

Eurich rushed to unlock the door for the EMS and stopped dead in his tracks. On the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room, Squirrely perched ready to attack. The pinchers protruding from her chest clacked and she fluttered her wings, squawking at her creator.

“You dumb monster!” said the boy as he eased into the kitchen. “You killed everybody! I wish I never made you!”

In response, the chimera attacked. It flew at Eurich, a deadly mass of exoskeleton and feathers. He desperately grabbed for something to defend himself with and came up with his dad’s dirty coffee mug. He slung it at the creature with all his might. Luck was with him. The mug struck Squirrely in midair sending her careening into the sink.

The mutant flopped around trying to right itself for another attack. Eurich didn’t waste any time. He grabbed the Replicator off the counter next to the sink and brought it down on his creation, again and again, screaming curses at it the entire time. When he was done, all that remained of Squirrely was a gooey mass of feathers.

“Dippin pissier!” he screamed at the remains and then there was a loud knock on the door.

“This is EMS! Open the door!”

Eurich complied, sobbing with joy. Everything would be alright now.

∞

Three days later Eurich sat with his mother beside his father’s hospital bed. The doctor had been able to synthesize an anti-venom from Squirrely’s remains, but the poison had already done extensive damage to Edrich’s internal organs.

“He’s in a coma now,” the doctor had explained. “And probably will be for a very long time.”

Marge hadn’t left her husband’s side, much to Eurich’s dismay. And as boredom claimed him yet again, he tried to persuade his mom to leave.

“C’mon mom! We’ll just go down to the caf. I hear their fish sticks are blazin!”

“No.” answered Marge hollowly. “What if your father wakes up while we’re gone?”

“Then he’ll be awake when we get back. C’mon, please! Can’t we just go out for a little bit?”

“I said no.”

Their argument was interrupted by a soft rapping on the door that preceded the entrance of a very well dressed man with oily hair and a thin mustache.

“Mrs. Dunhill, I take it? And you must be Eurich. I’m Maxwell from HQ.”

“What do you want?” asked Marge.

“I’m here with an exciting opportunity for Eurich.”

“What kind of opportunity?” said the boy, perking up.

“I’m offering you a place at Academy Elite for special boys and girls like you.”

“Academy Elite?” interrupted Marge. “That’s for high performing students. I have trouble keeping Rich at median.”

“Yes, well, studies have shown that most homies perform lower in academics than their corporate ward peers. Be that as it may, we aren’t interested in Eurich’s academic performance, per se. Although that will improve, won’t it young man?” Maxwell chided good naturally

“Then what are you interested in my son for?” Marge didn’t trust this drone from HQ. Drones like him didn’t show up unless HQ wanted something and planned to take it one way or another.

“He’s a very smart young man.”

“I’m not smart,” Insisted Eurich

“Oh, we beg to differ. What you did with the Replicator was, how should I put this? It was inspiring, Eurich.”

“I didn’t do nothing with the Replicator,” said Eurich, remembering the promise to his father.

“That’s not what you told your mates at the Academy, now is it? And it’s not what you told your father last night.”

Eurich flushed and looked at his mom.

“What did you do with the Replicator?” Marge asked sharply.

“Nothing! I promise.”

She didn’t buy it. A mom can smell a lie a mile off. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

The boy met his mom’s gaze, tears falling unbidden. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was you! They’re dead because of you!” Marge couldn’t take anymore heartache. What was left of her sanity shattered and all she saw was red.

She leapt at Eurich in a blind fury and turned her wrath on Maxwell when he tried to interfere.

Orderlies burst in almost immediately, restraining and sedating the grieving woman with powerful drugs.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” said the doctor who came in after the commotion had died down. “I treated her son recently. She’s been through a lot lately.”

“So she has,” said Maxwell, straightening his clothes. “Though her problems go far deeper than a mere family tragedy. Studies have shown that only the most unbalanced drones opt to raise homies. See that she gets the best, most extensive psychological treatment and re-education the Hospital has to offer. HQ will pay for it.”

“As you say,” the doctor said and nodded to the orderlies who hauled the drugged woman out.

“My babies. Don’t take my babies,” Marge mumbled weakly, unable to resist.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, son,” said Maxwell. “Now come along.” He reached out his hand.

Eurich looked at his father lying comatose in the bed and ran his fingers through his hair. “He said he loved me. Do you know that?”

“Yes. We were watching. Don’t worry about your dad, son. The doctors will make him well. Now shall we? Your new family and friends are waiting for you. Let’s go home.” He extended his hand again and this time Eurich took it.



Outside, Margora, the cuckoo, took flight. True to her brood parasitic nature, she had laid eggs in a pigeon’s nest (one of the few remaining species of bird) and now she longed to have the wind under her wings. She was free. Free of the invisible cage that the Manchild had imprisoned her in. Free of the terrifying presence of her abhorrent mutant kin. And her liberation was exhilarating. The cuckoo soared higher and higher the world of men fell away below the clouds and the winds bore her into the world anew.