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August

**F**IVE HUNDRED YARDS OFFSHORE DR. CATALYST STOOD at the stern of a commercial fishing vessel as it bobbed gently at anchor. He watched a group of seven people on the beach through his binoculars. Early this morning he had left his current base and followed the tracking signals in the group's vehicles to this semi-deserted stretch of ocean beach. They had no idea he was observing them. In fact, it was likely they presumed him dead. If only they knew the vengeance he was about to unleash on them.

Dr. Catalyst rubbed his mangled right hand against his thigh. It had taken months to recover from the crushing bite of his Pterogator, received when those two little brats Emmet Doyle and Calvin Geaux stepped

in to foil his plans. The severity of his injury had forced him to go to ground on the Seminole reservation deep in the River of Grass. There he had tried to heal under the care of his uncle, a tribal elder and doctor. But they had a vicious falling out. His uncle did not support Dr. Catalyst's methods for saving the environment. Finally, they argued so violently that his uncle banished him from the reservation forever. *Fool*. Dr. Catalyst was a genius. He was doing great things. Let them cast him out. When the time was right, he would destroy them, too.

His hand tapped harder and harder against his thigh until the discomfort forced him to stop. The constant pain he felt in his mangled limb was just one thing that little punk Emmet Doyle was going to pay for. Very soon.

As he made the final preparations to exact his revenge, he chuckled softly to himself. Dr. Catalyst was beyond wealthy. In the years leading up to the initiation of his plan to combat invasive species, he had acquired several bases of operation all over South Florida. The Geauxs and the Doyles thought they had defeated him. They would soon learn how wrong they were.

All morning he studied them from offshore as they cavorted in the sun, unaware of the gruesome fate that awaited them. Watching them only made Dr. Catalyst

angrier. They had cost him dearly in money, time, and resources. Now they played on the beach as if nothing had happened, as if they hadn't tried to destroy him and his work.

But their great mistake had been in thinking the Pterogators were his only creation. Boa constrictors and pythons were not the only invasive species destroying the fragile South Florida ecosystem. And his alligator hybrids were not his only experiment. Dr. Catalyst believed in multitasking.

Here in the waters of Florida, the nonnative lionfish was devastating the coastal reefs. No one knew exactly how the fish had been introduced here. Its normal habitat was in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Most likely, lazy and irresponsible aquarium owners had released it, ignorant of the destruction it could wreak in the nearby waters. Much in the same manner the giant snakes had been set free into the swamp.

As with the Pterogator, Dr. Catalyst had looked at the problem and devised a solution. The lionfish was a reef dweller and an aggressive fish. It drove off any competitors that might occupy the same habitat, gorging on the fish and mollusks that made their homes in the reefs. And when a reef was finally picked clean, the lionfish would move on to another, stripping it as well.

To counter the fish's aggressiveness, he had devised the perfect predators. And he had them here on his

boat, about to be released. The world would soon know that Dr. Catalyst had returned.

He had modified the catch tank on the boat. Now he opened the hatch in the rear deck and looked down on his creations. The sun was almost directly overhead, and the light flashed off the creatures' flanks as they writhed and thrashed in the shallow water of the tank below him. One of them reared its head, opening its elongated mouth. Its jaws revealed row upon row of sharp teeth, long and pointed as nails. They stuck out of the creature's mouth at odd angles, giving it a terrifying appearance. Its jaws snapped shut and Dr. Catalyst winced, remembering the devastation such a bite could cause.

The tank held his new fish species in just enough water for them to remain alive until they were released. He pressed a switch and it opened a panel cut through the bottom of the tank and through the boat's hull, releasing his newest killer species into the ocean.

From his computer pad, he watched the signals from the small tracking devices he had attached to the dorsal fin of each of his beasts. They swam so fast and hard, he did not think the devices would remain attached for long, but on their initial release he wished to track their progress for as long as he could. Taking a moment to adjust to their new environment, the giant fish swam lazily in the water beneath his boat. Then, as their

instincts commanded, they zoomed toward the reef, cutting through the water with powerful strokes.

The sea was crystal clear and shallow here, and he watched their long, sinuous bodies surging across the ocean floor. Small schools of fish scattered in fear, desperate to flee these loathsome beasts. Waters that were full of dozens of marine species just moments before now looked deserted.

He studied the shoreline again and saw that the five young people were putting on fins and masks. They were on their way into the water for snorkeling. Dr. Catalyst smiled.

They were about to have a very bad day.