

Lacerta

The few strands of light seeping through the old metal walls did very little to illuminate the inside of the train car. Even with my eyes adjusted to the dark surroundings, I can only just make out the looming shapes of the boxes surrounding our hiding spot and the swaying blob-like forms of my companions. After sitting in silence for over a half hour, the larger of the two blobs stands up and lumbers to the large sliding door. With a single shove, Orion pushes it open, allowing a beam of light to enter the train car, revealing his scarred and chiseled face. Crissy and I shield our eyes from the sudden brightness, but after allowing a few seconds for our pupils to contract, we join Orion at the opening.

In the light of the open door, Crissy gives Orion an upset look, glancing down subtly at the pockets of his hoody with her big doe eyes. Orion rolls his eyes and hands Crissy her pink winter hat. I guess he has decided we don't need to be incognito anymore. She puts it on with a big smile and plays with the wool tassels contentedly. I liked seeing Crissy's messy strawberry blonde hair uncovered, but I have to admit it wasn't really Crissy without the hat.

The constellation pushes the door open further, revealing the endless rows of trees speeding by as we venture deeper into the forests of Pennsylvania. I was smacked in the face with the smell of fresh air and the somewhat musty smell of the deep forest. Orion, confident that we would not be spotted trespassing on the freight train, walks back to his duffel bag and produces a rather large dagger and a whetstone. He sits cross legged and begins sharpening the blade, eyes focused on the task at hand. Crissy remains at the door way. She sits down with her feet dangling out of the car and rests her head on the metal frame. She stares at the blurry scenery and rhythmically taps on the metal frame with her knuckles. I stand nearby, unsure what to do,

awkwardly pacing around. The only sounds in the train car are the harsh scraping of Orion's whetstone, the jostling of the train's mechanisms, and Crissy's nervous xylophone solo. I decide that I'm the one who needs to break the silence, else I go insane before we ever get to Virgo.

I approach Orion and squat down next to him. His eyes quickly meet mine and he lets out a sigh.

"What brings you to my side of the train car, Mike?" Orion asks, looking back down at his dagger. I can almost make out the vein pulsing on the side of his shaved head.

Despite this clear signal of annoyance, I ask my question anyway. "So are you guys actually immortal?"

Orion pauses his task momentarily and then resumes. "Immortal, yes. Invulnerable, no. We can still be hurt, if our stars were to be damaged or severed."

"Stars?" I ask, puzzled. "Like on the actual constellation? Err...ummm. I mean the image drawn on the night sky?"

"Yes," he answers, disinterested in my fumbling words. "They are the locations on our bodies that the old casters imbued the power of the cosmos within, transforming us into celestial beings. With every blow or slice to one of our stars we become weaker and weaker until—"

"You die," I interrupt.

"Not quite. Remember how I told you that the constellations were too weak to exist in the celestial realm after Ophiuchus cast his spell? Well the same goes for Earth. If the power of the stars is weakened enough, then we will be jettisoned into the cosmos, just a shell of our glorious selves, waiting to gather enough power from the lifeless void of space to return to Earth. That's where our old friend Volans is residing now."

I smile a little bit at the thought of that disturbing fish monster floating in space, looking extremely bored. Serves him right for trying to turn Crissy and me into sawdust.

“Sounds like a sweet deal to me. You get to be a ninja constellation, battling fearsome beasts and saving innocents. Then you die a horrific death, sit around in space for a while, then jump right back into the action.”

Orion seems annoyed at that sentiment. “That’s an over simplification. First of all, dying is still quite painful, as you can imagine, so I would prefer if I never experienced it. Second, we cannot just “*jump back into the action.*” It could take months for a constellation to regain its power from the vacuum of space alone. If I were to fall in battle, by the time I returned, my usefulness to Crissy and the Astrologists will have been long retired. She needs me to escort her to each of the Zodiacs. I don’t think you’d be up for the challenge, Mike.”

I glance over at Crissy. She is looking at Orion and me, and possibly had been the whole time as we were conversing. We make eye contact before she hurriedly returns her gaze to the forest. I too quickly turn my gaze back to Orion, choosing to preoccupy my time with cleaning the lenses of my glasses with my shirt and continuing the conversation.

“Hey. I might be a little pudgy and have the vision of a mole with cataracts, but you saw me with Volans. I can hold my own in a fight, provided I have a decent pair of hedge clippers. And Crissy, I’m counting on you for a shovel assist again.”

Crissy lowers her head with a barely suppressed chuckle.

“I’m glad we won’t have to deal with that flying fish for a while,” I continued. “Now we just need to send the rest of those constellations into space and we’ll have a clear shot at the Zodiacs.”

“Good luck with that,” remarks Crissy, still staring outside the train. “There are eighty eight constellations in total. And as far as we know, the only friendly ones are Major and Orion. We don’t even know if the Zodiacs will be cooperative.”

Orion stands up and walks over to Crissy. “I have faith that they will. The Zodiacs are too smart to be swayed by Ophiuchus’ charms. Once we find them, and return them to the celestial realm, they could offer us the help we need to defeat the snake handler and send the rest of the constellations home.”

Crissy nods her head in agreement. “Yeah. You’re right. And there are some constellations that are inanimate objects. They can’t put up a fight.”

“Oh, and some constellations I can’t even imagine becoming hostile,” adds Orion. “I don’t think that lovable Toucana could harm a—“

At that moment, a massive object swings in from the doorway, moving so fast I can only make it out as a giant, green blur, and smacks into Orion, launching him into the opposite wall of the train car. Crissy and I jump to our feet in surprise, watching as Orion crumples to the floor, leaving a dent halfway up the metal plating. The object recedes back through the doorway. Now that it’s moving more slowly, I can determine that is a giant reptilian tale, with diamond shaped scales and countless spikes running along its length. Crissy stumbles backwards away from the tail as it exits the train car. Eventually the tail disappears from sight, but I still keep my distance from the doorway and keep my eyes firmly planted on the location it vanished from.

Crissy runs to aid Orion, who is groaning in pain. She lifts him up by the arm and he winces, clutching his left shoulder.

“Aaagh! Right in the Bellatrix.”

A few seconds after the tail disappeared, the creature it belongs to decides to literally rear its ugly head. The head of the green lizard cranes down into the train car from the roof. Its mouth is filled with a wide assortment of jagged teeth, and because I'm viewing the head upside down, the lizard appears to be giving me a morbid smile. Slowly, the creature's legs appear and it begins inching its way into the train car. It places its feet gingerly on the walls of the compartment, allowing its long body to smoothly funnel inside. The rest of its body is similarly scaly and spiky to the tail, with bright blue markings running down its length on either side of the spine. I also notice the retracted frills around the base of the creature's neck. Its bright orange eyes stare into mine with a hint of sly intelligence. This, along with the razor sharp teeth and twenty foot length difference make this specimen a lot more terrifying than your run of the mill gecko.

I remain at a standoff with the beast. I slowly make my way to my bag next to the right wall of the train car, careful not to make any sudden movements. The beast reacts to every muscle contraction I make, jolting its head towards the direction of my trajectory, almost taunting me. When I reach my bag, I pull out the baseball bat I had left in there from the last little league game I played and hold it aloft.

Orion steps towards me, with Crissy's support keeping him from falling over. "Uh, Mike? This might take a few seconds but I think you should wait for me to recover before doing anything stupid."

"Tell that to him," I say, not daring to break eye contact with the beast. "Just tell me everything I need to know, so I have more knowledge of what I'm fighting than last time."

Crissy leads Orion along the edge of the train car behind me, also wary of the creature as they pass within chomping distance. She seems to be making her way to her and Orion's bag as well.

“Lacerta, The Lizard,” she recites. “Created in the late 1600s. Extremely fast and dangerous. But you already knew that.”

Lacerta lunges towards me at an incredible speed. Gaping mouth wide open and claws splayed out. I sidestep, pressing myself against a crate, hardly suppressing a whimper as its teeth almost connect with my midsection. The beast turns back towards me, but even though I’m in no position to survive another attack, the lizard returns to his stalking speed and continues to follow me around the room. It’s almost as if that attack was simply a method of testing my fortitude.

“Okay, Crissy,” I gasp impatiently. “I think you know what I really need. Lay those stars on me. I need to know what I’m aiming for.”

“Ummm... crap. I should have taken more notes in Colonial Era Constellations 101. There are stars on its nose, neck, the base of the tail, and two at the end of the tail. I also think there’s a couple on his feet, not all of them though. Oh, and his eyes are stars. I think one of them is really important.”

“Which one?” I ask, as the lizard got a little too close and I swing my bat to keep it at bay. It recoils its head slightly before hissing violently.

“I think it’s the right one. Ow,” Orion chimes in, as he moves his arm incorrectly and hurts himself.

“I thought it was the left one,” counters Crissy.

“I don’t know. Lacerta was never very friendly. I kept my distance, even when we were in the celestial realm.”

Without warning, the lizard lunges at me again. Seeing no other option, I close my eyes and swing the bat, hitting the beast square on the nose. It falls on its side, whelping in pain, legs and tail moving erratically.

“Did I destroy one of the stars!?” I ask my companions loudly.

Orion and Crissy reach their bags and Crissy releases him so they can search through their respective belongings. “I don’t think so,” yells Orion. “It’s a good way to stun the creature, but a blunt object is not going to cause any permanent damage.”

Lacerta finishes messing around after the hit and quickly gets to its feet. Still a bit wobbly, the lizard returns its gaze to me, standing still as it emits a deep growl that steadily grows in volume. I realize the stalking game is over and I dash behind a crate. The beast recklessly flings itself around the boxes trying to catch me, smashing into walls and destroying some property in the process. I narrowly escaped the mess of wooden shrapnel behind me and find myself back in the middle of the train car. Lacerta is still fumbling around in the unfortunate owner of the train’s cargo, but I know that won’t last for long. Options are becoming increasingly limited in the cramped confines of the train car, so I need to find a way out. An image pops into my head of the outside of the train, which I only saw briefly before we stowed away back in Philadelphia. I remember a ladder that led to the roof. Without any further thought, I run to the door and push it open wider. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Orion limping towards me, a short-sword in hand.

“Mike! Hold on!” He shouts. But my head is already outside.

I saw the ladder, but at the speed my body was moving, there was a chance I would have jumped even if it hadn’t been there. Now I’m soaring through the air towards what I hope is salvation. Before I know it, my empty hand is grasping tightly to one of the rungs as my legs dangle loosely over the train tracks. Lacerta rushes to the doorway, at first looking below to see if I had fallen to my death. By the time my feet find the ladder, the beast realizes my whereabouts and we lock eyes. It hisses at me before lunging towards the bottom of the ladder. Before the

lizard's front feet connect, I'm already halfway to the roof. I throw myself over the ledge, listening anxiously to the creaks and groans from the ladder as Lacerta ascends the flimsy object. I spring to my feet and run to the opposite side of the train car. Once I'm there, I turn to face my opponent, bat held high, as it menacingly climbs onto the roof. I'm riding on the hope that the beast is going to continue to taunt me, but that hope is quickly dashed as the lizard jumps towards me without a second's delay. There's only one direction left to go now. I turn around and try to hop to the train car in front of ours, but it is too late.

My feet almost connect with the next car when I feel an unbearably sharp pain in my left leg. I yell in agony and slam into the roof of the neighboring car face down, accidentally losing my grip on the bat. It falls onto the car and rolls well out of reach. I turn my head to see the claws on Lacerta's front foot digging into my calf, tearing through denim and skin alike. I don't have time to react further before the lizard starts pulling me towards it, claws still latched firmly on my leg, while it opens its mouth wide in preparation. I was met with the lovely sight of its slimy maw, filled with row upon row of teeth, about to swallow me whole.

Thankfully, among deep-seated regrets and my entire life flashing before my eyes, Crissy's description of Lacerta ran through my mind. With that, I realize my only chance to escape certain death. I pull my pocket knife from my jeans and lurch forward, just far enough to avoid a toothy demise, and plunge the blade deep into Lacerta's neck. The beast freezes as a roar erupts from its throat. The knife remains stuck firmly in the lizard's neck for a few seconds before I manage to dislodge it. The blade is covered with the same black, glittery substance that flowed through Volans, and it spews out of the wound as well. Lacerta releases his grip on my leg and claws at the fresh wound frantically. I try to stand up, but I can't put any weight on the injured leg, so I fall back to the roof as Lacerta shakes off its own injury. With what I can only describe as a



curse word in hiss form, Lacerta places itself directly over my body and prepares to chomp down on me once more.

This is it, I'm totally out of options. My companions can't help me in time, and I can only do so much with this little pocket knife. I'm about to become lizard food. At least with me distracting the lizard, maybe Crissy and Orion can escape. That's why I followed them to Philadelphia in the first place, to protect her. At least I have that. I put my hands in front of my face, and close my eyes against my inevitable doom.

Okay it's been a few seconds, Maybe I'm not about to become lunch. Slowly, I reopen my eyes. Lacerta's gaping maw is still inches from my face, so I wince and shut my eyes once again. Gathering up the courage a second time, I peek to see the lizard frozen in mid-air, attempting to writhe free from what appears to be a pulsing, pale blue bubble of pure energy. Still barely able to move out of fear, I peek behind the beast. Crissy stands on the roof by the ladder, holding up a strange, metal tool. It resembles a drawing compass but is comprised of more than one triangular frame, with numerous lenses and dials attached to it. It is surrounded by a bright aura, the same color as the bubble that encases Lacerta. Crissy is on the verge of tears, but she laughs with joy as I lean into her view. I give her a nervous smile and turn back to the lizard. Slowly, making sure to keep the majority of my weight off my left leg, I stand up and come to eye level with Lacerta.

"Okay," I tell it, looking directly into its eye as it darts around frantically. "You have to admit that was pretty awesome."

Before the lizard could confirm that what Crissy did was awesome, I bring my pocket knife up and prepare to bring it down onto the beast. I think Crissy has earned my trust of her knowledge of constellations, so I plunge the blade into Lacerta's left eye. I'm barely able to pull

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my knife out before the creature begins flailing uncontrollably, unleashing sounds from its mouth that almost make me feel bad for it. As Lacerta grows more erratic, the bubble around it starts to writhe as well, becoming unstable. I slowly inch away, ready for the lizard's next move.

Eventually, Crissy's bubble bursts into a shockwave of energy, knocking me onto my back.

Lacerta thumps back onto the roof, moving freely once again.

The beast now turns its attention to Crissy, and with the same ferocity that it chased me down with, lunges at her. But it does not lead with its claws or mouth. Instead it chooses to spin around in mid-air, whipping its tail from behind to strike Crissy, which would inevitably lead to her being knocked off the train.

"Crissy!!" I yell helplessly as I sit on my ass.

Crissy can't react either, and she lets out a small gasp as Lacerta's tail flies towards her. However she is soon eclipsed by Orion's body as he flings himself up from the ladder. With a single swipe of his sword, he severs the last few feet of Lacerta's tail. With the shock of the new injury, the lizard thumps to the floor with yet another agonizing shriek. Orion places Crissy behind him and gives me a sly nod.

"Told you I just needed some time, Mike."

I can almost cry I'm so happy that Crissy is safe. I take the opportunity to stand up once again. However I'm still on a different train car removed from the rest of the action. I eye the short gap in front of me and prepare myself for what is truly a going to be painful. I leap to the other car and collapse onto my knees, suppressing a high pitched squeal for the sake of preserving my dignity.

Lacerta regains its footing and shakes its head before taking stock of its situation. It darts its head between me and Orion, both of whom have taken some of its stars with the bladed

weapons we were still holding aloft. It backs away slowly towards the edge of the train car as Orion closes the distance with confidence. Lacerta does not lunge, choosing to hiss instead. The frills on its neck flare out and vibrate, displaying another blue pattern on their front face. The hiss continues to rise in pitch, and I soon notice that Lacerta's neck is starting to glow with an acidic green color and pulsate, getting ready to spit. I'm smart enough to realize what's coming. Orion also straightens his posture in realization. He grabs Crissy and pulls her to the floor as Lacerta opens its mouth, letting loose a wide arc of bubbling and hissing green acid into the air. I roll to the side as the acid shoots past my previous position. My head ends up hanging off the edge of the train car, pointed towards the ground, so I witness the acid hit the wall of the neighboring car. I watch in horror as it eats through the metal plating, eventually dripping onto the locking mechanism that holds the two cars together.

I spin around quickly and jump to my feet. Orion is still making sure Crissy is safe from the acid. Lacerta seems no longer interested in fighting, having already sustained too much punishment. It swivels around and jumps off the train into the forest, disappearing into the thick brush of a tall tree. We forced our enemy to retreat, but there is no time to celebrate.

"Get back in the car!" I yell to Crissy and Orion as I limp towards the ladder. The acid is about to eat through the connection! We'll be thrown off!"

Everyone's eyes go wide with fear. Crissy immediately descends the ladder, with me and Orion not far behind. Once we're back inside, we shut the door and gather our bags. Seeing no better option, the three of us huddle in the center of the car, crouched low, away from all the clutter of heavy crates and splintered wood, and wait for what is about to happen.

Crissy and I stare wide eyed at each other as Orion placed his massive arms around us and pulls us closer to the ground. After an agonizing twenty seconds of waiting, we feel the car lurch

downward and skid along the tracks. We are thrown towards the front of the train like ragdolls as the sound of screeching metal and sparks fill our ears.

I remain lying amidst the debris of broken boxes for a couple minutes before I gather enough strength to move. I regain my footing with all the urgency of a retirement home inhabitant and try to find my bearings. I spot Orion's massive form in the darkness. Even he seems dazed from the crash. I search wildly for Crissy. Eventually I spot her emerging from behind a box. She is moving very sluggishly and is using the box for support. Before I can ask her if she is all right, Orion thrusts my bag into my arms and does the same for Crissy.

"Move it. We can't risk being found by whoever is driving this train. The Astrologists can't lose Crissy."

Orion throws open the door and checks to see if the coast is clear. Crissy shields her eyes from the light, nearly falling over in the process. Orion helps us both out of the train car and urges us to make some distance as quickly as possible. We soon find ourselves hidden amongst the foliage observing the crash site.

The train car did indeed disconnect from the rest of the train, and is now resting along the tracks at a thirty degree angle. The rest of the train stopped many yards away, and we can see the engineer just now making his way to our car, moving as fast as an overweight middle aged man can. He stops at the green acid eating away at his train, looking at the scene with bewilderment. Eventually he turns around to look for the potential stowaways. Orion quietly urges us deeper into the forest to continue our journey on foot.