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ECONOMIC CREATURES

BOOK TWO – THE CREATURES’
VIRUS

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Losing Control

I was bleeding like a slaughtered pig when the blond giant's fist caught me in the face again. Then a hard blow crashed into my stomach. My innards cramped, and acid shot into my throat, flooding my mouth with a nauseating taste. Dodging is impossible if you're sitting tied up on a chair and can only take what some sadistic guy deals out. Again, his fist flew towards me, caught me on the chin and added a new one to the numerous lacerations crisscrossing my body. Rejoicing that all my teeth were still firmly in place was little consolation because that could change with the next blow. The bizarre situation I was in was nothing new to me, apart from the fact that I was tied to that wooden chair wearing only my underpants, and my tormentor was having a great time. Only one, undeniable thing truly frightened me. The pain Castor was inflicting on me was more bearable than I had anticipated. Maybe I was just tired and weak, or my senses were playing tricks on me, but it seemed that this man couldn't hurt me in the slightest.

"Tell me, are you just doing this for your personal pleasure?", I asked my tanned tormentor, who was wearing a white muscle shirt and black trousers that that went with an elegant tuxedo. The man, almost two meter tall with neatly styled blond hair, clearly spent his free time in the weight room. He bent down to me.

"You got that right, Hardy," he replied, grinning arrogantly.

Then he ran to a trolley like car mechanics used and inspected the neatly arranged utensils he would use to raise my pain to a new level. In addition to the variety of torture instruments, the small radio he always carried with him also sat perched on the trolley. That dirty little device gave him complete control over me. Just one brief command was enough, and I wouldn't see Madeline alive again. That was the only means of pressure Castor and Lydia still had against me. And they would exploit it to the bitter end. I watched as Castor looked around, seeking something. Then the blond man turned around

without saying a word and ran towards the large archway, which led into another hall where weight benches, treadmills, bicycles and other fitness equipment stood. It took some time for Castor to disappear completely. This gave me the brief breathing space I desperately needed. After all, this giant, whose entire left side of his face sported a nasty burn wound, had been working on me for almost an hour. A few days ago, he presented himself in a black combat suit like one special forces wore. Unfortunately, his always polite choice of words did not hide his obviously sadistic streak. To label him a psychopath would be a bit too easy. Something just wasn't right with the guy.

After spitting an impressive amount of blood and saliva on the expensive marble floor, I looked around the huge hall, which obviously served its owner as a deluxe swimming pool. The disgusting smell of chlorine, which I had detested even as a child, caused me a big headache from the very beginning. The acrid smell mixed with the taste of my blood to form a strangely disgusting mélange. Immediately behind me was the expansive pool – the second he had on this property, I might add. Towering over the pool was a stone bridge with light brown Greek columns and a wide handrail. Underneath was a cocktail bar that offered everything your heart desired. To my left was a huge panorama window, through which I could see the pompous entrance gate that stood about fifty meters in front of the property. It was flanked by a high and thick stone wall that surrounded the entire area and was regularly patrolled by heavily armed guards. Not that the guards were necessary, as a novel weapon system protected the property and its inhabitants. An insurmountable fortress that was equipped for any attack. Living or undead did not matter.

A huge glass dome towered directly above me, through which the light of the rising sun slowly streamed. Under different circumstances, I would have liked it very much here. A nice cocktail, some pleasant women, and the party could begin. Unfortunately, another story was playing out here, one that could cost me head and neck if I didn't finally do something or unless someone rushed to my aid. But there was obviously no hope of rescue, and so I was once

again on my own and had to figure out how to get my ass off the firing line. Once again, I had catapulted myself into a situation that was my own fault. The fucking story of my life.

My mother once said that every person has a special talent or a talent that makes him mature into a very special personality. My talent obviously lay in putting pain away surprisingly well and saying incredibly stupid things. I regard a talent for maneuvering oneself into hopeless situations as a kind of gift that I wouldn't wish on anyone. It would all be only half as bad if I didn't keep dragging other people into this shit.

The wire Castor had used to fetter me hurt like crazy and had already cut into my wrists some time ago. Once again typical of these filthy rich jerks. They build palaces for millions, but save on bondage material for their prisoners. Some things never change. Despite all that, I am still surprised to have come this far and in such a short time. The mission had started a few weeks ago and had not excluded any kind of risk, no matter how life-threatening. Only to end up on a gigantic estate, whose owner, and her blond lackey, had welcomed me very warmly. Lydia, that ice-cold piece of crap, presented me with answers to unasked questions on a damned silver platter. Although I can do little with it now, it is reassuring to know who the real authors of this global catastrophe were – the catastrophe they had inflicted on humanity some time ago now. Bartosz would probably spin in his grave if he knew the facts. Many of his perspectives and theories were correct, but the real reason for our extermination was so banal that even I can't believe it. But that diabolical game for power paled in comparison to the explanations that Lydia had beaten around my ears. Before her trained dog Castor took me out of the cell and dragged me to this fun pool, bad things happened that will lead to a very unpleasant end for him, Lydia and everyone involved. Again, I sprinkle the floor with blood, look at the mushy mass for a long time and hope that Madeline is doing better than I am right now.

Castor returned whistling happily with a red canister in one hand and an olive-colored sack in the other. His initially dark silhouette took on ever clearer contours the closer he came to me. He calmly put down the canister, which was clearly filled with gasoline, and pulled something out of the bag. It was my nunchaku – the one I had used to kill the creature some time ago. Probably my other weapons were also in the bag. Without ammunition, they were useless, so I didn't think about them any further. The blond man held the thick wooden rods, attached to each other with a short steel chain stretched, in his hands. Then he started flinging the rods around. Apparently, he was very familiar with this weapon and put on an impressive show that would have earned a standing ovation even from Bruce Lee. With a breathtaking speed, he let the massive wood rods circulate, guided them past his body and never missed his grip. It was probably a kind of warm-up so that he wouldn't tear a tendon when he finished me off with my own weapon.

"Castor," I said to the giant, who continued to whirl the nunchaku. "Can't we talk about it again?" Admittedly, a desperate attempt to save my hitherto intact bones and buy some time. Time that might still save my ass. Was there ever an episode of the A-Team where John Hannibal Smith's plan didn't work out and he had to be rescued by his comrades? I thought I remembered one or two episodes. In one episode, even Murdock had hatched a successful plan, which Hannibal couldn't believe.

«What else should we talk about?», the voice of my tormentor tore me out of my thoughts. "Lydia said I can do whatever I want with you as long as I kill you afterwards. What more could I ask for?"

Castor was hard to beat in unscrupulousness, that much had become clear to me. But he had to have a weakness. The ugly burn scar on his face, which was probably the legacy of some ardent admirer (get it? ardent?) that he had paid back the end, seemed to me to be a good approach.

"What do you think about untying me and we sort it out in the traditional way," I suggested to the blond giant, who was undoubtedly quite able to defend himself. "You know, mano a mano and stuff. But before that, please let me put my pants back on. Otherwise, the situation might be a bit awkward, if you understand."

He just laughed and continued his exercise with the nunchaku. Then he lashed one of the rods against my skull. The force of the blow, to the left side of my face, jerked my head far to the right. To my amazement, some stars exploded before my eyes, but I barely felt the pain. I decided not to inform my counterpart about it, because he could always deal out a haymaker that I would not put away so easily. So, I slowly turned my head forward again and looked at Castor gloomily.

"Oh, that hurt, didn't it?" he asked me with a grin as he leaned down slightly. "You think I'm a moron, don't you?"

"Well, I didn't want to trumpet it to the world, but you're pretty ..."

At that moment, he rammed the rods into my family jewels. This time it hurt a lot. I was left breathless for some time while I struggled against fainting and let loose a low, humming groan. Some time passed before I came to myself again and looked gloomily at the tall man, who was now standing in front of me with his feet planted wide. A soft growl escaped my throat. He would pay for it, and not too cheaply. Again, he waved the rods in front of my head and walked up and down conspicuously slowly.

"Hardy, I saw how you dealt with Lydia's soldiers. That was really an impressive performance, I have to admit. I've seen how dangerous you really are. It's not that I'm afraid of you. But fate sometimes makes a 180 degree turn and I just won't allow to win. It's a probability thing, you understand. Since you wouldn't have a chance to save yourself anyway, I'll save myself the trouble. But I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll smash your bones for a while,

pour gasoline over you, and then I'll set you on fire. What do you think about that, my friend?"

Damn, if this dinosaur didn't slowly react to my provocations, I'd soon be blazing like a torch. All that was missing was "Stuck in the middle with you" and me calling him "Mr. Blonde" – then the whole scenario would have been perfect.

"Speaking of setting on fire," I said to him conspicuously casually. "Who actually fried your face?" Castor abruptly stopped pacing and stared at me emotionlessly. Then he crouched down in front of me, not breaking eye contact for a second. I had expected another blow, but he just smiled coldly at me.

"Kind of you to ask. My father did this to me because I stood in his way when he repeatedly tried to violate my sister. He tied me to the bed, put a pot of water on the stove and then poured it very slowly over my face. I only held out the left half to him so that he could not mutilate me completely. Eventually, the pain robbed me of consciousness. I was just eight years old when he did that to me. When I was twelve, I put an ice pick in the back of his head. I will never forget his surprised look when he sank to his knees in front of me and could not understand what was happening to him. He briefly tried to pull the metal out of his head, but it was too late. He fell right in front of my feet and breathed out his miserable little life. I've never felt as good as I did at that moment. So, that's the short version of my disfigurement. I think I'll skip the chapter with the bone smashing and go straight to flambéing. Your callous question has somehow inspired me."

With these words, Castor rose again, carelessly threw away the nunchaku, which loudly bounced off the marble floor a few times, and grabbed the red gasoline canister. Shit, this bum would never free me and risk a fistfight. He would put follow his plan and dance around me like an Indian while I burned like a damned sparkler. He opened the lid of the canister, looking at me with a cold smile. Then he poured out the stinking broth over me. It washed the blood

from my body, but burned like fire in my wounds. Another smell joined the pool's chlorine stink and reacted with the stomach acid still burning in my throat. The gasoline vapor gave me trouble breathing, and I coughed a few times. He laid a long trail of gasoline, almost to the large window, to light it from a safe distance. Then he pulled a silver Zippo lighter out of his pocket. The obligatory clacking when he opened the lighter reached my ears. After a few failed attempts to ignite the lighter, he eventually succeeded. The small flame blazed up, casting Castor's face into a mystical light.

"Any last pleas for mercy, Hardy?"

"Fuck you," I threw at him hatefully. I would never beg. Especially not with such a cowardly scumbag, who was probably still horny about it. In view of my imminent end, I closed my eyes and went deep into myself. I wasn't afraid. My father's legacy, which had served me well more than once, did not let me down even now.

Suddenly, a deafening bang broke the silence. Immediately afterwards, the window front to my left burst into a thousand shards. A shock wave tore me sideways and slammed me to the floor, breaking the chair. For a moment the world's volume level lowered, and I looked at Castor, who had also been torn off his legs and thrown against the wall. There were dozens of large glass shards in his body, but they did not prevent him from getting up and running to the destroyed window. Slowly I stood up and walked towards Castor, who was gazing outside as if spellbound. A few steps behind him I stopped and looked out as well. The iron gate had been blown open and a flood of undead were pouring onto the estate. Even in the distance, I could see no end to the stream of arrivals. They quickly spread all over the grounds, while some guards and soldiers scattered in vain. Those who opposed the horde were overrun and torn to pieces. The wall had protected them all for a long time, but even their superior technology, their weapon systems and their armed guards could not protect them. Countless screams of slaughtered men reached us as

we watched the spectacle. The well-known mumbling and groans, as well as the musty smell of decaying corpses, wafted over us. Probably the other windows of the building had been destroyed by the pressure of the detonation. Very soon, a host of undead would take over the house and pull the flesh from everyone's bones. Ezra – the thought shot through my head. So, that little boy was still alive and he was here. And if he were here, maybe the others had made it. I had no idea how they had found us, but the timing couldn't have been better. Slowly, I freed my hands from the wire and rubbed the wounds on my joints. The numb feeling in my hands subsided and I felt the strong pulse that supplied blood to my limbs again. Castor didn't look around. But he knew that I was behind him and that there was no escape.

"Why all this?" whispered Castor just loud enough for me to hear. "Why are you destroying everything we have created here? Why did you refuse to cooperate with us? It could have been so easy," he added as he turned to me.

"Are you serious?" I replied with a smile as I ran to my clothes and hastily put on my cargo pants. Then I watched as Castor pulled one shard after another out of his body and then slowly came toward me, looking at me glumly. The blond giant stood in front of me, raised his fists and remained silently in that pose. Watchfully he waited for me to strike the first blow. The time of vengeance had finally arrived. Castor had snuffed out too many lives, caused too much pain, and left behind too much misery for him to get away with. Finally, I feel the sense of justice that is mine. I will enjoy removing that arrogant grin from his face. I will abuse his bones and then feed his remains to the undead. And I'm going to take a lot of time with it. That much is certain.

"Time to die, you bastard."