



THE
KAIJU

PRESERVATION

SOCIETY JOHN

SCALZI **A NOVEL**

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KAIJU
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SOCIETY**

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*To Alexis Saarela,
my favorite publicist;
and to Matthew Ryan,
who writes the songs*

CHAPTER

1

“Jamie Gray!” Rob Sanders popped his head out of his office door and waved at me, grinning. “Come on down. Let’s do this thing.”

I got up from my workstation and grabbed the tablet with my notes, grinning as well. I glanced over to Qanisha Williams, who gave me a quick fist bump. “Knock him dead,” she said.

“Stone dead,” I said, and walked into the CEO’s office. It was time for my performance review, and I’m not gonna lie, I was going to crush it.

Rob Sanders welcomed me in and motioned me over to his “conversation pit,” as he liked to call it, which was four massive, primary-colored beanbags around a low table. The table was one of those ones that had a magnetic bead that dragged around blinding white sand under the glass, making geometric patterns as it did so. Currently the bead was making a swirly pattern. I picked the red beanbag and sank into it, only a little awkwardly. My tablet briefly flopped out of my hand, and I caught it before it skittered off the beanbag and onto the floor. I looked up at Sanders, who was still standing, and smiled. He smiled back, rolled over a standard desk chair and sat in backward, arms crossed over the back, looking down at me.

Oh, I see, CEO power move, very nice, I thought. I wasn’t worried about it. I understood how CEO egos worked, and I was prepared to navigate my way through this one. I was here for my six-month performance evaluation from Rob, and I was going to, as previously stated, knock him dead.

“Comfortable?” Rob asked me.

“Supremely,” I said. As discreetly as possible, I adjusted my center of gravity so I was no longer listing ever so slightly starboard.

“Good. How long have you been here at füd мүд, Jamie?”

“Six months.”

“And how do you feel about your time here?”

“I’m glad you asked, Rob. I feel really good about it. And in fact”—I held up my tablet —“I’d like to spend some time in this session talking about how I think we can improve not just the fūdmūd app, but our relationships with restaurants, delivery people, and users. It’s 2020 now, and the food delivery app space has matured. We really need to go all out to distinguish ourselves if we want to genuinely compete with Grubhub and Uber Eats and all the others, here in NYC and beyond.”

“So you think we can improve?”

“Yeah, I do.” I attempted to lean forward in the beanbag and succeeded only in driving my ass farther into its recesses. I rolled with it and just pointed to my tablet. “So, you’ve heard about this COVID-19 thing.”

“I have,” Rob allowed.

“I think it’s pretty clear we’re heading for a lockdown. Here in the city that means people will be getting food deliveries even more than usual. But it also means that restaurants are going to be pinched because they won’t be able to do table service. If fūdmūd offered to lower our fees in exchange for exclusive listings and delivery service, we’d both make friends with restaurant owners *and* get a leg up on the other apps.”

“You want us to lower fees.”

“Yes.”

“Decrease revenues during a possible pandemic.”

“No! See, that’s the thing. If we move quickly and lock down, pardon the pun, the popular restaurants, we’ll see revenues go up because order traffic will go up. And not just our revenue. Our delivery people—”

“Deliverators.”

I shifted in the beanbag. “What?”

“Deliverators. That’s what we’re calling them now. Clever, right? I thought up the term.”

“I thought Neal Stephenson did.”

“Who?”

“He’s a writer. He wrote *Snow Crash*.”

“And that’s, what, a *Frozen* sequel?”

“It’s a book, actually.”

Rob waved his hand dismissively. “If it’s not Disney, we won’t get sued for it. You were saying?”

“Our, uh, *deliverators* could also see an uptick. We could pay a higher delivery fee to them—not too much.” I saw Rob starting to frown here. “Just enough to differentiate ourselves from the other apps. In a gig economy, just a little boost goes a long way. We could actually build some loyalty, which would improve service, which would be another differentiator.”

“You want to compete on quality, basically.”

“Yes!” I made a pointing gesture, which sank me farther into the beanbag. “I mean, we’re already better than the other apps. We just have to drive the point home.”

“It’ll cost us a little more, but it will be worth it, is where you’re going with this.”

“I think so. I know, wild, right? But that’s the whole point. We’ll be where everyone else in the food delivery app space isn’t. And by the time they figure out what we’re up to, we’ll *own* New York City. For starters.”

“You have bold ideas, Jamie,” Rob said. “You’re not afraid to take risks and move the conversation.”

I beamed, and set down my tablet. “Thank you, Rob. I think you’re right. I took a risk when I left my doctorate program to come work at fūdmūd, you know? My friends at the University of Chicago thought I was nuts to pack up and move out to New York to work for a start-up. But it just felt right. I think I’m really making a difference in how people order food.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. Because the reason we’re here is to talk about your future with fūdmūd. Where best to place you, so you can utilize that passion you so clearly feel.”

“Well, *I’m* glad to hear *you* say that, Rob.” I tried to move forward again in the beanbag, failed, and decided to risk a small push-up. It realigned the beanbag so I was in a slightly less compacted position, but my tablet slid into the well my body had created. I was now sitting on my tablet. I decided to ignore it. “Tell me how I can serve the company.”

“Deliverationing.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Deliverationing,” Rob repeated. “That’s what our deliverators do. They deliverate. So, deliverationing.”

“Is that manifestly different from *delivery*?”

“No, but we can’t trademark *delivery*.”

I changed the subject. “So you want me to head up fūdmūd’s deliver ... ationing strategies?”

Rob shook his head. “I think that’s too limiting for you, don’t you think?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What I’m saying, Jamie, is that fūdmūd needs someone like you on the ground. In the trenches. Giving us intel from the street.” He waved out the window. “Real. Gritty. Unvarnished. As only *you* can.”

I took a minute to let this sink in. “You want me to be a fūdmūd delivery person.”

“Deliverator.”

“That’s not actually a position in the company.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s not important *to* the company, Jamie.”

I tried to adjust again, failed again. “Wait—what’s going on here, Rob?”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought this was my six-month performance review.”

Rob nodded. “In a way, it is.”

“But you’re telling me you want me to be a delivery per—”

“Deliverator.”

“—whatever the *fuck* you want to call it, it’s not actually a position with the company. You’re laying me off.”

“I’m not laying you off,” Rob assured me.

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m presenting you with an exciting opportunity to enrich the füdmüd work experience in an entirely different way.”

“A way that doesn’t pay me benefits *or* give me health insurance *or* a salary.”

Rob tutted at this. “You know that’s not true. füdmüd has a reciprocal agreement with Duane Reade that gets our deliverators up to ten percent off selected health products.”

“Yeah, all right, we’re done,” I said. I hefted myself up out of the beanbag, slipped, and fell back on my tablet, cracking the screen in the process. “Perfect.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Rob said, pointing to the tablet as I finally hauled myself out of my seat. “It’s company property. You can just leave it when you go.”

I flung the tablet over to Rob, who grabbed it. “You’re a real asshole,” I said. “Just so you know.”

“We’re going to miss you as part of the füdmüd family, Jamie,” Rob said. “But remember, there’s always a slot open for you in deliverating. That’s a promise.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Your choice.” He pointed out the door. “Qanisha has your severance paperwork ready to go. If you’re still here in fifteen minutes, building security will help you find the door.” He got up out of his chair, walked to his desk, dropped the tablet into the trash can there, and pulled out his phone to make a call.

“You *knew*,” I said accusingly to Qanisha as I walked up to her. “You knew and you wished me luck *anyway*.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“Put up your fist.”

She did, confused. I punched it, lightly. “There,” I said. “I’m taking back that previous solidarity fist bump.”

“Fair.” She handed me my severance paperwork. “I was also told to tell you that a *deliverator* account has been opened in your name.” She said *deliverator* like it hurt her to say it. “You know, just in case.”

“I think I’d rather die.”

“Don’t be hasty, Jamie,” Qanisha warned. “That shutdown is coming. And our Duane Reade discount is now up to fifteen percent.”

★ ★ ★

“So that was my day,” I said to my roommate Brent. We were in the pathetically small fourth-floor walk-up on Henry Street that I shared with Brent, Brent’s boyfriend, Laertes, and a convenient stranger named Reba, who we almost never saw and, if she didn’t leave long strands of hair on the shower wall on the daily, might not believe actually existed.

“That’s rough,” Brent said.

“Firebomb the place,” Laertes said, from the room he and Brent shared, where he was playing a video game.

“No one’s firebombing anything,” Brent yelled back to Laertes.

“Yet,” Laertes replied.

“You can’t firebomb your way out of every problem,” Brent said.

“*You* can’t,” Laertes called back.

“Don’t firebomb the place,” Brent said to me, his voice lowered so Laertes wouldn’t hear.

“I’m not going to,” I promised. “But it’s *tempting*.”

“So you’re looking for something else now?”

“I am, but it’s not looking great,” I said. “All of New York is in a state of emergency. Everything’s closing up. No one’s hiring for anything, and what jobs there are won’t pay for *this*.” I motioned to our crappy fourth-floor walk-up. “I mean, the good news, if you want to call it that, is that my severance payment from fūdmūd will pay my share of the rent here for a few months. I might starve, but I won’t be homeless at least until August.”

Brent looked uncomfortable at that. “What?” I said.

He reached over to the pile of mail on the kitchen table we were sitting at, and picked up a plain envelope. “I assume you didn’t see this, then.”

I took it and opened it. Inside were ten one-hundred-dollar bills, and a note which read, in its entirety, *Fuck this plague town I am out—R*.

I looked over to where Reba’s room was. “She’s gone?”

“To the extent she was ever here, yes.”

“She’s a ghost with an ATM card,” Laertes yelled, from the other room.

“Well, this is *great*,” I said. “At least she left her last month’s rent.” I dropped the envelope, the note, and the money on the table, and put my head in my hands. “This is what I get for not putting any of the rest of you on the lease. Don’t you two leave, okay?”

“So,” Brent said. “About that.”

I glanced at him through my fingers. “No.”

“Look, Jai—”

“*No*.”

Brent held up his hands. “Look, here’s the thing—”

“*Noooooooooo*,” I whined, and dropped my head on the table, thunking it nice and hard as I did so.

“Drama won’t help,” Laertes said, from the bedroom.

“You want to *firebomb* everything,” I yelled back at him.

“That’s not drama, that’s revolution,” was his response.

I looked back over to Brent. “Please tell me you’re not abandoning me,” I said.

“We work in the theater,” Brent said. “And it’s like you said, everything’s shutting down. I don’t have any savings, and you know Laertes doesn’t either.”

“I am *hilariously* broke,” Laertes confirmed.

Brent winced at that, then continued. “If things get bad, and they’re going to get bad, we can’t afford to stay.”

“Where will you go?” I asked. As far as I knew, Brent had no family to speak of.

“We can stay with Laertes’s parents in Boulder.”

“My old room is just the way I left it,” Laertes said. “Until I firebomb it.”

“No firebombing,” Brent said, but his heart wasn’t in it. Laertes’s parents were the sort of outwardly very nice conservative people who wouldn’t miss an opportunity to call Laertes by his deadname, and that shit will wear you down over time.

“You’re staying,” I said.

“We’re staying for now, yes,” Brent agreed. “But if we run out of—”

“You’re staying,” I said, more firmly.

“Jamie, I can’t ask you to do that,” Brent said.

“I can,” Laertes said, from the bedroom. “Fuck Boulder.”

“It’s settled, then.” I got up from the table.

“Jamie—”

“We’ll make it work.” I smiled at Brent and then went to my room, which was the size of a postage stamp, but at least it was drafty and the floor creaked.

I sat on my shitty twin bed, sighed, then lay down and stared at the ceiling for a good hour. Then I sighed again, sat up, and pulled out my phone. I turned it on.

The fūdmūd app was waiting for me on the screen.

I sighed a third time and opened it.

As promised, my deliverator account was signed in and ready to go.