



**THE**  
**KAIJU**

**PRESERVATION**

**SOCIETY JOHN**

**SCALZI** **A NOVEL**

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**THE  
KAIJU  
PRESERVATION  
SOCIETY**

**JOHN  
SCALZI**



**TOR**

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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 füd мүд 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 füd мүд 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 *füdmüd*, 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 *füdmüd*. 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 füd мүд’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 füd мүд 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 füd мүд 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 füd мүд 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. füd мүд 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 fűdműd 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 füd müd 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 füd мүd 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.

# CHAPTER

## 2

“Hello and thank you for ordering from füd мүd,” I said to the dude who opened the door to the ridiculously nice condo in the brand-new building that the doorman let me into because he knew I was an expected delivery person and not, probably, a robber. “I am your deliverator, Jamie. It is my passion to bring you your”—and here I looked at my phone—“seven-spice chicken and vegan egg rolls.” I thrust the bag forward for the dude to take.

“They make you say that?” he said, taking the bag.

“They really do,” I confirmed.

“Delivering isn’t actually your passion, is it?”

“It’s really *not*.”

“I understand. It will be our little secret.”

“Thank you.” I turned to go.

“Hope you find your samurai swords.”

I stopped turning. “What?”

“Sorry, inside joke,” the dude said. “You know ‘deliverator’ is from *Snow Crash*, right? The Neal Stephenson book? Anyway, the protagonist of the book is a delivery guy who has samurai swords. I forget the hero’s name.”

I turned back all the way. “*Thank you*,” I said. “I’ve been delivering food for six months, and you’re the first person to get the reference. At all.”

“I mean, it’s pretty obvious.”

“You would *think*, right? It’s only a modern classic of the genre. But *no one* gets it. First, no one *cares*”—I waved wildly to encompass all of the philistine Lower East Side, and possibly, all five boroughs of New York City—“and second of all, when anyone comments on it they think it’s a play on

*The Terminator.*”

“To be fair, it is a play on *The Terminator*.”

“Well, *yeah*,” I said. “But I think it’s come into its own.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve just found your passion,” the dude said.

I was suddenly aware of my emphatic body language, perhaps made more emphatic by the fact that I, like the dude, was wearing a face mask, because New York City was a plague town in a plague country and any potential vaccine was still undergoing double-blind studies somewhere we were not. “Sorry,” I said. “At one point in my life my dissertation was going to be on utopian and dystopian literature. As you might expect, *Snow Crash* was in there as one of the latter.” I nodded, and turned again to go.

“Wait,” the dude said. “Jamie ... *Gray*?”

*Oh my god*, my brain said. *Just walk away. Walk away and never admit that someone knows your deliverationing shame.* But even as my brain was saying that, my body was turning back, because like puppies we are enculturated to turn when our name is called. “That’s me,” I said, the words popping out, with the last one sounding like my tongue was desperately trying to recall the whole sentence.

The dude smiled, set down his bag, took a step back to get out of the immediate breath zone, and unhooked his mask for a second so I could see his face. Then he put it back on. “It’s Tom Stevens.”

My brain raced around in the primordial LinkedIn of my memory, trying to figure out how I knew this dude. He wasn’t helping; he clearly expected to be so memorable that he would pop up in my head instantly. He wasn’t, and yet—

“Tom Stevens who dated Iris Banks who was best friends with my roommate Diego when I lived in that apartment on South Kimbark just above Fifty-third Street and used to come to our parties sometimes,” I said.

“That’s very exact,” Tom said.

“You went to the business school.”

“I did. Hope you don’t mind. Not super academic.”

“I mean”—I motioned to the very nice condo in the brand-new building—“it turned out okay for you.”

He glanced at the condo as if noticing it for the first time, the bastard. “I guess it did. Anyway, I remember you talking about your dissertation at one of those parties once.”



“Sorry,” I said. “I did that a lot at parties back then.”

“It’s fine,” Tom assured me. “I mean, it got me to read *Snow Crash*, right? You changed lives.”

I smiled at that.

“So why did you leave your doctoral program?” Tom asked me, the next time I delivered food to him, which was an Ethiopian mixed meat combo with injera.

“I had a quarter-life crisis,” I said. “Or a twenty-eight-year-old crisis, which is the same only slightly later.”

“Got it.”

“I saw all these people I knew of, people like *you*, no offense—”

Tom grinned through his mask; I saw it through the eye crinkles. “None taken.”

“—going off and having lives and careers and taking vacations and meeting hot people, and I was sitting in Hyde Park with the same sixteen people, in a crappy apartment, reading books and arguing with undergrads that no, actually, they *did* have to turn in their papers on time.”

“I thought you liked reading books.”

“I do, but if you’re only reading books because you *have* to, it becomes much less fun.”

“But when you got your doctorate, you could become a professor.”

I snorted at this. “You have a much more optimistic view of the academic landscape than I do. I was looking down the barrel of adjunct professorships for the rest of my life.”

“Is that bad?”

I pointed at his food. “I’d make even less than I do delivering your injera.”

“So you ditched it all to become a deliverator,” Tom said as I delivered his Korean fried chicken.

“No,” I said. “I actually got a job at füd мүd. A real one with benefits and stock options. Then I got fired by their dicknozzle CEO just as the pandemic ramped up.”

“That sucks.”

“You know what really sucks,” I said. “After he punted me into the street, he took the ideas I had for locking up restaurants and paying deliverators more. Well, *some* of the deliverators anyway. You only get paid more if you get more than four stars. So remember to give me five stars, please, I’m right

on that edge. Every star counts, my dear deliverationee.”

“Deliverationee?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t ask.”

Tom smiled again; eye crinkles. “I take it you weren’t the one to come up with the ‘deliverator’ name.”

“Oh, hell, no.”

“So, you worked there, you can tell me this,” Tom said, when I delivered his Chicago-style deep-dish pizza, which honestly I was surprised was allowed within the borders of New York City at all, much less this close to Little Italy. “What’s with the umlauts?”

“You mean, why is it füdmüd, and not the more logical FoodMood?”

“Yes, that.”

“Because FoodMood was already taken by a food delivery app in Bangladesh, and they wouldn’t sell the name,” I said. “So if you’re ever in the Mymensingh area, be sure to use the app with the name that actually makes sense.”

“I’ve been to Bangladesh,” Tom said. “Well, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“For my job. It’s complicated.”

“Are you a spy?”

“No.”

“A mercenary? That would explain this very nice condo in a brand-new building.”

“I’m pretty sure mercenaries live in double-wides in the woods of North Carolina,” Tom said.

“Of course you would say that,” I said. “That’s what they tell mercenaries to say.”

“I work for an NGO, actually.”

“*Definitely* a mercenary.”

“I’m not a mercenary.”

“I’m going to remember you said that when I see you on CNN as part of a Bangladeshi coup.”

“This is the last time I’m going to get a delivery from you for a while, I’m afraid,” Tom said to me, when I delivered his shawarma platter to him. “My job is taking me back out into the field and I’ll be there for several months.”

“Actually this is last time you’ll ever get a delivery from me,” I said.

“You’re quitting?”

I laughed. “Not exactly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Oh, you haven’t *heard*, then,” I said. “füdmüd is being bought out by Uber for, like, four billion dollars, and rolled into Uber Eats. Apparently, we were so successful at locking up the best restaurants and the best deliverators that Uber decided it was just easier to buy us and all our exclusivity contracts.”

“So the CEO who stole your ideas—”

“Rob Shitmonkey Sanders, yes.”

“—is now becoming a billionaire.”

“It’s an eighty percent cash deal, so, yup, pretty much.”

“And you don’t want to deliver for Uber.”

“See, that’s the *best* part,” I said. “Uber already has their delivery people, and they didn’t want to have to roll over *all* the deliverators. That would make the delivery people they already have unhappy. So they’re only taking the ones that had four-star and above ratings.” I opened my füdmüd app and showed him my stats. “Three point nine seven five stars, baby.”

“I always gave you five stars,” Tom said.

“Well, I appreciate that, Tom, for what little good it does me now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Long term? I have no fucking idea. I was barely scraping by as it is. I’m the only one of my roommates who had anything approaching close to steady work, so I was paying the rent and the utilities and most of the food. We’re in the middle of a plague, so no one’s hiring for anything. I have no savings and nowhere else to go. So, yeah. No idea, long term. But”—I held up a finger—“short term? I’m gonna buy a bottle of shitty vodka and drink the whole damn thing in my shower. That way, when I make a mess of myself, it’ll be easy for my roommates to clean up.”

“I’m sorry, Jamie.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “And anyway, I apologize for unloading on you.”

“It’s all right. I mean, we’re friends.”

I laughed again at this. “It’s more like we have a workable service relationship with a tenuous personal history. But thank you, Tom. I actually did enjoy delivering to you. Enjoy your shawarma.” I started to go.

“Hold on,” Tom said. He set down his shawarma and disappeared into the recesses of his very nice condo. A minute later, he came back and thrust his hand out at me. “Take this.”

I stared at his hand. There was a business card in it. My face did a thing.

Tom noticed, even through the mask. “What is it?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were going to give me a cash tip.”

“This is better. This is a job.”

I blinked at this. “What?”

Tom sighed. “The NGO I work for. It’s an animal rights organization. Large animals. We spend a lot of time in the field. There’s a team I’m a part of. We’re supposed to ship out in the next week. One of my team members has COVID and is currently in a hospital in Houston, hooked up to a ventilator.” Tom saw my face do another thing and held up a hand. “He’s out of danger and is going to recover, or so they tell me. But he’s not going to recover before my team ships out this week. We need someone to replace him. You could do it. This card is for our recruitment officer. Go see her. I’ll tell her you’re coming.”

I stared at the card some more.

“What is it now?” Tom asked.

“I really did kind of think you were a mercenary.”

It was his turn to laugh. “I’m not a mercenary. What I do is much, much cooler. And much more interesting.”

“I, uh ... I don’t have any training. For whatever it is you do. That involves large animals.”

“You’ll do fine. Also, if you don’t mind me being blunt, at this point what I really need is a warm body that can lift things.” He pointed at his shawarma. “I know you can lift things.”

“And the pay?” I asked, and immediately regretted it, because that seemed like kicking a gift horse in the mouth.

Tom motioned at the very nice condo, as if to say, *See?* Then he held out the card again.

I took it this time. “I’ll let Gracia know you’re coming,” Tom said, and looked at his watch. “It’s one p.m. now. You can see her today, probably. Or early tomorrow. But that’s pushing it in terms of timing.”

“You need an answer that quickly?”

Tom nodded. “Yeah, that’s kind of the catch, actually. As long as Gracia signs off on it, the job is yours, but you sort of have to decide *now* whether you want it. I know that’s not cool of me. But I’m in a bind, and if you can’t take it, I have to find someone else, fast.”

“Well, I’m *free*,” I said. “You were literally my last deliverationee.”

“Okay, good.”

“Tom...”

“Yes?”

“Why? I mean, *thank you*, and I really, sincerely mean that. Thank you so much. You’re saving my life right now. But, why?”

“One, because you need a job, and I have a job to hand out,” Tom said. “Two, because from a totally self-interested point of view, you are saving *my* ass, because we can’t go out into the field without a full team and I don’t want us to be saddled with some random person we don’t know. You’re right, we’re *not* friends. Not yet. But I *do* know you. And three...” Tom smiled again. “Let’s just say you turning me on to *Snow Crash* a few years ago put me on the path I’m on now. So in a way I’m just returning the favor. Now—” He pointed to the card. “That address is in Midtown. I’ll tell Gracia to expect you around two thirty. Get going.”

# CHAPTER

## 3

“Let’s get right to it,” Gracia Avella said to me. “What did Tom tell you about KPS?”

The offices for KPS—the name of the organization on the card Tom gave me—were on Thirty-seventh, in the same building as the Costa Rican consulate, on the fifth floor. The office apparently shared a waiting room with a small medical practice. I had been in the waiting room for less than a minute when Avella came to get me to take me to her personal office. There was no one else in the KPS office. I guess they, like most everyone else, were working from home.

“He told me that you were an animal rights organization,” I said. “And that you do work in the field. And that you need people to lift heavy objects.”

“We are, we do, and we do,” Avella agreed. “Did he tell you what kind of animals?”

“Uh, large animals?”

“Is that a question?”

“No, I mean, he said large animals, but he wasn’t specific.”

Avella nodded. “When you think of large animals, what do you think of?”

“I guess, elephants? Hippos. Giraffes. Maybe rhinos.”

“Anything else?”

“I suppose there are whales,” I said. “But it didn’t seem to me Tom was talking about those. He said ‘in the field,’ not ‘out to sea.’”

“Technically, ‘in the field’ would indicate either,” Avella said. “But yes, we do most of our work on land.”

“I like land,” I said. “I don’t drown there.”