

Fish's lizard

Chloe Zhang

I peer out the glass of our self-guiding hobbicopter, warmed up by the sun's rays. Below, I see dark blue waves lapping this way and that like a shifting cobalt carpet. I can only stare at it for a few moments, because the sun's reflection in the water is too brilliant to look at. I peel away from the window once I can't last it any longer, and find myself face to face with my sour-faced brother, Fish.

He wears an expression like he swallowed a fly (he did once, actually, it was swimming around in his soda.) "What?" he snaps, seeing me stare at him.

I've had to deal with his moody behaviour ever since his pet fish died a week ago. I thought maybe a holiday occasion like this would cheer him up, but I guess I was wrong.

Before I can reply to his cold question, the hobbicopter veers down suddenly. Mum's head smacks into the window and she glances down. "Look, we're here!" she exclaims excitedly, trying to peel off the glass.

I look down too, thrilled. A sandy white beach drifts into view, standing out in the glinting ocean with a couple of lofty palm trees swaying side by side. "It's a paradise," I marvel. Fish grunts.

The hobbicopter descends slowly, scattering up a miniature sandstorm. It thunks into a random spot on the shore and the door abruptly swings open.

I leap out instantly, followed closely by Mum. Fish slouches out after us, but Dad lingers inside our rented vehicle.

"Shouldn't there have been a landing dock?" He asks, scratching his balding head.

Mum shoots back over to see what's wrong as I hop nonchalantly over washed up seashells, picking up the pretty ones.

Fish wanders off behind the palm trees. I dump my seashells in a hole and start covering them with sand, wondering what our holiday house will be like; we rarely have any chances to go out like this, so things feel extremely luxurious at a time like this.

"Abby, come look at this!" Fish's voice suddenly calls, filled with more excitement than I've heard in days. I come sprinting over, interested in what has stimulated him.

He's crouching at the bottom of the palm tree, cradling something hideous in his hands. It's a lizard, bearing neon yellow skin and bright blue splotches-- it even has whiskers-- whiskers!-- and its eyes are bulging out of its head. It squeaks helplessly. One of its legs is broken.

"Fish, drop it!" I gasp. He's too absorbed in it to hear, though, gazing at it with increasingly incredulous delight. I suddenly recognise this emotion; he had the same look on his face two years ago, when he got his first pet.

"Don't you dare," I warn him. I reach over to take it from him, brushing its slimy skin.

Immediately, the sun flashes in my eyes. I blink, alarmed, my head suddenly throbbing. When the light clears, I gasp.

Countless fish-- not my brother, the beautiful underwater ones with pigmented scales-- are flying through the air. The ocean is rising rhythmically, not side to side, but up and down into a huge wave. It folds momentarily into shapes before crashing back down. I turn to Fish, terrified, to see if he's witnessing the same things, but he looks absorbed in his own new world.

I stumble away and charge to the shore, where what looks like robotic lizards are rising out of the sand and scuttling towards where Fish and the real lizard is. I dodge the obstacles and fall into the wet sand, the world beginning to bend in alarming ways. I plunge my hands into the seawater and scrub furiously, washing my face for good measure. When I open my eyes everything is normal again.

Once I get back to Fish I find him lying on his back holding the lizard up to the sun and talking to it. Its legs are splayed apart and its mouth wide open-- it actually looks like it's enjoying itself. Too bad the moment can't last, because I throw water all over it and Fish. He jerks up into reality, spluttering bewilderedly. I hit his arm and the lizard goes flying-- it lands in the sand and lies there motionless.

I drag a protesting Fish all the way back to our parents, where Dad is waiting outside for us. He explains that the hobbicopter sat nav is actually quite outdated and has landed us on a beach which eroded long ago from our real destination.

"Do we know how to go back?" I ask worriedly, but Fish cuts right over me. "We found a really cool lizard, Dad!" he exclaims, pointing in the direction of the palm trees.

"Leave it, Fish!" I say, exasperated, but he's already dragging Dad to the whiskery creature.

Soon we're standing over the injured reptile. Dad is just as fascinated as Fish, bending over it and snapping photo after photo. He almost picks it up in his hands, but I shout, "Don't!"

Dad and Fish stare at me. "What is wrong with you two picking up unidentified animals?" I say crossly. "This thing makes you hallucinate!"

"Hey, you touched it too!" Fish protests.

"That was to stop you from holding it!"

"That's enough," Dad interrupts. "How about we take it with us, and when we land at our holiday house we can bring it to the vet? Then we'll see if it's safe enough to keep."

I cross my arms, unable to say anything else as Fish cheers triumphantly.

A day later, we're standing inside the veterinary as a doctor examines Fish's newest find on the table.

"I believe this is a whole new species you've discovered," the doctor suddenly says after a while.

"Can we keep it?" Fish asks straight away.

The doctor shakes his head slowly. "I'm afraid we're going to have to investigate this case a little more before making any decisions. We're not entirely sure it's safe."

"It makes you hallucinate," I offer as Fish's mouth drops open in horror.

The doctor sighs at Fish's expression. "Listen," he says, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Keeping this animal when you don't know anything about it is out of the question. If you really want a pet, you're going to have to ask your parents."

Mum shakes her head.

"Or," the doctor continues, "we've been experimenting something new on pets who suffer from loneliness. We have a few robot models which are supposed to keep depressed animals company; we'd be happy to gift you one, seeing as you discovered this new creature." He smiles wryly as Fish's old scowl peels off his face once more into pure hope.

"That sounds reasonable," Dad says with a side glance at Mum, who looks resigned at this point.

Seeing the look on Fish's face, I think I've got my brother back.

(Also, did those hallucinations predict something like this would happen?)