Chapter Sixteen

Death Row

A few days later, Pinetree visited my lab while I was actually working on a project. “Thought I would drop in,” she said.

She never dropped in.

Did she know more than I hoped? Or was she just checking up on me? She looked around my lab, tense. Her mind was elsewhere. “How’s Project 4?” she asked, looking at my computer monitor. I relaxed.

“That’s some of the current data on the screen. It has promise.” That was not a lie—the project had possibilities for bringing out a positive physical version of my anger, rather than something intensely negative. Why look like a monster if I could look like Superman? Complete with spit curl?

“And you? Thought about the base?”

“I’m better,” I lied. “I know my role.” She looked at me. “My cure won’t work if my anger isn’t completely freed.” I thought that part was true.

She knew I was lying, at least about some of it. “You’re a lab rat. You like field work?”

“It *was* exhilarating. Going out and being physical.”

“I know you have mixed feelings, Mike.” She turned to look at me rather than the monitor. “There’s another emergency.”

My heart fell through the floor as my face brightened. Or I thought I brightened it.

She noticed. “Too soon?”

“It’s only been a week. I’m still adapting.” I felt an exciting chill at the thought of using my transformed body again. “But if you need me, I’m here. What is it?”

“I’ll tell you, but you may not be needed,” she said. I think she was trying to calm me. “First, the first trial on Project 3 is ready. If he works out, we’ll use him. Come

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and see."

"Sure," I told her, feeling better, not wanting to feel that excitement until I knew more about controlling it. I followed her out of my lab and down the hallway, speeding up to match her pace. "Who is the test subject?"

"Arnold."

"*Arnold*? Seriously?"

"Why not?"

"He's full of self-loathing."

"That's why we thought it might work," she replied.

"Wrong mix," I told her. "It's a mistake."

She replied, "That's what trials are for."

We entered the lab now set up for these tests. This was the second test after happy face, at least that I was aware of. Arnold, a small man with a receding hairline and lips, sat already strapped into the chair in the cage, determined. All his projects had failed. He blamed himself and we all agreed. Arnold was desperate to succeed and Project 3 provided a unique opportunity to change his status and his life.

Video cameras were set up. Three guards stood by, armed with tranquilizer guns. Madeline was there, along with other researchers, to observe. Arnold's assistant, somehow less competent than him, held a hypo filled with a bright red fluid, waiting for the nod from Pinetree, now that she was there. She nodded.

A while ago, I'd told them both they were bad jokes as scientists. That was harsh. I apologized but neither spoke to me since. Which was fine. His assistant babbled and Arnold was difficult to be around. His self-hate was as bad as my anger.

In that, we were something of a fit.

At Pinetree's nod, Arnold was injected by his assistant, then left alone and the cage closed. He sat, strapped in, determined and confident. Everyone waited, including Arnold.

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Abruptly his body transformed into a large box with a lid on top. Colourful animals pranced on the outside of the box as the straps on his arms, legs and chest ripped apart.

The large box sat in the chair. I tried to make sense of what the serum had done to him. A handle sprouted on one side and began to turn. Tinkly music played, like a jack in the box. We heard someone inside cry “Yes!” Then the lid on the top of the box flipped open.

Arnold’s head popped out. It jerked on a long, thin neck. He grinned, looking at us happily. He said “I’m–” when his thin neck, unable to sustain his bobbing up and down, suddenly snapped. It was a disturbing, wet sound.

His head, now screaming in pain, fell with a loud clunk to the floor.

Then it rolled around, until his teeth stopped clattering.

His head lay on the floor, eyes wide open. Blood splattered everywhere. The box farted, then shrivelled.

Even Pinetree was shocked.

As the guards moved into the cage with mops, I asked her, “Did he have a family?”

“Wife and two kids,” she replied. “What a godawful mess.” She sighed. “I guess we can say self-loathing is off the acceptable personality list.” She shook her head. “You’re up, after all. Like I told you, there’s an emergency.”

“It can’t wait?”

“Shall I spell emergency for you? Put on your jump suit and meet me in the underground garage in ten minutes. We have a drive, not too far.”

“To where?”

“Death row.”

I asked about Arnold’s project as we rode together in the back of the van. She told me there was no time for that now. Despite myself, I was excited. It was disturbing that, for the first time, Pinetree appeared uncertain.

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“There’s been a riot on death row in the federal prison just outside the city,” she told me. “Nine inmates, appeals exhausted, all due to be executed. They’re all guilty of murder and additional charges. Maybe the appeals failing is why they rioted.”

“They’re on death row, nothing to lose.”

“Right,” she said, strangely not convinced. “They killed one guard and are holding two as hostages. The inmates can’t get out and the guards cannot get in. Somehow, the inmates have guns. The inmates are trying to negotiate an escape. That will never happen. Which leaves it to someone with special skills.”

“And secrecy?”

“It’s a prison. We can keep who sees your transformation limited.”

The targets had hostages and were already condemned legally. I was the only one who could get in there and solve the problem. “Sounds perfect, for me.”

“Too perfect,” she replied.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“No idea.”

During the rest of the drive, she briefed me on the individual inmates, who they were, what they had done to be sentenced to death. She told me about the guard they killed and her family. The riot quickly became a siege. It had been kept quiet but started three days ago. We met the Warden in his office, with some key corrections officers.

They were all tense, desperate for a solution. The Warden looked at me. “How is this guy going to help?”

As an answer, with a nod from Pinetree, I took off my jump suit and transformed, my body taking on the power and strength I enjoyed so much. I looked down on them, breathing my hot breath onto their faces as they cowered in shock.

“What the hell is this?” the Warden asked.

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“Like you were told, it’s different,” Pinetree told him. “A top-secret application.”

“But this?”

“Bullets won’t hurt him. He will save your two guards. We’re good?”

“Yeah. Good.” The Warden spoke as if he had no choice.

“There are nine inmates?” The Warden nodded. “And the two guards?”

“As far as we know, tied up but not injured.”

“Weapons?”

“Pistols.”

“And how did inmates on death row get weapons?” Pinetree looked at him suspiciously.

The Warden shook his head. “No idea. It’s devastating. We’re already investigating.”

“Anything else you can tell us?”

“There’s only one way in.”

“Take us there.”

We followed the Warden and several corrections officers down a hall, into an elevator, down another hall, into another elevator, then through a series of locked barred doors until we hit a solid large door.

“This is it,” the Warden told us. “Death row is on the other side.”

“How do we get in?”

“Turn the knob,” the Warden replied. “They unlocked it. The problem is if we try to walk in. It’s a large, open hallway, cells on either side. Nothing else, no cover. They killed the security cameras, so we’re guessing at anything you’ll find.”

“How do you talk with them?” He handed Pinetree a cell phone, pointed to an icon.

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“Anything else?”

“I’ve got one officer down. I’m hoping you’ll save the other two.”

“Okay, why not go a corridor back behind that barred door, and leave it to us?”

The Warden and the officers, looking at us suspiciously, retreated to the prior corridor, closing the door behind them.

Pinetree looked at me. “This is a set up. Somehow. I don’t like how guns got into play.”

I agreed. “Doesn’t make any difference,” I growled.

She touched the icon on the phone and put it on speaker. After three rings, a man answered. “This is the Warden? You got the choppers?”

“No,” Pinetree said. “It isn’t the Warden. It’s the Army. We’re on the other side of the door. We will use lethal force. Surrender yourselves and the hostages now.”

“Drop dead,” the man replied, ending the call.

Pinetree looked at me. “I want to talk to those two guards. They’re the likely source of the weapons.” I watched her join the Warden and corrections officer, closing the barred door behind her.

I stood alone, between the two doors. I pulled myself to my full height, enjoying my powerful muscles. My anger felt real. Not simply an emotion, it was physical. And unleashed. I looked at the door in front of me and howled. I imagined the shock of the men on the other side.

I howled again, making it as primordial as I could. The angry cries echoed in the small corridor. I loved the sound of my anger.

I turned the knob and burst into whatever I was bursting into.

It was a large, well lit open hall with open cell doors on both sides. The far end was a wall. Standing in front of me were four men, two with pistols. We faced each other. They were stunned. I bristled and howled again. They opened fire.

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Bullets hit my chest and shoulders. Blood spurted from the wounds. Instead of dying or falling back, as they expected, I leapt at them, claws extended.

They never had a chance.

Before they could fire again, I grabbed two by the neck, my claws sinking deep into their flesh. The other two shot again, one bullet ripping off my right ear. I dropped the first two, already dying, and buried my claws into the others, ripping their arms. Their guns went off uselessly as I hoisted each up off their feet, then threw them, bleeding and shrieking, against the five men charging down the hall towards us.

I also threw their arms.

The bodies and body parts hit them, but they shot at me as they scattered. These five also had guns. I howled. I felt bullets hit my chest, arms, legs. I had no idea if I was bleeding. If I was in pain, it did not matter. Nothing mattered except the remaining prey.

I crouched then leapt, knocking two down, clawing them badly with my feet while I ripped apart the face of s third. I felt more shots as the remaining two shot until their guns were empty. I stalked them down the hall, snarling, claws dripping blood, as they staggered back, defenceless.

I ripped their hearts out.

It all took less than a minute.

I looked at the nine men I had killed. Seven. Two still twitched. That soon stopped. Nine.

Now I felt pain and looked down to see I was bleeding. Bleeding from my chest, arms, legs. But the wounds did not feel deep. I saw bullets pop out of the holes, and my skin immediately begin to heal. Except one of my ears, which had been shot off. That was on the floor.

I prowled through the cells until I found the two guards. They were both tied, bruised but unharmed. I approached them, taking in their scents. Fear. More than fear of me, deeper.

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“Are you okay?” I growled.

They jerked in their bonds. One said, “Who the hell are you?”

I grabbed one in each claw and lifted them up, making them dangle helplessly. “What have you done?” I demanded. Blood from my claws dripped onto them.

“We followed orders,” one blurted. The other quickly told him, “Shut up, you idiot.”

Something or someone frightened them more than a monster who had just killed nine men. I would get nothing more from them. Maybe Pinetree would.

I put them down and left them, tied. Outside, I found a cell phone, under a body. I called, Pinetree answered, I told her it was done. After ending the call, I looked down. My multiple wounds had healed. All that was left now was a dull ache and blood all over my body.

I transformed back, shrinking from raw power to me. I felt at my head. I had both ears.

When I looked at my naked flesh, their blood covered me.

My ear lay on the floor.

It had transformed back to human.

Chapter Seventeen

Funeral

I handed over my ear to Pinetree and went home. She never gave it back.

Arnold’s funeral, the next day, was lovely. There were plenty of flowers and mourners. The sky was cloudy, which felt appropriate.

The casket was sealed.

The funeral was in a small cemetery on the edge of the city. Most of the Academy staff were there. It was a bit unreal, seeing them outside of their natural habitat,

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the labs. Pinetree was there, Dr. Orwell, Madeline and others. Many held umbrellas, waiting for rain.

I caught most of them stealing glances at me. They'd heard what I'd done yesterday. Now they were nervous around me, cancelling my earlier gains.

Arnold's wife stood in a receiving line. Their two young children were not there. Everyone murmured condolences and she thanked them. After a few minutes, standing in line, it was my turn.

"I'm so sorry," I told her.

She glared back. "You took that stuff. Why is *he* dead and not *you*?"

Her angry blunt question took me aback. I blurted out, "I used it because I'm angry. He used it because he hated himself. That's what killed him. That and living with you."

Her face crumpled and she burst into tears. Everyone moved away from me.

I left the line, feeling terrible. Why had I suddenly become angry, like the 'old days?' I moved towards Madeline, who moved away from me. Pinetree noticed and quietly walked over. The two of us stood away from everyone as the speeches began.

"Poor Arnold," I muttered.

"Yes."

"I was such a jerk just now. I upset her. Don't know what got into me. Suddenly I was angry. I haven't been angry with people in weeks."

"They'll get over it."

"I was making progress with Madeline. Now it's dead. Probably because I killed nine men yesterday."

"Did you talk with her about it?"

"She won't talk to me." I looked at her. I looked at the funeral. "What about his

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family?”

“Don’t worry too much. They were heading towards divorce. I read the papers from her lawyer. She has insurance. It’ll work out. And about the men you killed yesterday. No matter what, they *were* on death row.”

I looked at Arnold’s widow standing at the grave side. She dabbed at her eyes but was not crying. I wondered if the nine men left behind grieving family and friends, despite their crimes and personality disorders. I wondered what their funerals were like.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“We have four active projects.”

“Even after this?”

“I have a list of volunteers. And we’re not the only unit.”

I realized everyone was not listening to the speeches but looking at us. I saw concern, fear, some hostility.

“He died trying to do his best,” the priest told the group. The priest was the Academy chaplain and also ran a small chapel in the mall. “We all know how important his work, your work, is to our national interest.

“I spoke with him the day before he took the serum. He wanted peace. He understood the risks but was driven to succeed. To succeed at work *and* to defeat his inner demons. Those two drives are what we should remember and admire.

“Arnold’s legacy is to inspire us.”

He could have been talking about me. Did he know in the last two weeks I had killed fourteen men, pursuing those same goals of succeeding at work and defeating my inner demons?

I was not feeling inspired. Looking at my colleagues, who did not meet my eyes, neither were they. Everyone looked defeated.

It started to rain.

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Pinetree had an umbrella. She let me come under it with her.

Madeline looked at the coffin.

Although it rained, we all stayed until the speeches were over. Then we walked towards our cars. I was still under Pinetree's umbrella when Dr. Orwell approached.

"I thought we should schedule a session as soon as possible," she told me. "That death row situation must have been very difficult for you."

She said it while Pinetree watched. I told her I did have stuff I wanted to talk about, and then we all went to our separate cars. I approached Madeline as she got into hers.

"I'd love to talk with you," I told her.

"I'm not ready," she told me, getting into her car and closing the door. I watched her drive off.

I was getting pretty wet.

By the time I reached my car, everyone else had driven off. I paused a moment to watch the diggers shovel dirt onto the coffin, then got out of the rain.

It did not stop the rain, but I had a chance to dry off.

I wished I had someone to talk with.

Chapter Eighteen

I Need Someone To Talk With

My cell phone rang. I looked, it was Melanie. I wanted to talk with someone but she was probably calling about yesterday. I was not ready to talk with her about yesterday.

I was ready to talk with Dr. Orwell.

She *was* my therapist.

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We sat in her office. There was coffee and cookies on the table. I immediately poured a cup for myself, she shook her head, and gulped half of it down. The warm felt good, spreading through my chest. Any warmth felt good.

“I’m not so good,” I told her, and drank the other half.

“I saw.”

“I burst out at her.”

“Why?

“I don’t know. I think it may be because she was angry at me.”

“And your anger, now energized and even more alive within you, was of course angry back.”

“If you say so. I’m just living it.” I was, I realized, feeling resigned.

“You’re depressed. Yesterday must have been very hard for you.” She leaned forward.

I leaned forward as well. “No. It was easy.”

She did not move. Neither did I. She waited. She was great at waiting. There is nothing like silence to force talk.

“What I did, I just did what came naturally. Which was to show no mercy.” She nodded. “But the question still has not been answered about where the inmates got guns. The two surviving guards, Pinetree tells me, are being questioned. I asked them, one said he’d been given orders.”

She nodded again, thinking.

“Do you know what’s going on? What’s the larger picture?”

“My guess is some people believe the bank was not enough, especially after your actions at the research base. I think they knew you were reluctant and created a situation where you were free to do whatever, especially to use violence. I think your actions on death row satisfied them, at least that if not in you they had a real

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weapon they could use."

"For what?"

She had no answer.

"So what am I supposed to do now?" I asked.

"Look after yourself," she told me. "Talk with your daughter. Try talking with Madeline. The staff are worried again about you. Reassure them by acting normal. I think you'll find tomorrow better than today."

That was not a lot of help, but I turned down her offer of meds. I returned to my lab and turned on the computer, then slumped. It was all too much. When Madeline first injected the serum, my plan was by now, three weeks or so later, to be free—or at least well on my way. Instead, everything in my life had grown strange and surrounded me. Not only my anger, not only the results of the serum, but what increasingly was evidence of a larger conspiracy.

I had never found a conspiracy I believed in. My work was not a secret conspiracy in that everyone knew or assumed the government worked on secret weapons, including biological. And its use, for what it was, was normal. And which conspiracy? There were at least two, and that was counting with clenched fingers.

I unclenched my fingers and texted Melanie. "Sorry I missed u. Was at funeral. Call or text me?" And hit send. Then I texted Madeline, asking if we could talk. I stopped, having run out of people.

I texted Gloria, asking if we could meet that night instead of Friday.

She texted back: "7 as usual?" I sent back a thumb's up.

I sat alone for the rest of the day, waiting for another response. An email came to the staff working on the special research projects: "Due to the tragic occurrence yesterday, all trials are suspended until we complete a review of personality traits. Please continue your work otherwise." Then Pinetree phoned and told me the two guards blamed the dead one for smuggling pistols into death row.

I went home. I made some coffee and drank it while scanning the house. I found two new bugs and stepped on them.

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Then, thinking Gloria would be there in a couple of hours, I found myself vacuuming, cleaning the kitchen and tidying. I straightened the bed but did not bother with fresh sheets.

Then, thinking about it, I put on fresh sheets.

Then I changed my clothing.

While I was looking through the window, seeing only two guards in the car outside, I heard my cell phone ring. I thought it was Gloria.

“Dad?”

“Oh. Hi. I expected you to text.”

“I would have. I thought maybe you wanted to talk.”

Timing. “I do. Someone is coming over but I have time until then. You want to hear about yesterday.”

“Yeah. I read about it, some super rescue at the prison. I phoned mom, she said it was you. Mom’s real upset. Really.”

“She won’t talk to me.”

“Doesn’t know what to say,” my daughter responded. “I don’t either. How do you feel?”

“I defended myself,” I lied, “and rescued the hostages. I was encouraged to unleash my anger, and I did. It was a horror show.”

“You wanted to kill them?”

“Not exactly. More like, I let it happen.”

“Dad, we need to talk more. I wanted to tell you, I’m moving in with mom.” There was a pause as it sank it, or started to sink in. “Dad?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m dropping out in a month, when I finish my classes this year. I need to live in

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the city and mom's got room. Plus, she needs me. She enjoyed living alone, until now."

And then she said she'd call again in a week, and to text any time, and she ended the call. I looked up to see Gloria drive up and park. She wore a light coat, revealing nothing. The guards watched her walk up to my front door, and I answered a moment after she knocked. I smiled at the guards, let her in, and closed the door.

"Let's go to the basement," I told her.

"Why down here?" she asked as we walked down the steps. In a year, she had never been down there. It was unfinished and full of keepsakes in boxes I had not yet moved to the garage to rip up.

"I caught two more bugs today," I told her. "The house is clear, but if they're listening from outside, through the walls, they won't get anything down here."

"You didn't tidy up down here."

"Sorry, it is a mess. The garage is worse. But if we have anything to say that we don't want anyone to hear, it should be down here."

She looked around. "Got a chair?"

I found two folding chairs and set them up. She took off her light coat. Underneath she wore a plain dress, with some lovely flowers. She unpinned her hair and shook it out, then sat down.

We looked at each other.

"I've wanted to talk with someone all day. Talk honestly. All day. Now we're down here and I don't have any words."

"You're doing okay so far." She smiled. "I've worried."

"Can you tell me anything more about the group?"

She shook her head. "Wish I could. The two guards blame the dead one. How convenient. It's still being investigated, but already there's a hush from higher up.

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From somewhere."

"Can I meet someone else in the group?"

"Besides Dr. Orwell? It's being worked on, but no one right now knows where to put our resources. Too many threads. It's become big and screwed up. I don't know what to do, either."

Those were the questions.

"I wanted to talk. Phyllis, mind if we just sit here for a while?"

And so we sat, finding comfort in each other's company.

For a while, sitting in together in the basement, life felt a little stable and comforting. Until I heard again from Pinetree.

I worried this continued to get larger, and worse.

Chapter Nineteen

All About Me

The next day, Pinetree phoned and told me we were going for another drive. She said some people wanted to see me.

"Which people?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied.

A gray car waited out front. I did not recognize the driver, who wore plain clothing. She pulled away, Pinetree and I sitting in the back.

"How long will it take?" she asked the driver.

"Half an hour," the driver replied.

Pinetree did not know where we were going or to whom we were being taken. We exchanged looks. Neither of us wanted to talk much in front of the driver, leaving us to stew in our thoughts as we left the city. We went on a highway for a while, then took a turnoff, then a turnoff with a large sign about no trespassing and

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restricted property. We arrived at the property, a small military base surrounded by razor wire. After we passed through the entry, we were driven to a large building and let off by the front door.

A man in uniform was waiting. He led us into the building, to the second floor and into a small meeting room. Five men sat at a table, waiting for us. They did not stand as we entered but motioned to two chairs in front of the table. They all wore suits, were all clean shaven.

A thick man sitting in the centre smiled. “Welcome, General Pinetree and Mr. Smithers. We appreciate your coming today.” He paused as if waiting for us to thank him. I looked to Pinetree for a cue.

“Anything to be of help,” Pinetree told them. “What do you want?”

The thick man smiled. “We have seen the videos of the three transformations. Of course, two did not suit our purposes. But Mr. Smithers has been a success. While we have seen his transformations on video, we have never seen him in action.” He looked at me. “That is what today is all about.”

“Me?”

“Of course,” he told me. “It’s all about you.” For once, that did not make me feel good. “To start, we would like to see you transform. If you like, you can go behind that screen to remove your clothing and put on a robe.”

How considerate.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“If we wanted you to know,” he replied, “wouldn’t we have told you?”

I stood. “I don’t need the screen.” They sat up. I thought, they need to see it all? Fine. And I transformed, enjoying feeling not only my body grow more powerful but my clothing stretch and rip apart. In moments I stood at my full height, snarling.

The thick man asked, “Can you talk?”

“What do you want me to say?” I growled in my thick monster voice.

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“That was enough. Can you control how you look?”

“This is it.”

One of the other men asked, “Could you howl?”

So I howled. At his request, a few times, the angry bestial sound echoing in the small room.

They looked at each other. The thick man told Pinetree, “Very impressive.” To me, he said, “Let’s go outside.”

They took us outside to a training course. First, they had me run a few laps, timing me. Then there were thick mud pits to crawl through. I leapt over them easily. There was a fifty-foot climbing rope dangling from a tower. I scaled the rope, claw over claw, standing at the top. They told me to jump off. I landed with a loud thud but not a scratch.

“Thank you,” the thick man said to me. “Now we would like to shoot you.”

We were led back inside to a large gym like room where several men and women waited. They all wore Army combat uniforms, with body armor. On a table was a pistol, an uzi and a shotgun. I stood and watched a woman pick up the pistol.

“Not in the face,” I told her.

She shot me in the stomach.

They waited, and saw the bullet pop out and my flesh begin to heal.

A man picked up the uzi and sprayed it across my chest.

They waited and watched the bullets pop out, and those wounds begin to heal.

The shotgun blast took off part of my shoulder. I growled. But like them, I watched my shoulder reform and begin to grow back.

They used stopwatches to time each healing process.

Then the thick man pointed to the three soldiers who had just shot me. “Rough

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them up but don't hurt them. Use your claws, but on their body armor. Understood?"

"Sure. You want to see me slash," I replied.

"Exactly."

I approached the three soldiers, who looked at me warily. I was taller than any of them, powerful as each was.

"What do you want us to do?" one asked.

"It doesn't matter." I sank my claws into his chest armor and lifted him until his feet dangled a foot off the ground. Then I turned to look at the men watching. "This enough? If I do more, he'll get hurt."

"And you don't want to hurt him? Put him down." I lowered him and released my grip. The soldier backed away. He told the soldiers to leave, and they did. "What about the research base? You didn't kill. I understand your orders were to terminate whoever you found."

I was waiting for that. "I misinterpreted the order," I growled. "I thought I only should subdue them." I paused, looking at them. "I killed at the bank and prison."

"Would you do it again?"

"Already did it a second time."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"…. Yes."

"Good. Thank you." He looked at the others. "Excuse us a moment," he said, and then the five men went off to one side and whispered.

I looked at Pinetree, who was looking at them. "Are these guys military?"

"Two are. I recognize them. The others, I don't know."

"How's the thick guy?"

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“Some thick guy.”

They whispered for a while, not long. I’d met expectations. Then the thick man returned to us. “Thank you very much for this opportunity,” he said to both of us. “We’re encouraged.” He looked at me. “You cannot change your appearance?” I looked at him. “Then we will give priority to developing additional serums. And continue to explore options in your own development.”

“What options?” I asked.

He walked away.

Pinetree looked at me. We were alone in the large room. “I think we can leave now.”

Chapter Twenty

I Flee

I tried to settle into life, but it was impossible. Haunting me now was the thick man, and whatever schemes he planned for me. My prime goal, curing myself, to which I kept trying to return, was again overshadowed by someone else’s goals. Far from settling in, all I now thought about was getting out. Fleeing from the impossible situation I had partly created for myself, partly been sucked into (which I should have known would happen.) My being responsible for what I had already done was difficult enough. Being responsible for additional murders—that is what they were and would be—left me wanting only an exit. To escape. To flee.

Wouldn’t you?

I struggled with what I should do. The night after meeting the thick man and his colleagues, Madeline came to the house for a visit. Well, I asked her over. Well, she was reluctant but I insisted. Well, I pressured her until she had no choice. I felt guilty but told her she owed me. She had developed the serum, injected it into me, was part of the team.

Madeline nodded to the guards in the car as she walked up the front steps to her former home. She had not walked those steps for two years. I opened the door before she knocked.

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She looked at the ground. So did I. I stood aside, she stepped in and I shut the door behind her. She did not move. Then, summoning something up, she said quietly, “Okay. I’m here. Where can we talk?”

“The safest place is the basement.”

When she got to the basement, she sat in one of the two armchairs I’d lugged down. She looked at the pot of coffee and plate of cookies on the folding table between us. “Tidied up down here? And dainties. Just for me?” she asked.

I remembered Phyllis. It wasn’t only my work situation that pushed me to escape. “Yes, just for you.”

“You shouldn’t have bothered.” She pushed herself to look at me. “Thanks. Enough about me. You?”

“I’ve made a basement of my life. I’m living in it. I need to get out.”

“We create our basements.” She shifted in the armchair, crossing her legs. She wore a plain pants suit. She had not taken off her light coat. Madeline did not give the impression of wanting to stay long.

I got to the point. Reaching out. I needed support, help. “I’ve been talking with Mel. Texting.”

“She’s moving in next week. I could use the support and she wants to establish herself in the city. Will that her being so close be a problem?”

“I don’t know. There’s so much to hide.” She nodded. “Madeline, everything we talked about, everything we planned, it’s all gone sideways.” She started to say something. “Don’t tell me. I remind myself every day you told me so.”

“I wasn’t going to say that. You always assumed.” She stood, walked around the basement. “I know how you feel. I see you at work. How is the anger?”

“Under control. I think. If no one gets angry at me.”

“Good. I’ll remember to be careful, then.” That felt hostile. When I caught her eyes, I saw it was. “The staff are worried about how you, rather, about how you are being used. And that it will spill out at work somehow. They know about Arnold and

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certainly you. Most staff now have a tranquilizer gun in their labs."

"Can you help me?"

"To do what? There's nothing in this I can do, except maybe stall."

"I'm having trouble with Project 4. Serums are your area."

She stiffened. "You want *another one*?" Furious, she went straight up the stairs and out the front door. I heard it slam.

Reaching out to Madeline appeared problematic. Melanie was not what I needed. My anger had eliminated any friends.

The next morning I sat in my lab, unable to work. Dr. Orwell phoned, asked how I was. I told her I was disconnected from the world while it busily was trying to chain me. She offered meds. I rejected them as making me happy about not changing why I was depressed. I needed solutions, not veneers.

I set up a meeting with Pinetree late that afternoon, desperate. "I need to get away," I told her.

"Sorry. Vacations right now are not allowable."

I leaned forward. "No. I want out. Not a vacation. How about I slip away and no one sees me again? Wouldn't that solve problems?"

"This won't work. You know that."

"I need to try."

She twiddled her fingers for a moment, then sighed. "The guards in the parking lot will not be there when it's time to go home. More than that, I can't do." She was letting me go. "You'll have a few days. Don't stretch it. Use those days, Mike, to figure out what will work for you."

I thanked her and we didn't say anything else and at the end of the day a security guard followed me down in the elevator and left me alone, as usual, and as usual, there was a dark car—only today it was empty.

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I quickly got into my car, started it up, and drove out of the garage. When I reached the street, confronted with my first decision, I stopped. I had no idea whether to turn left, right or straight. All I knew for certain was not to back up.

I was determined to escape, but to where?

Certainly, I could not go home. I could not pack a suitcase. I just had to *leave*. Leave everything. Drive. But I could not drive long. It was not good, being in public. I needed a temporary hideout, clothes. A few hours to regroup.

I had credit cards but did not want to be traced. My first step was ATMs, withdrawing as much cash as I could. I left my car parked by the last–it was easily identified. And I had never thought to test it for bugs. I walked, to nowhere.

I walked past a hotel, deciding no hideout could be near my car. I stopped walking and took a bus. I changed busses. When I got close to the city limits, an area of cheap motels, I got off went into the nearest to the bus stop. I paid cash, was as pleasant as I could manage to the clerk and sat in a seedy room.

What next? I had impulsively leapt. I was trying to run away. Would that fix anything? Was there a real escape? Do any of us have real escapes? How many of you feel as trapped as I was? Okay, nobody. Nobody.

There was no time to brood. I had to do something other than feel threatened. I went outside to across the street. There was a strip mall. From a thrift store, I got some cheap clothes and a battered suitcase to put them in. For food, I picked up take out from the pizza restaurant next to the thrift store, then returned to my room and locked myself in with bad clothing and unhealthy food. It was a start.

I turned on the TV and sat on the bed eating and watching the news, glad I was not on it. There was a story about death row and the questions being raised.

For any plan, I needed help. I could not call Pinetree, Madeline nor Melanie. There was only one choice. I picked up my cell phone without a qualm. Phyllis.

I took a chance, telling her where I was. I thought my phone was safe—but it could be used for tracking me. And I did not know about her phone. I turned off the light and TV, darkening the room. Outside, it was early evening. Outside, people lived normal lives.

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After twenty minutes there was a knock on the door. I had seen no car pull up. It could only be Phyllis. Opening the door, I did not recognize her. She had dark hair and wore a long coat.

“Faster,” she said.

I stopped aside, she came in and I closed the door. She pulled off the wig. “Just being careful. I wasn’t followed, my phone’s okay.” She looked at the room and sighed. “Ugh. Reminds me of pits I’ve lived in.”

“Should I sleep here?” I asked. “Is it safe?”

“No.”

“Why? Too obvious? To close?”

“Bed bugs.”

I relaxed a bit. “Exactly the sort of advice I need,” I told her, although it was not quite what I’d expected. Then I overflowed. “Phyllis, I need to escape. Not from Pinetree but whoever is above her. Whoever will use me to kill again. Or show other people the way. It’s out of my control and I don’t know what’s coming next. I have to get out! You have years in security work. I’m sure you’ve helped people disappear.”

She looked at me.

“I mean, disappear into new lives.”

She nodded.

“Can you make *me* disappear?”

She was expecting this. “I can give you a safe house,” she told me. “Safe for how long, I can’t say. Probably through the weekend.”

“The weekend? Only that long?”

“Maybe not that long. The best I can think of is to come up with an excuse and you’re back to work on Monday.”

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“I can’t do that. I need to disappear.”

“Anyone can be found.”

“Can’t I change my identity? Get a face transplant or something?”

She laughed. “I’ll take you to my cabin.”

After slipping the wig back on, and opened the door a crack to check, Phyllis went outside. She walked easily, casually, without making obvious she was carefully looking around. Then she stood by her car and waved me an all clear. I took my suitcase and new clothes and left the bed bugs behind.

The car was small, confining but safe. It was dark. I let her drive. I had no words, enjoying security and companionship.

“It’s good just to sit and not talk,” I eventually told her. And that was all.

After half an hour, we approached the mountains. She took us on a single paved road through thick woods, driving up, steeper and steeper until she turned onto a dirt road with a metal gate across it, a “No Trespassing” sign attached.

She handed me a key and I got out, unlocked the iron gate and swung it open. She drove through and told me to lock the gate again. We drove along a narrower dirt road for over a mile until we entered a small clearing with a log cabin. She pulled up in front of the cabin, I took my cheap clothing and we went to the cabin. She unlocked the door and we went inside. She left the door open behind us.

The cabin was waiting, a retreat always ready. It was spartan, clean and tidy, nothing out of place. One large room and an attached bedroom. The large room had a kitchen to one side, a desk, with the rest mostly a living room, with a fireplace. She opened the cupboards, showing me canned and boxed food, including fruit juices. There was even wine and beer, cold in a cooler she’d brought along. There was no running water as such, but there was a pump built into the sink.

“This is great,” I told her. “I need alone time–with you.”

She told me, “I have to leave right away.”

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I had no words.

“Sorry,” she said. “Truly. I want to be with you, now. But I can’t. It’s the worst risk. You don’t show up for work, then I’m gone.”

“I understand,” as unreluctantly as I could manage. No point making her feel guilty in the middle of her taking a risk to help me.

“I can’t get away, not without attracting attention, until the weekend. Normal off time. It’s only a few days, Mike.”

I took a breath. “Of course. I totally understand, and it’s okay,” I lied. “But you’ll come back?”

“Friday. Only three days. This place doesn’t have running water, although the sink pump draws from an underground well. There’s no electricity, although there’s an emergency generator outside. If it gets chilly, you’ll find outside, next to the generator, chopped wood for the fireplace. It’s near the outhouse. It’s not without modern conveniences, there is toilet paper. You’ll figure it out.”

I’d taken my breath, absorbing what she told me. “I really appreciate this. Any idea where it’ll go from here?”

“Not a clue.”

We walked outside. “Don’t use your phone,” she told me. “Take out the chip and break it.” When we reached it, she opened the passenger side door of the car, opened the glove compartment and took out a phone. “Use this. It’s a burner.”

I stood there, holding the phone.

She pulled me to her and kissed me. I kissed back. “Think of me, big boy.” I watched her drive away and vanish among the trees.

The mountain was steep. I caught glimpses of her going back down the road. There was a pause, her opening and closing the gate, then I saw her car on the larger road, until it disappeared.

Sometimes, people can disappear.

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I saw a lot of the roads and, being high up, had an excellent view of the entire area. It was a natural place for a security agent to select. It would be difficult to approach without warning. It was dark. Without any lights, the night sky was clear and had remarkable depth. I saw new stars and what might have been constellations.

The outhouse was tidy. There was a full roll on a spindle.

I opened a beer and sat in a rickety chair on the front porch.

Although the setting was romantic, I had escaped to a dead end.

All I'd really escaped from was a comfortable house with cable TV. I figured there was less than a week before 'they' figured out where I was. Pinetree would guess quickly. She'd let me go, she knew about my connection with Phyllis.

Did Mr. Thick Guy know also?

And–I was stranded. Alone, no other buildings for miles except the cabin and outhouse. I trusted Phyllis, but I could be discovered and units sent here at any time. There were no escape routes if I was surrounded. Except, perhaps, the thick forest surrounding the cabin.

I doubted either Pinetree or Phyllis would have enough new information by the end of the weekend to get me out of the woods.

I sat until sunset, leaving the beer untouched. Exhausted, I went inside and fell on the bed into a troubled sleep. Twice I woke, to go out and pee against a tree.

Nightmares about the thick man. Nightmares about death row. Nightmares about my true self. Nightmares about my new chapter.

Chapter Twenty-One

A New Chapter

The next morning, after eating a canned breakfast, I walked outside. It was peaceful. I had nothing to do. In the distance, I heard some birds. The sky was clear, the sun bright, the woods inviting.

I took my clothing off and transformed. I left my clothing on the porch. Suddenly I

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felt better. The sun felt warm on my fur, the earth hard under my clawed feet. I stretched my claws into it, drawing in scents and sounds. Now I heard far more birds, heard animals move through the trees, took in deeply their scents.

I spent the morning and some of the afternoon exploring the woods. I saw rabbits, several times. The first few darted away as I approached. I learned what upwind was, and to follow it. Then I spotted a third. It was very cute. I got within ten feet when it froze, suddenly jerked its head up, looked in my direction and shot off in the opposite.

I ran after it, enjoying my muscles pumping. Predator and prey. I was faster, it knew tricks.

I returned to the cabin and ate another cold canned meal, then sat on the front porch again, watching the sun until it set. I wondered if Madeline or Melanie wondered where I was. If they were trying to contact me.

When it was late night, I went into the cabin, closing the door behind me this time. That felt better. The security here was good but safe was also good. I'd had a solid work out and slept more comfortably, not waking until late morning. Hearing crows just outside woke me.

I warmed the breakfast this time, using the gas stove. Eating something hot felt better. Walking outside, again the day looked fine. The area was clear, the sky cloudless.

The day in the woods went even better. I learned a lot about stalking, using the wind, using my muscles. Towards the end of the afternoon, taking my time, searching, I finally came across a worthwhile prey. Something larger, potentially dangerous. It was a large buck, with full sharp antlers. When I first came across it, it was fifty yards away, nibbling something. It occasionally looked up, smelling, then bent, grabbed something and ate some more.

I crouched, upwind, watching.

The deer moved on. I followed. Not followed, stalked. I stayed upwind, crouching, quiet. I stalked him for almost an hour, until I was within maybe twenty feet.

He would make good eating. He was prey.

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But killing was what I'd come her to fight. To repress. I looked at the deer, not feeling the urge to attack. That was okay, sort of. Canned food again tonight.

The buck saw me.

Our eyes met.

It immediately lowered its antlers at me, pawing the ground. I felt its hostility, up front, animalistic. My own anger surged in response.

The buck charged. So did I.

At the last moment, I leapt up over its antlers, landing on its back. My claws sank deep into its well muscled flesh. It cried out with a startled groan. Riding on its back, I leaned forward, grabbed its head and, with one powerful twist, snapped its neck.

The buck collapsed under me.

I collapsed with it, on its twitching body, claws in its flesh, panting. Victorious.

The buck's dying scent was overwhelming.

It never should have gotten angry at me. If it had simply run away, it would not have become food.

I wanted to transform back, but it was a long way to the cabin, I had no shoes, the deer was very heavy, so I hauled it up and carried it across my broad, hairy shoulders. I enjoyed its weight going home, that was part of the hunt. Blood from its neck and back covered me. At the cabin I left the deer outside, transformed back, pumped water into the sink and washed the blood off me. I put on some of my new clothes and then I tried to figure out how to butcher it.

Turns out, I had no idea, and it was gruesome.

One chunk looked like a roast so I put on a spit over the fire. I turned it regularly, enjoying more well water, until it must have been done because the smell was overwhelming and I tore off pieces. It was a satisfying meal. More than satisfying, much more.

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Beyond delicious.

I felt one with nature, eating part of it.

The next day I had venison steak for breakfast, seared on the outside, very rare on the inside. I used a cast iron skillet on the gas stove. Then I sat at the little table, savouring each piece, enjoying a drink from the jug of well water. I heard a few birds outside, nothing else.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent burying the deer.

It seemed only right.

I spent time looking for the right spot. It should be in view of the cabin, for some reason, but near the forest. Somewhere it would be at peace–now that it had been dinner and breakfast. I decided on a place at the edge of the clearing, near the road. It helped the earth there was soft. I found gardening tools, including a spade. It took over three hours and two warm beers to dig a large enough hole.

Even then, it did not quite fit. I covered it with dirt but its antlers stuck out. Just the antlers. I decided to leave it that way, as a marker. A marker for whoever stayed at the cabin, a marker for whoever came up the road.

I kept a leg (for tomorrow.)

Tomorrow was Friday. Phyllis would come that night. At least, I hoped so. The burner phone remained quiet and I did not want to risk using it to call her if she wasn’t calling me.

I did tidy.

I had seen no one else. I did not need food. There was nothing to do but think about possibilities, and there were too many of those and none felt as if they ended well. So I spent the day prowling the woods. It felt like being myself. I watched animals run from me. I climbed a tall tree and hung on a thick branch, smelling the animals and plants below me. It felt good, surveying my territory. I felt ready for company, for solutions, for a new chapter in my life.

I was still up there, nearing twilight, when I saw Phyllis’s car approach the base of the mountain.

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That was comforting, until I saw the second car.

I hid in the trees as the two cars pulled up. Phyllis drove one. Then I saw in the second were Dr. Orwell and two men. I stepped out of the trees and approached them.

“Mike,” Phyllis said, “meet some of the group.” I had looked forward to being alone with her. It must have showed. “Those three won’t be here long. Too dangerous. For them. Then we’ll have time together.”

“You’re psychic,” I told her. “Hey Dr. Orwell.”

“At this point, call me Fran.”

The other two, men, I did not recognize. One was thin and tall, the other shorter. They sort of smiled at me but did not introduce themselves. They looked at the road and skies. We all went in, leaving the door open. “Coffee?” I asked. “I didn’t know when you were coming but I can start some now.”

“No time,” Fran replied. “We have under an hour.”

Phyllis sat next to me, pulling up a chair. Dr. Orwell and the two men sat on the couch, facing us. “Mike,” Phyllis said, “this is Tod and Bill.”

They nodded. It was tense. They looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

“I work at another base,” Tod said to me. “Same type of research as you perform under Pinetree. We’ve been told to speed up. Get publicly acceptable soldiers. Or units.” That appeared all he was prepared to say.

Bill told me, “I work in government. I administer the bases. The people on the other side are in and out of office. Governmental and nongovernmental. They want to figure out how to use you, how to create better versions of you. In fact, so does Tod and Pinetree and the rest. We all want to use you. Maybe they have an idea how.”

They did not offer much beyond the assurance they were working on the situation.

“The two corrections officers have disappeared,” Phyllis said. “The official story is they took bribes from the inmates to smuggle in guns. I’m told they’re on the run.

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The third guard was honest, so the inmates killed her."

"Bribes from the inmates?" I asked. "To smuggle guns onto death row?"

"Yeah, no one believes it," she told me. "But someone either bought them or influenced them or used them. The officers and at least some of the inmates. To create an excuse, to use you."

"All those dead, for that? Cold," I said.

"Yes," Phyllis said.

I looked at Bill. "How do you want to use me? What makes you better than Pinetree or the others?"

He looked at Dr. Orwell. She turned to me. "They'll ask you first. And the top priority is exposing all this, not creating even more."

Bill shrugged. Fran nodded. That seemed to end the pleasant chatter. I asked her to walk outside with me for a therapy chat. We left the cabin and walked in circles around the clearing, away from everyone else still inside. There was nowhere to go, but in circles.

She asked, "How's your time been up here?"

"Good," I told her. "Been using my down time well. Trying to combine my two selves."

"Driving up, I saw antlers in the ground. That you?"

"Yeah. Couldn't kill anything until a buck. It got hostile and angry at me. I cooked and ate it. It felt natural, doctor."

"Fran."

"I responded naturally. I've felt more at peace with it, my anger, out here. Too bad I can't stay here."

"No," she told me. "We're working on the situation."

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“Are there more in the group?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “It isn’t safe to even talk about them. Meeting these two was taking a risk, for all of us. But they wanted to meet you, feel you out. See what you were willing to do.”

“Do what?”

“So far, they’re good guys. I’m not sure they know themselves, except there is a rare opportunity.”

We strolled back to the cabin. The air out there breathed good. “I’m planning a new chapter in my life.”

“Maybe it will be. What’s the plan?”

“Too early to say.”

By then Tod and Bill waited impatiently in the back of the car, Phyllis leaning in an open window, talking with them. Dr. Orwell got behind the wheel with a wave to me. She and Phyllis spoke a moment, I didn’t hear what. Dr. Orwell and the two men spoke a moment, I didn’t hear what. Then Phyllis and I watched them drive off.

“Will this end up being all right?” I asked as we looked at the car go down the road.

“It’s a huge stinking pile of crap,” she replied. “How have you been?”

I told her. “Want to go on a run?”

She grinned. “Doubt I could keep up. I’d like to talk.”

I pulled another chair onto the porch. We sat. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Everything. Anything. There’s too much. Let’s start with basics. You killed a deer?”

“Yesterday. I stalked it. That was okay, I felt all right. Then it saw me and turned hostile. It was an obvious trigger. Kaboom.”

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“Were you hurt?”

“Not a scratch.” We listened to the owls. “You ever hunt?” I asked her. “Kill anything?”

“I’ve never hunted. I have stalked. That was work. It’s in the past.”

“How long in the past? During the time I’ve known you?”

“Let’s say more than five years ago. Don’t ask.”

“Asking is rude,” I replied. “Sorry. How about a walk in the woods instead of a run?”

Phyllis knew this area well. Walking with her was relaxing, pleasant. We stopped and listened to birds or other animals. Best was sitting on a big rock and looking at the starry night sky. Out here it was dark and the sky particularly deep. The moon was almost full.

We got off the rock and down to the ground where we found grass and took off our clothing and lay together naked. We kissed. After a year of sex with her, this was completely different. A different woman, a different me. Before was mechanical. I thought of other things. Now I kissed her ear and whispered that I needed her.

As an answer, she ran her hands up and down my back.

We kissed and touched each other for a while. I knew she was ready and entered her. She invited me in and said, “Hello.” I wanted to be inside her. She wanted me inside her. We were now together. We moved together. We were part of each other. We would have felt part of everything around us, if we were aware of anything around us.

For the first time, without me thinking, we came together.

It was…satisfying. Very satisfying.

We returned to the cabin and she showed me how to wash up without running water.

When we woke the next morning, after making love again—I didn’t *quite* admit

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thinking of it to myself that way—and having some breakfast—she'd brought up eggs and bacon and bread–I said, as I washed up, handing her a plate, having delayed saying it until I was sure, "We should go back today."

She looked at me, taking the plate. "Today? It's only Saturday."

"I've been very impressed that every day anything unusual happens, it becomes a risk. If I go back now, I've just dodged the guards for a night. Low risk."

"And what will you say you were doing?"

"Going up here to be with you." She blinked. "I think they'll believe me. Because, when we go back, you'll move in with me."

She put down the plate. "Whoa, Lone Ranger."

I handed her another. "I kind of thought you were the Lone Ranger."

"Well—"

"Don't you want to?"

"Well—"

"If you're worried about cover, Pinetree has known about our…relationship…for over a year."

"Cover?"

"You can tell her you can keep a better eye on me. Or maybe that it shows I'm more stable. They want both."

"Cover." She put down the second plate. "You're asking me to move in with you?"

"Your apartment is probably too small."

"Mike. That isn't what I meant."

I kissed her. "I'm asking you to move in with me. Even *if* your apartment is small."

"You're sure?"

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“Even more so now. You’re so cute, uncertain.”

“Uh, well, what do you have in mind?”

“A new chapter. Part of it is being with you. Living with you. Sharing my life with you. I need to change what’s happening at work. I can’t do it alone, I don’t want to be alone. It’s bad for me, if I don’t have the right person. You. To do a new beginning, I need you. Not to work together, though we’ll do that. I need you, to share with, to live with. Phyllis, it’s the only way I can achieve a cure and become a better person.”

She leaned close to me. “My name isn’t Phyllis. Actually, it really is Bridgette O’Shaughnessy.”

“Does that mean you lie a lot?”

“All the time. Except with you.”

“How do I know you’re not lying now?”

She leaned in closer and kissed me. Didn’t at all feel fake.

As we drove back, she asked, “Can we talk about the stuff on your walls?”

The new chapter had begun. We had become a couple.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Coupling

My new chapter continued at Bridgette’s, where I helped her pack. Her apartment was small and barely functional, crammed with clothing and books. It was not very tidy. There did not seem to be a lot of personal items. When I asked about no personal photos, she said, “A lot of the past I’d rather forget about. Don’t you?”

“No, I think about it all the time,” I said, taking her clothes off hangers.

“I’ve always wanted to live in a home, not a place,” she told me, putting her underwear into a suitcase.

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“To me it’s a place, although the living room is a nest.”

Moving her things took two trips.

As we unloaded the first time, I waved at the guards in the car outside my house and walked over to them. “Sorry if you missed me,” I told them. “Just away for overnight.”

They looked at Bridgette carrying in boxes. “New roommate?”

When we arrived with the second load, they got out and helped. It had a sort of family feel, security helping. We gave them some coffee.

While she was clearing more than half the closet and both chests of drawers, I went to the basement and carried up the two chests I’d carried down there after Madeline left.

Then I had another call to make. I phoned Pinetree and told her Bridgette was moving in. Pinetree had let me go, why let her dangle? “Glad to hear it,” she said. “You coming in Monday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I told her, wishing I could. I could tell she was relieved.

I did not think of calling Madeline or Melanie.

I returned to Bridgette, who told me “My name really is Phyllis,” and laughed.

After rearranging our clothing—she had so many shoes! –Phyllis began a conversation about my movie posters. We agreed to limit them to the bathroom.

After lunch, we took a break, walking in the forest beyond my back yard. It was a nice afternoon, peaceful. I saw two guards, not carefully hiding behind trees. We heard some birds, saw no animals but I showed her the tracks of rabbits, foxes and even a small bear.

I showed her the garage and she said, “You can’t do that in the house.” She paused and added, “But you can put your posters up here.” She looked at the mess. “You go nuts?”

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“I needed to use my claws. I was angry.”

“Maybe we should leave it this way. Man cave.”

While she cooked dinner, I took the posters out of the bathroom.

We ate at the kitchen table. It felt quiet and intimate. Then we went for another walk in the woods. “Like it?” she asked.

“Not the same. This afternoon was pleasant, that’s all.”

“Want to transform? It’s okay. Go off on a run. Feel those muscles.”

I looked at her. “I’d rather be me, here with you. Phyllis. If that *is* you.”

“You’re such a romantic. I had no idea.”

She pulled me to her and we kissed. Gently. Trading.

We fell asleep in bed, cuddling, trading memories we’d never revealed to anyone else.

I woke Sunday morning to the soft feeling of her kissing my neck.

Coffee was easy but we debated breakfast. She loved lightly scrambled wet eggs with cheese and onions. She called them swampy eggs. She ate them delicately, a small section at a time, interspersed with toast spread with a jam she had brought. I liked my eggs sunny side up. I liked making a smiley face with the eggs as eyes and bacon as a mouth, and then eating it, dabbing toast into the eyes.

I told her to make the scrambled eggs for both of us. Nothing she did was wrong. She smiled and made scrambled and sunny side up eggs. And bacon, for the smile.

We went to the nursery after breakfast and bought a new rose bush. As we worked in the garden, patching the hole where the rose bush had been, I told her I was worried. “It’s the anger,” he told her. “It’s always there and I’m worried it will destroy everything. As it did with Madeline. I’m worried about us.”

She said nothing, listening, carefully burying the roots.

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“Madeline and I started wonderful. We both knew there were problems but thought we could overcome them. The first years there were problems but we dealt with them. But then I slowly spiralled away from her. I was more into myself, into anger. My anger came out, I had controlled it only at first.

“She tried. Therapists tried. For half a year, I used meds which made me feel like a zombie. In the end, I had to escape.”

“But isn’t she still with you?”

“Aren’t former lovers always still with us?”

“Can’t argue with that. But now you’re…friends?”

“Not friends. Acquaintances.”

We stood back, looking at the new rose bush, hoping it would flourish.

It was certainly a day of changes and adjustments for the two of us. The biggest change in the house was in the bathroom. Same as I’d experienced when Madeline and I moved in together. Suddenly the bathroom was filled with bottles and boxes and jars, creams and salves and pills and make up. A special hair towel I should never touch. And panties in the sink. I used to become furious, at times, when I went into the bathroom to wash my face and found panties in the sink. What was I supposed to do with them? Why were panties in the sink to begin with? Was there something wrong with putting them in the clothes washer? Or at least the bathtub?

I removed the panties, washed my face and hands, then quietly refilled the sink and put the panties back home.

She rearranged the cans in the cupboards, noting I had too much processed food. I knew the contents of the fridge would soon change. I was prepared to fight about ice cream but discovered she liked the cheap thrill of cold and flavour.

We needed a break from setting up, so we went out to the two guards sitting in the car (they were listening to podcasts) we were going bowling and invited them to join us. I never bowled, I lacked the coordination (and interest.) We all went together and at the alley were a foursome. On her first, Phyllis bowled a strike. She had this wonderful approach, carefully measured, and then the ball kind of popped

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from her fingers and landed gently on the wood. It went straight down the centre.

I avoided gutter balls, for the most part.

The two guards beat us, my score dragging us down.

It was a good time and after we got back to the house, we thanked them and then left them sitting in their car. They had work to do, sitting and listening to podcasts probably. We were both tired of working. For now, the house was organized enough. We went inside and sat at the kitchen table, drinking tea and talking about what might happen tomorrow, Monday morning. But something had been building all day. Suddenly we left a trail of clothing to the bedroom and when we arrived naked, faces flushed, she surprised me.

“Transform.”

I broke off the kiss. “Why?”

Her smile carried deep undercurrents. “The power,” she whispered. “Don’t you like having that power?”

I allowed myself to emerge, growing and stretching in front of her until I stood over her, hairy and muscular and powerful. My wolfish eyes stared hungrily into hers. Her eyes were as hungry as she pulled me down onto the bed.

It was slow, not frantic. She spread her legs. I lay between them. I laid my big strong body over her smaller, definitely less hairy one. I could not kiss her but I licked her across her red lips with my broad hot tongue. She sucked my tongue into her mouth. It sounds gross but it was electric for both of us. She was more energized than I had seen her before, more than the last year of having sex with her, even more than in the forest.

I slowly eased myself inside her as her mouth opened. When I filled her, she again said “Hello.” And then we entered into a slow rhythm, controlled by my powerful body steadily thrusting in and out for the longest most wonderful time until we came together and when we did, we both howled.

It felt wonderful. Later that night, as she slept, I lay next to her, wondering about what had just happened.

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How much did we both love sheer power?

I drifted off as I thought about getting ready to start the new week.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Like Every Monday Morning

It was a new week and I wanted this to be like every Monday morning from now on.

After a wonderful weekend, feeling like I was starting a new life, I kissed Phyllis good-bye as we left the house and went in our separate cars to our separate work. I had no idea what she did during the day, except it was in security. I was in a great mood and waved to the guards as I drove off and they followed me.

As soon as I got into work and turned on my computer, I started my new week by reading an email asking us to another funeral that morning.

This time, I carpooled. Madeline drove. I sat next to her. Three of our colleagues sat in the back. I looked at Madeline and thought of the weekend and Phyllis. I had no idea if Madeline's feelings would be hurt, but I decided not to risk it.

"Who's funeral are we going to?" I asked her. "I just read the subject line."

"Frank," she replied.

"Marshmallow guy," said one of the people in the back. "Poor schmuck."

"He was disappointed with his reaction to the serum the first time," Mary said, keeping her eyes on the road. "So he tried it again Friday night."

The night I started my new chapter.

"He turned into the same marshmallow balloon kind of thing," said the person in the back seat. "He bounced around his lab until he hit the syringe his assistant injected him with. It popped a hole and Frank deflated. They could not revive him, only fold him up."

The funeral was a same sombre affair, the priest again trying to inspire us to continue working. At the end, Pinetree motioned to me and asked me to ride back

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with her.

“I thought you should see the next test,” she told me.

“We’re doing more? After two funerals?”

“Can’t stop.”

In the car, I asked, “Who’s getting the shot this time?”

“Mark.”

“Mark? He’s full of himself.”

“That’s the idea. Positive. He had the highest ego score of anyone we tested.”

Her driver parked in her reserved space in the underground garage, then Pinetree led me upstairs to the test lab.

“The test is now?” I asked in the elevator.

“I asked for more time,” she replied, “but we can’t wait.”

The lab was again set up with the cage and chair, with several people waiting. Less staff than the first two tests–the less who saw it made for better morale given the history. Mark paced. He was tall, muscular, clean shaven, starting to go bald. There were strange marks on his forehead where he’d had hair implants.

Mark was a talented scientist and made sure everyone knew. It was not bravado. Many of his projects, more than most others’, succeeded. He recruited a talented assistant, which helped. His ego allowed him that, to share the work, but he grabbed as much credit as humanly possible. Today he wore a tight tee shirt and gym pants, to show off his bulges.

Pinetree and I took seats facing the cage. Mark walked in, with his assistant and two guards. The guards strapped him in. Mark was very confident, beaming at us. He nodded to his assistant, who injected him in the arm with a yellow liquid. Then the three stepped out of the cage, closing the door and stepping back, to watch.

The transformation started. I realized my heart was racing and I was gripping my

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knees as I watched. The last times had gone strangely. And ended horribly.

This serum worked better. Mark grew, proportionately, until he was eight feet tall. His clothing ripped apart as his body became powerful, thick, muscular. His hair grew in and he even developed a spit curl. His penis was very large. And erect.

Mark beamed at us. He looked like Superman, except perhaps for the penis. Then he grunted. I saw his eyes appear to grow desperate. His handsome face was frozen. I realized Mark was trying to move. Sweat broke out on his smooth forehead. His bulging muscular arms trembled but he could not make them move. Even his fingers remained stiff.

“What is it?” Pinetree asked, leaning forward.

“I think it’s that he’s too full of himself,” I replied.

And then Mark’s arms stopped trembling. His skin took on a grayish white sheen as his skin rapidly turned into marble. His eyes stopped moving. Mark stood in front of us, a marble statue, chiselled with perfection, of a brave super strong man gazing up to the sky with a powerful look on his face.

His assistant opened the cage door and rushed inside. He felt Mark’s face, then his arms and chest. He slapped the face to get a reaction.

A plaque formed on the bottom of the statue: MARK.

A medic rushed in with a stethoscope. She got no reaction. She tried to shoot adrenalin into Mark but the syringe’s needle broke on the marble skin.

Pinetree stood. She looked at me. “Another goddamn funeral. Don’t bother saying it. Never should have allowed this. Thank god the other labs aren’t this far along.” And she walked out, shaking her head. For the first time, I saw her experiencing regret. I think she went off quickly to be by herself.

Madeline had not been at the test. I sought her out, she was in her lab, and told her about Mark.

“Obviously, the serum worked. But what it brought out killed him.”

“Frank was a dull creampuff,” she replied quietly, with more than a trace of anger.

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“Arnold hated himself and Mark thought too much of himself. The serum brought all that out. They were all bad choices. It’s disturbing it killed him. I hate this.”

“It works for me.”

“It works for you because it is anger. If we’re learning from this, that’s the direction future projects should take. I don’t see any other emotion working.”

“So they have to find someone really angry to test the serums on.”

“They’re looking. I’m not sure where.”

It was depressing.

I returned to my lab. My cell phone rang. I looked at the screen. Melanie.

“Hey dad. Not much time to talk. I’m moving in with mom this weekend. Thought you should know.”

“Do you want me to come over? Help?”

“No. Gotta go. I’ll talk more after.”

After what? I put the cell phone down, grateful she had not asked about work, wishing my new chapter involved her and Madeline. I wanted to phone Phyllis but I did not know where she was or what she was doing.

I had lunch in the cafeteria, eating with colleagues. One even made room for me. We talked about Mark and why we were rushing the projects. No one wanted to be the next test subject. Everyone was worried and frightened about the future.

I spent a lot of the afternoon in my first normal Monday back at work in my new chapter worrying about how horrible it was.

I had an ally, to a point, in Pinetree. But she was up against something huge, enough to give her directions to speed up despite her objections. And I was increasingly central to whatever the larger mystery was because I was the only subject on whom a serum had worked. My first Monday at work got better when I drove home, followed of course, and found Phyllis waiting for me.

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It was unsettling that she asked me to transform again, for sex.

My morale was not great.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Morale

Instead of a gravestone, Mark himself was used. He was placed over an empty grave. He looked very nice, a glorious marble statue looking up to…something.

Very few attended the service.

By now, morale at *The Academy* was at an all time low. It used to be good—we were working on innovative projects for the good of the nation. After three deaths, almost everyone had begun to question what they were doing—and what would happen to them if they were used to test a serum.

That afternoon, Pinetree sent an email to all staff stating she was concerned about morale and inviting suggestions. Morale was impacting productivity. My email was that we stop all work until we figure out how to perform our research safely. Her solution, as announced the following morning, was to be more fun and hand out prizes.

It was fascinating. I saw it as a sort of additional study of my colleagues and started taking notes. What would be the result of the attempt to manipulate their emotions?

Before, they hid their anger and frustrations beneath the veneer of office politeness. Early on, as children, we learn to hide our anger in the playground. If we don't, we get beaten up. As adults, if we don't, we don't hold jobs and live alone.

My colleagues hide their anger in many ways, subtle and obvious. They isolate themselves, to avoid anyone seeing them. They snap or become brittle. They mumble to themselves. You walk softly around them. They criticize when they normally avoid it. Their clothing becomes wrinkled, even shabby. Men grow beards. Women stop being pleasant on autopilot.

Moments of rage are so unusual they became legendary, the person unable to

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escape their actions.

Like me.

I had already noticed a tendency of colleagues having worried looks. They no longer bothered to give me a wide birth. I began giving some of them more space, especially the ones who mumbled to themselves. I tried initiating conversations about our work, but everyone was either intimidated by the secrecy of their own work—we did not know what the other was specifically working on—or they were, to put it simply, freaked out.

Freaked out by the freaks we had created.

Morale was a huge issue. Something had to be done as the work had to continue. Changes began the day after Pinetree's email.

That next day became "Mystery Food Tuesday" in the cafeteria. Each steam tray was heaped with something unrecognizable–in that sense, the offerings were not unusual. But today the food was of all colours, most bright and unusual for food. Some were purple lumps in an orange sauce. Anyone who guessed what their lunch was won a free desert.

A box of fresh donuts appeared each morning on the reception desk. Each day, one of them contained a hidden $100 (coupon for the cafeteria.) You found out when you bit into it and tasted paper.

"Casual Thursday" was introduced. We were encouraged to wear non-office clothing. Madeline wore loose yoga pants and a sweat shirt. I wore jeans and a hoodie. Maurice dressed in a gorilla outfit. There was a vote each Thursday for best outfit, Maurice won the first.

Everyone liked "No Meetings Wednesdays."

Fridays during lunch in the cafeteria movies were shown. To cheer us up, they chose *Pinocchio*. Most staff walked out, seeing it as an allegory about themselves and their work. The film for next week, *Psycho*, was cancelled and the staff person scheduling the movies was demoted.

A higher ranking general than Pinetree was brought in to give the staff a pep talk. We'd never seen or heard of him before. His uniform was impressive and his chest

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covered with medals. We sat listening as he told us about what we did. He insisted it was important. When he asked for questions, there was dead silence and angry eyes.

Another way to hide anger is silence. Do not respond. Do not encourage. Just stare.

As it was civil service, people are considered lucky to be employed in a solid job it was difficult to be fired from. Raises are in steps, I hit the top five years ago. Bonuses are unheard of, except for the managers. Starting this week, when we did something worthy, supervisors handed out rolls of candy.

As far as I know, no one showed for the afterhours costume party.

Phyllis did join the new bowling league.

Ironically, to a small degree, staff morale was improved because we complained to each other. That was new. Workers usually grunt a bit but are careful about criticisms. Now the concerns were no longer concealed but boiling over. We talked over lunch, we met in twos and threes in our labs. The talk was short and bitter. People wanted an assurance they would be safe.

I talked with Madeline only occasionally. She avoided me. I recognized the anger in her. I texted Melanie and asked her to come to the mall. I didn't ask her to the house, I was still uncertain about introducing her to Phyllis. We met in a small, quiet mall café.

"Mom's a mess," she told me after a brief silence as we settled in. "What's going on?"

"It's work, not me," I told her. "It's falling apart. Everyone is scared to continue their work. There have been three funerals from experiments gone wrong. I shouldn't tell you that."

"Experiments like yours?"

"Yes, but mine worked out. Theirs were disasters."

"What can I do for mom?"

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All I could think of was for her to offer support. I could not tell her details of our work. I had no idea what Madeline shared with her, but she also was probably very careful. And Melanie, having grown up with us, knew better than to ask. She left, saying she had arranged a performance exhibit at a local art gallery and had to work on it.

It didn't escape me she did not ask what she could do to support me.

I wondered what I could do to improve morale, and quickly decided I did not care. The research into my colleagues was interesting but, more important, while everything felt suspended I could quietly continue work on a new serum, for me.

That was certainly good for my morale.

Home was better. Settling in and compromising made every evening a surprise, all pleasant and fun and innocent. I used to watch movies. Now we played double solitaire, it was better, it was together. We also played gin rummy and cribbage. Phyllis was remarkably good at all of them. I rarely won.

Once I saw her double dealing from the bottom of the deck. I said nothing.

After all, it was all for fun. I had her support, sharing with her even though she could share none of her work with me. Occasionally, I transformed and ran off into the forest, enjoying being by myself, being myself. I tried not to outpace the guards. Their morale was also important. I couldn't imagine a job where you sat and watched, waiting for something to happen. To help their morale, I suggested podcasts they had never heard of. One of them gave me a roll of candy, which he'd been given by his supervisor.

It was an unsettled time. We were all waiting for the next stage.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Next Stage

When you start sharing your life with a person you become involved in a mystery. Who is this person? What do they want? What do they like? Why are they with *you*? There are clues to unravel along with information and incidents which must be ignored if you are to continue together. It's like walking into a haunted house and wondering whether you should go into the basement.

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Perhaps ‘haunted house’ is not the best analogy for a successful approach to a relationship.

I had come up with the idea of the serum and pressured Mary to create it, all to improve my personal life. Now I was living with a woman I’d met at an escort service, who was in fact not an escort but who worked for the government, spying on me. About her I knew nothing. Probably not even her real name.

I had to have a real talk with Phyllis. Not so much what she had done in the past, although that worried me, but now. What was her work? Was I still an assignment? Was I work or did I mean something to her? If I was work, did it matter?

It had been a welcome week of companionship, but also unsettling. Phyllis was a mystery. I needed to know more. The basement had to be entered.

I went home that night and we cooked dinner together. We ate a pleasant supper, then went into the backyard and sat on lawn chairs, looking at the forest and the sky. I brought a bottle of wine and two glasses. For a while, we sat comfortably, sipping, looking at the clouds. She talked about the new bowling league.

I wanted to continue being comfortable, but there was only one way I could do that. “Phyllis, I have a couple of questions.”

“Questions?”

I took a breath and leapt. “Am I still work? An assignment?”

She looked at me, also took a breath. “Of course.”

“Of course?”

“Sure. Otherwise, Pinetree would never have let me move in. I told her I could keep a closer eye on you.”

“Yes, the excuse. I didn’t mean it that way.” I was feeling my way. “So. Do you report on us?”

“What she needs to hear. Nothing important. Nothing about us.”

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“Tell me about your other work. Apart from me.”

“Oh, come on. It’s top secret.” She smiled, trying to brush it off.

“*My* work’s top secret. You know about *that*.”

There was a long pause. She sipped a little wine and sat up. “Very good. I knew this would happen. Fine. I’m assigned to internal security. Surveillance of staff on all the research bases. I report directly to Pinetree.”

“You’ve been gone a couple of nights.”

There was another long pause.

“I want to tell you the truth. I do.” She seemed sincere. “Yes, I’m more than surveillance. I’ve been an agent for years. I’ve spied. And what goes with it.”

“Our work has similarities,” I told her, knowing it was weak.

“None at all,” she replied, a bit tense.

“We both work for the government,” I tried again. “We both engage in questionable work.”

“Yeah. Fair enough. Better.” She finished her wine. “I’ve felt good, living with you. I know you’re trying to make it work. So am I. If us being together feels strained at times, Mike—I’m used to being someone else. To being a cover. A ghost. With you, I’ve let me be myself. It’s a little frightening. I’ve never lived with anyone, not like this. It’s a challenge.” She put the empty glass down. “I’m sorry if it’s been tough.”

“It hasn’t been,” I lied. We were on a similar page. Or seemed to be. What she said hit all the proper marks–and, if I was still her work, was exactly what she would say. Still, Phyllis was part of the resistance group. Or was she also spying on it? All I had to go on was feeling her warmth, her affection. That was hard to fake. I believed it was real.

Then there was sex with her, wanting me when transformed. Okay, that was weird. But if she was attracted to power, and I was powerful when transformed–so? If it was innocent, just what turned her on, I could accept that. I wanted to accept that.

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I did not want to be alone. It *had* to be innocent.

More important than any of that, I realized I was not angry. Disturbed–not angry. That was a positive. Perhaps compassion and affection, whether towards something real or not, cancelled anger.

Perhaps this relationship was my cure.

We went quiet for a while and the bottle of wine just sat there so I suggested a walk in the forest. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of a guard behind us, but they were discrete. We walked, listening to the sounds of the forest. The sounds we heard tonight were teenagers laughing, deep in the bushes.

“What can I do to make it better?” she asked, taking my hand.

I had not touched her since coming home, I realized. Not even a kiss. “You can always make it better.” And I kissed her. She kissed back.

It only felt reassuring.

“I don’t think so,” she said, pulling back. “Where are you?”

“I feel like I’m falling and can’t see the bottom.”

“Fight it,” she said with a grimace. “Your work is horrible. Orwell and I and others are working to stop it. You have to stick it out.”

“And get it cut off? Orwell’s group wants to use me.”

“They do,” she agreed. “But they have no idea how. They’re desperate, Mike. They’re up against something enormous. That’s all. They need time, which we may not have.”

She took my hand and we continued walking. The teenagers laughing faded, it became quiet, then we heard more laughter from the bushes up ahead. After they faded, I said, “You know who *I’ve* killed.”

Her grip on my hand tightened. “You want to do this? Very well. It’s been a while. There was seven years ago, Budapest. He was a double agent about to sell out ten of us. Knife.”

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I waited.

“Okay. Fine. Good.” She looked directly at me. “Last week. The two guards.”

We stopped. She looked directly at me. “I was told to make it look like they committed suicide. What I learned was they were part of a conspiracy to create an incident. They were a willing sacrifice.”

“A sacrifice?”

“Someone on the cabinet level wanted to know what you could do. They were disappointed with your actions at the research base. The lives did not matter.”

“The cabinet? Who?”

“I wasn’t on a need to know.”

We continued our walk in the forest, no longer holding hands, occasionally passing bushes where people moaned and laughed. I tried to feel better. But.

She had killed two men—just last week.

The two men I had saved.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Revealing Truths

The next night, I decided to see Melanie’s performance installation. The subject was government sanctioned killing. Phyllis stayed behind.

I had never seen in person one of her installations, just photos and videos. I hadn’t avoided them, she just never told me about them. She invited me to this one.

I walked into her artistic world, the world she had moved into, lived in. The world created by her mind, from nothing but her thoughts. The product of Madeline and myself. She had grown up questioning, even turning rebellious about aspects of our society. I can’t imagine it was our influence–we always lied to her about our work.

There were quite a few people there. She already had a reputation, from what I

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overheard waiting in line. Her work was very socially conscious. I always admired her being an artist, though the socially conscious part left me uneasy about where she would go. We tried to bring her up with good ideals but to be careful about challenging the system. I had read reviews, online, of her previous installations. Her ideals were great but I was concerned about the challenge part, in part for her. Surveillance.

The installation was in a large art gallery downtown. Because of the crowd I had to wait to get in. Once you got in, it was a one-hour experience. She did three a night, I managed to get into the last.

I entered a long corridor along with about thirty people. On either side were large black and white photos of gravestones. Drum music played rhythmically in the background. The corridor led into a large open room. The walls had projected colour photos of scientists in white lab coats hovering over victims strapped to tables, holding hypos. The victims were terrified.

In the centre of the room was a man strapped to a table, like the ones in the photos. A Bach organ cantata began playing. A figure wearing a lab coat and gas mask entered from a side door, walked up to the struggling man and pulled out a hypo. The figure yanked off the gas mask, revealing Melanie.

Her face was painted a ghostly white. Her eyes were black holes. She stared at the man. “I need you for the national purpose,” she told the man in a ghastly voice. Then she injected him and he screamed.

“Give me the antidote!” he cried.

Her grin was evil. “First we must see what happens.”

The man groaned. Melanie turned towards us. “Welcome not to the future. Welcome to today. Where the government experiments on us in many ways and the media ignores it.” The images on the walls changed to photos of biological weapons and their impacts, all with lines through them, with the words ‘not broadcast.’ “Secrecy is our national interest. Covering up is the goal. Who benefits?”

She saw me in the crowd. We exchanged one long look. And then she danced to a collection of Beatles music, whirling in her lab coat as the images changed—police

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smiling, troops waving, people injured in war with fake smiles photoshopped onto their faces. A yellow submarine.

She danced to the man strapped to the table, who broke the strap on his right arm and grabbed her by the throat. As she struggled, he drew her down to him. And then the lights went out. We stood in darkness. After a pause, the lights came back on, and Melanie and the man took their bows.

There was a crowd around her, congratulating her. I waited quite a while until they left.

Then she walked out, nodding for me to follow. Her dressing room was hastily put together. I waited until she put on street clothes, then she let me in.

“Glad you made it,” she said. “That was our fourth evening, three more to go. What did you think?” Her look at me was not exactly daring. She was tense.

I was an encouraging dad: “Very dramatic.”

“I want you to like it. I thought you would. I know you hate what you do. Dad, it’s about the media. About lies,” she told me. “It wasn’t about you and mom. Not specifically.”

I told her I understood. She told me she wanted to talk about it with me, later, but she had to go, to meet her team. I could see she was nervous, discussing her piece, so I thanked her for the experience, told her she was a terrific artist, and left.

I needed to talk. She did not want to talk with me, at least not now. Madeline was not likely. Phyllis was the only one left. I phoned. She did not answer. I walked out of the gallery, wondering what I should do.

Outside, I walked by a pharmacy and looked at the posters for new meds on the windows, with problems about the meds in tiny print at the bottom. I saw a billboard promoting a new movie that was terrible. A video channel above the street showed the news—tanks were shooting at something, with the subtitle ‘collateral damage.’ A bus went by with a large photo of a smiling woman on the side. She was a politician, running for office. There was no information about her or her goals, only her smile.

It was a long drive home. On the radio was constant pop music about being in love

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or wanting love. I heard news reports on the radio about vital things in distant lands but little about vital issues here. Switching stations made no difference—on the hour, they all had news reports with the same stories.

Road signs provided choices about where to go.

We are all the victims of false advertising, from companies wanting to make profits or governments wanting to profit from us. I drove past strip malls full of signs promising me most anything I wanted, and if I drove farther, anything.

When I did drive farther and reached home, Phyllis and a suitcase were gone. She left a short note: ‘We were too fast. Thought it better this way.”

“It was getting tense, so I thought I’d move out,” Phyllis told me when I phoned. “What happened was very sudden. I had a great excuse to do it. But there’s too much to sort out for it to work as it was.”

I told her I was coming over. I was entitled to my say, I told her. She said okay. I hung up first. I drove over. I don’t remember how I drove, my mind was blank. I had to see her. I had no idea what I would say. I could not leave it like this.

She let me in and we sat on the couch, on opposite ends. On the floor was the suitcase she’d packed and brought here. It was still unopened. I noticed I was not angry, not the anger I was familiar with.

“Was it the two guards?”

“I crossed a line.”

“I can deal with that. Yes, I saved them. But from nothing. They probably had a deal with the inmates not to harm them.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “That’s what they told me.”

“You spoke with them?”

She sighed. “Like I said, I crossed a line. Now another one. Personal needs overrule work.”

“Personal needs? So you want to stay?”

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She stood, walked around the couch, straightening things. Not that there was much to straighten. “I’ve never lived with anyone before, Mike. Not like this. I did it for work, yes.”

This was good to hear. “Are you going to keep straightening stuff? You moved most of it out.”

She laughed, a little, and sat back on the couch.

“Okay,” I said, “so what’s so hard about living with me?”

She laughed a little more. “Nothing. That’s the problem.” I said I didn’t see the problem and she sighed. “I have to compromise. I don’t know if I’m ready. If I can.”

“So this is not about work? It’s about living together?” She nodded. “Look, every relationship is different. Everybody begins with compromises.”

“I’m not used to compromising. It isn’t in my DNA. That’s why I’m good at my work.”

We sat for a while.

Finally, I told her, “This is stupid.” Then I stood and took off my clothing and transformed. I looked down at her and growled. She kind of growled back and we grabbed at each other and let out our frustrations on her living room floor.

It was good. As good as always.

We lay on the floor after, sweating. I had transformed back, it was easier to talk. “We don’t have to live together,” I told her. “I could rent you a room in the basement.”

She leaned over and kissed me.

Phyllis, if that was her name, picked up the suitcase as we left. She never unpacked. I felt I had worked with her to solve a, well a couples crisis. Without anger.

We drove back to the house.

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I was pretty sure we were a couple. Nothing was really resolved except we were being honest with each other.

The guards followed me there and us back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Madeline Gets Another Word

He's only willing to give me another word because he needs me. He's using my love. He's not so different, in that.

When he phoned, I wanted to say no. I did. He called back. He wanted to come to my apartment. That was my safe space. I told him to meet me in the underground garage, that I'd be waiting in my car.

I could guess what he wanted to talk about. Much of that half hour was spent guessing. When he drove up half an hour later, I opened the passenger side door and let him come in and sit with me.

"Want to go anywhere?" he asked as he closed the door.

"No." I had decided to wait and let him tell me what the urgency was. The new serum? Pinetree? Melanie and her installation? I'd seen it opening night. Experiencing it left me feeling hollow. The installation was a spotlight on my life. And left me realizing my life had been a series of terrible mistakes.

He looked at me and said, "I want to talk about where we went wrong."

I was immediately uncomfortable. "Why? What do you mean? We've been through it all before."

He looked just as uncomfortable, I realized. "Madeline, I'm in a new relationship. I don't want it to go wrong." And he looked at me.

I looked back, probably, but I'm not sure what I saw. "What?"

"It's with a woman named Phyllis. I've been involved with her for a year."

"Why are you telling me this? You should go." I felt tense and wanted to throw

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something at him.

“Anger isn’t a problem with her. Being a couple is.”

“Why should I care?”

He looked at the floor.

I felt the tension drain, replaced by guilt. He looked wrecked. Damn.

It was quiet for a while, then I asked him to tell me what the problem was. “It started a year ago, when I called an escort service. I saw her once a week. Then, a couple of weeks ago, after the serum, things changed. I learned she was not an escort but worked for Pinetree. She’s been an agent for years.

“The sex is great but she left last night. I talked her back. But she’s worried about being a couple. She’s always been a lone wolf.”

I sat and thought. My ex was asking for advice about how to be a couple in what sounded like the most bizarre couple relationship ever. He had been seeing a hooker? And now they were living together and he wanted advice?

“I should call her and tell her to forget it,” I mumbled. He heard.

“I need to make this work,” he told me. “I think she needs it too.”

Here I had been thinking my life had been a series of terrible mistakes. One of them sat in the car with me. I wished I still did not love him, even if I had by now distanced myself. Although now I felt I was not nearly as distant enough.

His anger was the ultimate reason I had to leave him. The weight was oppressive, the anticipation constant. Life was impossible sitting on the crater of an active volcano.

“You said she left and you talked her back. Why did she leave?”

He sighed. “She said it was work. I’m not sure what I can tell you.”

“What kind of work?”

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“Killing people.”

I gave that some thought. “I can see how that might be an issue.”

“Wasn’t that much for me. She said they were a sacrifice. Part of a larger conspiracy, going all the way up. She thought she’d told me too much. But that was only the motivator. She was worried about being a couple, about compromising.”

“What about seeing Dr. Orwell?”

“She’s part of a conspiracy also, a conspiracy against the conspiracy. I’m not sure what I can tell her. If I say the wrong thing to anyone, Phyllis might be forced to leave.”

“I can’t believe you’re coming to me with this,” I finally said.

“I couldn’t think of anyone else,” he replied.

“Is she worried about Melanie’s installation? It hits close to home.”

He shook his head. “She doesn’t know about it. Maybe she does. I don’t know.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t want to be alone.”

I could have hated him for saying that, to me. I’d been alone since I’d left him.

“Well, then. Every day is a new one, isn’t it,” I told him. “Both of you have to make it work and, if you share enough, it will. Jesus Christ Mike, I don’t know what else to say.”

“That was pretty good,” he told me.

“What about Melanie?”

“I don’t think they’ll do anything.”

“That isn’t what I meant. You haven’t talked to her about this. She would have told me.”

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“No. Don’t know how.”

He had always dumped crap on me. I tried to escape, left him, set myself up on my own. I should have quit, left him completely. If only I could have done that. The serum had seemed a way out—at least I could give him something, maybe his life would settle.

Being together and untogether is a lot of work.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Halloween Hero

I felt overdue seeing my therapist. Life had become very confusing and I needed help weaving all the separate strands into a thick quilt that I could then lie under. It would be quiet under the quilt.

I sat on her couch, Dr. Orwell opposite me, no quilt in sight. I gobbled the cookies. “Tough times?” she asked.

“I feel like transforming and ripping things apart. That’s what this is supposed to be about.”

“You sound angry.”

“Frustrated.” I got up and paced. “You?”

“Pinetree has me working psychological profiles. I’ve reviewed files from institutions. Prisons. Asylums.” I told her that sounded like a very bad idea and she told me she and Pinetree agreed. But there was pressure to produce more of me.

It was all talk, frustrating talk. I needed release. “Take tonight off,” she told me. “Go out this evening. Tonight’s Halloween.”

So that was why all the cafeteria food was orange.

Going out for Halloween sounded like a reasonable idea, at least different. And I could do it with Phyllis. I went home at the end of the day, after stopping at the grocery store, and met Phyllis. We smiled at each other and kissed but it felt

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awkward, almost distant. “We need to do something together,” I told her.

She stopped the nothing she was doing. “Like what?”

“It’s therapy. You know what tonight is?” She shook her head. “Halloween. And we’re going out, together. We’ll do something together that has nothing to do with work, or anything else we’ve done before. You good?”

“I already have a costume in mind.”

When it was dark and the street was full of kids we got ready to go out. I poured the candy I’d bought into a bowl and put it on the porch. Back inside, Phyllis put a white sheet over her head, covering herself. She’d cut out two holes for her eyes.

“What’s the costume?”

“I’m a ghost.”

I grinned. “Appropriate. Here’s mine.” And I threw off my clothing and transformed. I looked at us in the hallway mirror. We were perfect for a fun night out.

It was dark, with a half moon. The sky was clear. It was enchanting. A ghost and a werewolf walked together down my front steps. Although I was heavy, my steps felt light. I think Phyllis was skipping.

We stopped at the sidewalk as the children and their parents swarmed around us. The kids were dressed as everything from monsters to pirates to doctors. There were several mad scientists, their lab coats quite well done, a lot like mine. About half the kids had store bought costumes, the others carefully sewn homemade outfits. Mini-me werewolves dotted the street, as super soldiers. The parents dressed as themselves.

As I towered over them, hairy and bristling, the parents complimented me on my costume and the kids felt up my hair. They told me I looked like the Super Solider from the bank.

I *was* the best on the street. It was fun.

Phyllis and I walked together, enjoying the kids’ giggling and laughter, the opposite

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of what their costumes depicted. Of course, for them Halloween was not about being scary. It was about candy. The streets were full, the kids going house to house, parents staying a bit behind, watching while chatting with each other.

It was lovely until we came upon the police car.

An officer told us the pharmacy had been burglarized, the narcotics safe opened. It happened moments ago–the burglars had just fled. The officers were waiting for backup. Without even thinking, I volunteered. “You’ll lose them. I can find them.”

At first they refused, looking at me up and down. I told them I was wearing the special suit I’d worn at the bank.

“That’s a suit?” one cop said. “Doesn’t look like a suit.”

“I can help you.” I pointed to the two guards who had followed us from the house, who flashed badges.

“Fine, wolf man. Go get them. But you find them, call us. “Don’t do anything.”

“I have a partner.” I stepped away from them. Phyllis pulled off the sheet. “They went in the back,” I told her. The scent was clear. Three people, men. Wearing clothing which had not been washed recently.

It’s easy to track prey which does not wash.

The two guards stayed discretely behind.

We went to the rear of the building and found a door open. I looked at their tracks and smelled their scents, then loped off down the dark street, Phyllis running by my side.

Soon we were back among the houses. The half moon was bright, providing just enough light. We ran past the parents and their kids, leaving them behind, coming to an area where the houses were dark. Except one large house down the street, whose ground floor lights burned.

“I’ll call the cops,” Phyllis said.

“We can handle this,” I growled.

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Her eyes were bright.

We circled the large house once, then stopped at the front porch. The two guards leaned against a tree by the sidewalk, watching. One was talking into her cell phone.

“What do you think?” Phyllis asked.

“They’re all on the ground floor,” I told her. “Five. All men. The three we tracked and two more. I smell gun grease.”

She thought only a moment. “Front door, back door? I knock in front, a diversion, you go in through the back. We meet inside.”

I licked her face.

She sucked on my long tongue.

We were excited.

I loped around the house to the back door. It was locked. I waited. When I heard Phyllis knock on the front door, I yanked at the doorknob. The lock broke and I quietly pulled the door open and stepped into the kitchen.

I paused, taking in the scents, now better. Five males, nearby. I listened. Phyllis was asking if her daughter had come by for trick and treat. A man said no.

I crept from the kitchen down the hallway. I saw her standing at the front door, talking to the man. He had a pistol tucked into the back of his pants. When she saw me over his shoulder, Phyllis made a move to leave and then whirled and punched the man in the stomach, then kicked him hard in the groin.

He fell over, clutching himself, gasping for breath. She took his gun.

We both went into the living room. Four men sat smoking. A pile of drugs in boxes was on a table in the centre of the room. The men saw a werewolf and a woman with a gun and three of them scrambled. One went for a pistol in his waistband. He was twelve feet away. I leapt the distance and the pistol went off as I grabbed his hand and yanked. Then I punched him in the face and he keeled over.

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Behind me, Phyllis had flipped one man, then stood on his neck while pointing the pistol at the other.

The fourth man sat frozen on the couch, halfway through a vape. “Jesus Christ!” he cried. “I give up!”

We pulled them together and I discovered Phyllis was very adept tying people up with kitchen towels. As she was about done, we heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Someone had been upstairs. I left the living room and saw a young woman stumbling down the stairs. She took one look at me and was terrified. Phyllis came out, saw the woman and said, “Police. Who are you?”

“Oh thank God,” she told us. “They’ve kept me here for days.”

Phyllis took out her phone. “Time to call the cops.”

“Who’s that?” the woman asked, pointing at me.

Before I could think of anything, Phyllis replied “Special Forces.”

She was good at this.

In a minute, while we were still comforting the girl, the police arrived. As we were explaining, news vans pulled up and reporters piled out. Being identified was supposed to be weeks away—but I was trapped, surrounded by reporters and their cameras. I could not reveal myself, so I stayed as I was. The two guards stayed out of the picture, shook their heads. One was on his phone.

“What are you?” one asked.

“Special Forces,” I growled. “I wore my suit to go out for Halloween. Discovered the robbery by accident. I had to help,” I said to the cameras in my deep voice. “They were armed, there was a hostage, we couldn’t wait.”

“This is a suit?”

“Yes.”

“Can you howl?” one reporter asked.

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I leaned back and let loose an eerie powerful howl which echoed through the neighbourhood.

From their reactions, it was great TV.

I got away without saying more, telling them I couldn't answer more questions. Phyllis and I dove into a car the guards had called up. We held hands in the back seat. As we were driven home, I transformed. The man driving passed me a robe he had thoughtfully brought. Then we walked back into the house, holding hands. As soon as we closed the front door we were pulling ourselves together as soon as we closed the front door.

What we had done together was terrific. We felt…stimulated. I wanted it. She wanted it. She asked and I stayed transformed as we stumbled into the bedroom.

If she preferred me transformed, if she liked me better that way.

Why not?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Why Not?

It was all over the news the next morning: *Super Soldier captures criminals, rescues woman!* I saw myself on the news, complete with both interview and howling. I had not remembered, but I left waving at the camera.

At least no one knew who the Super Soldier was. Yet. My neighbours knew. They had seen me leave the house on Halloween night. Soon enough reporters would knock on my door.

If people liked me, was that *really* a problem? I could get used to it—as a quite new experience. I kissed Phyllis good-bye and left for work. We went out together to our separate cars. No reporters yet. As I got into my car, Pinetree phoned. She told me to meet her when I came into work. Expected.

Unexpected was, before I started the engine, my phone ringing again. It was Melanie. "That was *you*, dad, wasn't it?"

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I hesitated. “Uh, well—”

“You were *amazing*. I have friends I want you to meet. Artists. You’re a hero!”

“Artists?”

“Performance art. This afternoon okay?” She gave me an address and time and told me she loved me.

Whoa. Life was opening up. Transforming creating possibilities I never anticipated. Did she see what I was doing as performance art? Well, in a way, wasn’t it?

When I arrived at *The Social Media Academy*, I went to see Pinetree. I expected anger. After all, I had disobeying orders or at least not obtained clearance.

She was happier than I’d seen her in ages. “Mike, you shouldn’t have done that,” she told me when I sat in front of her desk. “But it’s good. They liked it. They liked you being a hero, it’s what they want.

“It cools some of the heat.” She sighed. “How are you? Reporters?”

“Not yet. I’ll stick with the man in a suit as long as it lasts.”

“You’re okay with Phyllis?”

“Yeah. She was there, you know.”

Pinetree nodded. “I got an update from her while you were driving in.”

Well, that was expected. “So where do we go from here?”

“The work should continue. Everyone’s.”

“I think all of us are continuing on the theory.”

“Actually, Armstrong insists on trying his new serum this morning. Despite tests being on hold.”

“Another one?” And “Armstrong? He’s full of self-confidence.”

“That’s why he’s insisting.”

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“It’s a mistake.”

“Why?”

“Self-confidence is the wrong emotion.”

“I’m not going to stop him. He insists. He’ll do it whether I consent or not. So I’d rather be there. Maybe this time, it will work.”

“I doubt it,” I told her. “All the serums are emphasizing the wrong traits in the wrong ways. I was lucky. I hit the right combination. Anger and what it means to me. Armstrong will fail. He’d know it if he wasn’t the poster child for self-confidence.”

Muttering she hoped I was wrong but knew I was right, Pinetree led me to the lab used for the tests. Armstrong and his assistant waited, with several guards. He was tall, well groomed, with very good teeth. He had a wonderful smile. His assistant was a nerd.

“I have the perfect serum,” Armstrong told Pinetree.

“You should wait,” she replied. “Remember the funerals.”

“Went to them,” he told her. “Attended each one. Truly tragic. But they did not know what they were doing. I do.”

“You sound like Mark,” I told him.

“*His* ego was immense. *I’ve* done the work.” Armstrong held up a syringe with yellow liquid. He was dead certain.

Pinetree nodded and sat in an available chair. I stood, uncomfortable. We watched Armstrong strapped into the chair in the cage, his assistant shoot him up with the yellow serum. Then he was alone in the cage.

I waited unhappily. Armstrong smiled confidently. His smile broadened. Then broadened more, along with his face. Then his whole body broadened. The straps on his arms and legs broke.

“I’ve done it!” he cried as he shakily stood. But his legs dissolved as he continued to

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stretch until he became a large sheet, turning into a huge poster, with a photograph of him smiling and a quote: “I know what I’m doing! Do you?”

Then Armstrong the poster, fully developed, froze. And fell over.

Pinetree stood. “The antidote,” she told the assistant.

“He hasn’t developed it yet,” the nerd replied. “He was confident this would work.”

Pinetree looked at everyone in the room. “No more tests until I give further word. Put up Armstrong on a wall, to remind everyone about over confidence. No. That would not be respectful. Frame him first.”

As we left, Pinetree was mumbling again. “Can’t have more of this. Just can’t. Everyone but you’s been a disaster. The project isn’t practical.”

“It isn’t. They should cancel it.”

She shook her head. “Not enough failures yet. Too much invested.” She went into her office and closed the door.

I found Madeline in her lab and told her. Maybe she’d already heard, but instead of asking about him, she said, “I saw the TV reports. Mel told me to watch. How does it feel, being a hero?” she asked, looking at me hopefully. “Is it helping? You better?”

I did not know what to tell her. “Gotta admit, it feels good. I like the positive attention for a change.” She nodded. “As for Mel, she thinks I’m a hero. I’m going to see her and some of her friends this afternoon.”

She smiled, a little. Wanting to smile. “So. It’s working. Somehow. You haven’t been angry in weeks.”

“Anger’s there but there’s less of it. Or it’s being diverted. Or its satisfied when I’m transformed. It’s all blurry.”

“But so far, it’s positive.”

“Yah. Not what I thought. Never confronting it directly. That isn’t possible. But something’s clicking. The future, for the first time, feels good. It’s your work.”

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She nodded. It felt good she felt relieved.

I returned to my lab and turned on the TV and for a while watched the news reports. I felt proud. Proud at being known for saving, not killing. I worked for a while, concentrating on antidotes that might save my colleagues, at least the ones who could be saved. Then I went to the address Melanie provided, the fourth floor of a warehouse downtown, converted into an artists' cooperative.

Getting out of the elevator, I walked into a room with maybe fifteen people, a diverse group. They stood as I entered. I paused. There were a few cheers and scattered applause. I stopped.

Melanie came up. "You're a hero, dad." For the first time, she spoke with pride. This was all going to my head. I felt a little dizzy.

I looked at the group. "Hello, everyone. I'm Mel's dad. It won't be a secret long that I wore the Super Soldier suit."

"It isn't really a suit, is it?" one person asked. "Can you do it?"

"We want to see," another said. "Only if you want to, of course."

Well, she'd told me they were all performance artists. I'd been on TV. No one thought it was a suit. They wanted to see.

The rush was overwhelming.

"Dad, can you show them?"

What else could I say? If I'd injected a serum into me then, I would have turned into a large ham. "Do you have any music?"

I told her to play *Gimme Shelter* when I called out. Then I went into the bathroom, to be discrete, removed all my clothes and transformed. "Start the music." When I heard the dramatic strains about a gathering storm, I flung the door wide open, revealing myself. Snarling. Claws extended. Fur bristling.

They gasped.

It was exhilarating.

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I leapt into the room, spread my arms, extended my claws and howled. Not too loud. They were thrilled. I began to sway to the music—dancing in in my own way. I leapt and clawed out a light. I jumped in the middle of them and they quickly spread out, mouths open.

I trailed a claw across one woman's cheek, sharp enough for her to feel without scratching. Trailed it across a man's forehead the same way. Looked a person in the face and opened my jaws wide and howled, throwing my anger breath.

I clawed a poster to pieces (I hoped it was disposable.) Picked up a serving table and with a menacing growl bent the metal stand, then snapped it apart. I leapt up and grabbed one of the ventilation pipes, hanging over them, snarling, fangs dripping onto them.

They applauded. I howled. They applauded more.

I could love this.

I *did* love this.

Then I dropped back down and we all had a lovely wine and cheese.

I sat with them all around me, growling answers to their questions. I told them it was a serum I'd taken to deal with my anger. I avoided revealing any secrets. It was great for me and my work to be seen so positively, even though they were not truly seeing me or my work at all.

I went home feeling pretty good. My daughter was proud of me. I even told the two guards following me. They said it was cool but revealing myself that way was messed up.

There were news vans in front of my house. I parked in my driveway, got out and reporters surrounded me, asking if I was the Super Soldier. "Sorry, no comment" was all I gave them as I pushed through them, got into the house and locked the door behind me.

Phyllis stood in the hallway.

"We created quite a stir, big boy" she said.

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“Cat’s outta the bag.” I added, “Pinetree’s okay with it.”

“She thinks it’ll give her leverage.” She walked up close. “What’s it like, being a hero?”

“You make me feel like a star.” And I kissed her.

I fell asleep feeling good about myself.

Chapter Thirty

Trade Offs

It had been a long time since I had felt good about myself.

Honestly, I had *never* felt good about myself.

Now my daughter was proud of me.

Phyllis and I were now a couple and a team (same as it was with Madeline—coincidence?) Speaking of Madeline, she was now talking to me. And no one else had reached my level of research achievement. Even Pinetree let me get away with stuff. I had every reason for needing it to continue. It was energizing–feeling good, feeling good about myself, being liked. What could I do to continue it?

Maybe I could go on rides with police and catch more criminals. Maybe I could be parachuted into a country to help a revolution. Maybe I could be the poster child for strength and power. Maybe I could turn myself into performance art and make videos.

It was crazy thinking, of course. For the time being, I had to attend work and avoid the public. Carry on. But the future appeared limitless. I was up for almost anything. Anything. I know what you are thinking—but *is there* something wrong with that? Isn’t it what everyone wants? Feeling good about yourself and being liked?

Probably it was even part of my cure.

I was at work almost every day, it dominated my life, so I decided to start there. My

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colleagues were my family, sort of. Their no longer avoiding me was a start–how could I encourage them to not merely avoid me, but actually like me? Should I talk with them? Chat them up? Show them I was interested in them? Buy them gifts? Be a not-Secret Santa?

Yes–my interpersonal skills were poor.

I went home, made my way through the throng of reporters and, inside, asked Phyllis what I should do.

“Nothing,” she replied without hesitation. “First, see what’s been uncorked.”

“Uncorked?”

“You’re kind of acceptable as a suit. If people learn you’re real, it might go sideways. You might be seen not as a hero but as a monster.”

That was deflating. “Fair enough. Any news on your end?”

“All the research is on hold, pending psychological profiles for new test subjects. I’m told the powers that be are happy with your positive exposure, but they want you to stay out of the spotlight.”

To de-escalate, we ate dinner, played double solitaire and chatted. It was comforting. Until the knock on the front door. I opened it to reveal two of our neighbours, an elderly couple. I let them in, closing the door on the reporters.

“Sorry to intrude,” the man said.

“We couldn’t find your phone number,” his wife added.

“We just have cells,” I replied.

She nodded. “We have a problem.”

“Two problems,” he told us. “First, the mob outside. We hope this won’t last,” the man said.

“Couldn’t agree more,” I told them. “I hate it.”

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“We hate it,” he said.

“They’re trying to cool things out at work. It shouldn’t last long. It’s just a moment in the spotlight.”

Phyllis smiled, listening. I think her work taught her not to talk much.

“Uh, second,” the wife then said. “We don’t mean to pry, but it is it a suit?”

“We’re your neighbours,” he added. “We are entitled to know what’s living next door.”

“Yep, it’s a suit,” I told them. “This special suit we developed. Just me. Really.”

They weren’t satisfied. They did not move farther than the hallway, looking at me suspiciously. I offered them tea and cookies but they wanted to leave. Phyllis took them out the back way to avoid the reporters. When she returned, she muttered, “Beware villagers. They have torches waiting in their garages.”

“I want them to like me.”

“Oh? The less they know, the better.”

“Do you like me?”

“You’re lucky. I hardly know you at all.”

Although I didn’t want to, I helped clean up after dinner. She wanted that. Then we straightened up around the house. Transactions.

Yes, on some level I remained distant.

To be liked, I had to connect with people.

The next day first thing Pinetree called me into her office. The thick man, and a couple of others I had not seen before, was with her. We all shook hands, then sat around the small table. On the table was a pitcher of water and five glasses. No dainties.

I already knew how to play myself at such meetings, unless I became angry. Now I

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also tried using what I'd learned and thought of. This was going to be give and take, if it worked. Everyone would benefit. Transactional. Today was critical. My work might not continue it this talk failed.

He began by complimenting me on my work and asking if I could make myself look more friendly. Instead of a monster wolf, could I look more like a German shepherd? I told him I understood and was working on it.

I also told him I was working on an antidote for the three men who had transformed but might still be saved. Encouraging him was important. The research had to continue, at least until I was able to find a way to shut it down. That was a ways off. I was looking into a serum to see if I could appear more pleasant, even though I doubted it would ever work. Why tell them anger, the best emotion to use, would never look sweet?

It was unusual being liked. I had always been respected but never liked. But the days of working alone or only with an assistant were long gone. Now I was in the middle of it. Whatever *it* was.

I asked a question for which I already knew the answer. "Do you want me to do more interviews? I couldn't avoid one that night. The cameras were on top of me."

He shook his head. "The word on who you are will quickly spread. You've already been identified. The cover story about a suit won't last. We have to be ready when it blows, ready with something positive." He leaned forward. "We're not looking for ugly. We're not looking for violence. The public needs reassurance. These are tough times, yes? Reassurance is what we have in mind. This project is about reassuring the public. That's why we funded it."

Being transactional can be frustrating.

I felt anger tingle. "Then why was I sent to death row to kill those men? That would have to become public."

He looked at me. "It was a dangerous situation. You were the best fit. Yes, we wanted to see what you could do. But no, we never told you to kill anyone. Did we?"

He had a point. I killed them when I could have only taken them out. I assumed they wanted me to kill the inmates. That I had to, that they deserved me being

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their executioner.

Maybe they wanted to see what choice I made.

Did they like my choice?

He smiled. “I don’t mean to alarm you, doctor. We think you acted appropriately.” Flattery was always good. “And I should add that you have been very cooperative in very difficult situations. Your attitude is appreciated, believe me…uh…Mike. We trust you. Please trust us.”

He shook my hand again, then asked me to leave.

I left them with Pinetree. I believed Pinetree would be supportive. I felt she liked me. I had given her what she wanted and only screwed up once, maybe twice. She did not appear to like the thick man much and resented being ordered to ignore safety precautions. I hoped I had played her enough so she would play them about playing all of us.

Of course, people often pretend to like you. Politeness makes working with others possible. Often, you have to look at someone’s eyes when they are unguarded, watch their behaviour over time, before you sometimes even begin to have an idea what they think of you. We do a lot to be liked, at least liked by people it is important for us to be liked by. We alter what we do, feel. Often we pretend to be someone else because someone else is often more liked.

I learned that early on.

In school I realized the impact of personality. I wanted to be the someone who was popular—but although I tried, I did not care enough to change. At least, not consistently.

Or was unable to change.

Same through college and graduate school, where arguably I was the least popular student. It all led to my specialization, which I saw as a road to curing my anger. To achieve at work, I had to not only be talented. People had to be willing to work with me. My solution? Find work where I was isolated yet could work on my goal. I managed that. I had only one assistant—and they kept changing—and was not required to talk to colleagues.

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But I still had people around me and managed to alienate almost all of them. They would eventually sign a letter to Pinetree demanding I be fired. Previously, I did not mind eating alone in the cafeteria but now I ate with other staff and it felt good.

It had taken a great deal for them to at least pretend they liked me. My own actions played only a part.

Previously, I'd left a jar of candy in my office, as an encouragement to visitors. No one ate any. And it was hard to chat up people I cared nothing about.

I still did not care about them but in the last weeks, staff began dropping by. It was a pleasure, regularly refilling the candy bowl. Being transactional and everyone being united by stress led to me being liked more and I could see the results. And when I went home, I did things Phyllis wanted.

If all this sounds transactional, cold and distant, I agree it was. It was part of my ongoing problem. Life should go beyond giving to get.

We played double solitaire after dinner. As we sat together, flipping cards, she said, "I've received an alert. May have to go off again."

"Anything to do with my meeting today?"

"Feels like it."

"He made their role on death row sound innocent. That it was my choice. I guess it was."

She flipped a card. "The two guards had a choice. Probably not the third." She finished going through the deck for the first time, turned it over and continued. We played through several games, winning about half the time. That felt right.

Then she kissed me and we cuddled. I enjoyed being liked. But it took a while to fall asleep, lying next to her as she gently snored.

Life *should* go beyond giving to get.

I had to figure out what that meant and how to do it.

Caring about people was very important but I was not sure how to do that.

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My Inner Werewolf Chapters 16-30

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