Chapter Thirty-One

Exploring My Inner Space

As I looked at Pinetree and Dr. Orwell, I did not really care about them but knew I should. We met following yesterday's meeting with the thick man and his associates. I did care about the two of them–they were important to me.

That was sort of a start in caring.

"The government wants a strong force, capable of violence but radiating trust," I added to the conversation." They nodded. "None of the psychological profiles you've shown me, or the candidates, will work. Here's why. My serum works for me because it's based on my anger. I can control it. What I cannot control is what it looks like. Nor can you control what anyone else's looks like, except it probably won't meet project goals."

"Agreed," Pinetree said.

"We should stop the project now. It can never succeed."

Pinetree nodded, then said, "So, where do we go from here?"

I looked at Dr. Orwell.

She said, slowly, "We can't alter the ugly so we have to make it based on a palatable emotion, one that is still capable of strength and violence. If it turns out there are no alternatives to unacceptable appearances, well then we have to figure out how the public can relate to a monster image who is a hero."

"A monster can be acceptable if people get to know him," I said. "If he does good things."

"You need to get experience around people when transformed," she told me. "See how they react and try changing it."

"Is that why you suggested I go out on Halloween? Go out when everyone else is dressed up like a monster?"

She smiled. "I showed initiative. Was it bad?"

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“No, it was a hoot. No one thought it was a suit, but they accepted me as friendly.”

“Good,” Pinetree added. She had mostly been listening.

I wanted to be who I was and yet be liked. Apparently that meant accepting being manipulated. “How can I appear more likeable?”

Pinetree shrugged. “Be less like yourself?”

“General,” Dr. Orwell said quickly. “We need to be positive. Mike is in a very difficult place and will be, for a while.” Then she looked at Pinetree. “There’s a problem?

“He’s right. The entire project should be suspended.” She grunted, quietly. “It all needs more thought. Screw it. I need a break.”

I left them together as it looked like Dr. Orwell was about to start a therapy session with General Pinetree. When I got home, Phyllis was not there. There was a note on the kitchen table: “Tomorrow evening, hopefully.”

All alone, first thing I did was take off my clothing (after drawing the curtains—I wanted to be liked for appropriate reasons.) Much of my life had been spent alone, distanced. It was never comfortable, now it felt…difficult.

I thought of visiting my neighbours but it felt early and I’d always avoided them. Phoning Mel seemed too aggressive. Who else could I call? There was no one, that was why I was in this situation. So I decided to use it. I had time alone. What should I do with it?

Caring more about people was a start. Then I would be less angry and my cure would be helped. I made a list of traits which were important if I was to relate to people. Pretending to care as a way of learning to care. What could be wrong with that? It was not like I was desperately deluding myself.

Well, it kind of was. Here are the traits I had to develop and use:

–listen

–ask questions about hobbies, personal stuff

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–act concerned

–act as if I like them

I had been trying already but most knew I was going through motions. Being sincere would be a challenge. But it was not impossible to be sincere. At least, probably not impossible.

Maybe I needed to think differently. I was alone. How would I feel, transformed? Would letting my anger out give me new ideas? I'd never tried thinking when transformed. It always was so…physical.

I transformed, then loped out of the house into the backyard. The moon cast a good light in a clear sky. I nodded at the two guards in the woods. One wore a track suit, ready if I went on a run.

I took off, she followed. The other guard kept up as best he could but we soon left him behind. We ran side by side, along a trail in the forest. I avoided people and did not run fast, though after a while she had trouble keeping up.

I thought about how to care about people. For a moment, I thought of them as prey. That got pushed out swiftly. Non-productive. Then I thought of the people I worked with, transformed. Transformed like me. And that we ran in the forest as a pack.

That felt on the right track. I thought of being part of a pack, mostly hunting together, working together, watching out for each other. Could I see my colleagues as my pack? We worked together, lived much of our lives together. Could I lick their wounds?

Those thoughts were intriguing, transforming from an isolated individual to being part of a pack. How was it now not a pack? We even worked towards a common goal. Perhaps the difference was, we were all out for ourselves. A wolf pack was composed of individuals out for themselves, though. Perhaps it was our individual goals were too important to us. We never placed the pack first. Always, we placed ourselves first.

I slowed and then stopped as we entered a quiet spot, no one around. She quickly came up to my side, panting and sweating. I looked at her. She was tall with a tight frame.

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“Do you like your work?”

She looked at me, obviously surprised. “It has its moments. You?”

“Same. You know about me. Can I ask, do you have a family?”

“Husband and two kids.”

“I’m sorry if I’m taking you away from them.”

“It’s work. They’re used to my shifts. Phyllis is away.”

“Yeah. I got lonely. I appreciate the company.” She smiled a little. I was going to ask if she had any hobbies but that felt like pushing it. We stood there a moment. I could not think of anything else to say, so I started to run again, the guard at my side.

It was a good run. We heard a coyote, a couple of owls. I heard field mice and snakes, sounds too low for her to hear. Life was about running and listening and being part of the environment. That also felt as if it was an important lesson of some kind. The run had generated lots to think about.

When we got back, I thanked her for the run and then leapt over my backyard fence and went into my house. I transformed and had a long hot shower. The steam felt good. I had time alone. What could I do with it? It was good being part of the forest, being physical. I dried, put on a robe. What could I be part of in my bathroom?

I washed the dishes.

Then, I vacuumed. Did the laundry. Tidied. There was a real pleasure in allowing myself time to do household chores I usually ignored because they felt meaningless. It was all kind of zen. I made coffee and took it to the guards in front and in back.

After, I thought I should have asked how they were but I had done plenty. It was tiring, thinking about what others wanted, like coffee.

I went into the living room and put a disc in the player. *Forbidden Planet* was a favourite film. I settled in with popcorn and sparkling water and watched. The main

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story involved the long-dead alien race, the Krell. They lived on a distant planet, Altair Four, and had developed a technology allowing their minds to create matter anywhere on the planet. Unfortunately, they had not counted on their most basic desires—like anger. When they turned the power on, they destroyed themselves overnight, with no idea what was happening to them, that their consciously unknown vicious desires now were unleashed.

I thought of watching another allegory, but it was getting late.

Probably later than I thought. I went to bed alone and turned on the smaller TV there.

TCM had just begun *Forbidden Planet*. I fell asleep watching monsters from the ID and wondering what monsters I and my colleagues had—my team, my family.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Team Building!

The next morning, I was part of a team of researchers assembled by Pinetree and Dr. Orwell. We met in the large board room, around the big oak table. There was coffee, tea and dainties. Today, particularly nice dainties.

“As you all know,” Pinetree began, leaving her own tea untouched, “all research on the personality enhancing projects has been suspended until further notice. I want you to advise you all in person of this, and to reaffirm that we will never proceed unsafely. Your work is our top priority, but you must be safe and confident. You understand, we know this.”

The researchers around the table nodded, waiting.

“Mike here,” she continued, “is to date the only truly successful use of a serum. As you know. He not only survived transformation but has excelled at using his new body. Given his unique experience, he has some pertinent observations. Mike?”

She stood aside and I took centre stage. “Here’s my advice, for what it’s worth. Our research has resulted in tragedies because it starts off wrong. The emphasis was personality. We looked for who we hoped would be good transformed. Who would be confident, for example. However, my own example shows the focus should be on emotions. Although anger itself can be self-destructive.

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“The serum works for me because it tapped into a deep emotion which I could use, which would not use me. Basically, my experience demonstrates that we need a certain type of anger and a subject who can use it. Anyone else faces risks we all know.”

They nodded. “So,” one asked, “where do we go from here?”

Dr. Orwell stepped in. “Obviously, with testing limited, for the time being we will only continue theoretical work. Meanwhile, I’ve been looking into potential candidates. To date, I’ve found none. I do expect to have a reasonable short list in about two weeks.”

“All the bases are working on it,” Pinetree added. “Including this one. Remember, we have you and your safety in mind. Caution first.

“I hope this delay will not last long,” she added. “Any questions?”

It was a pep talk which told us what we already knew. There were no questions.

We left, dainties untouched, still individuals working in the same area in the same facility. Not a team. Not a family. Only many worried individuals, shaking their heads.

“At least we’re not being laid off,” one muttered.

“They’d never lay us off,” another muttered back.

It was time to work from my list. The list did not have everyone, only the twenty most important. The time had arrived for me to figure out how to care about them. Or convince them I cared.

First was Fred. I’d publicly criticized him the most and he’d avoided me the most. I sought him out and found him in his lab, talking with two other researchers. “Excuse me, can I have a moment?” I said as I approached them.

They were quiet but not hostile. Workplace friendly.

I offered them each a usb stick. “Here are my research notes and data,” I told them, handing each a stick. “I know we’ve always tended to work separately but maybe it’s time for that to change.”

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They were surprised, it was obvious. They gratefully took the usb sticks, a solid first step.

“We’re screwed,” Fred said, looking at the stick in his hand. “Everything but you and your serum is a dead end.”

I shook my head. “Yes but there are possibilities. Variations on the formula and test subject. Maybe we can talk when you study the data.” I thought of asking how their families were, but that was probably too much.

“I hope we get this resolved,” Fred said. ““My family’s worried about me.”

So I asked about his family, surprised he even had one.

Then I dropped in on Pinetree, catching her between phone calls. I didn’t know if she anyone in her personal life, or if she even had a personal life. “Tough meeting today,” I began.

“Thanks. How are you?”

Maybe I should have begun that way. “Giving other researchers my data. Thinking about where we go from here. I guess everything depends on finding the right test candidates.”

“Orwell’s working on it. And we have volunteers. I’m hoping for a short list soon.” She paused. “I don’t like having these failures on my conscience.”

I refilled her empty tea cup from the pot on her desk. “It’s not your fault.”

“Of course it is.”

Madeline was in her lab, working with her assistant. She was more relaxed than usual. “I’m glad it’s stopped,” she told me. “It seems to have worked for you. I haven’t seen any sign of your usual anger. But for others? Too dangerous. Worse, Mike, I don’t like how it may be used. Usually we have some idea of the purpose. Why the mystery?”

“Good question. Maybe they have a lot to hide. Maybe they’re just jerks. I can relate to them being jerks.”

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She shrugged. “I agree.” That was a little disconcerting, but she had divorced me. “I’m only fiddling. No more assignments, at least not yet. They probably don’t know how to use me. Except I feel the pressure. Our serum was the one which worked.

“I’m worried about you. At least, if they had more subjects that worked…” her voice trailed off. “We have to do something.”

“What?”

“Mark and Armstrong. We should start with them. They’re physically available.”

“They’re dead.”

“Yes. It’s a problem.”

I radiated sympathy, much of which was genuine. “I’m sorry it’s so tough.” She was hurting. I left her agreeing we could meet for dinner one night soon. We had not eaten together for years.

Throughout the day, I met other colleagues, showing them all I cared about them, checking each off the list. It was artificial but inside it generated a warmth. And I felt no anger at all. Perhaps showing empathy was indeed a first step to achieving a cure.

I also told them all that although anger was the best emotion for the project’s purposes, it was difficult to control. I used myself as an example. That they really responded to. I felt a greater warmth inside.

To make the point, I started transform in front of them. I thought it was good sharing. None had seen me in person. Now they saw my anger full out, with fangs and claws and predatory eyes.

Dr. Orwell called me in. “You’re scaring the staff,” she told me. Then added, “They need rattling. Keep it up.”

“What about morale?”

“In the toilet. Where it should be.”

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Since she was a therapist, I did not try anything on my list with her. “I’ve talked with staff not about the politics but the feelings. I’m sharing.”

“You shared too much. Your transformed anger is frightening.”

“Okay, sorry, I’ll stop.”

“I care about them. It’s part of my cure.”

“You’re only pretending.”

“Well, yes.”

“Keep on doing it. Can’t hurt at all. But remember. There are many ways to express anger. Some that you don’t think about. That just spring up. Like scaring your colleagues.”

I had not thought of it that way. Was I being sideways hostile? “I hear you. Maybe I’ll hold off on transforming any more. I did see they were scared.” I thought a moment. “What other ways am I still expressing anger?”

“Working everyone off a check list. You made a list, right?” I nodded, embarrassed. “You’re not working with strangers. Remember, you have history with all of them. They even signed that letter.”

I drove home, a lot to think about. There were less reporters outside. I blew them off. Phyllis was waiting in the house. We looked at each other for a moment when I entered, then hugged.

“Miss me?” she asked.

“Who?”

“They wanted to find out more about the researchers rebelling. Sadly, I failed. You?”

“My anger may still be there. Passive-aggressive stuff.”

There was a knock on the door. I went and opened it and to reveal Melanie. Oh My God.

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“Hi dad. Was dropping in a bad idea?” And she looked over my shoulder and saw Phyllis standing in the hall.

The day had gone sweetly right up until that moment. It was a moment frozen in time. Except it was not frozen, it was hot. Red hot.

I had no idea what to say. Phyllis smiled and held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Phyllis.”

“I’m Melanie.”

“I work security at your father’s place.”

Melanie knew. I saw it. “Oh? That’s nice.” She whirled on me and demanded, “Does mom know about this?”

“Well, I—”

And she abruptly walked away.

I looked at Phyllis, then ran out after my daughter.

The reporters had thinned out but were still around. They followed me. I told them it was private and, surprisingly, they stopped. I saw Melanie getting into a car. I came up to her as she started the engine.

“Not now, dad.”

“Now. Stop. Please.” I opened her car door. Hands gripping the steering wheel, she waited, staring ahead.

“I should have told you,” I admitted. “I was afraid of what you’d think.”

“Uh huh.”

“I met Phyllis a year ago. She was…assigned to me as security. A little less than a month ago, we started a relationship. I was lonely.”

“Mom’s all alone,” she snapped.

“I talk with her every day, honey.”

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“Could you let go of the door? I have to process this.”

“Would you like to meet Phyllis?”

“Dad!”

I closed the door and she drove off. I stalked back into the house without speaking to the reporters, closing the door on them. I looked at Phyllis. “I have to rip something apart.”

“Not here. Go outside. The woods.”

I tore off my clothing, transformed and went outside, Phyllis following. I leapt over the fence, she opened the door. The guards in the forest snapped to attention. I growled at them. They stepped back.

I found a large green bush and ripped it to pieces with my claws. Then more bushes and an entire small tree, my claws bleeding sap.

I saw no animals and caught only scents. They’d all taken off.

I was furious. I looked at my arm and clawed it. Red blood spurted out of the wounds. I watched the wounds heal, then slashed my arm again. And again. The long deep wounds healed.

Phyllis grabbed my arm. “You can’t kill yourself,” she told me.

“I don’t want to,” I told her. “I want to bleed.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Family Meeting

Melanie demanded a family meeting.

Technically, we hadn’t been a family for ten years. Well, we had been, via long distance. I received the text from Mel the next morning. A few minutes later, Madeline stepped into my lab, uncomfortable, holding up her cell phone.

“I don’t want to do this,” she told me. “She wants it right away.”

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“She saw Phyllis with me last night. Sorry. I was in shock, I guess. Should have told you.”

“No, you didn’t have to. We’re divorced. And I already knew.” I looked at her. “How you were acting the last few weeks. I know when you’re…having sex. Regularly, anyway.”

Hmmm. “So where? The house?”

“That where she saw Phyllis?” I nodded. “No. Too many memories, anyway.”

“Your apartment?”

“No way.”

A restaurant was too public. After discussion, we settled on a bench in a quiet place in a quiet park. That was safest. We hoped it would not rain.

It rained.

Madeline and I found the designated bench under the designated tree. It was a gray, miserable afternoon, fitting both our moods.

“I’d rather put this off,” I said.

“She’s our child. She moved out last night. Moved out. We argued about you know what, and she moved out. That hurt, Mike.”

“Sorry.”

We waited in the rain. I was genuinely sorry for messing up Madeline’s situation with our daughter. Madeline deserved better. I cared about her, I cared about Melanie. I did. It was important they respect me. Within a minute I went from hero to zero. I felt no angry. I felt guilt.

We saw Melanie appear down the path, walking slowly until she saw us. Then she stopped, looked at us, then walked determined to us. Then she stopped a few feet away, looked at us on the bench, pulled out a small folding chair and sat. Then she pulled out an umbrella and opened it up.

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It was sort of performance art. It was Mel. She could be…dramatic.

I imagine most parents have been through something similar. Children need to be independent. Melanie was certainly her own self.

We both waited.

“Well, okay, I called the chat,” she finally said. “I know this is awkward. But no more awkward than last night. Dad, apologies. I shouldn’t have driven off.”

I shrugged. “You were upset.”

“Yeah, but so were you. Mom? You said last night you knew?”

“Your father is entitled to his own life. Honey, we’re divorced. Remember, I moved out.”

“Not far.”

“You’re not being fair. You’re angry. I understand.”

“You’re alone. He isn’t. That doesn’t feel fair. And you accepting it. I’m not sorry I moved out. It’s better for both of us.”

Madeline sighed. “It’s good to be honest, dear, but you don’t have to go overboard.”

“And he’s got this Phyllis.”

“Phyllis just happened, Mel,” I told her. “I feels serious. I couldn’t be alone. It had been a long time.” That was partly true. There was no point mentioning I’d used Phyllis as an escort for a year. No point going overboard.

“I prefer being alone, honey,” Madeline said. And then added, “Phyllis is good for your dad. Don’t you want what’s good for him? Isn’t he going through enough?”

Melanie thought about it. “So where do we go from here?”

“We keep caring about each other,” I told her. “Honey, it kills me I’ve hurt you. Never wanted it to happen. That’s why I never told you.” She grunted. “I’m

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dealing with the serum and work and anger. Life's complicated these days. Remember. I'm your father. I'll always be your father. We have to keep talking."

Finally, she said quietly, "Yeah, sure."

We walked together out of the park, then went our separate ways.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Burning Man

Phyllis was packing a bag when I came home. "Assignment," she said.

"It can wait. We have to talk."

She paused, holding a blouse. "What? *The* talk?"

"No, about honesty."

"Oh," she said. "*That* talk." She put the blouse in the bag. "How was the family chat? That bad?"

"Tough enough. But it left me feeling if I cared more, I would be honest more. Or something. I'm confused. Mel walked out on both of us, because of me. Where are you going?"

"There's a problem at one of the research bases."

I didn't think about it. "I'm going with you."

"They're not expecting you. Breach of confidentiality."

"They know we live together, yes? Is it about another test subject?" She nodded. "Then I'm the best person to go with you."

We both packed bags and drove off in her car to a military base, where we caught a chopper. Three-hour flight. First we saw black smoke. We landed in one of the most remote research bases. I'd heard about it, that's all. I didn't know any of the researchers there.

Several officers met us as we stepped off the chopper. There was thick smoke, part

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of a building was blazing. Fire workers with hoses sprayed it down with little effect.

“It’s Lieutenant Irwin,” one told us. “They gave him the serum and he’s out of control.” He filled in the blanks as we walked into a building. Irwin was an officer who’d been flagged by Dr. Orwell. A researcher took that as permission to give her version of the serum to him. We met the base commander in his office.

“Who’s this?” he demanded, looking at me.

I transformed, my clothing shredding, and snarled.

“Oh,” he said. “I see. Fine.” He looked at Phyllis. “He’s in that burning building. I don’t know for how long before it collapses. We have to at least get him out of there. If possible, give him the antidote.” He pointed to a filled hypodermic on his desk.

Phyllis nodded. “The short version?”

He led us to a window so we could look at the burning building. “That’s where we do our tests. The researcher thought Dr. Orwell had given a go ahead. I checked. She hadn’t, just agreed to a third analysis.”

“And Lieutenant Irwin?” Phyllis asked.

“He burst into flame. We’re looking for anger and Peter has it in spades. Created serious problems with his career, denied promotion several times after borderline rage incidents.”

“Can he control it?” I asked.

The commander looked at me. “You see the fire? He transformed and there was chaos. All five men in the room with him are dead.”

“Dead?” Phyllis asked.

“Burned to death. Accident. Not on purpose.”

“The antidote?” I growled. The commander held up the syringe and Phyllis took it. Then she put on a shoulder holster from her bag and fit a large pistol into it, the safety clicked off. From the commander she took a long gun.

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“Those won’t do any good,” the commander told her.

She looked at me and we left, Phyllis leading the way, me loping just behind her.

We entered the side of the building not yet on fire. Inside the smoke was not yet as bad. We were in a hallway. The room we sought as at the other end. Through an open doorway, we saw flames.

We approached the room and saw Lieutenant Irwin, on fire. Literally. His skin was flames. His anger had emerged as a different kind of monster. He turned to us, holding out his hands. I looked up. The ceiling was close to collapse. Flames covering the walls had reached it. He saw us and stopped, his large eyes bright burning holes.

He focussed on me. I held up a claw. “Yes. I also was given the serum.”

He tried to talk. Flames shot out of his mouth.

I moved closer to him, the heat uncomfortable. “It can be hard for me to talk. You?” He shook his head. “You can understand me though?” He nodded. “I’ve been through this. We have an antidote. It’ll work.”

He breathed heavily. “Can’t do this,” he finally managed.

“We should get out of here,” I told him. “The building will collapse on us. Follow us. Remember, I’m one of you.” I started to back away. He slowly followed, leaving burning footprints.

With Phyllis in front, we left the room and into the hallway. Behind us, the ceiling collapsed and the room was enveloped in bright red and yellow flames.

We quickly led him through the hallway and outside. We got far enough from the building for it to no longer be a danger. Irwin was staggering. He leaned against a mental post which quickly began to blister and melt.

“My anger comes out like this, a beast” I told him. “Yours is rage, so you’re all flames.”

“I have the antidote,” Phyllis said. She looked at me. The syringe will melt before I can use it.”

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I looked at the burning man. I wanted to hold him but that was impossible. “You have to focus. We can get you out of this.”

His eyes were deep flames. With obvious effort, he grunted out, “I…am…so…pissed.” The pole melted through and toppled. He staggered, struggling to keep his balance.

“Focus. Focus on your arm,” I told him. “Create one clear patch.”

He closed his eyes, hands becoming fists. “Can feel it the rage. Burning inside me. What a mistake!”

“Focus on your arm. Remember. I can control my anger. You can. Concentrate.”

I could see his flaming forehead frown. He held out his right arm, staring at it.

“All we need is one patch of your skin that’s clear.”

We heard him grunt as he fell to his knees, burning alive. A patch of skin appeared on his arm, clear of flames. Phyllis plunged the hypo into him, then the antidote. Burned, she jumped back, the hypo falling to the floor and breaking.

He stared at his arm, not moving. Frozen not quite the proper word. The flames died as the serum began to work. In a few moments a naked, covered with grit, skin smoking Lieutenant Irwin fell unconscious to the ground.

We called the medics and followed him to the base surgery. After about half an hour, he woke as we stood around his bed. His skin looked normal, there were no scars. He looked at me and said “Thanks.”

“Welcome to the club.”

“What’s next?”

“I haven’t looked at the serum or antidote. My guess? The flames will return. You got to learn to chill.”

“We have more antidote,” one of the attending doctors said.

“More antidotes. Great,” Lieutenant Irwin said, quietly. “Never should have done

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this. Thought I had no choice."

I said to him, quietly, "Ditto."

"How do you live with it?"

"One day at a time."

The antidote only worked temporarily. Irwin needed a lifetime fix to fix his life. I knew I was not over with him.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Work Relationships

"Going up there without my permission was a betrayal," Pinetree snapped. "How could you do it? What the hell were you thinking?"

We were in her office, sitting in front of her desk, Pinetree behind it. Dr. Orwell sat to one side.

"It was my idea," I blurted out. "I'm responsible."

"You are both responsible. I trusted both of you." Emotionally she was shouting even if her voice was controlled. She looked at Phyllis. "Especially you."

"General, I agreed to it. Yes, I should have contacted you for permission but it was an emergency. I was ordered there asap. Mike thought he could help and he did. No one else could have reached that guy. Now he's no longer burning and still alive."

She glared at Phyllis. "Who cares? This is about trust." She stood, pacing. I had never seen her like this. "I work hard. I've cut both of you slack. I hoped I'd earned your trust." She looked at us. "Have I ever lied to you?"

We both looked back.

"Well, okay," she admitted. "Part of the job. But not about anything I was at liberty to tell you." I saw her hands tremble. "You took off and let him show himself."

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“It was only at a base,” Phyllis told her.

“The man’s still alive,” I added. “The only other test subject who’s taken a serum. Only him and me.”

She sighed, returned to her chair and poured a cup of tea for herself from the pot on her desk. She did not drink any.

“It will never happen again,” Phyllis said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

Pinetree mumbled something to herself.

“Sometimes I hate being a manager,” Pinetree finally said. She sipped a little tea.

“It made me happy,” I told her. “You want me to be happy.”

“Not that much.” She looked at Dr. Orwell. “You happy?”

“I’m…distressed,” Orwell replied. “Lieutenant Irwin was only a possibility. I told them that, that I wanted further tests. Now a lot of the other candidates are off the list. We’re almost back to square one.

“Right now, we are all being…emotional. Given events, it is understandable. The stress is enormous on everyone. General, I appreciate your concerns. But are you being fair?”

“Fair?” Pinetree shot back abruptly. “Why should I be fair?”

“It’s how you became a General,” Dr. Orwell told her.

“Generals become Generals by getting results. The results so far are death, abuse, rebellion, betrayal.”

I had never seen her like this. Probably no one had. “How the hell,” she flared at Orwell, “did they think they had the green light?”

Orwell remained poised. “I told them he’d passed the first two swipes. But I wanted to a third. They were eager, I thought I argued them out of it.”

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Pinetree glared at her. “I guess you were *wrong*, doctor.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” she replied. She subtly adjusted her glasses. “There is too much pressure. On the researchers. On us. On you.”

She looked at both Orwell and Phyllis. “Can you tell me where that pressure is coming from?” Orwell and Phyllis looked at each other. “Well?” she demanded.

Phyllis spoke up. “You know there’s at least one person at the cabinet level. There are others, outside government. You know what I know, General.”

“Do I? What about you?” she asked Orwell. “Want to tell me about the resistance?”

It was very awkward. I thought I heard footsteps outside, it was so deadly quiet.

“General,” Orwell, said, adjusting her glasses again, “We need a safety valve. Something to let the pressure out. Something to give us all a chance to breathe. What you call the resistance is a natural reaction to our work here.”

“You all think I don’t know,” Pinetree snapped. “I know plenty. I just can’t do anything about it. None of it.” She looked at us. “Thanks for listening. Thanks for the talk.” She looked down, at her desk. “Get out.”

Phyllis, Orwell and I left. We stood outside her closed door. “It’s falling apart,” I said quietly.

“Yeah,” Phyllis agreed.

“My office,” Orwell said.

We followed her to her office, closing the door behind us.

“Pinetree knows about the resistance,” Phyllis said as we sat.

“Of course she does,” Orwell said. She took off her glasses and polished the lenses. “She hasn’t done anything because it wouldn’t make any difference.”

There was a pause. “Maybe it should fall apart,” I finally said. They both nodded. “So,” I added, “what safety valve will work? For her, for us?”

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We split up and asked staff what they thought might work to improve morale. The result, two days later, was a talent show.

It was in the cafeteria, the only room large enough. Everyone had a skit about work. Phyllis tap danced around everyone and made jokes. I transformed and juggled dishes, most of which broke. General Pinetree revealed ventriloquism skills with a puppet dressed like a researcher—sitting on her knee, the puppet kept interrupting her and doing what it wanted.

The room grew progressively more relaxed and soon people were laughing and applauding. For a couple of hours, work was ridiculed and stress celebrated.

Next day, morale was as bad. But at the afternoon staff meeting, Pinetree brought out her dummy and managed a few solid laughs.

Meanwhile, I could not forget Lieutenant Irwin. I worked on a different type of antidote. Madeline helped. After a week, I told Pinetree I had developed something and wanted to try it out. The burning man remained confined, at his base. I'd accessed the research and formula used on him. The new type of antidote would not only stop a transformation but prevent it–permanently. My hope was that if it worked, Lieutenant Irwin would return to being normal. His anger might not be cured but his flames could be doused.

I worked on that antidote because the poor fellow was so screwed up. His life had become grotesque. It was in my power to try and find a cure. I had already started the research, looking for a permanent antidote for myself. I stopped it, unsure of whether I even wanted a permanent antidote. For Irwin, I restarted. I'd been deeply troubled by him from day one, and on day two began looking into what might cure him. Perhaps I was so troubled because he reminded me of me.

Pinetree agreed it was worth a shot. Her permission secured, I would return to the man's base, with Phyllis. Phyllis was ready to meet me at the airfield. We stepped aboard, well aware of the stakes.

It was a long chopper ride to the remote base.

We landed, were met by an officer who took us to the commander. The burned building was covered with plywood. The air stank. No one looked business as usual.

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We met with the base commander first, who updated us on the reports we'd be sent. Lieutenant Irwin was kept sedated in a fireproof room.

"I have to speak to him clear headed," I told the commander. "I want his informed consent on the antidote I've prepared."

The commander looked puzzled. "Just shoot it in him."

I shook my head. "His conscious has to be involved. How long will it take to clear his head enough?"

The commander considered. "With meds, a couple of hours. I'll get the doctors on it."

"Thanks. In the meantime," I told him, "I'd like to meet the scientists who developed his serum."

During all this, Phyllis watched. We'd discussed me taking the lead and her observing. When you are in the middle of something, you cannot see everything.

"You already read their research," he countered.

"I want to know what they were thinking," I told him. He nodded and had an officer take us to the scientists.

As we were led along, Phyllis said quietly to me, "Defensive. Hiding something."

"Probably that he gave the go ahead," I replied. "He looks like he's eager for success."

We were led to a lab on the second floor of the building, where a man and a woman waited, the lead scientist and her assistant. She was tall with dark hair, he was a bit shorter and blonde. They both wore lab coats and anxious faces.

"Don't worry," I told them. "We're not investigating. You know who I am?" They nodded. "Good. I'm here to help, that's all. I have developed a new type of antidote."

"Fine," she said. "What do you want from us?" Nervous.

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“He’s full of rage. His profile isn’t very helpful, except for listing incidents. Any idea where the rage comes from? Any idea why it is *rage*?”

She took a long breath, then launched into what sounded like a prepared speech. “No. He’s always on a slow boil. There was nothing special in his childhood. He seems born this way.

“He joined the Army to channel his rage. It worked to a point, he’s competent but not promotable. He begged us to use him as a test subject. Begged me, for a week. Over and over. He volunteered, knew the risks. So I gave in. After I got a green light.”

“You don’t have to talk about that,” I told her.

“No one predicted he would turn into uncontrollable fire. You control yourself. But it was unstoppable. Since you were here, he’s burst into flames three more times. The antidote is less effective each time we use it. The rage is consuming him.

“If you can do something, fabulous. Otherwise, he’s doomed. I’m sorry. Of course, I accept full responsibility.”

No, she would dodge responsibility as if it was a car racing to run her over. “Thanks. It was very helpful. So you worked to transform his rage, his rage came out as flames.”

“I don’t understand why he became flames and you become that wolf thing?”

“My anger is different than rage,” I told her.

After more talk, we left them knowing we cared zero about the green light. The scientist was obviously worried about a future investigation. I assured her we did not care and would talk to Pinetree about it being a misunderstanding. It was important to reassure her. We had to work together. Also, I knew where she was. I kind of cared.

However, I did not ask about their families or feelings. I mean, really.

An officer led us to the clinic, where we met two doctors. Lieutenant Irwin would be ready to talk with us shortly. Phyllis and I sat to one side and waited, alone for a few moments.

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“Obviously, they’re all worried about the green light and harming their careers,” Phyllis said quietly. “Like the other researchers, they were stumbling along, hoping for the best.”

“Don’t care,” I told her. “The issue is on the other side of that door. I can control my anger. Maybe it’s the serum, more likely it’s the nature of my anger. It comes out only occasionally, triggered. His is constant. Different, deeper. He struggled to fit into an ordered society like the Army, even though it provided control and clear rules.”

The doctors opened the door. One gave me an empty syringe. We stepped inside. Lieutenant Irwin was sitting up on a bed, looking bleary.

“Remember us?” I asked.

He shook his head. I took off my clothing and transformed, staring at him in what I tried to make a friendly face. I think lifting my eyebrow helped. “Oh yeah,” he finally said. “You. Thanks.”

“How’s it been?” I asked.

“Rough. I try to stop and flame back on. They’ve had me doped up, hard to think.”

I transformed back, pulling on my clothes while explaining the concept of my antidote—that it was intended to be a permanent fix. He would never flame on again, never have to worry about control. “It won’t fix your rage, though. At least, I don’t think so. But I hope it will end the transformations.”

He replied, “Do it. Can’t be worse than now. Man, seeing my rage, being it, that’s turned me around. Nothing like seeing yourself in flames burning everything and everyone around you. I’ve been trying to confront it ever since. That’s why I keep flaming on.”

What he was experiencing was exactly what I hoped would happen to me.

Physically confront your anger, get smart, turn your life around. For a moment I looked at him, nothing to say. I was jealous.

“Give him the shot,” Phyllis said.

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“You understand, who knows?” I said to him.

“Do it.”

I took the antidote from my pocket. It was a small vial full of orange liquid. I filled the syringe, stuck it in his arm and pushed the plunger. We all watched the orange serum vanish into him. Then I pulled back the syringe.

He saw us stand by his bedside, waiting.

“You’re not getting out?”

“We’re here with you,” I told him. “I feel like we’re in this together, Lieutenant.”

He was about to reply when he blinked, stiffened, then sort of softened. He let out a long breath. Lifting his hands, he looked at them.

“What are you feeling?” I asked.

“Peace,” he replied.

We waited, standing by the bed. He visibly relaxed, pushing himself up so he wouldn’t slip down. He started to tremble.

I was alarmed. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he replied, smiling. “I’m not dissolving or anything. I’m feeling myself, for the first time. The rage is gone.”

“All gone?” Phyllis asked, looking at him carefully.

“Who knows? Never felt like this.”

I was worried he might dissolve into inertia or a puddle or something. His body appeared stable. “Do you want to do anything?”

He smiled. “Oh yeah. There’s a list, starting with a promotion. A partner. A life.” He sat up more, pushing himself. “Thank you. I can’t say it enough.”

“We have to wait. Make certain it works.”

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“Can you get me a phone? I need to make some calls.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Success Multiplied!

After the new antidote’s success with Irwin I was excited. I developed a plan. Probably I should have waited, to determine whether the antidote truly lasted—but waiting did not feel like an option. I had to act. Do something. I was the only one who could change my research base, the only one. I felt a responsibility.

It was part of my cure. It was part of caring about other people, even if they were a pain in the butt.

I had a long talk with Pinetree. My plan involved improving morale. Pulling us together as a team. If we found a way to work together, overcome our differences, it would make us more like a family. And then, eventually, I could bring them all into the resistance and end the brutal nature of our work forever.

She accepted my idea and called a staff meeting for that afternoon.

I looked at the glum faces of my colleagues as they walked in. By now they expected the worst. Some looked to see if Pinetree had brought her dummy. Others looked for dainties. Today, neither dummy nor dainties. Just me.

Pinetree told them, “Mike’s come up with an excellent idea. He’ll fill you in.” And she handed it over to me. I looked at them. They were not expecting much. Madeline smiled.

I never thought I was good at public presentations, but today I felt an urgency, a need. I took a long breath as they waited expectantly. Before anyone could look at their watch, I began. “Here’s the deal. You all know it. Our work is in a bad place. Suspended indefinitely, except for theoretical work. We’re treading water.”

A few nods.

“Except for me, the transformations so far have failed. Two of our colleagues are irretrievable. Armstrong and Mark seem equally past hope. But there is hope. Dim the lights and I’ll show you.”

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Pinetree, standing by the light switches, turned the room dark. I turned on my notebook and the video projector threw my power point presentation onto a large screen always pulled down. Phyllis did the power point, I'm hopeless at that. I questioned whether it was necessary but she said visual aides are important.

The first image was Lieutenant Irwin, burning.

"You're looking at Test Subject A. Two weeks ago, I flew up to one of our more remote research bases. Our colleagues there believed they had clearance to proceed. They did not, but that is not important.

"Subject A was chosen because he was always in a simmering rage that often boiled over. When he was injected with a serum, he transformed into what you see here. His rage turned into flames."

I then changed the slide to show the building burning. "He had no control. Fury was everything." The next slide showed me, transformed, and Phyllis talking with him. "I transformed. That helped get him out of the building. Talking with him enabled him to cool out enough so he created a small patch of nonburning skin, so we could inject him." The next slide showed him naked, us holding him up.

"His rage, however, continued to emerge, with no control. He did not want it. Changing and seeing himself helped him to confront his rage. Last week, I returned to him. I had developed an antidote. Not our usual type. This antidote is designed to permanently end transformations. Permanently.

"A week ago, I injected Subject A with the new type of antidote." The slide showed him in bed, me injecting him. He was smiling. "Today, Test Subject A is fully restored. To date he has not transformed and is eager to start a new life."

I turned off the power point. Pinetree switched the lights back on.

"He said at the time the antidote worked," I told them. "He also said he understood himself better and had plans to change. That was, again, last week. Today I zoomed with him. He continues to be stable, has been released from confinement and is back at work. Subject A is a Lieutenant on that base."

I totally had their attention.

"But it is more than a new antidote to prevent future test disasters. I believe

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Armstrong and Mark are not dead. They are frozen. Waiting for us to come up with a solution. And we can. I believe that my new type of antidote can be adapted. I think that underneath, they are still alive. I think my new antidote is a start towards restoring them.

“Before this meeting, I emailed all of you the data on my new approach. If we work together, between all of us it should not take much time to figure out how to adapt my antidote to use on our colleagues. Together, we can bring them back.”

They stood and applauded. It was wonderful.

The next days were exciting. I chatted with colleagues who signed the letter demanding I be fired only a month or so ago. We bounced ideas back and forth, had energizing discussions over lunch in the cafeteria. Madeline was very involved, excited about doing something positive. I enjoyed it all and did not either feel angry, nor did I miss transforming.

Better, most people now treated me as an equal. That is, they liked me a lot more, as if I was one of them.

It took four days for two teams, me leading one and Madeline the other, to develop antidotes we hoped were specific for each man. The marble statue that was Mark and the framed poster that was Armstrong were brought into the test lab. We did not use the cage but stood Mark in the centre of the room, while Armstrong was deframed and held by wires from the ceiling.

I injected my team’s blue antidote into Armstrong. The poster was thick so it was not too difficult. For Mark, who was not injectable, Madeline poured her team’s orange antidote into his open mouth, slowly, so it all went down.

“This could take a while,” I told everyone. “This is a first. We’ll have to wait.”

We waited five minutes. They were the longest five minutes of my life. I kept looking at them, at my watch, back at them. Hoping for something. After three minutes, anything,. By five minutes, hope was starting to slide away, a defensive numbness setting in.

Then Mark coughed. His marble skin began to soften. As he continued, Armstrong flapped on his clippers, the poster rattling. His face was shrinking, pulling together as he began to change. His transformation was the first to complete. He stood

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naked and woozy but was back to being alive and himself—although he looked subdued and quite unconfident.

Mark finished shortly after, perhaps his marbleized body took more work. But then he also stood naked and restored. We gave them both robes.

“I really screwed up,” Mark told us.

“I should have listened,” Armstrong added. “We both blew it.”

“How do you feel?” I asked them.

“It’s all gone,” Armstrong told me. “I don’t feel it within me at all. But I’m not very confident. I feel different. But alive is good.”

“Agreed,” Mark added. “It will take a while to sort out. I was pretty stupid. I think I can figure out why but yes, alive is good.”

“Yes,” Armstrong agreed. “I’m growing confident we can sort this out.”

“We can work together,” Mark told him, “although I’m feeling more certain I can do it on my own.”

Mark and Armstrong were alive and quickly back to normal but, I hoped, chastened.

For all of us, it was a profound moment. They literally were brought back from the dead by our combined work. In that room we all shared what had to be one of the best moments in any of our lives. We were a team. Morale was high.

I was on a roll. What should be next? The answer was obvious.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Meeting At Least

I had to restore something resembling normal relations with Melanie–even though our normal relations were awful. There had been a breakthrough—I did not want the walls to return. The damage had to be repaired. Even Madeline was talking to me.

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She and I went to dinner together (when I asked.) Phyllis, at Madeline's request, joined us. Phyllis told me it was good Madeline wanted her there. I agreed but worried it would be awkward.

They did not argue. They seemed to hit it off immediately and had fun laughing about me and my eccentricities. Each finished a glass of wine before we even ordered.

Previously, I would have gotten upset, then angry. Now I laughed with them—at least, some of the time. Often I was not in on the joke but that felt okay—at least, some of the time. Some of the time is better than none of the time.

"And what did he say then?" Madeline asked.

"What do you think?" Phyllis replied and they both laughed.

"I think we should call Mel and see if she'll join us," Madeline announced. "Mike and I agree we still have baggage to open. She should meet you. Okay?" Phyllis nodded and I mumbled. Madeline phoned and Mel was there before dinner arrived. She had never rushed to be with us before.

She entered guarded, but saw her mom laughing, so she sat gingerly, then looked at Phyllis.

"We've met," Phyllis told her.

"I remember," Mel said warily. She looked at her mom, smiling, then back at Phyllis. "So."

"So?"

"I never asked how you met my dad met," Mel said, adding sarcastically, "Was it a meet cute?"

"I'm a spy," Phyllis replied. "A ghost. Your dad was an assignment. Routine surveillance. Including sex." She sipped some wine. "We started about a year ago. I pretended I was from an escort service, though he never quite believed it."

Mel blinked. "Sounds like performance art."

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“Yes, but for real. I’ve been different people, for months at a time.”

I poured Mel a glass of wine and she took it.

Finally, she said, “Wow,” she said. “That is so cool. Did you go to school for it?”

Phyllis shrugged. “School of hard knocks.”

“What kind of wigs do you use?”

Madeline asked Phyllis about her work and emotional attachments. “Until Mike, I never had any. We connected on a deep level from the start.”

We had?

Dinner arrived and we ate and I mostly listened to them gossip and chat. It was hard getting a word in. Normally, that would have gotten me angry. Now, I enjoyed just listening because they were getting to know each other, liked each other, learning they had a lot in common—at least, besides me.

Mel appeared satisfied her mom was happy—if lonely–and more than okay with Phyllis. Mel seemed to think my relationship with Phyllis further freed her mom from me. She knew her mom cared deeply about me and would be unable to get on with her life until I was okay. To date, I had never been okay. I could see in Mel’s face she thought Phyllis was a big step forward for her mom.

Better, Mel warmed to Phyllis, exchanging makeup tips and what to observe in people. It was the best dinner I’d ever had, except for the one where I proposed to Madeline.

The new chapter in my life was going great. There remained threads to wrap up, very big ones. I brought them up during desert. None of us had any idea what to do because none of us knew what would happen next with the research, the transformations, me.

“Dad,” Mel asked as I paid the cheque, “are you developing an antidote for you? To permanently stop you from transforming?”

I put the credit card back in my wallet. “I already have one. But I won’t take it. Not yet. I’m not done yet.”

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“Why not?”

“Still have some anger issues,” I told her. “And I don’t know where my future is going. Being able to be transformed keeps me stable at work.”

Madeline gave Mel a lift to where Mel was staying. Phyllis and I went home. We brushed our teeth and then lay together in the bedroom, the TV on TCM, watching *The Wolfman*, halfway through. Lon Chaney was already cursed. “Oh God,” I said, “not another documentary.”

We kissed.

“Want me to change?” I asked. “Go all hairy?”

“Tonight, I like you just as you are.”

It was our own naked bodies against each other. The movie faded into the background as we tumbled eagerly into another world.

After, lying together, I thought of Madeline and hoped she would find some peace.

It was all going to work out. Mel at least was not an enemy. Madeline was at least not unhappy. The research programme was in a shambles and at least likely to be cancelled. Ending the destructive work I was involved in was at least well underway. And my anger had become the least of it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Pinetree Email

I am pleased to announce we are able to resume active tests of new serums.

This is possible because of a new antidote. It reverses transformations completely, permanently restoring the test subject to their normal selves.

Working as a team, based on the first antidote, used on Subject A, new applications were created. Two of our colleagues, as you are aware, have now been fully restored. The third person, Subject A, given the original antidote, remains stable. The danger to test subjects appears to have been finally eliminated.

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Given that, I have been instructed to give a green light to proceed. I note we will no longer use our own staff researchers as volunteers but will work from a list being prepared by Dr. Orwell.

Staff working as a team made this wonderful turnaround possible!

Chapter Thirty-Nine

From Bad To Worse…Of Course

The other researchers were thrilled to fully return to their work. While we were no longer quite a team, each researcher working on separate projects, now they eagerly collaborated and traded information. They had truly become a work family, a family I'd played a key role in creating–only it was a family I did not want any part of.

It was kinda ironic.

I knew I had to change the situation but had no idea how. The work had taken on a life of its own. I was a success story. The government wanted more. The new type of antidote had created exactly the administrative escape valve my team wanted. Lieutenant Irwin's ongoing stability, Mark and Armstrong being restored and working again was all the proof they needed.

Fred was particularly cheerful. "This is great! I've developed a terrific new serum and all I need is a volunteer! Not me, of course."

Of course.

"I have to wait for a volunteer," he added, but I've been sharing notes and I think we're all on the right track. Once I have the volunteer, I can fine tune the serum to him. Have to know him before I can finish, eh?"

Of all the researchers, only Madeline was upset. We chatted in her lab. She did not ask her assistant to leave. "I'm sorry about Irwin, of course—but in hindsight, it's horrifyingly clear. You should never have developed that new antidote. It helped Irwin but ruined everything. It's gone from bad to worse."

"I cared about him."

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“You cared too much.”

Cared too much? My problem was I did not care enough. I had gone the extra mile for Irwin. It was all very confusing.

How could the best intentions have gone so badly off course? The answer was obvious. I had not thought through the impact of the antidote. It was good to care so much. My mistake had been telling anyone about the antidote. If I had kept it a secret, and told everyone Irwin’s remission was a fluke, the research programme would still be a mess.

But I wanted to care about my colleagues. To do that, I wanted them to be a team, a family. Maybe I should focus on caring about only a few people at a time.

At the next staff meeting, Pinetree brought along her dummy. Sitting on her knee, the dummy cracked jokes about our work and progress. “A dummy with a headful of wood could do better!” People laughed. “Now splinter off and get back to work!” They laughed more. “I would if I could but I’m wood!”

I wanted them happy, content even, not laughing. Not about their destructive, dangerous work. I chatted with Madeline in her lab. She again let her assistant stay. “They were on track to be off track,” I told Madeline. “Now they’re all the little engine who could, chugging up the mountain.”

“I have no idea what to suggest,” she told me.

I replied, “We have to work together. To come up with something before it’s too late.” She agreed. Madeline and I working together to unravel work would be great.

As I started to leave, Madeline said, “Mike. Something to tell you. Anna and I”—she motioned towards her assistant, a woman about her age— “are a thing. I thought you should know.”

Anna looked at me and smiled.

“That’s nice,” I managed and walked away trying to smile. Everything was suddenly unravelling.

Dr. Orwell came into my office as I hung up after speaking with Phyllis, she would be

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home that night. Good. I so needed to talk. “It’s gone from bad to worse,” she began.

I nodded.

“Researchers have started up everywhere. Eager, after all the delays. They have a green light. I’m under a lot of pressure to provide that short list of volunteers.”

“How are you doing?”

“The short list? It’ll be around eleven. Pinetree told me another is coming in.”

“No. I meant you.”

“I’ve been worse,” she said, trying to be comforting. But added, “Although I can’t remember anything worse than this.”

“My morale ain’t high.”

“Same here.”

“I talked with Madeline. We’re up for brainstorming a solution. Maybe the three of us can meet tomorrow?”

“What can you do?”

“Maybe we can throw the researchers off with bad data. We have to do something.”

As I was packing to go home, more depressed than ever, Fred dropped in, cheerful.

“Gotta say again, your data and notes are super helpful,” he told me. “Really appreciate it.”

“Great,” I told him. “What are you going for?”

“You’re our role model. A beast. Powerful but controlled.”

“You think your serum will do that?”

“It’ll be a totally useful tool,” he replied. “Again, you worked out great. All we have

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to do is find a volunteer with the proper emotional mind set, fine tune the serum to it, and off we go! What do you think?"

I thought he was a totally useful tool but chose discretion. "I hope it works but you know it's all really a crap shoot."

He ignored that and took some candy from the jar on my desk.

When I got home—only a handful of reporters by now—Phyllis sat in the kitchen, nursing a scotch.

"It's gone from bad to worse," she told me.

I pulled a glass from the cupboard and joined her at the kitchen table. I looked at her. "What?"

"Pinetree called today. She told me someone thought I would be an ideal test subject." She sipped at her drink. "Apparently, I've volunteered."

I drank mine in a gulp. "For God's sake, why?"

She shrugged. "I've been an agent for decades. I've killed. I can totally control myself. And they seem to think deep inside I'm pretty angry."

"Will you let them do it?"

"Well, I have my orders. And no escape routes." She finished her drink, poured another, topped mine up. "Jury's out but the decision's really in."

"When?"

"When Orwell completes her list, I guess. She already had my psychological profiles on file."

How could it have gone from great to horrible so quickly?

The answer was easy: me, of course.

Chapter Forty

Building A Team

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I woke determined. There was plenty on my plate. Let's see what I could gobble up.

Phyllis was depressed. I told her I had a plan. I would offer to develop her serum. Tragically, it would fail and nothing would happen to her. The serum I planned was orange juice. I assumed Dr. Orwell would help. We agreed it was worth a shot and we left to our work in our cars, both feeling better.

I sure felt better. Getting Phyllis out of her trap was a great start.

On the drive in, I asked Melanie to meet me in my office asap. I think I woke her. She agreed to be in by ten. I thought that was also a great start.

My assistant was nowhere to be seen in my lab, which was also good. She never liked me and in the past I'd worked hard to control my anger around her. A couple of days ago she'd agreed to move over and work with Fred—just on loan, of course. I did not trust her and it was better she does not see me too close the next few days..

Mel arrived at ten, looking as if she had just woken, still drinking a mug of coffee. But she said "Hello" as she slumped into a chair. After the dinner she apparently had shifted back and into her not liking me but accepting me and conflicted about all if it. At last, I hoped she was conflicted. "What's the deal? Why the call?"

"I want you to check out the staff here and give me some advice."

"About what? I don't know anything about your work."

"It isn't about the work, it's the people," I told her. "I want to figure out how to manipulate them. To stop them doing their work."

"How can I help with that?"

"I don't know, but here's the thing. You're a performance artist. You not only create art, you perform it for an audience. That takes a big ego. The work here gets done by big egos."

She laughed. "So you want me to figure out how to stick pins in them? Deflate them?"

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“Mom and I need all the help we can get.”

“She’s in this too?”

“Of course.”

We actually chatted a while, about her work, and then, holding a fresh cup of coffee, she went with me around the Social Media Academy. I introduced her as my daughter and that I was showing her my work, given she knew about my personal transformations. Most of them were quite polite and talked to her as much about their work as they could. It took a couple of hours before we were back in my lab.

“So?”

“Well, they all have huge egos, as you said,” she told me. “The best way to puncture a big ego is criticism and humiliation, publicly.”

“I’ve done that before and they all hated me for it. I’ve gotten to the point where they might almost like me. And I want them to be part of my work family.”

She sort of smirked. “So nasty is out.” I nodded. “How about secretly nasty?” I shrugged. “This will take some thought. Can I ask my friends?” I shook my head. “Okay, hmmm.”

She left thinking. I left my lab to see Dr. Orwell. Fortunately, she had a few minutes. We sat at her little table.

“Phyllis has told me she’s been volunteered. Is she on your list?” Dr. Orwell nodded. “Can you alter her profile to help make sure she gets assigned to me? That I develop her serum?”

Dr. Orwell smiled, a little. “Fake?”

“Orange juice.”

“Consider it done. I’ll talk to Pinetree. I think she’ll understand. I already know she doesn’t want Phyllis used that way. She as much as said so yesterday, when she told me to put her on the list. You’re certain?”

“I don’t want her at risk and neither does she. And I’m not sure I want to see what

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she would transform into."

Then I returned to my lab. In time to receive an email from Pinetree with Dr. Orwell's shortlist of test subjects. Phyllis was on it, and I was assigned to create her serum. Sighting with relief, I went to the cafeteria. My appetite was healthy and it was time to check in with my colleagues.

Their appetites were also healthy and they were just as happy as I was but for profoundly different reasons. Now they not only had the green light but each had been assigned a test subject. They were all eager to fine tune their serums to suit what they hoped would happen.

I'd thought of lying about Lieutenant Irwin, but Mark and Armstrong were sitting together in the cafeteria, proof my antidote worked.

Fred was among the group I was eating with. I told them they were doing great and I had high hopes and would help any way I could. "Of course, I was lucky. It worked. If it had backfired, I'd have damaged my career."

"Damaged your career?" Fred asked.

"Sure. Any failure is damage. So just make sure your serums are right, eh?" I said it with a smile but I could see them thinking. Maybe it would delay their final versions a few days.

On the other hand, each wanted to be first.

I video phoned Lieutenant Irwin. He was back in command of an artillery unit. He told me he was stable and his anger was normal. He thanked me again and asked if there was anything he could do for me. I told him no. I'd considered the possibility of reinjecting him so he would burst into flames again, demonstrating the antidote failed at least with him. But apart from the evidence of Mark and Armstrong, it was not in my heart to even suggest that to Irwin. I told him I'd be in touch.

I was kinda proud of myself he was doing so well and that I had no intention of interest interfering.

There was only one reporter outside my house that night.

Phyllis was inside. I'd already phoned her to tell her about the list and her being

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assigned to me. She'd gotten home earlier and had time to prepare a quiche. It was fabulous.

We ate quietly.

Chapter Forty-One

Backfire

Fred's serum was ready in two days. The fellow was in a rush and feeling a rush about it. He invited me to see the test, very excited and proud of his work. I asked if it was too soon. He replied, "Not soon enough." He had been not quite so eager when the researchers tested the serum on themselves.

Pinetree, Dr. Orwell, Madeline and several key researchers assembled as before in the test lab. Several security guards stood ready, armed with tranquilizer guns. The cage and chair inside waited. Full-length mirrors faced the cage, so the volunteer could see himself. None of us was relaxed, we were all visibly tense. Except mine, although certainly memorable none of the other tests had ended well.

When we were seated and ready, Fred and his assistant led in the volunteer. "Today," Fred announced proudly, "is the first test with our new protocols. We have developed a serum—and antidote—specific to our test subject. He has been fully informed about the serum and its possibilities. We recognize surprise at the impact can be counter productive. He motioned to the volunteer standing next to him.

The man was tall, bulky, wearing only a robe. He had a thick neck, solid build. Covering his body, what we could see of it, were tattoos of knives piercing hearts, the colours vivid, red blood dripping from the hearts. He looked like a thug. And angry. I would not want to meet the volunteer in a dark alley. I would want him as a wing man.

"Everyone, this is Sergeant Phillip Oswald," Fred told us, motioning again to the volunteer. "My serum is tailored to his personality. Right?"

Oswald looked at him. "Whatever you say. I don't understand the science." He looked determined.

"Sergeant, before you are our key researchers and our base commander, General Pinetree. The guards with tranquilizer guns are here solely as a cautionary

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measure.”

“Yeah, you told me. They won’t need it when I look like a cool super hero.” I saw his anger, all in his eyes.

“That is what we are going for,” Fred chimed in. “And we appreciate your volunteering.”

“General, doctors, everyone, thank you for this opportunity. To date, I have taken my skills only so far. I do have anger problems. A lot of the time. I look forward to becoming someone who will be looked up to and admired. I want it.” He smiled, hiding underneath an angry wariness that somehow, as always, he would be screwed.

Fred told him, “In a moment.”

“Just as long as I don’t get screwed,” Oswald muttered as he followed Fred into the cage.

I saw handwriting on the wall.

Fred raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Oswald took off his robe and handed it to the assistant. Tattoos covered his arms and legs, each featuring blood red rips, tears and drops. Oswald sat in the chair and was strapped in. He tried to appear confident but was nervous.

“It’s okay,” Fred told him. “Remember what we talked about. We’ve done our best to make this a sure thing.”

“Yeah.”

Fred’s assistant handed him a hypo filled with a blue liquid. Fred looked at Oswald, smiled, pushed the needle into Oswald’s arm and pressed the plunger. “In we go!”

Fred and his assistant stepped outside the cage and closed the door. The lock snapped shut. Oswald looked at us. “I’m all in,” he said. “I want—,” then he grunted.

We all looked, waiting.

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Oswald’s entire body swelled and thickened. He cried out in alarm as the arm and leg straps broke with a loud snap under the pressure. “This don’t feel good!” Freed, he stood on his thickening legs. The tattoos of hearts and knives spread and smeared.

I stood.

“What’s happening,” he said, then grunted again. His entire body thickened dramatically, turning gray. Oswald became too heavy to stand and fell forward, onto all fours, limbs thickening still more, hands and feet transforming into thick stumps. As his face thickened, an enormous white horn spouting where his nose had been.

He opened his lengthened jaws to speak. I saw long sharp fangs. His stumps became hooves, then hooves with long claws. He had a small tail over a huge butt. His transformation complete, he squinted at us. Then he saw himself in the mirrors.

His nasty jaw dropped. Instead of a handsome, inspiring superman, he saw an undeniably ugly rhinoceros. Complete with jutting white horn, a smaller but equally sharp one behind it.

“What the hell?” he belched out. “This is what you turned me into? Who am Isupposed to inspire?” He was full of anger, which was understandable given being full of anger was a prime requirement. Also, as he feared, he had been screwed. “Assholes!” he shouted again, then lowered his head so his horn was level with the door. And, on the other side, us.

Pinetree hit a remote and an alarm blared. A security guard managed to shoot a tranquilizer dart. It bounced off Oswald’s head. His new skin was thick.

He burst through the cage door.

More tranquilizer darts bounced off his newly hardened skin as he glared at us. He seemed to have difficulty seeing, squinting.

We all scattered. There was only one exit. No one could quickly get out. Oswald roared and hunched down, growling. He saw Fred in the crowd and charged. His horn pierced Fred in his chest. Fred screamed as he was lifted off the ground. His assistant plunged the antidote into Oswald’s neck. The needle broke.

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Everyone was crying out.

Oswald looked at the computers and research equipment. At the science. As he charged at them, distracted by smashed what he could with his bloody horn, trampling what was left of Fred, Pinetree took charge in pushing us through the door, getting us out. We all managed to get out, two at a time. Pinetree was last.

Security guards armed with long guns began arriving.

Oswald had finished destroying the lab. Whirling around, he realized we were all gone but saw the open doorway. Standing in it were security guards raising their guns.

Oswald shouted, “Screw you!” and charged.

They shot at him with automatic weapons, spent casings rattling on the floor. I saw bullets bounce off his hardened skin, ricocheting all over the lab. Then I was running down the hall with the others. Alarms blared. I heard shouts of terror. Automatic lockdown was in progress. Soundproofing ensured no one in the adjacent stores or the mall would hear the gunfire and alarms.

Reaching my own lab, I found Phyllis had just run in. “Pinetree phoned. Something about the latest test going rogue?”

“Yeah.” I went straight for my own tranquilizer gun—after the first failed experiments, we all had them. I loaded it with the antidote I’d developed for myself. “I didn’t develop this for the test subject, but it’s worth a shot. And I don’t have anything else.”

Phyllis took a heavy duty automatic from her shoulder holster and clicked off the safety.

“That won’t do any good,” I told her. “Maybe eyes and mouth. His only vulnerable spots.”

We hurriedly left, hearing more screams. We ran towards them. The screams grew louder. People ran past us.

We found him in the cafeteria, browsing through the steam trays.

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“You’ll never hit him in the eye,” Phyllis said quietly, “and it’d be dumb luck to get that dart into his mouth.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, looking at Oswald grazing. “I need an open target. There is one that’s easier. Get to the other side and make some noise.”

“Why over there?”

“I need him to turn to give me the best shot.”

She edged across the large cafeteria. When she was on the other side and I nodded, she shouted out, “Hey! Butt hole!”

Oswald raised his head, jaws dripping macaroni and cheese.

Phyllis shot at him. The bullet bounced off his head, just missing an eye. Oswald turned to her, away from me, lowered his head and charged. As he rushed forward he gave me my chance. The dart hit him in his butt hole and the plunger shot the antidote into him.

His butt hole, I reasoned, was not a hardened part.

Oswald squealed, like a stuck rhinoceros. He whirled in circles, crying out. Then he stopped as the antidote hit him. He grunted and shivered.

Phyllis came to stand beside me as we slowly approached. His body began to shrink. Soon he was no longer thick. His skin colour returned to normal. He looked like himself.

But the changes continued.

He grew longer, his height increasing. His hands returned, his feet, on lengthening limbs, growing long claws. His body sprouted fur all over. His jaw lengthened and grew fangs. Oswald staggered against a table, grunting. He looked exactly as I did when I transformed. He growled.

Then he passed out.

We looked at him unconscious on the floor. I waited for him to transform back to normal human form, completing the antidote. But Oswald did not transform. He

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remained unconscious on the floor, hairy and looking like a werewolf.

A werewolf with tattoos.

We accompanied him as he was carried to the medical clinic on a stretcher. There the doctors swarmed over him, Orwell come in to observe. He regained consciousness, looked at us for a moment, said “Screw you” and fell unconscious again.

The next morning, when he woke, Oswald could talk and make sense. He was still a werewolf. He tried to transition back and could not. My antidote for me had transformed him into me, maybe permanently.

Chapter Forty-Two

What Reality?

“We need to confront reality.” Dr. Orwell stood in front of the assembled group. We were in what was left of the cafeteria, seated in chairs facing her. All the key researchers were there, along with the key administrative staff. Most moved uneasily.

“Most serum tests have resulted in disaster. Only great fortune brought Mark and Armstrong back to us. But the reality is disaster.”

They moved more uneasily.

“Why?” she continued, in a calm and even voice. “We have not properly prepared our volunteers. Is that not obvious? The test subject two days ago believed he would be transformed into a vision that was nothing less than ideal. When he saw he had become brutal instead, to use the technical term, he freaked.”

They nodded.

“The death of Fred is tragic. The memorial yesterday was beautiful. Given how he was–” she searched for the word, not trampled nor stomped nor mangled—“injured, restoration is impossible. We honour his memory.”

More nodding.

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“We need to confront the reality and learn our lesson. We must prevent future adverse reactions from test subjects. For reasons obvious. Moral and practical.”

Much more nodding, but nervous. Where was Orwell going?

Madeline and I sighed. Pinetree was stoic and remained stoic. No one but Orwell spoke, it was her presentation.

“We’ve had two days since the incident. The test subject regained consciousness but has not changed physically. He remains similar in appearance to Mike, which makes sense, given the antidote was intended for Mike. He talks with us, he understands, but remains unable to transform back. He continues to look like a monster.

“This is the opposite of what he was promised.

“Understandably, the test subject is very angry even as he has been forced to accept his situation. It still may be only temporary. He is able to control his anger. However, what if he transforms back into the brute we saw, and not his normal self? We must apply this reality, this understanding of our work to our next steps.”

“So what do we do?” Madeline asked. It was a prompt. She, I and Pinetree already knew where Orwell was headed.

“Obviously,” Orwell replied, “test subjects must be better prepared for the possibility of failure. We must revise our protocols. Specifically, we must be completely honest with them about the possible outcomes.”

“But then they won’t do it,” Fred’s former assistant chimed in. “The percentages for success so far have been poor. If we are honest with the test subjects, that even an antidote might not work, none would do it. They’re not idiots.” He looked at her. “Wouldn’t you? Where does that leave our work? We’re dead in the water.”

She looked at him. “It is a conundrum, Ernie.”

We all tried to smile.

“We are in a totally different situation with volunteers. It is different than putting them to war, in harm’s way. It is even different from testing vaccines on them.

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“Asking soldiers to sacrifice their lives has been a tradition through multitudes of lost lifetimes. Wars were a sacrifice volunteers, soldiers, understood. They expected to be honoured as war heroes. Depending of course on who won the conflict and how the history was written.

“Our situation is gravely different. For the serum to work, the test subject must be prepared for any result, even the worst. Sergeant Oswald erupted because he became the opposite of what he believed he would become.”

We all nodded at that.

She took a long breath. I saw some of the researchers hold their own breath during the pause. “Right now, personally, in consultation with General Pinetree,” she told us, “I believe that, currently it is impossible for us to continue any tests.”

There was dead silence in the room. Long moments went by. All the researchers and most administrators were tense. Jobs were on the line. Careers were on the line.

“But” Armstrong asked, breaking the silence, “only if we are honest.”

There was another long pause. Dr. Orwell looked at him. “The reason, Jim, is practical. Otherwise, we risk what happened two days ago. There have been too many injuries and deaths among us. Not top mention the test subjects. We cannot proceed if there is no reliable method for predicting end results. For predicting what will happen to the test subjects.”

“I think we’ve been honest about the risks,” Mark said, firmly.

There was a murmur around the room.

“The next one could be different,” Ernie added.

“We must develop a foolproof method of delivering the antidote,” Armstrong agreed. “That’s the real problem. Honesty isn’t the problem.”

“We’re as honest as possible,” Jim chimed in.

More murmuring, now positive murmuring.

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“It’s delivering the antidote. We need something that will get through impenetrable skin.”

“A pill.”

“Fit the subject with an intravenous site hooked up first.”

“Something up the subject’s ass,” another said. “It worked with Oswald.”

Orwell smiled, remaining calm, reassuring, firm. “Good ideas,” she told us, “but I think you are forgetting the psychology. We cannot fall back on hoping the antidote can be delivered or works. For successful results, the subject really must not only be prepared to accept an unwanted transformation. As Mike here has demonstrated, he must embrace it. Own it.”

“Get them embrace being transformed?” Armstrong asked. “We have drugs to do that.”

I stood up, feeling the frustration boiling inside me. Not anger, well maybe some anger, yes. I could no longer sit and watch. But although I was angry, I felt it controlled, modified—normal. “Are any of you listening to her? Stop it! It’s great we’re putting in a team effort, but a team effort for what? To create monsters? Look at our end results. We don’t even know our goals. Can you please understand why I’m angry? We’re committed to what? Why are we doing this?”

“They pay us,” Mark said.

“We like it,” Armstrong added.

“Why did you?” Ernie asked.

I looked at him. “Ernie, my goal was not that I was paid or liked it. My goal was me. Helping me. You all know the problems I had, what I inflicted on all of you.

“For years, my goal was to create a serum to bring my anger out. The idea was to confront it and control it. The serum worked. I can tell you, so far it’s a success. I helped create the serum. It is part of me. Understand? It was not only tailored for me, I embraced it. I wanted it. And when I transformed, although I was shocked, in the end it was in fact what I wanted also.

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“No one else can ever be in that situation. Not in the sense of how involved I was, from developing the serum to testing it on myself.”

They nodded, listening intently.

“The mistake we make is believing anyone can be used. That we can give orders, ideas and they will be followed.”

There was a long pause as they considered.

“So we would be back to testing it on ourselves, then?” Mark concluded. “That makes some sense. Except none of us are angry enough.”

“No,” I told him, “that isn’t—”

“We have drugs to help with that,” Armstrong said.

“We are in an exciting area of research,” Ernie said. “Groundbreaking. Setbacks are inevitable. But the stars are within our reach. Look at you.”

“Walking on the cutting edge carries risks,” Mark agreed.

“You’re our role model,” Armstrong added, “even if you don’t understand that. As you told us, you are a success story.”

I sat.

It was quiet.

Pinetree stood and went to the front of the room. She guided the conversation, which ranged about how to continue—the conclusion was inevitable, given the group—to when the cafeteria would be repaired. She told us an apartment was being prepared for Oswald. Until he could transform to a person, he would remain in our base, for security and further study.

Pinetree told everyone that she and Orwell were working on the problem, but until a resolution was found further serum tests were postponed.

I walked out with Madeline. “What do you want to do?” I asked her.

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“Get drunk.”

She walked away. I returned to my lab. My assistant was there, which was unusual as she generally avoided me. I could not talk with her. She would support the other researchers. I’d already noticed her nosing around with Mark and Armstrong in the cafeteria.

I need to do something.

What would wake up my colleagues to reality?

I went to see Sergeant Oswald.

His apartment was not yet ready. I found him sitting on a bed in a makeshift room, reading People Magazine. He still looked like me. He wore shorts.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Sucks,” he growled.

I shed my clothing, letting it fall to the floor (I’ve never even been aware of wrinkles, much fewer matching colours, I never cared what other people thought) and transformed. In a moment, I was also tall and hairy and fanged.

He sat up immediately. He stood. We looked at ourselves side by side. There was a mirror on the wall. We were close to identical, at least looking like a werewolf. We both had big angry eyes and dripping fangs.

“Hey brother,” I growled.

“Hey bro,” he growled back.

“You like having fangs? How you look?”

“That part, yeah. It’s kind of embarrassing my cock hanging out.”

“Part of the deal. Want to go for a walk?”

“Hell yeah.”

We left his room.

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“What do you have in mind?” he asked as we kind of loped into the hallway, naked and hairy and smelly kind of hoary.

“I think they should see us as we are.”

He looked at me. “So there’s no more of us? I’m in on that.”

The guy was a quick study.

I led us first to Armstrong’s lab. He sat with Mark and their two assistants, eagerly discussing Orwell’s talk and developing new ideas to continue their research. Very self involved.

“What’s up?” I growled. They looked up and stopped talking. We all stared at each other. Oswald’s and my drool puddled on the floor. Their coffee cooled.

Finally, Armstrong said, “Uh, hi. Hi you two. How’s it going?”

“We match up, don’t we?” I growled. “Must be because I configured the antidote for me.” I growled more than I had to. I wanted them unnerved.

“So, uh, what’s it like?” Mark asked.

“Are you stupid?” Oswald growled at him. “What do you think? It blows. Try the antidote yourself. Want to look like this the rest of your life?” And he spread his arms and showed his claws and fangs and howled.

It was a really long, cool howl.

The four scientists all leaned away. Far away.

I looked at a wall and ripped my claws across it, leaving a shredded gaping hole. “Feels great to rip things,” I told them.

We left them still leaning.

Oswald and I moved shoulder by shoulder in the hallway. Researchers and other staff stepped aside, even pressing against the walls to allow us to pass. No one wanted to get near us.

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“This feels good,” Oswald growled. “They’re easy to scare.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

I took us into the cafeteria. Workers were busy putting it back together, but many tables were up and the steam trays full. We gathered trays full of food, then sat down with other staff. All we did was eat. No knives or forks or spoons. Just claws.

The others were disgusted. It’s hard to eat politely with claws and long jaws. Food fell half eaten and we drooled everywhere. A cafeteria worker came by with a mop. Everyone had stopped eating by the time we left.

For a break, we went to the gym, which cleared quickly, and enjoyed some ping pong. It was a challenge holding the paddles with long, clawed fingers. Then Oswald thanked me, said we should go for a beer sometime and we loped our separate ways.

I went home happier and hopeful. Yet. Hope is important, but not a plan. There was much more to do. I phoned Mel and told her what we had done. She loved it and told me she had an idea on how she could help. The next day, with Pinetree’s agreement, she and several other artists set up in the restored cafeteria.

When we walked in we entered a mini theatre. The tables were gone and the chairs arranged to face the front, for an audience, facing the steam trays. We could not see the trays, though, as large white sheets, forming a set, covered three sides, the open front facing the audience.

On the set was the cage used in the test lab, complete with chair inside. Painted on the white sheets on the right and left were large windows, with startled, worried faces peering in. On the rear sheet a door was painted, with the edges cut so it could be opened. Written on the door, in backwards letters, was SECRET.

When the audience chairs were full, leaving more staff standing, the lights dimmed. Spotlights I had not noticed lit up the set. We waited, assuming there would be an introduction or set up. Instead, the performance just started.

The door opened and a man in a robe entered the set, followed by Mel and another woman, both wearing white lab coats. They were followed by two men dressed as armed guards, another woman, dressed as a General, and finally by two men in suits who wore black sunglasses.

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“Naked time,” Mel said. The man dropped his robe, revealing he was indeed naked. “Are you a volunteer ready to serve your nation?”

“Of course,” the man replied. “What will happen to me?”

“We don’t know,” Mel replied. “But we hope you’ll turn into something we admire and fear and someone else can use.”

“Sounds perfect,” he replied.

He walked into the cage, sat in the chair. Mel and the other woman wearing a lab coat entered with him and strapped his arms and legs. The others stayed outside and watched.

“Ready to serve?” Mel asked. He nodded. The other woman handed her a hypo filled with a blood red liquid. Mel appeared to inject it into his right arm. Then she and the other woman stepped outside the cage, shut the door, and we all watched the man.

I’m not sure how they did it. Mel told me some of her ideas came from the 1930’s version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. That transformation came from using makeup which responded to different lights and filters.

Suddenly the man in the chair lurched. He cried out in pain. He struggled with the straps, then one arm strap broke, then the other. He undid the leg straps and stood, then hunched over in pain. When he straightened and we saw his face again, it was a vampire’s—pale white, sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, two long fangs in his open, hungry mouth.

“You want to see transformed?” he snarled at the other actors, who appeared horrified. He pushed open the cage door and pounced on Mel, sinking his fangs into her throat. The others screamed as he then leapt on them. The door would not open. He sank his fangs into all of them, drinking their blood.

For a moment it was quiet. The vampire stood over his victims. Then Mel moved jerkily, gathered strength and rose, her neck bloody. Her face was deathly white. The others rose, also deathly white, blood dripping from wounds on their necks.

Mel held up the empty hypo and cried out triumphantly, “It worked!”

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The lights went out.

Dead silence.

The applause was hesitant.

After, Mel and her group handed out leaflets for their other performances. There were few takers. Staff's eyes were on the floor.

After, Mel and her group met with myself, Madeline, Pinetree and Dr. Orwell. Mel was nervous until Pinetree shook her hand. Orwell wiped a tear away.

Madeline and I beamed, proud parents.

Chapter Forty-Three

Betrayed

Phyllis and I drove in together the next morning. We were both nervous. Today I would inject her–with orange juice. I told Pinetree and Orwell the night before. Green light. All was good and there was nothing to worry about. Even though I vaguely felt I was in a Chekov play, waiting for the pistol on the wall to go off.

We entered *The Academy*, grabbed coffees from the cafeteria, went to my lab. My assistant was there and held up two filled hypos, the "antidote" purple liquid, the serum orange. Grape and orange juice.

My assistant smiled. "We're ready to go," she cheerfully told us. I took the two capped syringes and thanked her. At ten o'clock, half an hour later which felt longer, the three of us went to the test lab. Phyllis wore only a robe. The lab was prepared: cage, chair, security guards with tranquilizer guns. Pinetree and Orwell were already there, nodding at us, relaxed. Armstrong, Mark and several other key researchers were also there, Armstrong leaning against a wall, giving Phyllis and myself a smile.

I followed Phyllis into the cage and helped strap her in. She kept her robe on, looking away from Armstrong, who himself looked disappointed. We were ready.

I took the orange filled syringe from my pocket and pulled off the cap. I rolled up the sleeve on Phyllis' arm, cleaned an area with an alcohol swab and pushed the

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needle gently into Phyllis' arm. Slowly I filled her with orange juice. Then I stepped back, out of the cage, closing the door behind me.

I waited–for nothing to happen.

Phyllis smiled at me.

Then, to my shock, she transformed. I had injected her with a real serum—and it was working. Her skin grew pale. In fact, her entire body paled. Then her body became transparent. I saw through her body. Phyllis became…ethereal. Ghostly. There but not there at all.

She stood. The leather straps did not break. She drifted through them. She floated a few feet above the floor. Her body was all moving wisps. She looked at her arms and legs, then us, then drifted forward, straight through the bars. She stopped a few feet from me, hovering.

"Phyllis?" I asked, stunned.

"I feel released!" she told me in a voice distant, her smile eerie, pleased. "Been a ghost half my life, now I am one! This is perfect!"

"Really?" I had no idea what to say. I thought of grabbing the antidote, but it was still probably just grape juice. Moreover, how could I inject someone who was not there?

She floated over us. "I can go anywhere. Do anything. No more disguises! The hell with make-up!" She sounded thrilled.

And then Phyllis went through a wall and was gone.

The lab was dead silent.

We looked at each other, stunned. Pinetree and Orwell were as surprised as I.

I turned to my assistant. She looked at the floor. "What the hell?" I snarled at her. I felt like transforming and holding her up against a wall.

Pinetree looked at the two of us and snapped, "In my office. Now!"

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She stomped off and we followed, Dr. Orwell behind us. We went into Pinetree's office. She shut the door behind us. Slammed it.

She glared at me. "What happened?"

I faced my assistant, whose eyes were glued to the floor. "Well?"

"I don't know," she mumbled.

Pinetree smashed her fist in a wall. She made a hole. "Tell the truth!" she demanded. She was an undeniable force.

My assistant jumped back. "It was Mark and Armstrong. They convinced me. Said they had a brilliant idea. That Mike would never approve."

"Mark and Armstrong?" Pinetree asked skeptically.

"They told me they were pressured. By someone outside the base."

"And the antidote?" I demanded.

"We developed one, and I have it in my pocket, but…"

Pinetree glared at her. "Go home. You'll get a call about your future." She watched my assistant leave, then picked up her phone. "Tell Mark and Armstrong to come here at once." Then she looked at me.

"Sorry," she said. "Sabotage. Egos are rampant here."

I held up in my hands in frustration. "What should I do? We have no idea where she went. Or whether she'll be back."

Pinetree sighed. "Go home," Pinetree told me. "If she goes anywhere, she may go there. We'll meet tomorrow morning to sort this out. Damn dealing with all this crap!"

As I left, I heard her tell Dr. Orwell, "If she comes back, we can use her. A ghost is perfect. Can't believe it. Check the serum they used." And then, "I'll murder those two."

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As I closed the door, I heard Orwell ask, “Can I watch?”

I went home frustrated, depressed, disturbed—you name it. There were no reporters at the house. I went inside, feeling alone. Unpleasantly alone.

The house was empty. Where was she?

“Phyllis?” I called out with little hope.

She drifted through the living room wall and hovered in front of me.

“Thank God,” I burst out. “Are you all right?”

“Great so far. I’ve had a great time just flying around and being invisible. Scared a couple of kids but that was a mistake.”

I took a breath. She seemed okay. Not psychotic or changed—yet she had changed. She was much lighter. “Can you transform back?”

Her ghostly smile shimmered. “Haven’t thought of that. Been having too much fun.” Her brow furrowed, as much as it would furrow, and slowly she took real shape. Her body solidifying took her down to the floor. In a moment, she stood in front of me, herself. Naked but herself.

She looked at her arms and legs, feeling them. “It’s more fun being a ghost,” she told me.

I did not know what to say. Phyllis appeared to be the project’s first real success, besides me but she seemed to have surpassed me. Unless she decided to fade into nothing and never return. Did she still have connections to earth?

“Transform,” she told me. “Let’s go for a run!”

She helped me off with my clothing and I transformed. She transformed back into being a ghost. Then werewolf and ghost left the house. Me through the kitchen door, Phyllis through a wall. I leapt over the fence, she floated over it. I nodded to the two guards waiting in the forest. They saw us and took out their cell phones. I smiled and waved. They would let Pinetree know where Phyllis was.

Then we went for a run and a float.

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The moon was bright, except for a few clouds. The air was clear, except for Phyllis.

I ran fast, outdistancing the following guards who struggled to keep up. She kept up easily, passing through trees and birds and, as I watched, she abruptly raced up, into the sky, vanishing in a cloud.

I stopped, panting, waiting for her to return to earth.

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