Chapter Forty-Four

The Ghost

I went into work the next morning apparently alone. The guards watching saw no one walk to the car with me, no one sit next to me. The guards in the car followed while others stayed behind, watching for Phyllis.

Sitting beside me, invisible, Phyllis giggled.

“This is so much better than being a ghost in real life! I mean, not a ghost, but—”

“I know what you mean. You’re really enjoying this.”

“Oh yeah!”

We drove downtown and parked underneath *The Academy*. I apparently went up alone in the elevator. In my lab, I phoned Pinetree.

“What is it?” she asked brusquely. “Phyllis?”

“Yeah. I want to come in and see you.”

“…mind if I call in Dr. Orwell?”

“Tell her to bring a robe.”

“Gotcha.”

Ten minutes later I was in Pinetree’s office. She stood by her desk. Dr. Orwell stood to one side, holding a white robe.

“Where is she?” Pinetree asked immediately, visibly controlling her stress.

Phyllis appeared before them, shedding invisibility for a ghost appearance. As a ghost, she decided to look like a wraith, menacing, all floating white wisps and angry haunted face with hollow dark eyes. “Robe,” the wraith said.

Dr. Orwell stepped forward and handed me the robe. Phyllis transformed, going from hideous wraith to hardening form to herself, standing naked. I handed her the robe and she quickly slipped it on.

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“Thanks,” she told me. “I don’t like exposing myself.”

“So you control it?” Pinetree asked, relaxing.

“Oh totally.”

“And how do you feel?” Orwell asked.

“Right now? Down to earth. Before, I floated.”

We all sat, circling the chairs so the four of us faced each other.

There was an awkward pause.

“You took off,” Pinetree told her. “Disappeared on me. I have operations to run.”

“Sorry but not sorry, General,” Phyllis replied. “For the first time in many years, I felt free. I could just float off. So I did. I felt no responsibilities, no connection to anything but myself.”

“And?” Orwell asked, leaning forward.

“And I felt hollow,” Phyllis told her. “I think maybe that was why I transformed into a ghost, something unreal and hollow inside. I’ve been that way for years, being other people, obeying orders. Being a hollow tool.”

Pinetree looked steadily at her. “I understand. I think I do. I’m sure you will understand when I ask, how are you about obeying orders now? Will you still work for me? Or do you want to drift off into the ozone?” Pinetree’s look was hard.

Phyllis returned the look. “Got no idea, boss. Depends for starts on whether the orders are reasonable. I think I should choose.” She saw Pinetree’s look. “Don’t worry. I’m not flying off. I need to stay here, be observed. Mike will keep an eye on me. I know I can’t trust myself, not yet, not until I understand what’s going on. Or, understand it better.”

I leaned forward. “So it may help with your anger? Or whatever?”

“You mean, is it a cure for whatever ails me?” She smiled. “I was more frustrated than angry. I was angry at being cold. At not caring. At feeling without

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personality."

"So that's what you're thinking about?" Dr. Orwell asked. "Not about, say, your powers?"

Phyllis actually giggled. "Who cares about powers? You don't have to, when you have them." She stood. "I need time to settle in. Mike will know where I am, General, so call off the dogs. You'll be kept up to date." And Phyllis abruptly vanished, the robe falling to the floor. She was gone. Through the wall. Or perhaps still standing in the room, watching us.

We all looked at the robe on the floor.

"I need her," Pinetree muttered.

"She laughed," Dr. Orwell said. "I've never seen her laugh."

Pinetree went to her desk and poured herself a cup of tea. "The question, doctor, is whether she will work for us. She could be invaluable, as she currently is."

I looked at Pinetree. I waited. She noticed. I waited.

"Fine," she said. "Sit." I sat.

I waited, as she considered.

"Mike, I and the other base commanders have been talking for over two months about the pressure. You know about it. Outside pressure to produce a certain type of soldier. Enough pressure to make us feel very uncomfortable. We didn't know where it came from or its purpose. I was…unhappy."

I nodded, my role to listen and be informed. She was reluctantly opening a door. Secrets were her business.

"That pressure increased dramatically with your successful transformation. They had what they wanted, or something close."

"They?"

She shook her head. "Some group or groups outside the government. We're still

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trying to find out. Whoever they are, they are powerful." She paused. "I brought in Dr. Orwell early. You might say she's our moral conscience." Orwell shrugged modestly. "But she's also practical."

"Morality is practical," Dr. Orwell said.

"So where do we go from here?" I asked.

"No idea," Pinetree told me. "But something has to be done. Now. The situation currently is too stable. For the other side. Time to rock the boat."

"It would be dangerous to do that," Orwell told her.

"It's dangerous right now," Pinetree replied.

Do what?

Neither was prepared to confide that much in me. Perhaps I was not there yet. Perhaps they did not quite know themselves.

"Don't worry," Pinetree said, looking at me. "You'll know soon enough."

I left them talking. I chatted with staff in the hallways and cafeteria. The researchers especially were thrilled. Phyllis' transformation had been a success, as far as they were concerned. Confidence in their work and using it on test subjects was returning, with a vengeance—if it had ever been gone.

Entering my lab, I saw my assistant. She was packing.

"You're fired," I told her.

"Transferred and on probation," she replied. "Orders from Pinetree. I'll be working with Armstrong."

"How can you still work here, given how you betrayed Phyllis and me?" I asked, feeling some anger.

She looked at me briefly. "Pinetree told me I'm useful." And she took her packed bag and left.

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Angry, I phoned Pinetree. “There’s a reason,” she said. Great. Great to know there was a reason.

Frustrated, I phoned Madeline and Melanie and asked them to meet me at home after work. I spent the next hours killing time, waiting for Phyllis to appear through a wall. Nothing. But it felt as if she was very close as soon as I left The Academy. The feeling came to me during the drive home.

I parked, nodded to the two guards who’d followed me and walked into my house. There were no reporters. Inside, I dropped my case in the hallway and walked into the kitchen and made some more coffee. I got a robe from the bathroom and draped it over a kitchen chair. I looked at my watch.

I was halfway through the first cup when there was a knock on the front door. I took the robe with me. When I opened the door, Madeline and Melanie stood there.

“Hey dad. Mom gave me a lift,” Mel said, walking in. “She filled me in.”

“Do you know anything about Phyllis?” Madeline asked before even stepping inside.

“Yep. Come in.” She entered and I closed the door. “I asked you both here because I know you care about her. First, she’s all right. At least, I think so. So far.” They just looked at me.

“Mom said she transformed and disappeared. No one knows where she is.”

“I was with her last night. My guess is, she’s with us right now. I can feel her.” I held out the robe.

Next to me, Phyllis materialized. She went from invisible to normal human, quickly taking the robe and pulling it on. She ran a hand through her hair, straightening it, smiling.

“Hi, girls.”

They hugged. Madeline was crying.

We sat in the living room, sipping coffee. I opened a box of cookies, I thought there should be dainties. Only Phyllis ate the cookies.

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“What the hell?” Madeline finally said. “So you’re okay? You don’t feel anything weird or horrible?”

“The opposite, Matsy,” she told her. “It’s freedom. Think of it. No body. No plumbing. No guck leaking down below. No leering. Zero pressure. It feels wonderful. I feel free.”

“Oh,” Madeline replied. She settled back, thinking.

“How long can you do it?” Mel asked. “Without a body, I mean?”

“No idea. I think I should keep it short. Feels too good.”

Madeline stroked her forehead. “Your transforming has helped you?”

“So far. The days ahead will show if I’m walking down the garden path. This could be leading me somewhere I don’t know yet. You can appreciate, it’s all kinda new.”

“Tell me more about feeling free you have no body,” Mel asked.

The three talked for a long time, while I mostly sat and watched and enjoyed how well they got along. Madeline and Mel left reassured, especially Madeline. Mel was fascinated by the biology end.

Phyllis and I cleaned up, then went upstairs, to the bedroom.

We did not stop to brush our teeth.

She slipped off her robe, I took off my clothing.

“There’s only one way to do this tonight,” she told me, settling onto the bed. “I’m the invisible woman.” And she disappeared. The depression on the sheets remained.

“And I’m Michael J. Fox. Teen Wolf.” I transformed into my anger form but I felt only lust or was it love? When we had sex it was not sex. It was more than sex. It was like we were together.

Werewolf and ghost.

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Chapter Forty-Five

Ticking

The next morning, after breakfast, Phyllis said she was taking off. “Seems to me the key is who’s behind the pressure. Who is the man with the thick neck? I checked with Pinetree while you were in the shower.”

“How long?”

She shrugged. “Couple of days maybe? Used to take weeks but not now.” And she smiled and disappeared.

As I drove in, I thought about how much more Phyllis was enjoying transforming than me. I enjoyed having the power and strength and claws. She enjoyed having no body.

Was this a gender thing?

When I got into work, I found an email from Pinetree which, after yesterday’s meeting, I had half expected:

Given the apparent success of the most recent use of the serum, existing safety protocols are further relaxed. I will leave it to the researchers to determine the viability of their test subjects. Work should continue immediately, with results expected promptly.

This was what she was talking about yesterday, that the base was too stable. She intended to shake things up. Maybe make someone hit a panic button. Allow her to find out what was happening and how to stop it.

That was all important, sure.

But I was starting to think the real problem was closer to home. I had treated my colleagues more as pawns, even when caring about them. But what did I know about them? What drove them?

Would I learn more about myself? My end goal was always a cure. To a degree, it was working. I should be furious with my colleagues for being idiots. Today, furious was frustrated.

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I wished this was as easy as research work, based on facts and figures. Researching what made people tick was tougher. It was difficult knowing where to even start.

I decided to start with Armstrong. He was a ringleader. He had transformed disastrously. Why was he still in the game?

I found Armstrong in his lab, sitting with Mark and their two assistants, including my former one. He was as tall and broad shouldered as ever. Mark was a thin man. Their two assistants were both women in their thirties. They were chatting, cups of coffee or tea half drunk, some half-eaten Danishes on a plate between them.

They looked up as I entered.

“Hey Mike, always good to see you,” Armstrong said, voice strong, sounding welcoming. I could see from the expressions on the others’ faces how welcome I was. They all forced smiles.

“Hard at work?” I asked, sitting down, joining them.

“We’re excited,” Armstrong replied. “It’s all green light. You?”

“Phyllis seems all right.”

“So we’ve been told.”

“If it’s okay, I’d like to talk with you all, just a little bit.” They looked and waited. “You know me and the work I’ve done. You do the same work. I know why I got into this. My anger. You’ve all seen it.”

“True enough. I wrote the letter,” Armstrong said, slowly.

“I know why I do this work. Why do you, Bill? …It is Bill, isn’t it?”

Armstrong chuckled. “On top of it as always, eh Mike?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t care,” he told me, looking at me directly. “Why am I here? Because this type of research is unique. It fits my unique talents, you see.”

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“If you ask,” Mark added, “I’m in it because if it works, what I’d get would be amazing.”

We chatted. They were both involved in such science as children. They felt it was natural to them and, more important, the only subject they were interested in. They followed one career path, building their expertise step by step. They devoured whatever they could on the subject. That was why they were on top of their field.

But willing to risk death by trying it on themselves? Both had. Was it the lure of achievement combined with personal glory? There had to be more. Both men had experimented on themselves. Had they denied the risks or accepted them?

After the chatting well dried up, I thanked them, wished them the best, and then asked to speak with my former assistant privately. She and I walked out of the lab and stood awkwardly in the hallway.

“I’m trying to think things through,” I told her. “I don’t know how to put this, except directly. You betrayed me. You betrayed Phyllis. You knew the serum I prepared was fruit juice. You substituted the real thing.”

She looked at me directly. “Yes. I did. I told Armstrong what you were planning. He had a serum ready to go. He described you as a roadblock. Or pothole. He was right.”

“What about the ethics?”

“What about the ethics of spending all this public money and not doing something?” she shot back. “This work is important. And my career is important. Armstrong promised he would make he his new assistant. That I would get credit for breakthroughs.”

“And it didn’t hurt that you hate me.”

She laughed. “It sure helped.”

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

“You’re an arrogant dick,” she snapped. “You’re willing drag all of us down, to stop any other successes. This is all about you, not morality.” And she stomped back

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into Armstrong's lab.

I spent the rest of the day in similar chats with my colleagues. Most were not as extreme as Armstrong, but they all were dedicated to the work. They wanted their careers to advance but more important to most, they wanted to help their country.

Some were in denial. They saw the work as heroic, with understandable failures at first. Others knew they were in the business of creating monsters, accepting their work with relish. I was not surprised—it was a secret selective research base, and only the best were recruited. It was a workplace culture, similar to an office, except for what it produced.

Some workplace cultures were imposed. In our situation, it was self-created, encouraged by management. How do you stop what comes from within? Was that not my own problem? How do you change what is in your heart?

I asked Madeline. She looked lost. She wanted the work to stop and had no idea how.

Yes, it felt like a lotta work.

And almost entirely impossible.

I saw one tiny ray of sunlight, through the cracks.

Towards the end of the day, I chatted briefly with Pinetree. She agreed with my assessment of staff and the situation. The only solution, she and Dr. Orwell agreed, along with me, was to confront the staff with their own work. That meant a whole lot of upcoming transformations.

Pinetree was already beefing up security staff.

At the end of the day, Madeline and Mel came to a restaurant, at my request. I filled them in on my day, especially Mel. Madeline already knew.

"Your performance art was great," I told Mel. "It unnerved them. Showed them what they were doing. But it only seems to have worked in the moment. What can make it permanent?"

Mel thought. "Drugs? Dope them up?"

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Madeline thought more. “Your assistant shows one way. Alter the serums. Deliver what they don’t expect.”

I pondered also, then smiled, looking at them. “How about both?”

Chapter Forty-Six

Legacy Of The Krell

Bubbling was the best way to describe how most of the staff felt. Bubbling not like volcanic lava destroying everything in its path but like very refreshing sparkling water. They were having their cake and eating it also. They were heading towards indigestion.

The new green light had a profound impact. Oswald and I transformed and prowled the halls, checking on staff. This time, we impressed no one.

They said hello, a few slapped me on the ass. I growled. They laughed. It was not clear if it was denial or being off in space. They were giddy with unfettered access to experimentation and especially new trials. Inhibitions were removed, restrictions ether. They had actually evolved into a family, all sharing and helping and supportive. Throbbing with life, excitement and promise.

What could I do with this bunch of misguided fools?

Was that too harsh? Have you been reading this?

Phyllis was still gone. Madeline and I were aghast. Mel had no idea how to help. Pinetree stayed in her office, grim. Extra security prowled the halls. The stores on either side of *The Academy* were suddenly vacated. Then the entire mall, because there was a ‘bacterial infection.’ The security guards spread out to the mall itself.

I had no one at home and almost no one at work. Yet I did not feel alone. There was Madeline and Mel and Pinetree and Orwell. We felt like a family, and a much better one. Although we never ate together or talked about much other than work. Like some families.

I felt reassured and full of hurt. The ray of light through the cracks of darkness? That some of them would wake up.

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What alarm clock would do that?

That night, instead of moping alone in the house, I shed my clothing and transformed, then went into the back yard and jumped the fence. I waved at the guards. They followed me as I began to run, an easy loping that brought joy to my muscles. We ran for an hour. One fell behind but the woman kept up to the end.

“How are you?” I growled, feeling fine.

“I think I’m gonna puke.”

I invited her back into the house, awkwardly took a glass from the cupboard in one claw and the bottle of brandy next to it with the other. I poured her a shot, then went upstairs, transformed, pulled on a robe and returned to her.

“Better?” I asked.

“That was a burn,” she replied. “Feeling tense? That was a lot.”

“Yeah. Work’s gone haywire.”

“Tell me about it. We’re all on overtime.”

“Why?”

She shook her head, looked at the bottle but did not pour another drink. “Something big is coming. Doesn’t feel good. I should go.”

I thanked her, apologized for being part of her work, and watched her leave.

Then I was alone again. And sweaty.

The shower was long and steamy. I felt cleaner but not cleaner.

I could return *to The Academy* tonight. When no one was there. Everyone’s notes were now available. I could subtly change them so the serums would be a disaster.

I could not do that.

Could not do it to the test subjects, nor did I want to deliberately put anyone under a threat. It was totally wrong. So that idea was out. I could also subtly alter the

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new serums to be better. But that would make it worse. Success from tragedy will always be a mistake.

So, I could not screw it up or make it better. Nor could I allow it to remain as it was. Nor could I ignore I was their role model. Nor could I ignore they mostly hated me, if not disliked me. I felt responsible. My success had inflamed them all.

I transformed again and looked in the full-length mirror in the bedroom. Instead of seeing power, I saw ugly. Maybe power is ugly, no matter how used or for what glorious purpose.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Mac and Cheese

After a tip from Dr. Orwell, I dropped in on Armstrong. He and his new assistant were interviewing their new test subject.

“Hey, Mike,” he said with a smile as I entered. “This is, uh—”

“Boris Karloff,” the man sitting next to him replied. “It’s a name people usually remember.” He stood and extended his hand. I shook it and sat with them.

“Right,” Armstrong said. “Boris here is our new test subject. It’s our first meeting. I’m giving him my new serum tomorrow morning.”

“Does he know what he’s getting into?” I asked.

“Of course.”

I stood and loosened my clothing and transformed. I stood, towering over them, muscles rippling. I looked at Boris and growled.

“That is so cool!” he blurted out. “Just like you told me!”

Armstrong smiled. “So you are prepared for anything?”

“Oh yeah!”

“You realize that, if you transform, we cannot predict into exactly what?”

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“You said we have to see what happens,” Boris replied.

“Yes.”

“But it’ll be good.”

“We certainly believe so,” Armstrong told him. “Everything new carries risks.”

“Okay, then I’m all ready,” Boris replied.

I transformed back and put my clothing back on. I didn’t bother with my socks. “Boris,” I said to him, “I do not think you are really prepared for what could happen.”

Armstrong smiled. “You’ll have to forgive Mike, he’s something of a competitor. Wants the spotlight to himself.”

“True,” my former assistant added with a smirk.

I took Armstrong outside, away from the others. “You haven’t really prepared him at all. This is arrogant. Remember last time.”

“You helped me recover and rethink last time,” Armstrong replied. “Right now I think you are just jealous. Shows all over you.” And he turned and went back into his lab, leaving me standing in the hallway.

I approached five other key researchers before lunch. Every conversation was similar—I was jealous, they were courageous—not selfish—in continuing their work. Test subjects were volunteers. And there was always antidotes, even though they might be possible to deliver. But for them, any end result was part of the science.

I sat glumly in the cafeteria, eating its macaroni and cheese. It delivered great taste but was inherently unhealthy. Mac and cheese was the cafeteria’s most popular dish.

Tomorrow was shaping up to be a day I should call in sick. If I ate too much of the mac and cheese, I probably would be.

I spent the afternoon meeting with the rest of the researchers. A few were going deliberately slow, being extra cautious. A few more were uncertain on how to

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proceed.

At the afternoon's end, I chatted with Madeline in her lab. She had also canvassed our colleagues. Some thought her also jealous, guarding her own success, while others dismissed her as so cautious it was amazing she had created anything.

"There's no way out of it but letting them see themselves, tomorrow."

"Will they?" I asked. "Mistakes will be dismissed. That green light blinds them. They'll create a slew of monsters."

"Let them."

"The monsters will overrun us. Overrun the mall."

"Let them. Then it won't be a secret any longer. Either way is a win, Mike."

She had accepted Pinetree and Orwell's need to subvert the entire base. When I asked, she said she had spoken with them. The plan? There was no plan, except to unleash.

This felt like a desperate way to go. I drove home, sat alone in my house. I phoned Mel. When I told her, she asked if it could be video'd. She also asked if I'd heard from Phyllis, a lot of her friends wanted to learn more about body freedom.

I slept poorly. One dream was of the Krell. Another was of King Kong tromping through New York. A third was me and King Kong tromping the streets.

Pinetree called Madeline and myself into her office at the end of the day. "You two deserve a head's up," she said, looking a bit weary. We waited. "It's about tomorrow." We waited. "I've set up the tests scheduled for tomorrow in a certain way."

"Certain way?" Madeline asked.

"Let's say, for security reasons," Pinetree replied.

"Security reasons?" I asked, allowing myself to be skeptical.

"No," she told me. "Not really. I've set it up in line with what Dr. Orwell and I and a

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few others think should be done. We are far ahead of the other bases, being the largest. They are looking to us for guidance. At least, their commanders are." She paused again, taking a breath. Being this direct appeared to be difficult for her.

"When you both walk in tomorrow, into the cafeteria, you will see test cages set up. All we have. About ten."

I sat up. "You're going to let the researchers do all their tests at once? In the cafeteria?"

"It's the largest room," she replied.

"Ten transformations at the same time?" Madeline asked, mouth open. "It will be chaos."

Pinetree looked at her. "Yes. Phyllis has been helpful, with intelligence. She will be here, tomorrow."

"So that's why thew extra security and empty mall? You're creating chaos?" I asked, starting to feel numb. The possibilities were almost all dreadful.

"Out of chaos comes stability," she replied, "once the chaos dies."

"But—" I started.

"I've told you enough."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Wait For It

I went home alone, was alone there, and stayed there. It was a long night and I woke tired, stressed at what might happen today. What would happen. I dressed in the clothing I felt most disposable.

I was gritting my teeth on the drive in, wondering what on earth I could do to prevent disaster. Did I even want to prevent disaster? Was not disaster the swiftest way to end the base and its work?

Unless, of course, many of the transformations were successful—and controllable.

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Then it could just as swiftly fall apart. I was starting to wish I had brought more coffee when I felt a presence in the car, light at first, then settling in beside me.

“Hey kid,” I heard Phyllis’ voice. “Don’t look at me. Look straight head. The guards behind us are watching. For now, I need to stay out of sight.”

“Glad to not see you,” I said, trying to concentrate on the road. “Pinetree said you’d be here today.”

“Yeah. She’s called in one of those powerful guys. The one with the thick neck. He’s been hard to find. If he shows, I can follow him.”

“Gotcha.” I realized the steering wheel was wet. My hands were sweating. “Missed you. How are you doing?”

“I’ve spent most of my time like this. I’ve had to be careful. After a while, I begin to feel detached. Like none of this is important.”

“It is important.”

“I keep telling myself.”

We chatted until we entered the mall parking lot. The transformation was impacting her, maybe more than she realized. I had even more to worry about.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Gong Show

The parking lot was half full—a lot of staff had stayed away. Instead of the normal receptionist, several armed guards stood by the front doors. The mall itself was deserted. Given it was built for crowds, the silence was unnatural. Everything today felt unnatural. Wrong.

I sought out Pinetree and found her in her office, talking with Dr. Orwell. Standing next to them was the fellow with the thick neck and two of his pals. I sensed Phyllis move away from me, towards him. Pinetree had told her he would be here, allowing her to target and follow him, to discover his secrets.

“Good morning,” Pinetree said to me. “You know everyone here.” She looked at

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her watch. “Five minutes. Staff are entering the cafeteria now.”

“Always good to see you again, Mike,” thick neck told me.

“Ditto. Today should be…something else, eh? Ten at once?”

He smiled. “General Pinetree is putting on quite a show. Getting so many test subjects injected will certainly speed your work here. At least, we hope so. We’re quite confident.” He brushed at his neck, feeling something flick at it. Phyllis. Thick neck looked as if he needed success. Worried.

Pinetree looked at me and allowed herself a hidden smile.

I looked at the man. “If you don’t mind. You know who *I* am.”

He smiled. “And myself?” His smile grew stiff as he looked carefully at me. “You could say I’m an investor.”

“Investor?”

“In this country.” His smile froze.

I thought of saying something but it sarcasm would not have gone down well.

“Time’s up,” Pinetree said, breaking the silence up. “Let’s go.”

She led us out of her office and down the hallway and into the cafeteria. Madeline was already there, standing at the open double doors. I let the others go ahead. Madeline was deeply worried. I wanted to take her hand but that was out of bounds.

“You’re upset,” I said instead.

“I’m frightened,” she replied. “This can go wrong in so many ways.”

“If it does, you’ll get out. Right?”

“First out the door,” she said.

She took a seat while I went to lean against a wall, between two guards.

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There were about twenty armed guards around the walls, plus two each for every cage—ten cages had been placed by the steam trays, in the front of the room, sturdy seats inside. Ten researchers stood by the cages, along with their assistants. Armstrong, tall and handsome, stood out from the rest. Actually, he stood out because he was a few steps forward, facing the seats.

The cafeteria had been cleared of tables, replaced by rows of folding chairs facing the cages–seating for an audience. Only a third of the seats were taken. Of the staff who'd turned up, most looked ready to flee.

I was glad I had chosen disposable clothing.

Pinetree walked up to Armstrong. She motioned to the largely empty seats. "No one else?"

"Must be another covid outbreak." Armstrong smiled. "I'm sure more of my colleagues wanted to be here. I asked around. There was some, well, reluctance. So yes, this is it. No more are coming. Might as well launch, eh?"

Pinetree nodded and went to sit in the front row. The thick necked fellow and his two friends sat next to her. Dr. Orwell stood by the entrance, nervous. The cafeteria's main entrance remained wide open. There were two side doors, no other exits.

I loosened my clothing.

Armstrong sent my former assistant out of the room. She used one of the rear side doors, leading into the kitchen. She quickly returned with the volunteer test subjects, leading them out. They were all men, ranging from in age from early twenties to mid sixties. Some were fit, a few pudgy. All wore robes, all were naked underneath. They all had short hair and clean cheeks. At least, the cheeks I saw.

They all looked nervous but confident—their big moment had arrived. When the researchers and test subjects were lined up by their cages, Armstrong stepped forward to address the audience. He radiated assurance and confidence.

"Good morning," Armstrong told us. "Thank you for coming. I am certain today will be a unique experience." He motioned to the volunteers. "Here are today's test subjects, all, of course, volunteers," Armstrong continued. Many in the audience twitched, wary. "They have all been properly prepared for what may happen after

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injection.

“Believe me, we are concerned about transformation results. I stand before you, someone who himself was a…victim…of a serum dose. However, I also stand before you. Recovered. That gives us every hope there will be no problems today. That and the fact there have already been two successes in the programme, one of which stands with us today.”

He nodded to me, standing pretty far from him. I nodded back. I loosened the buttons on my shirt.

“The serums have been tailored to them. We anticipate positive results. Heroic figures who will inspire confidence, as our programme guidelines require.

“And if there is a problem, we have antidotes, available in various delivery forms.” He pointed to collars around their necks. “Antidote delivery includes syringes, darts and in the unbreakable collar each test subject wears.”

He looked around the room. “I won’t bother you with the names and histories of each volunteer. What you should know is we drew them from Dr. Orwell’s list. They have been carefully vetted. In addition, all have been drawn from the military, where their work ranges from combat to administration. I think that’s all, so let’s begin,” he concluded, smiling, beaming.

Pinetree nodded to him. She looked expectant. I saw her fists were clenched. As were Dr. Orwell’s. As were Madeline’s. As were my former assistant’s.

As were mine.

Armstrong nodded to his new assistant and the other researchers. His assistant handed him a filled syringe, as did the other assistants to their researchers, all in a line. It all felt very staged. The test subjects walked into the cages and sat in the chairs, looking at the syringes. Holding the syringes, the researchers walked into the cages, followed by their assistants. The assistants strapped each test subject into his chair, then rolled up each robe’s right sleeve.

Outside the cages, security guards stood, armed with tranquilizer and dart guns, two guards for each cage. The guards looked ready for anything. Although the researchers were eager, even celebratory, the overall atmosphere was tense.

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I was the only one with a real ability to defend himself if this turned into a gong show. Guns would likely do little good. Antidotes might not be delivered. Given how each transformation involved body changes, the collars were...poorly thought through.

Why is it to progress, people must forget history?

I unbuckled my belt and slipped my shoes off. The socks were disposable. Maybe I just should have worn a robe myself.

The assistants each cleaned a spot on each subject's right arm. The researchers stepped forward and injected a serum into each arm. When the syringe was empty, each researcher stepped back, most smiling, then quickly backed out of the cage, their assistants following. A security guard closed each cage door behind them, not bothering to lock it. If a lock was useful it would be useless.

We waited. The volunteer test subjects. The researchers. The guards. The audience. Madeline. Pinetree and Dr. Orwell.

Me.

I took off my shirt altogether. Then my pants. I stood in my shorts and socks but it did not matter. No one saw. Everyone's eyes were on the test subjects. Waiting. Hoping for the best, certainly, but certainly waiting for the worst.

The moment, tense and wary, filled with reluctance, was over.

The men all began to transform at about the same time, although at different speeds. They all struggled, bound, in their chairs. Several cried out, letting their fear show.

One thin fellow in the middle, wearing glasses, first began to take shape. His body stretched. At first I thought he was going to be some type of poster, like Mark. But he thickened as he expanded into a large slim rectangle. His face melted into the front. Icons on the front appeared. As he continued to transform, he cried out angrily. Instead of a handsome hero, he was transforming into a cell phone.

"I thought I was going to be inspiring!" he shouted. "What the hell?"

The next man whose transformation took shape was two cages down. He was a

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thick fellow in his early twenties. He grunted as his arms and legs thickened, breaking the leather straps. He tried to stand but fell over, unable to support himself. His entire skin was transforming into a shiny bright blue. Soon it became apparent, especially when his eyes formed into headlights, that he was transforming into a sports car. A convertible.

He opened his hood, obviously furious. “This is dignified?” he honked.

By then the man on the far right was recreating himself into shredded pieces of paper, bonding together, a little like living Paper Mache. He easily slipped his arms and legs free through the straps, not having to break the leather. Pushing himself up, he stood, wobbly, by then his skin had become dollar signs. Mostly fives and tens. His face, however, was thousand-dollar bills. This volunteer had transformed into living money.

He looked at himself, then glared at the researcher who injected him. He yelled at them, perhaps predictably, “I’ve been short changed!”

The man on the far left was now standing, having broken his straps. He had evolved into someone tall and thin and who now wore a long cape. His skin was red. Horns had grown from his forehead. He looked at me and half of him abruptly changed. The horns disappeared and wings grew spread his back. He flapped them and hovered over the floor, looking down at us with a kindly smile.

“This is good,” he said in an evil voice.

The man next to him had transformed into, strangely even for this group, a man-sized set of keys. His startled face on the keyring. On the key ring, I saw what looked like a car fob, actual keys too large to fit any lock. Dangling also from the keyring were machine guns and two long sharp swords. When the keys looked at himself in the mirrors he freaked. His uzi went off. The security guards outside the cage both pumped darts at him, filled with the antidote and a tranquilizer. But he was now metal. The darts bounced off. As for the collar, it dangled uselessly next to the uzi.

Someone in the crowd screamed. Pinetree stood. Dr. Orwell left. Madeline sat stiffly, eyes wide.

I began to transform.

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More people screamed when another test subject bit through his leather straps as he became something that looked like a T-Rex, all large head and snarling with a jaw full of sharp long teeth. All animal, all ferocious. He bit through his leg straps, then stood, wobbly at first, on two muscular thick legs. He steadied himself by balancing himself with his new long tail. He began to grow feathers. The antidote collar lay on the floor.

As if to match him, the man in the cage next to him transformed into a huge gorilla looking a lot like King Kong. His restraining straps burst as his arms and legs grew, as did his collar. Now he stood in his cage, saw the T-Rex, pounded his chest and roared.

Next to him was a man who had transformed into a large ball of light. It floated a few feet above the air, changing colours. Arms and legs emerged from the ball and withdrew. One arm then appeared, holding a thunderbolt. He threw it and it flew over my head and smashed into a far wall. It exploded, burning a big hole in the wall. “I am the vengeance!” the ball of light declared.

The blue car smashed through its cage and ran over the first person it saw. The Devil/Angel, half each, waved the bars of its cage apart to hover over the blue car approvingly. More screams.

And more when another test subject, who had transformed into a rather charming cherub on first glance, floating above the floor in its cage while fluttering his wings, took an arrow from his quiver and shot it into the chest of a man standing next to the man with a thick neck. The man with the thick neck had jumped up first and was scrambling away, towards the back, as the armed guards moved forward. The cherub shot an arrow at him. I saw a ghostly hand materialize around it in half flight, gently sending it off course. Phyllis.

Another test subject transformed into an excellent copy of Superman. This fellow looked exactly like what the research guidelines sought. He had the cape, the tights, the big, stylized *S* on his chest. He stood in his cage, looking at his arms, full of rippling muscles, at his amazing chest, at his sturdy legs. Absorbed with himself, ignoring everything exploding around him. He appeared amazed with how super he had become.

By then tranquilizer darts and antidotes were flying at the transformed men. All bounced off. The collars had all broken open, falling uselessly to the floor, no longer

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able to bind what were no longer human necks. Armstrong and the other researchers ran from the cages and exited stage left, through a side door. Armstrong looked confused. He was first out. The last shut the door behind him.

It rapidly went downhill although it was already downhill. Downhill is a slippery slope. A slope which had been deliberately fostered, leading to this morning.

Cell phone guy simply slipped between the bars of his cage. When he began dialing numbers. Cell phones in people's pockets began exploding. Mine was in my clothing. I was by now fully transformed. King Kong and T-Rex smashed through the bars of their cars, looked at each other and immediately began fighting. The cherub continued to shoot arrows, hitting people in the back as they fled. Money Man flung twenty-dollar bills which sliced into unprotected necks. And legs. And hands. His twenties seemed endless.

Pinetree and her aides did their best to control the crowd scrambling for the open doors of the entrance. They must have had a plan but in the panic it crumpled. The panic grew worse as thunderbolts flew over everyone's head. Even worse when the keys starting shooting again, spraying the room with bullets. Superman stood in his cage, admiring his body.

Transformed, I could protect myself, maybe help. I moved forward, uncertain what to do. There were ten weird monsters and many injured at their feet. As they advanced, the transformed men looked at me—and ignored me. I breathed a grunt of relief. They saw me as one of them.

By now the staff had managed to flee. Pinetree remained, commanding the guards. But they had no chance. "Do what you can," she said then then told the guard to retreat. She was last out of the cafeteria as the ten transformed men advanced. They followed through the open door, new holes in the wall next to it, or like the car just drove through a wall.

Suddenly the cafeteria was quiet.

Except for the moans of injured men and women. Only Superman remained in his cage, near King Kong and T-Rex, who still fought. They seemed well matched. I walked up to Superman and growled, "How are you?"

He looked up for a moment, from his magnificent body. "Super. I'm super. Just like

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they said. I'm handsome and I have muscles and power and I'm…super!!" His eyes returned to his body as he flexed a huge bicep.

I decided he was not an immediate problem.

Nor were King Kong and T Rex, who were obsessed with fighting each other, accidentally smashing anything nearby in the process.

However, there were the victims. My first act was to help the injured. Few were dead. Many were guards. I did quick triages to stop bleeding. The ones beyond help were mostly shot by arrows or burned by thunderbolts or run over by the sports car.

Three transformed men were in the cafeteria and did not need immediate attention. That left seven rampaging through the *Academy*.

Pinetree and Dr. Orwell could be anywhere. There was no one to stop this but me. I snarled, tensing my claws. I had already thought through this type of disaster scenario. There were too many to fight. And I did not want to fight them. They did not deserve to be injured or die, even if they themselves had injured or killed others.

What they had transformed into was not their fault.

It was ours.

What would happen to them now was not their fault. It would be mine.

I loped to the open doors of the cafeteria and paused. No sounds. Hopefully by now all but the transformed remained in the facility—but for how long? No gunshots meant the guards were probably outside, regrouping. Pinetree must have had reinforcements ready. She must have. a

I sniffed.

The closest scent was down the hall. I saw no one. Doors lining the hallway were open and closed. I trotted cautiously towards the scent.

It came through an open door. I knew it. Armstrong's lab. I peered inside. Armstrong and my former assistant were cowering against a back wall, trapped.

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Facing them were the Devil and God, apparently now working as a team.

I entered the room and growled, announcing myself. The Devil turned to look at me. God did not have to turn.

“Ah,” the Devil murmured in a deep raspy voice, “one of us. The first one.”

I growled and stepped forward. They would be formidable if I had to fight them. “That’s me. What was inside me did this.” I spread my arms, showed them my claws. “Guess the two of you are arguing.”

Half of the Devil became an Angel. Horn on one side, wing on the other. “Yes,” the Angel half said. “We’re arguing how to kill them,” the Devil added.

“I tell them it’s up to me, I’m God,” God told me. “The Angel wants to fly them up to the sun. Burn them in the heavens, so to speak. The Devil wants them dropped into an active volcano, but none is available, so he wants to pick them up, take them high and then drop them.”

“And you?”

“I intend to disintegrate them, perhaps while in the form of a burning bush. I like burning bushes.”

I let loose with a long, roaring howl, letting them hear my anger and the beast it had created. Then looked at them.

“I wish I could do that,” the Angel said. “Me too,” the Devil added. “I will create that soon,” God chimed in.

I loped closer to them. Armstrong and his assistant could only cower and watch. I noticed the assistant held two syringes. Antidotes. I looked at them, they looked back. They were afraid to move. Reasonable fear. I moved still closer to their creations.

“That was fast,” I growled. “I’m surprised you sorted it out.”

“Sorted what out?” God asked, piqued.

“The morality,” I replied. “Normally, God and the Devil would never agree.”

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“Agree on what?” God demanded.

“Mr. Devil/Angel here wants to kill them. So do you.”

“Of course. They deserve punishment,” the Devil chimed in. His Angel half flapped its wings.

“Yet,” I continued, “God, there are your ten commandments. They’re different across interpretations but the first commandment is always the same. Thou shalt not kill.”

They all nodded. No disagreement there.

“No thou shalt not kill unless they really deserve it. Thou shalt not kill, period.”

They nodded again, looking less angry, more intrigued.

“Morality is confusing,” murmured the Angel.

“Morality is what you all focus on. You are moral opposites. How can you agree on killing? Shouldn’t you think this through a bit more?” I asked God. God sort of shimmered. I turned to Devil/Angel. “And you. Let’s be honest. Your Angel half is a sham,” I growled.

Devil/Angel shrugged and Angel vanished. Now he was all Devil. “It’s part of what I do,” he explained.

Both stared at me, fascinated.

Progress.

I looked at God and the Devil.

“Don’t you have to think this through?” I asked. “I’m confused. Aren’t you?”

“Think through what?” the Devil asked.

“That I am God and you are the Devil,” God told him. “We should never agree.”

“What’s wrong with us agreeing?” the Devil asked. “Sounds good to me.”

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“Exactly,” God replied.

Then began a lengthy debate on morality. Neither was used to thinking about morality and certainly not in any depth that would help in a profound theological discussion. After a few minutes, it left both exhausted, and God shimmered into something like his human form while the Devil transformed back into his former self. They looked at each other, dazed.

“Now,” I snapped at the scientists. “While you can.”

Armstrong and the researcher were ready. They pushed themselves up and lurched forward. Armstrong injected God, his assistant the Devil. Both transformed men lurched back. They pulled out the syringes but it was too late. The syringes were empty and the antidotes worked quickly. They faltered, struggling. Their bodies began to change, transforming until both were completely back to a normal appearance, dazed on the floor, naked, moaning. My former researcher stepped forward, took two more syringes from her pocket and quickly stabbed both men. Their eyes rolled over as they went into some void.

I looked at the scientists. “Get out. If you can.” I added, although part of me did not want them safe, “Though maybe you’re better off staying here and hiding.” Then I left them. Then I came back. I growled at Armstrong, “Know where the other antidotes are?”

“Yes. Thank you. That was incredible.”

“Where?” I growled.

“I worked with the other researchers,” he told me. “I have all the antidotes.”

I can’t say I thought or had much of a plan. It was moment by moment. But I needed help. “Good. Get them.”

“I have them,” the assistant told me.

“Good. Both of you come with me.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Save the others,” I replied. “Can’t do it alone. Good career move.”

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She thought about it a moment, then agreed. Armstrong started to say something but, when I left the lab and she followed, he had no choice but to join us. Otherwise, he would lose face.

I looked out from the lab. The hallway was empty. Still heard nothing.

“No active scents,” I growled. “Bad. By now, must be in the mall.”

I loped forward, the two scientists reluctantly following. I kept listening. No gunshots. No moans either. I paused, near the front doors, picking up scents outside, and the sound of glass breaking. I took a breath and moved into the mall.

“Stay close,” I growled, probably without need as I could easily hear them panting.

I stopped at the entrance to the mall. Lights were on. I saw broken glass. A guard in a uniform crawling towards the front door, his leg broken. There were many scents. Then I heard breaking sounds, close by, a few doors down.

It was in the money lending store a cash for lengthy loan place. It was the closest sound. The guard seemed okay for the moment so I led the scientists towards the store. As we approached, the sounds grew louder. The glass on the front windows and door had been shattered. Inside I saw was the Money Man, wrecking everything he could see. Money Man in the Money Store.

I flexed my claws. Money Man I could rip to tiny pieces. His flesh slicing bills were no match for my claws and fangs. I could not fight both God and the Devil, but flying cash from a man made from paper was something else.

“Stay out of sight,” I growled to the scientists. “You’ll know when to come in. Let me try first.”

I leapt over the broken window and into the store, ignoring the glass which crunched under my feet. He was slashing a computer with dollar bills. I loped towards him and growled. He looked up.

He nodded. “You. I heard about you.”

I growled. “Yeah, I’m one of you. We both got a shot.”

He looked around, gesturing wildly. “I owe so much money to places like this.

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Always hated them. I saw this store when they brought me into *The Academy*. I knew, if I could, it would be the first place I would destroy."

"Yes," I growled, nodding my hair head, drawing closer. "It's a nightmare."

"They take advantage of people. Of me."

"Yes. Being inside this store, it must be a nightmare for you."

"Nightmare?" The way I growled it distracted him from his wildness. He turned and faced me. "For me? What do you mean?"

"Cash is dead. This store represents that. Everything is digital. Everything is credit cards. No one uses cash. I'm so sorry. You're obsolete."

The twenty-dollar bills forming his brow furrowed. He looked closely at me. "I know, yes."

"It must be so hard for you. Demoralizing. I mean, you even shoot dollar bills, right?"

"Yes, so? They sliced up these computers good."

"Think about it. They have not made dollar bills for decades."

"Oh. Yeah."

"They're probably setting up some kind of machine outside to convert you into a credit card."

"I would hate that."

"Cash has been on the way out for years. It was slow but happening. Then there was the never- ending pandemic. We were told money was dirty, it could carry the virus. That wasn't true, but the damage was done. I switched to credit and kept the filth out of my wallet."

"I'm filth," Money Man said sadly.

"Can you transform into a credit card? Or a banker's cheque?"

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He shook his head. “No, but I like the idea about the virus. Each bill could carry a covid variant. Or the Plague. Lots of fleas on every bill. No one would care if they’re singles or fifties. Could I do that?”

“Maybe. If they didn’t tell you, actually I’m one of the researchers. I helped develop the serum which transformed me. My guess is that if you transform back to your normal self, you can then think, readjust and transform back into something better.”

He was thinking. “Yeah, I could turn my bills into the Plague. Or somehow destroy credit cards. And banks. Maybe not Credit Unions.” Troubled, now desperate, he began to transform and soon another naked man stood in front of me.

Armstrong and the assistant ran in. She injected him before he could react. He backed away and began to transform back. I readied my claws, not wanting to use them. But then the transformation stopped, faltered and he shrank back to his human form and fell to the floor, gasping, skin and body back to normal.

The researcher leaned forward and shot him up with something that knocked him out. She was *so* prepared. A great assistant, except for her being blech.

That left Cupid, the Cell Phone, Keys and the Car.

I stepped back into the mall, the scientists following, pausing to listen and smell. Nothing useful. I saw no sign of Pinetree or any guards. They were probably regrouping outside the mall, on the street. I looked down the end of the mall and did see flashing police car lights at one of the mall entrances. Yellow police tape was already covering the doors.

If I was going to avoid the others being killed—in a sense, they were my brothers—I had to be quick.

I smelled something and saw movement in the lingerie store across the mall. I swiftly loped forward and entered. Cupid was floating among the panties, angry. He had his bow and arrow ready. He looked up when I entered, lifting his bow, but stopped when he saw who/what I was. I loped up close to him.

“This is disgusting!” Cupid cried, looking at some crotchless panties. “Where is the love? I have to kill all of them, until only those who love are left. Otherwise, love will never survive.”

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“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I thought you would understand!” He raised his bow.

“Couldn’t agree more,” I growled. “Look at me.”

“You? You’re one of the scientists. They told me about you. You’re a success story. They bragged about you. You’re probably full of lust, not love. But I won’t shoot you. You’re an animal.”

“And one of you.” I barked a laugh. “Sure. Want to know about me, really? About how I’m a success story?

“I developed the serum because of my anger. I’m angry a lot. I don’t know why. I was divorced because of it. Divorced because I was a jerk. I’m still a jerk.

“Lust? A year after my divorce, I called an escort service and they sent a woman over. I saw her regularly. I paid for it. She took the money. It was lust, at least for me. For her? I assumed she was spying on me, probably for the government. Checking up on me.

“She was. She used me and my lust. Then, a few weeks ago, I transformed. So did she. We had sex, me like this, she as this kind of ghostly invisible person.”

“More sex,” Cupid said. “It sickens me. Lust?”

“No, not any longer.” Cupid frowned, listening. “The odd thing is, I think it’s turning into love. Now maybe I love her. I think she’s loved me for a while. So now I don’t want to have sex with her as much as just to be with her. We sit and talk and sip coffee. That’s better than sex. Companionship, maybe?”

Cupid nodding. “Love is confusing.”

“You have to give lust time.”

“Why should I?”

“How will killing people who are in lust but could be converted to love help? Less people? How will that increase love? People won’t understand. You represent love and you kill people. You are destroying any chance they could feel love.”

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“This is all so new. All I want is love,” Cupid said sadly. Humming the Beatles song, Cupid began to cry, small silver tears trickling down his cheeks. “I need a hug,” Cupid told me.

He fluttered forward, barely able to fly, and I took him into my arms, giving him a great big hug. The assistant snuck up behind us and injected Cupid with the antidote. Cupid looked at him, startled. “Why? I could do so much good.”

“Your arrows kill.”

“I could change that. I love you.”

“Don’t worry. Love never dies.”

“Sure it does.”

Cupid’s expression weakened as his face melted. He began to sob. I held him as he transformed back into a human. My former assistant injected him with something to knock him out.

During all this, Armstrong stood at the front entrance, watching. Nervous.

Three to go. After tracking a scent, I found the car keys in the hardware store, unlocking sample doors. “I have work for us,” I told him. Bored, he eagerly followed.

Outside we almost ran into the cell phone, who had no one to dial. He also was bored.

“I don’t have service,” he complained. “No one paid for a plan.”

“I can solve that, friend. Meanwhile, we have important work to do.”

“Like what?”

“Get out of here.”

“I’m with that.”

I led them down the mall, searching. Behind us, Armstrong and the assistant

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followed. There was a fancy car supply store down the mall. I figured the car might be there and headed there. And indeed, the blue car was inside the fancy auto parts store, having smashed a chunk of the front section to fit inside. The car appeared happy, headlights on high, browsing car stereo systems.

“This is wonderland,” the car, or its engine, murmured. “I could browse here forever.”

“You should get away,” I growled. “Escape. Drive out.”

“I guess so. But look at me. I don’t have a stereo like this. And those tires on the walls! I’m not complete. I’m supposed to be classy and fun. How can I show myself?” He had transformed into a convertible sports car, after all. He raised his top. “How’s this? Any better? These are leather seats!”

“You have to get out. There are better stores.”

“Hmmm. Point taken.”

“But you can’t drive anywhere. Not outside the mall.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, no keys.”

And the keys perked up proudly and leapt into the car. “Here we are!” The engine purred.

“And how about a cell phone? What if you get into a fender bender?” And the cell phone, no longer bored, also leapt into the car. Now the engine was really purring, revving up.

“You’re right! I have keys and a phone! I’m ready to tear out of here!”

I motioned to Armstrong and the assistant who had snuck up behind up me. All the transformed men were self-absorbed. They both had antidotes ready. The researcher handed me a third. Did I say she was prepared? The woman was eager and doubtless would work her way to the top. If her career did not kill her first.

“Shoot the car in the upholstery,” I told the assistant. “I think it’s soft and

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vulnerable. Only place." She nodded. To Armstrong, I said, "The cell phone is only vulnerable in its charging ports. Try for those."

We approached slowly. "Too bad you can't go anywhere," I then told the car.

"Why not? I'm all set."

"It isn't legal. You can't drive with a cell phone in you, phoning people."

"That's stupid," the cell phone protested. "And I can phone through his dashboard."

"Don't have that," the sports car replied sadly. "I was looking at some of that in this store."

"I want to go!" cried the keys. "C'mon!"

"We can't!" cried back the car and cell phone. "We have to sort this out!"

They argued.

The assistant shot a dart into the front seat. The car quickly began wavering. The assistant shot the cell phone through his charging jack. He quickly slumped. The keys leapt out of the car, frightened.

"What are you doing?" The face in the key ring stared at me, shuddering. I shot a dart into its open mouth as it gasped. Went straight between the lips.

Shooting it in the eye felt gross.

The keys slumped to the floor. The car had returned to his human form, struggling to stand. The assistant injected him and he went quiet. The cell phone moaned "My battery's gone!" as he also transformed back to a naked man. The assistant injected him. Then the keys. All three were now quiet.

All that was left were the monster guys and Superman.

I led the scientists back to the *Academy*. They were sweating. I saw Pinetree, with a large squad of soldiers, enter the mall. I held my arm up, claws extended.

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“We’re good,” I told her. “Three to go. In the cafeteria. Follow us. More are in stores.”

She held up her hand, stopping the squad. Armstrong ran up to them, rather eagerly, to explain that everyone but those in the cafeteria had been neutralized. I saw groups of soldiers heading out to round up the unconscious.

I entered the Academy, the researcher following, Pinetree and some troops not far behind.

“You’re doing the right thing,” I encouraged her.

“You were right,” she replied. “It’s great for my career.”

I led us into the cafeteria.

Superman still was in his cage, admiring himself. He did look super. Meanwhile, King Kong and the T Rex continued to brawl. Everything around them was wrecked. Neither seemed to have any advantage. Kong tried to wrestle and flip T-Rex, but it had seen the film. I ignored them and went to Superman.

“How do we do Superman?” the assistant asked. “We could shoot it into his mouth and hope he swallows. He might spit it out.” She smirked. “Look at him. I say, pull down his pants and stick the hypo up his butt.”

Her suggestion felt sacrilegious but reasonable.

“You’re enjoying this,” I said to her.

“We’re saving them,” she replied. “Let’s get this hypo up his ass.”

We entered his cage. He did not even notice us.

“Golly!” the assistant said, eyes wide and flirting. She touched his bicep. “Look at you! You’re so super!”

He smiled, eyes on his muscles. “Want me to flex a little?

“Oh yes!”

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And he began flexing his chest muscles. It was very impressive. While he flexed, the assistant pulled down his trunks. Underneath, Superman was commando.

“What are you doing?” he muttered. “I think you’ve pulled down my pants.”

“Want to see your super parts,” she replied. He smiled. She parted his cheeks, pushed the hypo into his butt and pressed the plunger.

“Oh, I like that,” he said, smiling.

Then his eyes rolled over and he stumbled around a bit and fell to the floor. When he was human, she gave him another shot.

That left King Kong and T-Rex.

Pinetree entered the cafeteria, quite a few guards behind her. She saw us and ran up.

“You all right?”

“Better than all right. Did not have to hurt any of them.”

“They’re all neutralized?”

“Given antidotes,” the assistant said, chiming in. “They should stay normal, but there is no way to be certain. I was glad to be of service.”

Pinetree nodded. “And those two?”

I looked at the fighting monsters. “The others, I could talk with. Not these two. Let’s see if your guards can hit them in their mouths with tranks. Kong’s only furry. The dino may be vulnerable in his neck, where the tissues are soft.”

Pinetree snapped to the guards. They raised their guns and shot a flurry of tranquilize darts. Three hit Kong in the chest, and stuck. Most bounced off the dinosaur but two caught him in his neck when he raised his head to roar. They also stuck.

In another few short relief-filled moments, both slumped to the ground and were promptly shot with tranquilizers.

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All done.

I grabbed my pants from the floor, transformed, and slipped them on, zipping up as I returned to Pinetree.

“The base is a disaster,” I told her. “This is what you wanted. The public has to know.”

“There’s a big crowd outside already,” she replied.

“The whole base will have to be rebuilt,” the assistant said, wanting to be part of the conversation, especially if it involved the General. “I’d love to help.”

“Not sure I want it rebuilt,” Pinetree replied quietly. “Not like it was. In any event, yes, the next few days are clean-up.”

For me as well.

I had not become angry once, although there were plenty of opportunities. Why? I had to understand why. All this felt part of my cure. To be cured, I had to understand.

But at the moment, I was worried far more worried about something else. “Where’s Madeline?” I demanded, anxious.

“Calm down,” Pinetree tried to comfort me. “She’s okay. I saw her.”

That was something. “Where is she?”

“Gone home, I think,” Pinetree said. And she actually gave me a hug.

I liked the hug.

I’d never seen her hug anyone.

I went to the basement and got into my car, still wearing only pants. Fortunately, I had left my cell phone in one of the pockets. I phoned Madeline. No answer.

The drive over was reckless, frantic.

I knocked on her door until she answered. She pulled it open. Her eyes were red.

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Mel stood behind her. “You okay?” I asked. She shook her head and stepped away.

I went into her apartment, her private sanctum, and closed the door behind me. I appreciated her letting me inside. Mel stepped up and gave me a hug.

I liked the hugs.

I wanted one with Madeline, but that was out of bounds.

I yearned for Phyllis.

“You got more clothes?” Mel asked.

“Left them,” I told her, kissing her forehead. “Guess I was in a rush.”

After a moment, we walked into Madeline’s living room. It was spare and clean. Quite a few plants, some prints I’d never liked on the walls. Madeline and Mel sat on the couch, I pulled up an armchair.

Madeline started to cry. “So many dead and hurt.” Mel took her into her arms. Hugs.

“Anything I can do?” I asked, sitting alone. Mel shook her head. I went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water, went back and put it on the coffee table in front of them, then sat again.

“I talked with Pinetree,” I finally said. “Six, maybe seven dead. About twenty injured. I don’t know more.”

“What about Armstrong?” Madeline asked, wiping away tears, Mel handing her some tissues.

“He helped me give antidotes. He and my former assistant. They’re…somewhere. She helped a lot. He watched. I think his confidence was broken.”

“And the volunteers?”

“Madeline, my goal was to save them. I did. If they killed, I could not blame them. It was the serum. The drug. I was the only one who could pull it off. And somehow,

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it worked."

She nodded, taking more tissues and blowing her nose. She always had a lovely nose. "How did you do it?"

"Mostly just talked with them. I didn't want to fight. And, Madeline, no anger. Just feeling a determination. I don't know where the anger is."

She looked at me. "No anger at all? Not even your old assistant?"

"God, that woman is cold," I told her. "I think I hate her, as much as I hate anyone. But angry? No. Weird, eh?"

"Yes," she said. "Weird."

"How's Phyllis?" Mel asked.

I shook my head. "She followed one of the men behind all the pressure. She's probably okay. No, I'm worried. Not about him. When transformed, she's becoming detached. I think it's affecting her. Distancing her. I need to speak with her but I don't know when she'll be back. Or, if."

There was nothing more to say. I stood and paced. Mel watched. Madeline threw a wad of tissues into a waste basket. I was frustrated. I should be doing something. Then, I realized I was. With my family. I sat back with them again, this time on the couch, on the other side of Madeline.

"What about the research?" Madeline asked. "Is it finally over?"

"If only. Don't know," I told her. "Hope so. I have no idea what Pinetree's doing. Or Orwell. But they wanted this. Let's hope they can use it. Could be over tomorrow, eh?" I told her, trying to sound reassuring.

"I spoke with Pinetree. They're in touch with the other bases," Madeline said quietly. "The other commanders are jointly asking for the bases to be shut down."

"Only to be restarted under another name," Mel added. When we looked at her, she said, "I'm not being cynical. The government sees this work as necessary. Right? What happened at the mall isn't enough. The public doesn't know enough. Something has to push it over the edge."

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“It probably will take more,” I muttered, agreeing. “In the long run.”

“More,” Mel said.

“More of *what*?” Madeline asked.

The conversation shut down. After a while, I left them. Mel was going to stay the night with Madeline. Great. But I felt outside looking in. I had history with them. Healing would take a long time.

I drove home, thinking.

At home, the reporters had returned. I dodged them, walking up to the guards who had followed me to Madeline’s and then to my house. “You can go for coffee,” I told them. “I’m good.”

They both held up travel mugs.

I walked into my house and closed the door. I stopped and waited. The sense of Phyllis did not come. I was alone. I felt alone.

I went down to the basement. There was some old furniture Phyllis had consigned to the dump, but we never had time to get rid of it. I took off my pants, stood naked for a moment, then transformed. Now I had fangs. Now I had claws.

I dove into an old armchair. My claws slashed the fabric. I grabbed a chunk of headrest in my jaws and ripped it off. Then I went to work on two old cabinets.

By the time I was finished, panting, there was nothing left but splinters and bits of fabric and stuffing floating in the air. I wanted to rip more apart, but the rest was reserved, she liked it, it was off limits. I stood straight, pulled my head back and howled. Howling felt good.

I loped up the stairs and went into the back yard. Leaping over the fence, I nodded at the two guards in the forest and started to run. They both followed. I let them.

After a short run, I stopped. It was a fairly clear night, the moon good. I took in scents and sounds. There were people nearby but the deeper section of the forest had no humans. I headed there.

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Soon I was in thick forest, no easy paths for people to follow. The guards behind me stumbled. I stopped again. I smelled squirrels. Boring. Owls and other birds. Hard and silly. Then I caught the scent of a rabbit.

I moved slowly forward, focussing. I followed the trail, the scent and visual cues, closing in. The scent grew stronger. I heard rustling up ahead. I moved cautiously, crouching.

And there it was, nibbling on something. Innocent. Harmless. Prey.

It stiffened, aware of my presence. I leapt forward. The rabbit was fast but it never had a chance. One big hand grabbed it on the rear legs as it turned away, then the other hand around its back. Then I lifted it, one clawed hand around its head as it struggled, terrified.

“This part is natural,” I growled.

Then I released it.

It was running as it hit the ground. The two guards had caught up by then and seen it all. I looked at them, seeing the question in their eyes. They had expected me to kill the rabbit, maybe eat some of it.

“It felt better to let it live,” I told them. “Even if it is not natural. Must be natural for me.”

“I thought you liked killing,” one guard said.

“It does feel good,” I replied. “That’s the problem.”

We trotted back to my house. They stayed behind while I leapt over the fence. Back at my house, I had a long hot shower.

Chapter Fifty

Aftermath

I woke, hoping to find Phyllis next to me. Same when I stepped out of the shower. Same when I finally stepped outside. I yearned for a feeling of her. Nothing.

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Phyllis had been gone a long time. Too long.

I drove off alone that morning, desperate.

I sipped from my travel mug. The radio was full of reports about the mall disaster. It was clear a secret military base conducting dangerous experiments was placed there in the middle of a civilian area. Politicians—possibly some of the same ones who ordered the new research to blast ahead—publicly were already demanding answers.

When I arrived, the mall remained cordoned off. Security guards allowed me in. The underground parking lot was half empty. I was not sure what that meant. Were staff staying away or had many resigned?

I took the elevator up, not knowing what to expect. First, I had to talk with Pinetree about Phyllis. Perhaps she'd had second thoughts. Perhaps she was in Pinetree's office even now.

When the elevator doors opened I saw workers cleaning up. Several more struggled to lift a large marble statue onto a wheeled palette. Dr. Orwell stood next to them.

The statue was Armstrong.

As before, he looked noble in marble, looking up hopefully.

"What happened?" I asked.

Dr. Orwell was shaken. She walked up, wiping her forehead with a tissue. "Suicide. Of a sort. We found him this morning, here. I imagine he wanted us all to see. That we would be inspired."

The marble statue gleamed. "He took his own serum again?" The eyes on the statue were glazed, dull.

She nodded. "Same. Left a note. Acknowledged yesterday was a disaster. That he was a key part of it. Guilt. He wrote that if he was best remembered this way, that he would inspire us."

I shook my head. "Did he realize it would inspire us to stop the research?"

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She wiped something away from her eyes, lifting off her glasses. “He was a fool. His thinking probably never went that far.” She put her glasses back on. “What a mess. It’s one thing to think of it hypothetically.” She took a breath, rattled. “Pinetree will want to see you.”

“This reality is what you wanted,” I reminded her.

“Thanks so much.” She took off her glasses and used the tissue on them. “Was here all night, along with Pinetree. Sleep would be good but I can’t.”

“Guilty?” She should be. Why let her off the hook. Her goals were noble, the road to them broken and harsh.

“Thanks again. Too much to do. Mike, it was the only way. We should have stopped this months ago.”

“Yeah, but no one wanted to stop.”

We both looked at the gleaming statue for a long moment.

“Where are they taking him?” I finally asked.

“Back to the graveyard. He looks good as a monument. Later.” And she returned to the workers who finished hoisting Armstrong onto the palette and were ready to wheel him out. She left with them, haltingly.

As I walked to Pinetree’s office, I saw signs of destruction everywhere. Holes in walls. Blood on floors. An arm.

I passed by Armstrong’s lab. It was a mess. In the middle, cleaning up, was my former assistant.

“Too bad about Armstrong,” I said to her, walking in, sipping coffee.

“Not really,” she told me, looking up. “He was a fool. Screwed it all up. Over eager. Arrogant. What a mess.”

Her recent experiences had apparently made her more direct.

I walked out, not having time. I had to see Pinetree.

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Her office door was closed.

Jane, her secretary, did not have her usual glare. She looked haggard.

“You’ll have to wait,” she told me. “She’s in with the Mayor.”

“Aftermath?”

“Blow back.” She rubbed her eyes. “I was up half the night, once they let us back in. We had to look after the test subjects, place them somewhere safe. Secure *The Academy*. Got a few hours’ sleep, then came back. Just got back in twenty minutes ago. The phone was ringing. Pinetree’s been here all night. She didn’t let herself go home.”

“Sorry this is such a mess.”

“Hardly your fault,” she told me. “You see Armstrong?”

“Yeah. He thought he’d inspire us.”

“Fool.” She was bitter. I had never seen her as anything but reserved, discrete.

Pinetree’s door was opened by someone I did not recognize. He wore a business suit, as did the three men and women who followed. Then the Mayor emerged, Pinetree behind him. As he left, the Mayor turned to Pinetree.

“I can’t believe this,” he growled. “There was no excuse for placing this operation downtown. And in the heart of the city. No excuse for this tragedy.”

“No, sir, there isn’t,” Pinetree quietly replied, meeting his glare.

The Mayor swiftly left with his entourage, slamming the door behind him. Pinetree looked at the closed door, sighed.

She looked at her secretary.

“About twenty messages,” Jane replied. “The base commanders agreed to your zoom call this afternoon. 1;30.”

Pinetree nodded. “Good. Thanks. Stay with it.” She started back into her office,

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waving me in to follow. She was exhausted, slumping into her chair. “I hate this. How are you.” Her voice was flat. She picked up the cup on her desk, this time not tea but black coffee.

“Processing. Lots to absorb,” I told her. “And we’re not done yet.” She did not mention Phyllis. I did not feel Phyllis.

Pinetree nodded, finishing the coffee and pouring another. “The base commanders are united, the politicians angry. No one saw what really happened, but enough is public. Enough of the secret is out.” She paused, looking at the refilled cup. “Told all but key staff to stay home for a week. They’ll be reassigned when the base is closed.” She sipped more coffee. “Hoped,” she sighed, “there would fewer casualties.”

“Could have been worse. Will be, if this work continues.”

She nodded. “By now, everyone thinks that way. You’ve seen Armstrong?” I nodded. “You haven’t said anything about Phyllis. Nothing?”

Finally. I shook my head.

“Well, intelligence takes time.” She shrugged. More coffee. “You’re worried about her.”

“The longer she’s transformed, the more detached she becomes.”

“Well then, let’s hope she shows up soon,” Pinetree replied. What else could she say? “I’ve got work to do, Mike.”

So I left.

I returned to my lab, but there seemed to be no point. I wandered around *The Academy*. Clean-up everywhere. Empty desks everywhere. Stunned eyes everywhere.

No sign of Madeline. I decided against phoning her. I was not sure I could help her heal. I was not what she needed. After waiting the rest of the day for her to show up, I gave up and went home.

Maybe she would show up at the house.

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There were no reporters. Plenty for them to cover elsewhere. I parked and went into my house, acknowledging the two guards who'd followed me and were now parked by the curb outside, reaching for their coffees. At least they were not alone.

It was quiet inside the house. I had plenty of feelings but none of Phyllis. It was beyond quiet, pulsing with…nothing. I thought of transforming but that felt stupid. No solution. I looked at the TV but kept it off. I poured a glass of water and sat in the backyard on a lawn chair, looking at the sky. Clouds. A storm in the distance, coming this way.

I felt unsettled, empty. After a few hours, I woke, still in the lawn chair. Normally it felt great to ponder life's mysteries, and then wake up. Now I felt weary. I pushed myself up and went into the kitchen, found the small bottle of brandy and poured a little into a little glass. Everything felt small. Everything felt little.

Which was when I felt the presence.

The hairs on my neck rose.

I whirled around, searching.

Next to me a wraith suddenly materialized, white and ethereal, floating. The wraith's face was Phyllis.' It was not ghastly. She was smiling, distant. She looked at me as if I was very far away.

"Thank God," I told her. "You're back. Become human again."

She cocked her head a bit, looking at me with some sadness. "Mike. Hello. I had to return to talk to you. The pull away is irresistible." She smiled. "I love being like this."

Alarmed, I insisted, already hopelessly, "You have to fight it."

She looked at me. "Why?"

I searched for an answer as she floated in front of me.

"I returned for two reasons, Mike," she told me. Her voice was as thin, as ethereal as her body. It was difficult, hearing it that way. She was in another place. "First,

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that man. I followed him, observed him with colleagues. I know his secrets. Their secrets. I know it all, why the enormous pressure came down to proceed with new serums." She smiled. "It's unbelievably stupid.

"He and his pals head crypto currency exchanges. Some went bankrupt long ago or are close to it. The survivors are struggling and afraid. The had a bold, positive public image. That was trashed. They needed a new public image. They wanted transformed subjects who became noble ideals. Ideals they would use as spokespeople."

"Spokespeople? That's it?" I asked. "This was all about creating spokespeople for crypto currencies?"

"Sounds stupid but so is crypto currency. And they still had enough money to buy off enough politicians and generals to make it happen. Now they're desperate. They know, with the mall incident, it will all become public."

Incident? Not tragedy?

"Tell Pinetree. I could not be bothered with two visits. I had to push to make the time to visit you. Second, Mike, I have to tell you I grew to love you."

"I love you."

"I will always remember you. I think. My former life is so distant. This one is free and wonderful." She looked at me, smiling. "Good-bye. There is too much to explore."

And Phyllis shimmered and vanished.

Vanished.

I felt nothing.

I was in the kitchen, alone.

Stunned. Numb.

Heartbroken.

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My Inner Werewolf Chapters 44-50

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