Chapter Fifty-One

My Solution

I thought of transforming and ripping something. Instead, I went to bed. To ponder. It was a long night. Little sleep, only that from exhaustion.

I woke not wanting to. Part of me wanted to stay in bed, but that was impossible. Too much to do. Today was the day to resolve my own situation. Impose my own solution. Before anyone could impose a solution on me.

I showered, dressed, did all that, got in the car and drove to work. Preoccupied, I forgot all about bringing coffee. There were loose ends to tie up.

The mall had partly reopened. No police or yellow tape.

I drove into the underground garage, which was still half empty. I waved to the two guards who'd followed me, then took the elevator. When I walked into *The Academy*, the receptionist was back—although a different one. She smiled at me with a question. I flashed her my badge and went inside.

I heard the hum of people. Not nearly as many, of course.

My lab was quiet. I went to the cafeteria. It was partly rebuilt, and I grabbed a cup of coffee. Today's lunch special was wieners and beans, probably as tasteless as always, but the wieners were plant based and the meal healthy. There is limited satisfaction to eating tasteless food, even if it fills you. And today I was not hungry.

Leaving my lab, I went straight to Pinetree's office. Jane was busy on the phone. She smiled at me, flagged me in. Pinetree's door was open, she sat behind her desk.

"Get any sleep?" I asked.

"Some," she replied, looking weary. "Phyllis?"

I took a breath. It was difficult to say. "She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

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I sighed. “The ether. The ozone. No idea. Someplace else. We no longer mean anything to her.”

“Gone.” Pinetree sighed. “Maybe she’ll return.”

I filled Pinetree in on Phyllis’ information. “So that’s where your pressure came from,” I concluded. “It’s all so stupid.”

“Welcome to the club,” she muttered. “I’ll tell Orwell. The politicians have seen the storm coming. You saw the Mayor yesterday. Late last night, I got the call. *The Academy* and all the other bases are dead. I’m spending the next couple of weeks wrapping up. Then I’ll be reassigned or I’ll retire. No idea which. I like the idea of going fishing, somewhere in the woods, where there are no people.”

“So it’s over?” Oh? I found that difficult to believe. I felt no relief.

“Don’t take any bets. Give it a year and these programmes will re-emerge. Although it’s been made clear to me, not downtown.” She shook her head. “Maybe next time, the focus will be different. We could be doing so much good.”

I left her as she picked up her phone.

There were three other people to see today.

I found my former researcher in Armstrong’s lab. She looked stressed.

“Morning,” I told her.

“Yeah, I should be. He’s dead,” she replied. “Who cares right now?”

I let that go. “What are you doing?”

“Getting organized. I’ve been promoted to researcher. This is my lab now.” She looked up at me. “Go ahead. Say it.” Now obviously determined.

“Okay.” I smiled, a little, restraining my sarcasm. “You earned it.” Silence. I let that sink in. Then added, “We all make mistakes. Have you learned anything?”

“It’s obvious. Our work has to succeed. Armstrong plunged ahead. He was arrogant. He caused failure.”

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“You’re still going ahead?”

“If they let me. I expect to be reassigned to something useless for a year, then I’ll be returned to my true work.” She allowed herself to smile. “We’ve never gotten it right. Except you. You’re our one success. Why? That’s what I have to understand, to succeed.”

I shrugged, for her. “The big secret? I’ve already told all of you. It was keyed to my personality. My personality had the right diameters. Madeline’s a genius at this. It all clicked. Because mostly from dumb luck. I’m unique. None of you will ever get it right. The project maybe be brought back to life but it will never create anything but more Armstrongs.”

She understood but did not accept. Fine. From her face I saw she was already thinking of how to work around me. Her reaction was what I expected. Likely the other researchers felt the same. They would want to continue and there would be pressure to continue. But that was years away and, except for me, they would never develop a test subject they could use.

Phyllis was an example they should consider. She was the only other success, and she was gone.

I left her. She watched me leave, then returned to her computer. There remained two other people to see before I acted.

Oswald sat in a chair in his makeshift apartment, reading *The Stranger*. He looked up when I entered. “Glad to see you. Glad you’re okay,” he growled. “Heard you did good.” He put the book down.

“Yeah, at least none of the volunteers were injured.” I pulled up a chair and sat. We were two werewolves, chatting. “The staff, that’s something else.”

“No offense, the staff deserved what they got.” He pushed himself up a bit. “I heard the fighting. So I stayed here. Did not want any part of it. Somebody looking like the Devil came in, but saw I was transformed, so he left me alone.”

“Had nothing to do with you.”

“No.”

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I let that go as there was nothing I could say. Why should he take any risks, given what we had done to him? His detachment reminded me of Phyllis. “I understand. What are you going to do now? They’re closing this base down.”

“Yeah,” he growled. “Pinetree said they’re planning to move me. I told her no way.”

“They’re going to rebuild the bases, eventually. And I’m here. I can work on your cure. There has to be a way. With luck, I’ll find it.”

“Don’t bother,” he replied. “I’ve already told Pinetree. Tomorrow, I get an airlift. Up north. To mostly wilderness. I want to be dropped in the middle of it. I’ll fit in there. I’ll find my food, build a shelter. I’m looking forward to it. My own territory. No people. I’ll be like this forever, and that’s good. I want to be alone.

“Technically, they’re putting me on the payroll as a Forest Ranger.”

“Sounds good.” Nothing else to say. His eyes were bitter. “Maybe I understand better than anyone else. I love running through the woods. Stay in touch?”

“Don’t think so.” He took my hand. “Thanks.”

As I left, he picked up the novel again.

I returned to my lab and sat at my desk. I pulled open the bottom left-hand drawer and took out a vial. And a syringe. I looked at my cell phone. There was one person left I had to see.

Madeline walked in. She was pale, hesitant. “Mike? I’ve been looking for you.”

“Hey. Been wandering around.” I stood. “How are you?”

“Better. Spoke with Pinetree. I’ll be able to leave all this.”

“What will you do?”

“No idea. Not this.” She looked at the vial and syringe on my desk. “And you?”

“It’s on the desk.”

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“The permanent antidote?”

I nodded. “Comes down to it, it’s the only way,” I told her. “Return me to who I am. Transforming taught me. All this taught me.”

“Taught you?” Hope in her eyes now.

“I don’t know if it’s a cure.

“I am who I am. I can accept it and at the same time not accept it. I can work on controlling my anger.

“That I’ve felt real loss. Profound loss.

“I connect to people in a different way. I see them differently. I relate differently. I could have been furious at my former assistant being promoted, but I was…detached.

“I don’t like being detached. I’ve been detached too long. Not being myself is not the solution.

“Although ripping stuff up helps.”

She smiled a little, hope returning.

I rolled up my sleeve and asked if she would give me the shot.

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