Chapter Six

On Trial

I shaved using the bedroom mirror. It was important this morning to see myself whole.

My face looked fine and while my hand ached there were no marks anyone would notice. I chose a new suit, never worn. New white shirt, new black socks, new underwear. Even a new tie. I was going on trial. The serum was being tried and, in a real sense, so was I.

A quick cup of strong coffee in the kitchen to rev me up, plus a travel mug for the car, and off I went. I drifted through driving. There were a lot of red lights, giving me plenty of time to think. Except I didn't want to think. The time to think had passed–if it hadn't, I might have thought about that. I wanted to act.

I was the first to arrive. Chimps in cages on the other side of the lab quietly watched me. I had my own cage, a waiting human-sized cage, empty chair inside. The cage was specially built, solid, with straps to hold my arms, legs and chest. Built for me. There were video cameras on tripods and three mirrors faced me, outside the cage, so I could see myself.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked pretty good, in the suit. Better dressed than the chimps. I was too impatient to sit, so I stood, finishing the travel mug. I sat in the chair in the cage, finishing the coffee, looking at the chimps while they looked at me, curious. They knew I was not acting normally.

Pinetree entered the lab, followed by her assistant and three security officers. They smiled and said hello. Madeline was last, completing the team. She looked at the floor, silent.

We all stood around, uncertain. Pinetree asked "Any words before you're shot?"

"For months I've looked forward to this," I replied. "Let's do it."

I stood, took off the jacket, rolled up my right sleeve, and sat back down. Madeline watched as the security officers tightly strapped my arms, legs and chest. I thought she wiped away a tear. Pinetree sat in a chair her assistant provided, calmly watching.

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“Comfortable?” one guard asked, tightening the strap on my right arm. It hurt. He did not like me much, with good reason. Ditto the other guard, actually. Their lips were tighter than the straps. Madeline approached, holding a syringe filled with the green serum. I barely felt the jab. Then she backed out of the cage, eyes on the floor, capping the used syringe. The security officers followed, closing the cage door, locking it.

Then all five humans watched me.

The chimps also watched the new chimp, curious.

I felt no different for maybe ten seconds. The serum worked with incredible speed. My face felt warm. Tingling covered my skin, as if ants crawled and bit over every inch of me. It went from warm to very hot. I began to sweat, gasping. Panting. Something inside me, a force inside the centre of my chest, grew. My arms and legs swelled. Something was happening to my face. I tried to say something.

I growled.

I saw them watching. More, I now smelled them. They had scents.

My body surged with power. I heard my suit rip apart at the seams. So did the shirt, even the underwear. All my clothing was shredding. I saw the thick leather straps break with a loud *pop*. I looked down. My shoes had split open. My feet were long and thick and hairy, with sharp claws on long toes. The feet of an animal. An animal that could run and attack.

I looked at myself in the mirrors.

A werewolf glared back.

That is the only way I can describe what my anger looked like: worse than any movie werewolf, more powerful, bigger, drool dripping over sharp fangs. I was over seven feet tall. I was hairy all over. My fingers were claws. My elongated feet also had deadly claws. My eyes looked…evil.

My anger was a monster.

I was a monster.

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The guards stepped back, raising their tranquilizer guns. Madeline was frightened. Pinetree did not budge an inch. Her assistant's mouth gaped open.

I had to say something, to demonstrate I was not a werewolf, a dangerous vicious animal. My vocal chords were different, my voice had become a growl. "I'm me."

I hoped that would be reassuring.

I looked at the bars. My anger wanted to be free. I felt power surging through my thick muscled arms and legs. The claws on my feet scratched the hard floor. "Who are they to cage me?" a force inside complained. I curled my long strong fingers around the bars. It would be so easy to bend them. I had to be let out.

I bent my furry head back and howled. Claws extended. Lips pulled back to reveal my fangs. Howling loud and long, enjoying the deep vibrations throughout my body. They all jumped back a few feet.

"No problem," I growled. "I needed to howl."

Madeline asked tentatively, "Mike?"

Pinetree was standing. "Why did you need to howl?"

I spoke to Madeline. "I not only see me in the mirror, I am me. My anger. It's amazing. I smell everything. See everything. Strength throbs through all of me. But don't worry, I'm in control. I see now my anger for what it is. The cure will work."

Pinetree stepped closer to me. "What are you capable of?"

"Right now?" I growled. "Anything."

"Let's see you change back."

Fair enough.

I closed my new wide eyes and concentrated. Something inside responded. It responded reluctantly but I forced it to withdraw. I slowly shrank. When I looked at the mirrors I saw myself. Standing before them naked, my clothing shredded.

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They gave me a lab coat.

At Pinetree's demand—it sounded like a request–I changed to my anger side, then back again. Then again and again, until she was satisfied. I sat in a folding chair they brought. They sat in chairs around me. I wished the lab coat had buttons.

"What's next?" I asked.

"Obviously, we need a test," Pinetree told me. "To see what you're capable of."

"Me?"

"Who else?"

We bundled into a van—well, I was in one, with two security guards, they were in the other–and drove to a military base outside the city. I wore a one-piece jump suit. I had a pretty good idea what Pinetree wanted.

It was a nice day. The base was surrounded by razor wire. We unloaded and I was led to a four-storey building, a shell. "I've been here," I told Pinetree. "For my own projects."

"I know. We adapt it as needed. Today it's an apartment block. One apartment contains terrorists and their hostages. Your goal is to incapacitate the terrorists and rescue the hostages."

"Are the terrorists wearing body armor?"

She nodded.

"How rough can I be? What are my guidelines?"

"Subdue them."

"Just subdue?"

"Yes. Let's see what you do and how quickly you do it."

It was no longer therapy. I was a weapon.

That did not mean it was not part of my cure.

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“Mike?” It was Madeline. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to.”

“We need more time.”

“No. This was what I need. A test. Control the anger.”

We stood looking at each other. Pinetree looked at her watch.

Time to act, not think. I did not have to concentrate. All my anger needed was an open door. I let it emerge, felt myself surge. I looked at my claws. My long feet with their claws. My sharp fangs. Why have them if not to use them? I resisted the impulse and got to work.

Without moving, using my sense of smell, I separated out scents and found recent ones, from about an hour ago. Five people. Wearing shoes, I saw their faint tracks on the ground. They walked into the building. Three pairs of army boots, one pair of man’s shoes, one pair high heels.

I smelled concern. Tension.

Good. Tension gave me a thrill.

I loped into the building. Nothing recent I smelled on this floor—except the five people who walked in through the front doors and entered the elevator. My fur bristled. It was a hunt, and it would be easy. I raced up the stairs, enjoying how my muscles moved. Nothing on the second floor. No one had left the elevator recently. Or the third.

Of course, the top floor.

Invigorated, heart pounding, I loped up the last stairs. I felt…alive! Maybe part of the cure was not just letting my anger out, not just seeing it, but using it.

On the fourth floor, I paused, took in the scents. People *were* here. They had come out of the elevator and gone down the hall. They were in an apartment on the end. The scent was obvious as were the traces of their footprints.

I ran silently down the corridor, stopping at the apartment next to the end one. I

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smelled nothing inside. My clawed hand grasped the doorknob. It turned.

Entering, I slipped through the empty apartment to the balcony, then leapt easily to the other apartment's. I smelled them inside. The curtains were drawn over the windows, but where a normal person would see nothing, I saw enough. Two people tied to chairs. Three armed men standing by them, looking at the front door. The men held automatic weapons. Below, I saw Pinetree and Madeline and the others watching.

It was very quiet. They were waiting down below. Inside the apartment, the pretend hostages and terrorists were waiting.

I forced myself to remember to hold my power in check. Only subdue. Energy surged through my powerful body. Inside, they had no idea what was coming.

Howling ferociously, I leapt through the window, shattering glass everywhere. The broken glass did not bother me at all.

I was behind the 'terrorists.' They looked at me, paralyzed with fear. I imagined them with long claw scratches on their faces, leaving blood. Before they could react, I grabbed one, sank my claws into his body armor and threw him against the other two. They all tumbled to the ground, stunned.

That was not enough.

My goal was to subdue them.

I curled my claws into fists and punched them repeatedly, until their faces were covered with blood and they were…subdued. Blood all over my claws as I stood over them, growling. Wanting to do more—but I was in control.

Subdue.

The 'terrorists' were unconscious. The 'hostages' were rescued. The test was a success. I transformed and stood in front of the 'hostages,' naked. The trial was over and the verdict in. "Should I untie you?" I asked.

They screamed into their gags.

It was not acting.

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Chapter Seven

Aftermath: All Is Normal?

“I want to live a normal life.”

We sat in Pinetree’s office, this time at the table. Sipping tea. On a plate decorated with flowers were cookies, fresh from the mall bakery.

“I was successful with the terrorists. They were subdued. And I’ve demonstrated I control the transformations,” I continued.

“Hmmm,” Pinetree replied.

“I’ve lived here a week, under tight security. I want to go home.”

“And be normal?”

“Something like that.”

“Your situation is no longer normal.” She sipped some tea. “The public can’t know about you. Not yet.”

“I don’t want them to know. When are you going to use the serum on other human trials? I assume that’s where you’re heading.”

She sipped some more tea. “Perhaps Madeline should be with you.”

I shook my head. “I’m looking for normal. General, please. I need the balance. I need to see how well the cure works. I haven’t gotten angry for a week, that’s something. But I need to see what I’m like out there.”

She finished the tea, then poured more from the small pot on the table. Decorated with flowers, the pot matched the plate. “Mike, I want you happy. I want you to explore the therapy side.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Return to normal. Live at home. See your friends. But understand you are top secret. Security guards will follow you everywhere. I don’t want anyone to see you

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until we're ready. And we may never be ready. PR already has serious concerns about your image."

"It's what my anger is. I understand." I felt owned. "I can work on that. Maybe I can now transform into something else." What choice did I have at this point? I had not yet reached the tipping point–but I was on the knife's sharp edge. "You won't regret it. What's next?"

"We're waiting for some real terrorists to pop up."

I ate a cookie.

Unsure of the future except I was on the right track, and it was a track with tall walls on either side. I could only now move forward.

I returned to my lab and began packing a few things. Madeline saw me and walked in.

"Going home? That a good idea?"

She was always negative, especially now that she saw me succeeding. It was part of why I was better living alone. "I don't need a disaster scenario," I snapped.

"Mike—"

"Sorry. Sorry. Really. Don't worry," I stumbled. "Pinetree's watching me. I feel better than I have in years."

"They'll turn you into a weapon. This isn't therapy."

I smiled as best I could and left before I was ready. She let me go. Although usually it was me storming out. I felt strangely calm. Anger nowhere in sight—I had confidence this road would take me to a cure. The cure had already started. I had been surrounded by people for a week. All watching me. I was frustrated at times, pictured clawing them at times, but all that was inside. For once, on the outside, I was consistently pleasant.

The ride home, alone, was enjoyable, even keeping an eye on the dark car following, keeping an eye on me. I pulled into my driveway, locked the car, went into my house, turned the lights on and put my briefcase on the kitchen table.

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Through the window I saw the car parking by my driveway, the two men inside watching the house.

I had a plan and now finally I was home and alone. I knew what I needed—to acknowledge my anger was desperate to do its thing. Burying it all week became increasingly difficult. I needed to go beyond subduing. The anger inside me hated subduing.

I turned on the living room light, then turned off the kitchen light and waited a few minutes. They were the longest minutes I'd ever lived. Then, without them seeing, I slipped out of the kitchen and into the garage, through its side door. Inside was dark, no windows, just a large, closed door for a car, the side door and a back door.

Finally, I was truly alone. Finally, I emerged and stood growling, covered with bristling fur, fangs dripping, claws sharp and extended. Finally, I could use this body as it wanted to be used.

The garage contained boxes filled with high school papers, old photos, souvenirs I never looked at but could not bear to throw away. We all have prized possessions we ignore. I stood over them, needing to tear something apart, and here it was.

I ripped open the boxes, and then slashed apart everything inside, old papers to teddy bears to memorable tee-shirts. Slashed them all, into jagged slashed pieces. Using my claws for real felt so good! I'd only used them on actors in body armor. It was good to slash their clothing but nothing like the exhilaration of destroying.

After the boxes, I looked for more. I grabbed the lawnmower, solid metal, and pulled it apart. I broke the rake and shovel and hoes in half, then snapped the wood again just for the joy of it.

I found my shredded clothing and shredded it more, bit off half of one shoe and spit it out. Only when there was nothing left to destroy did I stop.

I dragged a claw along the wall, ripping off a calendar, leaving a jagged scar. Then I reluctantly transitioned back. Naked and sweating, I slipped out of the garage and back into my kitchen, then into the living room, where I poured a drink, then sat on the couch holding it.

I didn't want to destroy anything in my house. I lived there. Though the throw pillows *were* inviting. They come would pieces so easily.

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I could call Gloria. I saw her once a week. We got along well. Well, I paid her. About a year after Madeline left, lonely, horny yes, I phoned an escort service. Gloria showed up, and I've been a steady of hers ever since. I wanted to be with her while transformed. I doubted she would go for that. Gloria was tolerant but I would have to work hard to figure out how to get her acceptance first, so she was not terrorized, like the 'hostages.'

I could call Madeline but that would hardly be a relief. I knew what she would say, especially if she saw the garage. Calling my daughter? I could text, she doesn't talk to me. I'm sure she would be shocked at what I was doing to myself, which was normal.

I was back to normal, home alone–except someone was watching outside.

At least, the cure was working. I controlled my anger. I had not gotten mad at anyone all week. It wasn't easy, at times I saw myself ripping throats out. But, for the first time, I kept that awful anger inside and wore a smile outside.

Colleagues loved it. I felt them grow warmer—but still wary. Word was out about my alter appearance.

Sitting on the couch, I realized I was still angry, even after ripping apart the garage. When I thought about it, I was angry because I was, again, being used. All my life people used me, giving little in return. They interfered with me getting what I wanted. My work was now being perverted for someone else's purposes. I went to sleep thinking about it, the drink untouched.

The next morning my first thought on waking, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, was: am I not living my normal life? What was my normal? Working on secret military projects and under personal surveillance–my work was not normal. I developed biological weapons and defences against them–most everyone has a job which is meaningless, mine is full of meaning, all of it disturbing. Most people work because it pays them–I work because it channels my anger and meets my personal needs, which include once I am cured not doing such work. It is normal to dislike your work—I hate my work, for the past three years have ensured my projects failed if they could become weapons.

My social life was not normal. I had no friends. I can acquire them–until I flare up. I can be charming. I'm not always a monster. But I learned early the problem for

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people was not so much my flare ups, but people anticipating them. Sooner or later I would explode, probably sooner, and soon enough they were gone.

I'm an only child, which is not unusual–but neither parent wanted me. Neither spent time with me once I was old enough for daycare. I don't remember them playing with me, although I expect the must have.

Most people have at least one or two friends from childhood whom they still stay connected with. I have one, Freddie. We grew up together, went to movies together, played stick ball in the street. Over time we separated, then got together again as adults. We did not like each other. But I was the only one alive who remembered his mom and dad, same for him, so we have polite diners once a month.

I'm not sure why I named the animal test subjects after him.

To recapture my childhood, the parts I enjoyed, I would revisit my old neighbourhood. It stopped existing four years ago: redevelopment, gentrification, all those little homes replaced by steely towers. I stopped going back the day I drove on my former street and saw only apartment blocks. An undeveloped block nearby, covered with weeds, was the prettiest thing in the neighbourhood. Losing your homeland is everyone's new normal, but that is precious little comfort.

I'm not asking for sympathy, much less pity–just for normal. I knew my normal was not normally your normal. Normal gnawed at me nastily for years.

Meanwhile, I woke up into my first full day of my new normal.

I felt cleaner after a shower, not better. I felt on edge, with good reason. Normally, I knew what to expect from the day. Now, normal was anticipating the unknown. People around me anticipated me flaring up into not merely an angry man, but a frightening monster. It was walking on eggshells time.

I made instant coffee. That was steadying. Then more for my travel mug, as usual. Also steadying. My clothing was fresh, I was ready. I walked outside. In front of my house two men sat in a car, watching. I waved to them as I walked to my car and got in. They waved back and followed me right into the underground garage. One of them got in the elevator with me and rode it up, walking behind me until I entered the *Academy*.

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My lab was ready. My assistant was not there, but I understood my transformation scared her. I'd rather be alone, at least until I needed work done. I went through my email—nothing. The day was open to do whatever I wanted. I had no idea what to do with it. I wanted to transform and keep testing myself. Each time enabled me to control my anger more. But I wasn't sure it was the best idea to transform in the lab, without sanction.

My normal now was that not only was my work top secret, so was I.

I thought of Madeline but kept my distance. It was easier that way–for her.

So I spent the morning finishing three reviews of colleagues' research projects. Then I went to eat in the cafeteria. No one sat with me, as normal. The food was normal. Their constantly sneaking looks at me was unusual—normally, they ignored me. In the afternoon, I completed two more reviews, then reviewed my own work. There was no word from Pinetree. No new assignment. No word on my future.

I took the elevator down to the parking garage, a security woman with me. The same car with two different officers followed me out of the garage and home, parking outside. I got out of my car, went into the garage. I let my anger burst out, feeling powerful and fulfilled. I transformed into a version of…my true self, but one which needed considerable psychiatric work.

There was nothing left to destroy in the garage.

But there was, beyond my back yard, a forest.

I slipped out of the kitchen and leapt over the fence without being seen. Then I was hidden in the forest, which accepted me.

It was lush, full of fascinating scents. I drew them in. I had not known there were coyotes in the neighbourhood. I seemed to sense they were coyotes, although I had no idea what coyotes smelled like.

I got on all fours. It was comfortable. I enjoyed using all my muscles. What would it be like to have a tail? Then I ran. Ran for the first time on my powerful arms and legs. Whipping past branches and bushes and trees. Running was exhilarating.

I froze. I smelled people nearby. I crouched, them scampered low through the foliage until I saw them beyond the trees, in a clearing. Three people having a

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picnic. How nice. I growled and wanted to rip their little scene to bits. It came from this body, the one I had to confront.

I passed the test, letting them live.

After a couple of hours enjoying myself, giving into my body, as it grew dark I loped back home. My muscles felt worked out. I felt better. I stood for a moment at the edge of the forest, by my backyard. Feeling better, I transformed and jumped naked over the fence into my backyard.

The two guards were waiting. One shook his head. I apologized to her, said I would not do it again, then left them, naked and embarrassed, into my house. Through the window, I saw them walk down the driveway to their car. There would be guards in the forest.

I turned the lights on. That had been a mistake, the house had been dark. Under my new normal, I would have to not yield to impulse. If I wanted to fool anyone, I had to plan.

And I would need to keep unshredded clothing ready.

Chapter Eight

Unleashed

Two days later, Pinetree phoned as I reorganized files. “There’s an emergency.”

As we faced each other in the van, she explained.

“Mike, a bank robbery is in progress. Right now. Clients and staff are being held hostage. At least five armed robbers.”

“This is for real?”

“For real. For three hours.” For the first time, Pinetree was tense. “The robbers are desperate, threatening to kill hostages unless they get an escape route. They’re all in the lobby. The bank’s surrounded by police and SWAT teams, but they can’t get in. Something special is needed. I was contacted.”

“So this is real. What about top secret?”

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“It’s an emergency. Lives are at stake. It’s the justification we were waiting for. As for top secret, you’ll be described as a man in a special suit.”

If I wasn’t so tense, I would have laughed. “What are my guidelines?”

“Your *orders*?”

She waited, so I said, “What are my orders?”

“Survey the situation. If possible, free the hostages. Make it up as you go along.”

The bank was in an older two storey building downtown. Skyscrapers towered over it, alleys on each side. The bank was a fortress, solid concrete with a few barred windows, except for the front, which was floor to ceiling glass. The streets were full of police. I took off the jump suit I wore and transformed. I had to bend down to fit in the van.

“How many are there inside?”

“Too far away,” I growled. “Can’t tell. I can go in the back and get closer.”

“Okay, see what you can do.”

Unleashed.

As I stepped out of the van the police stared–but they had been alerted a special agent in a weird suit was coming. I straightened to my full height, feeling my fur bristle. The cops’ eyes were wide enough to lope through. I liked being seen. Even as a suit.

Avoiding view from the bank, I loped through an alley and approached the rear. Police had the rear end covered. They backed off as I approached, panting. Their eyes were also wide. I was happy that no warning was enough. I needed to use fear.

The building was old, solid brick. The rear door was metal with a very small, barred window. I tried the door, it was locked. There was no way the police could get inside.

There were two large, barred windows on each floor. The glass had some kind of

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spidery metal to make it unbreakable. It was impossible to detect scents. Through the door window, looking carefully, I saw two men at the end of a hallway. They held what looked like automatic rifles.

I had some surveillance.

The two goons walked out of sight. For a moment, it was clear. Suddenly, the opportunity arose to survey more. I knew Pinetree wanted me to act. I salivated.

I could not get any grip on the door but I could on the bars. They were not thick and outside the windows. I gripped them in my claws. They were easy to bend, at least with my strength. When I pulled them out of the concrete there was noise, but not enough to attract attention inside.

I looked behind me, at the waiting paramedics. “Blanket,” I growled. They stepped back. “I need a blanket. Now.” One of the paramedics snapped out of it, grabbed a blanket from the ambulance and handed it to me nervously. I padded it against the window, to quiet the sound, and then easily pushed the window in.

It was a squeeze through the window. What better way to survey than from the inside? I could unlock the back door, but now I smelled them. I smelled prey.

More surveillance was clearly needed. The police could wait. This was my mission, Pinetree was waiting.

I loped down the hallway, hearing my claws scratch the hard floor. At the end of the hall, I saw them. I stayed just out of sight. The hall opened into the lobby.

It was a tense scene.

A lot of people were on the floor, hands over their heads, clients and staff. They were trembling, terrified, keeping their eyes to the floor. Over them, weaving around them, moving nervously, were the armed thieves. They wore black hoods and body armor. Bags packed full of money were at their feet. Five men, desperate to find an escape route. Whatever they planned had clearly failed.

I took a deep breath through my nostrils and smelled fear. Fear from everyone, in fact. Most of it came not from the hostages, but the failed thieves.

I could lope to the back door and open it. One was on the phone, shouting. “Oh

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yeah? Well keep listening. Maybe I'll kill one now!"

I had reason to argue the time for surveillance just passed.

I stepped into the open, tilted my head back and *howled*.

It was deep throated, the howl of something dangerous. The sound came from deep inside me and carried clear anger with it. It was the howl of a monster wolf, on the hunt.

They were slow to raise their guns, stunned at the sight of me. Their hostages were completely forgotten, as I'd hoped—that the sight of me in full rage would be stunning.

Leaping at the closest, I howled again.

I slashed with my claws, there was a splash of blood and he fell, without a face.

I felt a bullet hit my shoulder. To my surprise, I barely felt it. Another bullet hit my chest. The first bullet popped out, falling to the floor. I grabbed an arm and ripped it off, then hit the next man with it. The other bullet popped out. The thieves started to shout, I don't know what. The bullets made me…angry.

Howling and snarling, I ripped my way through them. My claws slashed relentlessly until no one fought back or tried to run. They were all dead or gurgling death rattles. My cure was also a weapon.

I howled again, enjoying the victory.

The hostages looked at me terrified.

When I transformed back to my normal self, they were even more terrified. I pulled the bloody clothing from one of the thieves and covered my nakedness. The corpses were put in bags and taken. Military staff met with police and hostages who told them I was a soldier in a special suit. They all had to sign non-disclosure agreements.

Some had to be forced.

I did not like that part, but it was necessary—for now. Sooner or later, I would

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always be public. But public as what?

That afternoon, I sat across from Pinetree at the table in her office, drinking coffee while she sipped tea. “Don’t worry about it,” she told me. “We’ve handled this sort of thing before.”

“You have done this before? I’ve never heard.”

“We’re good at it.”

“I’m not sorry about killing them. They shot at me.”

“Don’t apologize. Not necessary. But the bullets did not stop you. They barely entered you, then popped out and the wounds healed.”

“You don’t mind I killed them?”

“I’m sure you did your best not to. We heard it all on the phone that one of the thieves was holding. They shot at you. You defended yourself.” She looked at me, then decided to add, “There were hostages. You used the weapons you had. I think it worked out fine.”

“Will it happen again?”

She smiled. “You are operational.” She sipped more tea. “As far as I can tell, it is part of your cure. From what I’ve seen, and the staff tell me, the cure is working.”

I left her office unsettled. Normal kept shifting.

I found Madeline in her lab.

She gave me a plastic smile. “How are you?”

“Pinetree’s fine. I’m worried.”

Her plastic smile disappeared. “How’s the cure?”

“Charting its own course.”

“You killed seven people.”

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“They were shooting at me. They were about to shoot hostages.”

Her plastic smiled returned. “This isn’t the time, eh? You must need rest.”

I drove home. After pacing and looking at the news on TV—there was no footage of me—I phoned Gloria. She was in my living room in an hour.

Gloria was tall, in her late twenties, blonde, attractive. “I wondered when you’d call,” she purred professionally.

I was nervous. “Glad I did. I’ve been, well, busy.”

“With what? Work?” She curled a finger around the top button of my shirt and opened it.

I nodded.

“Can you talk about it? I know you work at stuff you can’t talk about.”

“I can show you. It’s sort of public now. But it’s scary.”

She raised an eyebrow as she opened another button. “What kind of scary?”

“It’s the project I’ve mentioned. We finished it.”

She took a few steps back. “Show me.”

“Really scary. It’s what my anger is. I get big and hairy. With fangs and claws.”

“Do I need popcorn?” Her smile, lovely red lips, was daring.

“This isn’t a joke. Don’t bother with more buttons. I like hearing the clothes rip.”

And I let it out.

She shrank and stepped back as I emerged. But she was not terrified. She stroked the fur on my arms. “Well, look at you.” I snarled.

“Bedroom,” she whispered, smelling me. “No claws.”

She led me into my bedroom, taking off her clothing along the way. Then I lay on

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top of her nude body with my big, hairy one. She tried to wrap her arms around my back, I was too big. I licked her ear, her throat. Kissing was impossible with my lengthy fanged jaws. So I licked her lips. I felt her hands clutch me.

I licked her breasts, her stomach, all of her. She grunted when I licked her groin, spreading her legs as my tongue entered her. She liked my tongue, I thought.

I suppose I have always been selfish about sex. I've read and heard people should come together. I tried it once, it was good. But I always get lost when having sex. It is all about me. How it feels. Even how she responds is all about me. All I want to do is come. I'll ensure she does have an orgasm, but later. First, me.

The sex was wild. For me. For her, it was controlled. When I came, somehow it was not satisfying, not like before. Something was wrong. And suddenly I knew what it was.

I transformed back, sinking into my less intimidating form. I had to talk and she had to respond, and that was not possible while I looked like a monster.

As we lay panting, sweaty, I said to the room, "You work for them."

I waited until she nodded. "How long?"

"Since you talked to people about developing a serum," she replied. "Word got out and Pinetree wanted better information about you. When did you figure it out?"

"From the start," I lied. My ego was involved. I was more worried she would not think I was smart or aware than I was she had been spying on me for Pinetree.

All this felt normal for my new normal.

She looked at me. "Next week, same time?"

Chapter Nine

General Pinetree Gets A Word

Thank you, no.

Chapter Ten

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Dr. Orwell

My life was a lie. Finally, I admitted it to myself. I supposed I had known all along. Gloria's spying on me was no surprise. My phones were tapped, why not relationships? My cage was larger than the chimps', but still a cage.

People lied to me, I lied to myself. My new normal had grown increasingly abnormal. I got along better with people yet it felt fabulous killing them. This was supposed to be therapy. If it would become a weapon, it would be someone else. I never wanted to be a weapon and now had created myself into one–for someone else's needs.

My life was certainly a worse mess than ever. I had thought my cure would be simple. See it, confront it, tame it. How naïve. Makes me angry thinking about it. I had to make things right.

I needed someone to talk with. More than someone.

I phoned my therapist.

My former therapist, actually.

I phoned and made an appointment for the following morning. She made space. She would. She worked for *The Academy*. Pinetree did not allow outside therapists. There were too many secrets to be kept secret.

We sat in her office, which had a couch a client could lie down on. I chose the armchair, which faced hers. There was a bookcase, with psychology texts. Apart from her framed diplomas, neutral landscapes were placed on her walls.

Dr. Orwell was in her late thirties, wore glasses, had short dark hair with a tinge of gray. She always dressed in a neutral business suit. On the table between us was a pot of coffee, two cups, and cookies. Along with the blank writing pad she used for notes, and a pen.

"I'm glad you're back," she said as we settled in. Her voice was throaty.

"It means I'm still screwed up," I replied.

She smiled. "Have a cookie."

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It was delicious.

She poured coffee into the cups from a jug. “I’m aware of your use of the serum. Pinetree ensures I’m kept informed. She thought you might contact me. Just so you know.”

I appreciated the honesty. “Thanks.”

“You broke it off last year, if I understand it right, because you did not want to use pharmaceuticals.”

“Therapy was useless, sorry. The meds turned me into a zombie. I floated through life.” Those were the worst times, seeking real solutions. “Pharmaceuticals were also useless.”

“Isn’t the serum a pharmaceutical?” she asked.

“Nothing like what you use.” I sipped some coffee. “It’s opened the door to what’s inside me. And as a cure, it seems to be working. My relations with people are fine, I haven’t gotten angry ate anyone in weeks. I’m don’t understand the process. I don’t understand what it’s doing.”

“You’re not angry with people but still angry?”

“Yeah. Nice on the outside, jerk on the inside.”

“Any ideas on where to go from here?” she asked.

“No idea. While I hate being used with no control, in the moment I have all the control I want. I enjoy using my claws to rip and tear. It’s satisfying. Becoming anger physically is satisfying.”

“But you’re worried about becoming a weapon.”

“Being used to kill people is not my idea of a cure.”

“And you don’t know what to do.” She had that right. So far, it was all very normal. She leaned forward. “What if you had a say?”

Whoa. The way she looked at me brought everything to a dead stop. “What are

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you saying?”

Dr. Orwell had been my therapist for two years before I broke it off, to develop a serum. She knew my background, issues that I disliked the work and Pinetree, that I wanted out. She took a breath. “There may be a group opposed to *The Academy*, to what it does and means.”

“May be?”

“For now, may be,” she said firmly. “Mike, the best therapy is to stop doing work you hate.”

“Stop? I know how this works. I’ll be sent out more. The missions will get bigger. When I’m a success, they’ll create duplicates.”

She finished her coffee. “Yes. But there is a way. If you are patient. Pinetree is smart. It will take a while, but I have something in mind.”

I left wondering what Dr. Orwell had in mind, whether I could trust her, and that my new normal including my therapist being abnormal and, of course, using me for her own reasons.

And–what group? How could it grow weirder?

The only thing weirder would be if my daughter talked to me.

Chapter Eleven

Melanie Talks To Me

As I left Dr. Orwell’s office, my cell phone rang. It was my daughter. She wanted to talk.

I grabbed the opportunity.

Dinner in a restaurant seemed cold, she said. She would come over tonight. But not for dinner, she just wanted to talk.

I prepared a pot of coffee and put her favourite fruit juice in the fridge. I tidied up, so she would not see how I lived. I even vacuumed. All the time, I wondered what

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Madeline had told her. It was not difficult to guess what Melanie wanted to talk about.

She knocked on the front door, not simply opening it and entering. I opened it and there she stood. Smiling. Her mom's plastic smile. But she looked me in the eyes. Melanie had grown—well, matured—in the year and a half since I'd seen her. A year and a half is a long time, too long.

"Hi, dad."

She was in her early twenties, I always forget her birthdate. But I remember her being born and the excitement. Melanie stood about 5' 8", long dark hair, pretty with nice cheekbones and wide eyes. She wore no makeup and an overcoat.

"It's great to see you, honey." I smiled.

We stood there.

"How's the performance art?"

"Fine. How's the work?"

There was a long pause.

I kept the smile on my lips and stepped back. "Come on in."

She walked in, went to the living room and sat on an armchair. I sat on the couch, near her. Already I was uncomfortable. She did not want to sit next to me. But she *was* here.

"Like something?" I asked her. "Coffee? Fruit juice?"

She took a breath. "You must be wondering why I'm here. I know it's uncomfortable for you. Me too. I should have called you a long time ago. But it was hard."

"I could have tried more," I offered.

She was looking at me directly, bluntly. "You did. Just didn't want to talk with you. But. Mom's told me what's going on."

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And there you had it. I assumed Madeline might tell our daughter. Top secret in families only goes so far. "I hope you'll understand. I needed to do something about my anger."

"I appreciate that. You can trust me on that." She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "I'm sorry, talking about this with you now, it's out of nowhere."

"Same here. No problem."

She stopped shifting. "You were the soldier in the special suit at the bank. You killed five people."

"I was sent in there. It was an emergency. They were going to shoot the hostages and they did shoot at me."

"Yeah, I know. Did you have to kill them?"

"Sorry. Kill or be killed." That was not the entire truth. She did not need to know the entire truth.

She was quiet a moment, then said, "Can I see?"

I stood and took off my clothing and shoes. No point in ripping them, no point in making it more dramatic than it was. She turned her eyes away as I became naked.

My anger emerged, my body growing and stretching, jaws and fangs and claws forming, hair covering me. In moments I stared down at her, drool dripping from my jaws.

"Hello," I said in my growly voice.

"Shit," she said.

She stepped forward and gingerly touched my claws. "This is what your anger looks like? Figures." She stroked my long muscular hairy arms, felt my fangs, smelled me. She relaxed, not feeling threatened despite my appearance. She felt my fur in her fingers. Traced her finger along the edge of my pointed large ears.

"Creepy and violent." As she drew her hand across mine, my claw accidentally

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scratched her palm, drawing blood. My claws are sharp. She yanked her hand back.

“Sorry,” I told her.

“No no, it was me,” she replied, taking a cloth napkin from the living room table to bandage her hand. “Uh dad,” she then said, “if it’s okay, I’ve seen enough. Could you change back?”

I understood and left, walking into the bedroom, where I transformed back. Then I slipped on a shirt and pants and returned to her.

“Better,” she said. “You know, no one will believe that special suit story.”

“It wasn’t my idea.” I sat on the couch next to her.

She did not move away. “That was really amazing. You can control it? That’s you in there?”

“Me in there and out there.”

“I thought a lot about what to say, before. Now I don’t know.”

“It’s okay, it’s a lot.”

“Has it helped? Are you still crazy?”

It can be difficult to appreciate honesty. “Honestly? I don’t know. It being outside, physical, fills me with strength, confidence, power. I can control it. And I’m still angry, but not as much. I don’t get angry with people any more.”

“That’s good.”

“But I can’t control what they will want me to do. They used me as a weapon. I never seriously thought that would happen, not to me.”

“You’ve done it to others,” she snipped. Then, in a softer tone, “You did save lives.”

I shrugged. “When I had to act, when they shot at me, something snapped. I didn’t

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have to kill them, honey. It was over before I knew what had happened. Like one of my fits. That body did it all."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"And now you're left with the future. What is it?"

"No idea."

"What about mom? She's upset." She was looking at me intently. It made me uncomfortable, yet here she was, finally talking with me. She also looked uncomfortable.

"Mom's involved. I don't know what she told you," I said, "but I had the idea and she made it real. She's been there for all the tests, except the bank. Mom's invested but she thinks it's going too fast."

"Maybe it is." She was shifting on the couch again. "Dad, I'm twitchy. Can we go for a walk or something?"

We went out through the kitchen door. The guards in the car outside got out and followed, at a discrete distance. I waved to them, and they remained at a discrete distance. I opened the back yard gate and we walked into the forest.

She breathed in deep. "It's so clean in here. I love these woods."

We walked into the trees, following a trail. I could not remember the last time I had done anything like this with her. Just being with her, not talking.

It made me nervous.

"How's school?"

She stopped to smell a wildflower, handed it to me. "Thinking of quitting."

I looked at her with fatherly concern. "Quitting college? You're halfway through."

"I've had three installations in the last few months, with more coming. I do public

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pieces once a week, sometimes twice. I'm learning more from work than college. And the work pays."

"What about the MFA?"

"Not much use unless I want to be an academic."

"So you're working close to full time? I had no idea. What about your classes?"

"I've got a month to go, so I'll finish them. Then I'll decide about another year."

"I had no idea," I repeated.

"Well, it's been a while. I'm sorry," she said. "Mom's tense."

"Yeah."

"Can you do anything?"

"I try to reassure her."

"It isn't working."

We continued walking along the trail, surrounded by plants deep in their own world, as we were in ours.

She said she'd call in a week.

We never held hands. I settled for walking closely together.

Chapter Twelve

Treading

I tried to talk with Madeline. I approached her in her lab, she said she was too busy. I waited until she took a seat in the cafeteria for lunch, then tried to sit next to her. "Not today," she said, so I moved away. She refused to meet, have dinner or talk. I asked why.

"You know why," she replied. "My work is done. I've been sidelined on you and directed to work on the next project."

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“What next project?”

“Pinetree will tell you this morning.”

I wondered what the meeting with Pinetree would be about. In her office, we sat at the table with the usual tea and cookies.

“We are planning what to do with you next,” Pinetree told me. “It’s complicated.”

“By what?”

“By what you look like. Some of our work is secret but some will be done in public. You look like a monster, agreed?”

I nodded. “That’s what my anger is.”

“It hasn’t gone down well with the public. Neither has the special suit cover. We have to limit your public appearances, if you have any, while we develop an alternative.”

“Alternative?”

“Something pleasant to look at. Something not frightening. Powerful but not scary. I’ve directed Madeline and other staff on a priority basis to develop a serum which brings out both the dark side—we need the dark side—but also something misleadingly pleasant. Something that looks inoffensive and powerful but still has the anger component.”

“I don’t think that’ll work.”

“The first test, yesterday, was not great. The subject evolved into a pink blob. Not quite what we wanted. We have a ways to go.”

“And what about me?”

“You’re on the shelf.”

“So I’m no longer looking forward to a career as a weapon?”

She smiled. “That was never going to happen. You’re the first subject.” I did not

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believe her. She leaned forward. “Isn’t this what you wanted? Now you can continue your therapy.”

“So I’m no longer going to be used as a weapon?”

“I never said that.”

The next afternoon, I saw Dr. Orwell. She asked if I had thought about what she had said. I told her I wanted to find out more.

“It’s becoming even more urgent,” she told me. “Pinetree branched out. She has the researchers, including Madeline, developing alternate versions of the serum. Ones which will be just as dangerous but which will be more acceptable to the public. We worry about where this is going, and why being publicly good looking is a goal.”

We sat talking. She remained vague. Clearly, she was part of a larger group opposed to Pinetree/the government’s actions. How many people were involved, I had no real idea, except she said there were many. The goal was obvious: stop the projects. The plan to do so? I was given no clue. I did not know if they were hiding it from me or they themselves had no idea what to do.

It was as disturbing as talking with Madeline and Pinetree. I had hints, there were clues but no one was being direct.

I phoned Melanie. And left a message. She texted back, “Next week.”

My own work continued, although it was no longer clear what that work was. Involvement in the alternate projects was denied. Colleagues would smile but not talk. Having little to do, I began to explore what I could do with my own transformations, how they could continue my healing. I was angry but not with anyone, at the situation. Although I wondered if I was simply denying being angry with the people who created that situation.

Blah blah blah. Putter putter putter. Work home work home work home.

One her usual night, Gloria came over. As always, she was very attractive, wearing a top revealing her cleavage and a short skirt. Without speaking, we went straight to the bedroom. After, I could relax.

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“That was great,” she told me. “You didn’t want to transform?”

“I want to control it. I’m thinking about it. I’d tell you, Gloria. But I can’t trust you.”

She nodded. “Pinetree?” I nodded. “What if I told you I speak with Dr. Orwell?”

“Are you?”

She nodded, again. “We’re everywhere, Mike. A lot of us who work for the government want to stop what it’s doing.”

“A lot of who? And how stop it?”

She got up and stood before me naked. “I appreciate you have trouble trusting us. Do you appreciate we have trouble trusting you?”

“Me? What have I done?”

“It’s what you might do. You’re a wild card. None of us know what you’ll really do.” And she walked into the washroom and came back wearing my robe.

We did not talk much after that and she left early, agreeing to return next week. She suggested I phone her if I wanted to meet early and that she would be in touch when she knew more herself. It was all so vague.

After she left, I transformed.

I stood in my bedroom, tall and powerful, looking down on the bed where we just had a version of making love. I looked at my sharp claws, at the sheets. Ripping them felt…stupid.

I went into the living room and picked up one of those fluffy throw pillows, waiting for me like a red shirted crew member on Star Trek. My claws could so easily pierce it. I tossed it back on the couch. I could not destroy where I lived.

I thought of going back to the garage, but there was nothing left to rip up. If I tried going into the forest, there were guards waiting. I could do nothing in public, where someone might see.

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I did not know what to do. And I was someone who always had a plan. I had to have some kind of short- and long-term plan.

I could be called up tomorrow for another “emergency.” Or it could be months. Or never. Or an “alternate” could fill my shoes instead. I had to avoid being distracted the “group” and concerns over Pinetree’s plans. My priority was me. First work on myself. The original idea was a cure. Now I had been given a gift: the freedom to do whatever I wanted, including to pursue my cure, to eliminate the anger, to make my life a positive even with the constant threat of the negative shadowing me.

And there were Melanie and Madeline. Maybe Gloria, the only person I had a physical connection with.

I tilted my head back and howled.

I could do that, if it wasn’t too loud.

Chapter Thirteen

Attacking The Other Research Base

The emergency call came a few days later–before I’d figured out what to do. I was in my lab, fiddling, when Pinetree came in. No phone call this time. One look at her face told me this would be a deep dive.

“We have an emergency,” she told me. “You ready?”

“Yes.” I did not want to go on another mission. I did not see how being a weapon would help with my anger. “Ready for what?”

“Similar to the bank, except it’s military targets,” was all she said until we were in the chopper.

As we flew, she told me, “We’re going to a secret installation, miles from the city. Research base. Some staff have gone rogue. They killed anyone who didn’t join them. The base contains biological weapons which would be extremely dangerous if they unleashed them.

“Army troops surround the base, but we believe your special talents would be useful. These rogue staff have to be stopped.”

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“Another test?”

“Sure.”

It wasn’t that long ride in the chopper, noisy and rough, and she told me nothing more. I kept my questions to myself. We flew about thirty miles outside the city. I saw the base as we approached. It was a small two storey building, surrounded by a fence. A cropped lawn surrounded the building, extending to the fence. Not much security. Outside the fence, I saw troops and armoured vehicles. Surrounding it all was a forest.

We landed near the tanks.

Pinetree got out first and was approached by an officer. They kept away from me so I did not hear. The atmosphere was tense. The troops wore grim faces and bore heavy weapons. They did not move.

Pinetree approached me. “There are five rogues inside. I hear they’ve killed three other staff. You’re cleared to go in. The military has disabled the security cameras from here, so they won’t see you coming.”

“So I go inside. And when I get there?”

“They’ve gone rogue. None of them can leave. Understand? Am I clear?”

I very much understood. She wanted me to kill them. I confronted her. “So you want them dead?”

She confronted me back. “I prefer terminated. Go. I’m depending on you.”

There was no place she suggested I change, so in front of them all I took off the jump suit and emerged. All the soldiers backed away as my body stretched and expanded, my claws and fangs grew. I towered over them, snarling. Each use, less secret?

I left them behind, loping forward to the fence. I easily climbed to the top and jumped over. Another moment and I was beside the building, panting. It was quiet. Not even a breeze. I smelled nothing nearby, but there was a hint of a male above me, probably on the roof.

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It was a plain wooden building with large windows on both floors. I dug my claws into the wood and climbed to the roof, avoiding the windows. The scent was much stronger. I looked over the rooftop, slowly.

A man stood guard in front of the door to the roof. He wore regular clothing. With both hands, he held a pistol.

He turned and I waited until he was looking in the opposite direction, then pulled myself onto the roof, crouched and looked—no one else—then loped toward him and, as I got close, growled. He turned quickly. I balled my right claw into a fist and punched. His nose broke and he tumbled backwards. I caught him before he fell off the roof and laid him down, unconscious. I looked at the blood from his nose, feeling my fur bristle.

That was one.

I slowly opened the door, no idea what I would find. Turned out, a stairway. I saw no one at the bottom, so I went down quietly, keeping the noise of my claws scratching the steps to a minimum. When I reached the end, I first smelled her and then immediately encountered a woman approaching the stairs.

She stepped back in horror.

I slammed her against a wall. She fell to the floor unconscious.

Two.

A man came out of a room at the sounds. I grabbed him around the throat and held my other claw over his mouth, muffling his screams. It took a few moments before his eyes rolled back and I could let him fall. I smelled two people in the room he had come from. I leapt in. A man and a woman were just rising from their chairs. The woman held a pistol. I leapt forward, snarling, grabbing the pistol with one claw while punching her in the face with the other. The man took hold of my arm, his fingers digging into my fur. As I dropped the woman, I turned to look at him and snarled.

He fainted.

Four.

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One left.

I had seen no one dead. I had smelled no corpses.

I took in the scents on the floor. There was a fifth, a woman. She had been on this floor very recently, then taken the stairs to the first floor. My last prey was there.

I heard nothing as I went quietly down the stairs. I stopped on the first floor, to smell. She was down the hall, in a room. The door was open. I went for it and entered the room. It was a lab, looking a lot like mine.

She was waiting for me. I stood before her, jaws drooling. She looked at me unsurprised but frightened. Her expression asked if I was going to kill her. She was too frightened to talk.

I transformed, and soon was naked. I held my hands in front of my crotch. “I didn’t kill them. I won’t kill you. What’s this about?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’m on need to know and I guess I didn’t need.”

“We do research at this station. Very similar to yours.”

“You know who I am?”

She nodded. “The work has become worse than anything we’ve ever done or bargained for. The group of us decided to go on strike. Stop working. Make a statement.

“Pinetree sent in the troops.”

“So you just told them you wouldn’t do the work anymore?”

She sighed. “We did expect a military response. This is all so secret.”

I looked out the window. I saw the troops on the other side of the fence. “I can’t get you out of here. I can’t save you. The best I can do is not harm you.”

She looked at me. “I know.” She took a little breath. “Tell Dr. Orwell.”

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Her expression said she would not say anything more, and she knew it was over, so I punched her. She fell back, unconscious, like the others.

I found some pants in a locker, put them on, then loped to the front door. I opened it and stepped outside. Pinetree looked at me from the other side of the fence, maybe thirty feet away.

“It’s over. You can come in.” Pinetree’s eyes bored into me. “They’re all alive,” I said loudly, so everyone would hear. “I saw no one killed. I killed no one. They’re all unconscious, ready for you to come in and get them.”

Pinetree looked intently at me. She could not send in the troops to kill them, not regular troops. But I was a weapon, and she could manage that with me, a literal lone wolf. She clearly wanted me to kill them, expecting me to unleash my anger and repeat the bank incident.

The expression on her face?

A combination of pissed off, wary and, unpredictably, curious.

Chapter Fourteen

Happy Face

I expected Pinetree to be angry with me. During the chopper flight back to the city she hid it well. After we were in the air, she looked and me and smiled, though her lips were tight. “It’s good you didn’t kill any of them.”

Mixed messages time began.

“I controlled my anger,” I told her. “I did what I wanted, not what it wanted.” That was true.

“Good. Very good.” That was not true.

“I didn’t do what you wanted.” “I forgot, in the excitement.” Also not true.

There was air turbulence. We held onto wall straps. When it calmed, she said, “Mike, I was over the top. I’m sorry. It’s good. Forget it. I won’t order you to kill again.”

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I found her impossible to believe. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.” I paused, looking at the medals on her chest. “What’s going to happen to *them*?”

“I’m told they’re being transported to their home base, for debriefing.”

“Debriefing?”

“That’s all I know,” she lied. “Speaking of debriefing, did you learn anything?”

“No,” I lied. “I knocked them out before they could talk. I thought it had to be fast.” That part was true, as was “There were no corpses. They didn’t kill anyone. What was that?”

She looked at me. “Motivation.”

We did not lie or disassemble or be ingenious for the rest of the flight. That’s because neither of us said anything more. Pinetree sighed a few times, looking at me. As we got out of the chopper, she said, “You’ve been kept out of the loop, Mike. I’m bringing you in. My apologies. When your serum was a success, I initiated other projects to duplicate it. Including with Madeline. She is our best at this.”

“Duplicate it? Why do you need to do that?”

“Not duplicate. Modify. We need an altered soldier the public will accept. Not one which looks like, well, you.”

“I know I look scary.”

We left the landing area and got into a dark sedan waiting for her. Her driver was in the front sea, we sat in back.

“The idea is to present an acceptable exterior while maintaining the original idea.”

“The original idea?”

“To bring out anger for use in extreme situations. As a potential weapon in that it weaponizes the unit receiving the serum.”

That was not my original idea.

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“I’ll show you. They have a first test ready.”

“What about the subjects? Do they have anger management problems?”

“Not yet.”

I felt she was not lying, at least not as much. Her car took us into the parking garage underneath the mall, where she had a reserved slot. I followed Pinetree into the *Academy* and one of the labs.

Frank, a lab assistant, sat in a large cage—the same cage and chair I had used. Video cameras had been placed around the cage and security guards held tranquilizer guns. Based on my experience, I guess, Frank wore only a robe. Madeline stood next to him as he was strapped into the chair. She held a hypo filled with a purple liquid.

When we walked in, she looked at the floor.

“Is this the very first test of this?” I asked.

Madeline did not answer. Pinetree said, “The very first. She worked to modify the physical appearance of what emerged. Less related to anger, more to something visually acceptable.”

They were waiting for Pinetree. She had nothing more to say, just nodding at Madeline in the cage. Her own cage, in a way.

She injected Frank, slowly pushing the purple liquid into his right arm. She pulled the empty hypo out of his arm, then quickly backed out of the cage. So did the two guards, leaving Frank alone in the cage.

As with me, it was fast.

His arms and legs bulged. The straps on his body snapped as his body transformed. His outer flesh grew pink, pink and not quite fat but with pudgy arms and legs. His face changed until it became a blank smiley face, with large purple eyes and a fixed grinning purple mouth. He looked like a cute big marshmallow man, except his mouth contained sharp fangs.

Frank stood shakily. He fell over. He pushed himself up and fell over again, his

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plump legs without the muscles to support him. We watched him lurch around the cage, jiggling. When he fell another time, the pressure of landing made him fart.

Was that his weapon?

Pinetree told Madeline, “Give the sorry thing the antidote. I need something that looks like a soldier, understand? Not the marshmallow man from *Ghostbusters*. Remember: imposing, not threatening.”

Madeline replied, tight lipped, “Frank created what you wanted. The serum did create a version of your acceptable appearance. I can inject, but the result came from inside Frank. The wolf is what Mike looks like. Frank looks like marshmallow guy. There’s no way to know until the serums do their work,” Madeline told her quietly. When she finished, her eyes returned to the floor.

“Psychological profiles, then,” was Pinetree’s response. “We need to profile subjects very carefully to bring out what we ant. I understand. Keep at it.”

“It’s hopeless,” Madeline said to Pinetree’s back.

Pinetree took me back to her office, muttering. It was a rare time she allowed, or was unable to stop, her own emotions from emerging. Tension.

We sat at the table. Her secretary had placed tea and cookies on it. Pinetree poured us both a cup. She sipped hers while I held mine.

“Mike, obviously, we continue to need you. As a role model. I want you to start working on one of the new alternates asap. You’ve treaded water long enough. Get back to real work. The sooner we develop viable options, the sooner you get on with your normal life.”

I did not believe her at all, but my best course was agreement and plowing straight ahead, staying in my lane. While just outside the lane was Dr. Orwell and her group. And I wasn’t sure how Madeline would respond to all this in the long run. “I’ve been working on it. I’ve restarted therapy with Dr. Orwell. I think it helps.”

Pinetree nodded. I figured she knew I was seeing Dr. Orwell. I left her office and made an appointment with Dr. Orwell. Half an hour later I walked into her office. I told her what had happened at the base.

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“Their action was premature, but they were agonized,” she told me. “They appreciate you did not seriously harm them.”

“What’s going to happen to them?”

She told me she was trying to find out. I told her I wanted to meet the rest of the group. She told me that, with the surveillance, would take time. I asked her about Gloria.

“She’s one of us. I don’t think Pinetree’s suspicious, she’s been very careful. You can use her. See me every few days, we can get away with that.”

Meeting with her raised more questions than ever. I thought my next stop should be Madeline.

She was in her lab, with her assistant. She looked flustered when I approached. The assistant went out for coffee. I told Madeline about my talk with Pinetree. She went to her computer and loaded a usb.

“Look at that,” she said, handing it to me. “Let me know which one you pick.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You didn’t kill anyone.” She looked at me for the first time.

“Didn’t want to. I controlled it. I really did.” I gave her a moment to absorb that. “But what about Frank and the rest?” I asked, holding up the usb.

“I know. It’s twisting the project out of shape. I knew this would happen if the serum worked. But Mike, it’s no different that anything else we’ve done. They all lead to a weapon. I’m getting sick of it.”

“Why do they want one the public accepts? What does the public have to do with anything?”

She shook her head and returned to work, her back to me.

I went back to my lab and checked the data on the usb. There were five different new projects, working on the same theme: bring out usable inner anger with a physically acceptable exterior. The exterior guidelines: impressive, powerful,

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likeable. While being capable of extreme violence a normal human was incapable of. Each approached tapped a different emotional core of the subject.

It was easy to see why Happy Face did not make the cut. I saw what they wanted but not the real why. Why were they so concerned about how the public reacted? Our subjects had always been secret.

Something larger than me was involved. As if a serum had been injected into the government. There was no way to know what would emerge from that.

Chapter Fifteen

Back To Me

I had to avoid the swirling political mess trying to suck me in. I had to focus on what I could do, not what I couldn't. I returned to my priority. Me.

Pursuing my cure. Not killing anyone at the research base was a huge first step. Changing the angry me into Cary Grant. Or at least Robert Downey Jr., as Tony Stark struggling to get along with anyone.

Now for normal life.

I had to study how I related to people. I had not become seriously angry with any of my colleagues since I first transformed. Why? It could not be as simple as seeing my anger as a monster. I had to explore why my anger had become repressed, manageable—without me even thinking about it. Not once did I have to stop myself from boiling over. I never reached simmer. Why?

I was changing, consciously and unconsciously. How could I continue becoming a myself others would accept while still being a myself I could live with? How much change would I create and how much would just happen?

I was safe from military assignments for the predictable future. I guessed Pinetree was reluctant to use me partly because she needed a better-looking version. Partly, because I was a wild card she could not control. Likely she was not surprised when I ignored her order and did not kill anyone at the research base. Maybe she was pulling back, giving me less to do until she could figure out how to stop me disobeying her orders. It could be any of that and more I had no idea of.

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I was living in a truly godforsaken mess. At least before, although I hated what I did, life was stable. There was Madeline and a home and a garden. It was when she left me that it all fell apart. And now I had pushed her to help me solve the problem, but the solution had deep roots. There were more thorns than roses.

Yet it could be so much worse. Why be a negative Norman? Norman Bates was positive.

For work, my sole current responsibility was to pick and work on one of the new projects and pretend to be involved. Instead, I would spend my time exploring primarily how I related to people. My secondary goal was to figure out how the serum had changed my relationship with anger. It was at least subdued—how and why? To find the answers, I would be doing work I enjoyed, twice over: research and me!

That sounded glib, but I felt happy. There was a path forward and I would follow it, despite the emerging diverting side paths of Melanie, Madeline, Pinetree, Dr. Orwell and Gloria. I already knew some of the paths crossed not only mine but others. Melanie was the only one outside the circle.

I had a list and boxes to check. I even kept a daily diary, with notes on what to do that day. That way I could record my progress. A paper diary was easier to hide. My plan had to be secret from everyone, until I could sort everyone out. The first week was laid out before I started it.

I texted Melanie. She texted she would text back later.

I saw Madeline each day at the Academy. Talking with her at the start was like texting, only less personal.

I ensured Gloria would be at my house the usual time on Friday.

I avoided Pinetree *and* Dr. Orwell. Although I could ignore neither, both were diversions. Pinetree would contact me. I could stick handle our conversations. As for Dr. Orwell, I decided to continue meeting her twice a week. With her, I had no stick. I planned to ignore the politics–although I needed to learn the fate of the researchers from the base. I saved them. If I hadn’t gone in, perhaps they would have shelled the base on the grounds it contained biological weapons. I felt–if not responsible for them–involved.

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I found that need disturbing. I was used to being disconnected from people.

I began my new new normal. Every day I went in, prepared. For my version of working with colleagues.

I managed to encourage my assistant to return. I chatted pleasantly with her and learned she was married and expecting. I found it boring, but I showed sincere interest. After I thought about it, it was boring because I did not care about her. Yet I worked with her every day.

For lunch in the cafeteria, I would pick a table with a couple of colleagues and sit with them. Eating together is a social activity. We chatted about hobbies. I found it boring and had images of apes eating bananas, grunting. After I thought about it, it was boring because I did not care about them. Yet they were colleagues I worked with every day.

In the evening, I approached my neighbours, one side at a time, talking them up. Mostly we talked about gardening, always safe. I found it boring and had images of sleeping in my bed. After I thought about it, it was boring because I did not care about them. Yet I lived next door to them and depended on them during emergencies.

It did not take long, analyzing my actions and feelings, to determine that at best I cared for only a handful of people, if that. To progress, I had to care about someone other than myself. That would be tough. I'd already found it difficult reinventing myself. Me not feeling bad was kind of the end goal. I had to at least pretend to care about them to get them to sincerely care about me so I felt good and was not angry. The logic felt twisted but I had time to sort out the knots.

At work, the only place I really interacted with people, I began working on being interested in them. Interested enough so they thought I cared about them, that I saw them as individuals with individual needs. I needed to know what my colleagues responded to so I could determine how best to pretend. This took conscious effort and a scientific plan.

I separated my colleagues into three test groups. A, B and C ranged from a little interested to medium interested to engaged. My data showed B, the medium group, was warmest. A stayed distant, while C awkward with increasingly personal questions.

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After a few days of observation, I switched the colleagues. A people were put into B, B into C, C into A. Then again, rotating my colleagues until they had all been A, B and Cs. Then I tabulated the results, which I judged by how my colleagues reacted, how much work it took to get them to react that way, and whether the reactions were positive or negative.

Best results were midway between A and B. More than a little interest, enough to know hobbies and a bit of their personal life. Anything more was intrusive. That was helpful. I switched to working towards A/B midway as my new relationship normal.

Perhaps this sounds a cold approach to one's personal life. I found it helpful. I realized I did not care about people. They were usually in the way. I knew this was not how people normally felt. My approach may sound cold but it would help me want to care instead of pretending. Being able to be relaxed with people, and examine them, was good.

Before the serum, I would not have achieved any of that. I was still angry with the usual crap, but it was submerged deep. Very deep. As if it was reserved for when I transformed. Was that how the serum worked? If so, it was not a permanent solution. I did not want the anger there at all, at least not the crazy levels I was used to experiencing.

I know all this sounds cold. But there were a handful of people I cared about. I cared about Melanie. When she did not return my text, I texted her again. She responded, "How r u?"

"Good."

"Okay. My turn next week."

I decided to leave it until I somehow warmed her up. She had grown up with my rages. Never against her but witnessing my anger was her childhood. It was all emotional, but that was enough. Establishing any real relationship would take time. I could not rewrite history, only attempt replacing the past with the present.

At work, I made sure I saw Madeline each day. Some was on genuine work, some an excuse. She was angry with her work being used. I put her slightly above a B. Slowly she responded. I cared about her—I thought I loved her until I realized I did

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not love anyone–about the damage I had inflicted on her. It was hard now especially, seeing her upset at the very time she should feel triumph and relief.

I included Gloria with Melanie and Madeline, although I'm not sure why. Gloria was an entirely different situation and project.

At first, she was an escort from a service I contacted. The service had been cleared by Pinetree. I never escorted Gloria anywhere, except to the different rooms of my house. It started a year after the divorce. I sought sex, not companionship, and got what I paid for. That lasted a while. But, underneath it all, I was suspicious of Gloria. My phones were tapped, my therapist theirs. The escort service theirs. I ignored the clues because if she worked for Pinetree, it did not matter. She was there for sex and two hours of paid companionship. Up until the serum.

The first time I let her see me emerge, and she was encouraging rather than shocked, even having sex with me, I should have known. Gloria should have run screaming while I transformed. No one would have even waited for my emergence to be complete. That evening was when what simmered on the back burner went on the hot front burner.

And then last week Gloria admitted she spied on me for Pinetree. Except she also spoke of the "other side." Was she also spying on me for them? If so, had she now switched to recruiting me? Should I see her? In the same way? What would *she* do? In decisions, I was only half the equation.

Friday night arrived. I phoned Thursday to check she was coming (sorry.) Previously, she arrived, we talked a little and then went to the bedroom for two hours. Now, I tidied up, cleaning the kitchen, put new sheets on the bed. I was not sure why I did that, except I'd been thinking. Our relationship had changed. I vacuumed. Before she was due to arrive, I had a pot of coffee, two cups and some cookies on a matching plate on the living room table.

In terms of privacy, a week ago, the day *before* Gloria's last visit, I scanned my house and found a surveillance device in each room. I disabled them, telling Pinetree I deserved a little privacy, the guards outside were enough. She agreed, probably thinking she would install new ones while I was at work. She did. I scanned each night and found more, the first two nights. After that, none.

Hopefully, Pinetree knew nothing of what Gloria told me last week about resistance

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among the staff. My house was safe then and now. Although I could never be totally sure—some surveillance equipment was able to hear and even see-through walls. At some point, I had to decide whether the risk was worth it. With Gloria, for several reasons, it was.

Gloria was on time. Tonight she wore a modest dress, not her usual revealing clothing. Her manner was entirely different from a two weeks ago, when our roles in the relationship were clear. She was sexy on the doorstep, where the guards could see her. Her back to the guards, she looked at me and, for the first time, I saw her frown.

As I let her in, I looked at the two guards in the car parked in front of my house and nodded. They expected Gloria. They nodded back. It was Friday night, 7:30. Like every Friday night for the past year. I wanted them to think I was being normal.

She walked into my living room, and, out of sight of the guards, her shoulders slumped.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I told her. “I think we’re both tired of pretend.”

“I’d love to talk but I took too much of a chance last week. Seems we got away with it, but it bothered me I was impulsive. I had to reach out. But I don’t like relying on luck. I plan my luck.”

“Relax.” She was nervous, it was important to comfort her. “Last week no luck was involved. I disabled all the surveillance devices before you arrived. I told Pinetree. After that, each day, when I come home, I check. I found more but right now the place is clean. They have devices to hear through the walls, but even if they are using them, we can talk, quietly. You okay with that?”

“Sure. What choice do we have? She put her purse on the table, next to the cookies. She picked a bit of lint off my shirt. “Pinetree told me about the disrupted security in your house. She wants to be informed if you’ve done anything different she should know about. She’s worried about you being a breach.”

“Just worried?”

“For now. It will get worse. There’s pressure on her to succeed. From somewhere above her. People above my pay grade.”

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I asked if she wanted a drink. She replied coffee was good for now–and thanked me, and said it was nice I provided coffee and cookies. She said the cookies were her favourite kind. I told her I'd remembered.

We sat on the couch.

"You tidied up," she said, moving a cushion. "Just for me?"

I nodded. She looked at me. I said it. "Just for you."

She smiled. "My name isn't Gloria. My real name is Bridgette. Bridgette O'Shaughnessy." She laughed a little, relaxing. "Got that from a movie. About a woman who lies. No, my name is Phyllis."

I would have recorded that in my data as a B+, but I was not thinking of data. "Okay. Phyllis. I like it. Sounds real. Nice to meet you, Phyllis. I'm Mike."

"Hello, Mike. It's like we're meeting for the first time."

"Phyllis, I'm going to be abrupt. I've been waiting a long week."

"Go for it."

"Who are you? What's up with Orwell?"

She poured a cup of coffee for herself and, with a nod from me, filled the other cup. She poured a bit of milk into hers, stirred it until it turned a creamy light brown. She sipped some. "Okey-doke. I've worked for the government twelve years, starting and staying in intelligence, working my way up. I have top clearances, although with Pinetree not top enough."

She sipped more coffee, so did I. We were not yet ready for the cookies.

"I've been all over the world for the government. I've been assigned to friendly countries and to enemies. When I realized that we often treated friends and enemies the same way, I got myself assigned back here. I'd moved for years. I wanted something more stable. More than an apartment I knew I'd leave in a few weeks or months. Maybe even make some friends, at least outside of the business.

"I ended up working here, working security for Pinetree, among others. My work

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requires me to use myself. As you know."

"I was part of your job."

"That's how it started." She took a cookie.

I took one and dunked it in my coffee. I liked it when the cookies were soaked. They melted in my mouth delightfully.

"About six months ago, a group loosely formed. Not many at first but it grew. There are several groups, actually. Communicating must be secret. Dr. Orwell is centrally located and generally above suspicion."

"Is she the leader?"

"No. We have one but it isn't safe to tell you who."

"Who's in the groups?"

"Everyone works on these projects. Everyone has become alarmed at their initiation and what they seem to mean. Some of us object to the overall morality. Some, to whether it will be used on our national enemies. Some to whether it will be used here, on political enemies."

"Like vegans."

She laughed, a little. "All we know is this is new. A new direction with new goals. It has a lot of us running scared. The group at the base, for example. They were isolated from the rest of us. Something finally snapped, I don't know what. I think their idea was to destroy all the data on the base. It didn't make sense, but it's tough doing work you grow to hate and feeling increasingly threatened."

This time I poured more coffee into our cups. "I was there. I didn't have time or opportunity to learn much. If they had a plan, I never heard it. I did speak with one of them. She referred me to Orwell. Then I had to punch her."

"A lot better than killing her. We appreciated how you handled it."

"What's happened to them?"

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“Trying to find out. Very deep security. I know the base is still being examined to see what was deleted, damaged or destroyed. Like our mission 3Ds.”

I looked at her, not understanding.

“3 Ds. Delete, damage, destroy. Those are the usual goals, sometimes one or two, sometimes all three. Secret services love that stuff. They like giving missions stupid names, too.”

“3 Ds. I didn’t’ do any of that. Phyllis, like the others, I’m worried about Pinetree’s plans. About whom gives her orders and what those orders are. About the new projects, why she initiated them, why so quickly.”

“Yes, she’s branching out, trying different possibilities with the serum. I heard about smiley face guy. Sounds like a joke.”

“That *was* a joke. But sooner or later, they’ll stumble into the right combination of individual person and serum that will give them a soldier who looks like Superman, complete with spit curl. Someone strong who will be trusted on sight.

“What do they want with troops like that? How many varieties will they develop? And once you have an army, history says you use it. An army of serum enhanced super soldiers. None of this looks good.”

We talked for a couple of hours, about nothing much really. It felt a lot better than what we usually did. Then she left. Time was up and we both wanted the guards outside to not be on their guard. We agreed to meet as usual next Friday.

Neither of us wanted it to end but the guards outside expected her to stay two hours and then leave. So that had to be, ending our evening together.

Interestingly, we never made it to the bedroom.

Two different men were in the car outside. I nodded to them as Phyllis got into her car parked theirs and drove away. I watched her leave, take the next turn and drive out of sight.

I did not want next Friday to be difficult.

I would have to try the A/B/C on the guards.

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Normal did not feel like normal. Nothing was stable. Stable isn’t bad to aim for.

I had researched my relationships. Now I had to understand the role of the serum. A cure even seemed real. Certainly, my relations with people had vastly improved because I could pretend so well.

I thought for a while about that last sentence.

And that my relationship with Phyllis had improved because I had stopped pretending with her.

I thought a while about that last sentence, also.

It was not quite all about me, no. But I remained focused on the cure. Gloria, along with Melanie and Madeline, was now part of my cure. Not quite back to just me. I was learning.

This was a very long chapter.

Somehow, everything felt like it was getting longer.

I felt almost as if I was in a cell. The door only seemed open.

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