

I close the door quietly behind myself and walk briskly down the hallway. An orderly looks at me and then looks down, hurrying past without making eye contact. I'm not wearing a uniform, but I have the cop face on. A lot of the hospital staff learn to recognize it. The ones in the ICU ward tend to pick it up faster than most.

I step into a bathroom to change before I go downstairs. I'm supposed to be on my way back to my assignment. I'm playing an hourly employee at a pawn shop, one that's being used by a Latino gang as a fence. But I can't get my head straight, and I decide on the spot to sit and think instead. It might be bad for my cover, but it would be worse to go in to work right now. With my head in the state it is, I might give the game away entirely. If my boss asks I can just tell him I was in the hospital with a friend. It won't even be a lie.

Which, now that I think of it, is a large part of the problem.

Looking in the mirror, I see that I already look inappropriate for my role as an employee, too old and not cocky enough. I don't feel like being interrupted, so I decide to go further that route, take the grieving father route. No one is likely to start a conversation with that.

It isn't much work. I muss my hair a little more, rub my eyes roughly so that it looks like I've been crying, tug my clothing out of position. I don't even use any makeup or anything like that, but when I look in the mirror it's like a completely different person is looking back at me.

People ask me how I do it sometimes. I used to really try to explain it, but these days I just shrug and smile. They don't get it anyway. The kids always think it's about looks, when really it's more a matter of being able to fit in wherever you go. You can't teach that.

That's my secret, really. That's why I'm better than the rest. They play the role. I *live* it.

Which, now that I think about it, is the rest of the problem.

I head back to the main waiting area and sit down in the corner, next to a small table with magazines on it. I take a magazine at random and flip it open to a random page, resting it in my lap. I hesitate a moment, then take a baseball cap from my bag and set it on the table next to me. I'd planned to use it as part of my disguise for my job, but it works just as well as a prop for this persona.

I sit and stare at the magazine without reading it, trying to work out why I feel so conflicted. The problem, I think is that I *like* Winter. He's a friend, sort of, in a way. I want to believe him when he says that he's harmless, that werewolves in general are harmless.

I *want* to believe him. Do I?

That's more complicated.

I know he's a liar. He's a *bad* liar, a terrible liar, but he's still lied to me a lot. All the time, almost. I'd spent years waiting for him to come clean, to just tell the truth, and he hadn't. I'd had to almost hit

him over the head with it to get any honesty out of him. So, as a professional liar, I think it's fair to say I have a pretty good grasp on how Winter lies. I've got enough experience with it, after all.

Was he lying to me earlier? I don't think so. He's got a lot of tells, a lot of uncomfortable mannerisms that he falls back on when he lies, and I didn't notice any of them. He wasn't lying, unless he's either gotten a lot better at it very quickly or he's only been pretending to be a bad liar this whole time, and I can't take either of those propositions seriously.

But was he telling the truth? I don't think so, or not exactly. Telling the truth, maybe, but only the parts he thought I wanted to hear. There was too much satisfaction in it to have been totally honest.

Which is where my approach becomes a problem. I'd been playing at being his friend for how many years now? And it wasn't just an act. When I take a role, I live it, I *believe* it. It's a part of me.

How long can you wear a mask before you start to forget what your face looks like?

Or worse, what if the real reason that my masks always look so good was that there *is* nothing underneath it? I mean, it had been a while since I went out without a mask on. It had been a long while. I can't even picture what I look like when I'm not trying for one persona or another.

That's not comfortable to think about, so I go back to debating the whole Winter topic. It doesn't feel much better. I'm still conflicted on the topic, which is hard to deal with, because I'm not used to feeling conflicted.

The smart thing to do would be to drop it. Recognize that I'm in over my head and I've lost my objectivity. But I can't do that. There's no one willing to pick the job up after I quit. I mean, we all know that he's done some shady stuff. If nothing else the way his girlfriend disappeared in college, *that* is just messed up. But he's got some friends with pull, and there's nothing we can do to really *prove* it was him. So how am I supposed to hand this job off to someone else? It would take them years to get to where I already am, if they even could. And that's if I could convince them to start the job with basically no official backing, which wouldn't be easy.

And that's not even counting the werewolf thing. I mean, I'd been suspicious for *years* once I started to take the idea seriously. And still, I'd been almost stunned to actually find out that I'd been right. It had taken weeks to really adjust to the idea that werewolves actually existed.

After fifteen minutes, I still haven't settled the issue. I eventually sigh and get up, walking out. This isn't fixing anything.

I don't think there's anything that's going to fix this.