

Chapter One

In almost all respects, Marcus Dominic Griffin was a singularly uninteresting man.

Born to a stockbroker and a nurse, his family was comfortable but not remarkably wealthy. An only child whose parents were largely absent, Mark spent a considerable proportion of his time alone. When he was young his family had a golden retriever, known as Champ, of which Mark was extremely fond. When Mark was six years of age, Champ died after being run over by the neighbors, a family which is of no further importance to this narrative and thus will not be described in any additional detail. Champ was then replaced, albeit insufficiently, by a pit bull which was extremely fond of Mark, an emotion which was not entirely reciprocated. This second dog died of distemper four years, seven months, and twenty-one days later. The family did not replace it with another pet.

In high school, Mark performed adequately. His grades, while not outstanding, were above average, and his parents seldom had cause to complain about his academic performance. Socially, he was a part of that curious group which is defined primarily by its lack of defining traits. Mark was not technically inclined enough to be a geek, social enough to be popular, athletic enough to be considered a jock, or studious enough to be at home with the academically focused, and as a result did not fall in with a well-defined clique of any type. His interests and activities were diverse, but not atypical for his age and social station.

After graduation, Mark attended a nearby state university. A modest scholarship, combined with savings from summer jobs and a not-inconsiderable amount of assistance from parents, allowed him to pay tuition while sustaining only moderately extortionate student loans. Mark initially hoped to earn a degree in art, or possibly literature; however, being in most ways an eminently practical individual, he swiftly dismissed this ambition as frivolous. Instead, after four unremarkable years, he graduated in the middle of his class with a degree in marketing, despite having no solid understanding what, precisely, made this a more financially responsible choice than a baccalaureate degree in European literature.

Following this lackluster college career, Mark was swiftly ushered into the workplace. He soon found his degree put to use in the entry of numbers the meaning of which he did not know into spreadsheets the function of which he did not grasp, and entering the results into forms the purpose of which he could not comprehend. His overseer, a position which played host to an embarrassing plethora of individuals over the next several years, invariably had very little to say about Mark. A valuable and reliable employee, to be sure, but not one to stick out in one's memory.

And thus Marcus Dominic Griffin had drifted through life, as close to a cnidarian as any hominid could hope to come. If he had achieved no great accomplishments, it must be acknowledged that he had also suffered no crushing defeats. This was, he told himself, better than many could say, and in any case a tie was certainly better than a loss in the game of life.

And, most days, he even believed himself.

But there were times, in the dark hours of the morning, that these words rang hollow in Mark's ears. There were times when he asked himself, in the utmost privacy, whether this was truly what he had intended to do with his life. There were times when he wondered whether a loss might not be, at the very least, more exciting than a tie.

Hounded by this vague sense of absence, Mark tried repeatedly to find something that would fill the perceived gap in his life. He considered religious faith, but found the doctrine unconvincing, and the teachings unsettling. He flirted with patriotism, but was off-put by the rhetoric, and dismayed by the proposals. His period of environmentalism lasted only as long as it took for him to realize that a vegan diet would require him to eat beans on a daily basis in order to remain reasonably healthy.

He occasionally remembered, and was deeply upset by, the fact that if he were to die the following morning, not even most of his family members would bother to attend the funeral.

This, then, was Marcus Dominic Griffin's only truly remarkable trait. He was filled, however he might deny it most of the time, with a deep, indefinable, and abiding dissatisfaction, with life in general and himself most of all.

He was, in other words, a perfect tool for my purposes, just waiting to be shaped.

I first approached Mark on the twenty-seventh of June, when he was twenty-six years, four months, and three days of age. When I made first contact, I had already been considering him for nearly a year, and I had begun preliminary work nearly three months earlier.

Three days before I met him, Mark was laid off from his job, another victim of the recession. This was not, in itself, a crippling blow; always a frugal man, Mark had few expenses and considerable savings. He would certainly be able to maintain a reasonable quality of life until he was able to arrange another job. But this would, I knew, deal yet another blow to an already insubstantial self-esteem. The timing of my approach had been carefully arranged, giving him sufficient time to grasp the magnitude of the event but not so much that he could begin to reconcile himself to it.

I most likely could have proceeded without this advantage; as I have already stated, Mark was an exceptionally fine subject, and indeed it is difficult to see how he could have been made more ideal. It is always wise to take the utmost care with a new tool, however, and I wished to have every reasonable advantage; setting the first hook is a delicate task, and one which is best undertaken with suitable caution. It is essential, also, to tailor the approach to the individual under consideration, ensuring that the details of the operation are in accord with the subject's psychological state and vulnerabilities.

Mark, as I have noted, was dissatisfied with life, and felt strongly that his mundane existence was lacking an integral aspect which would provide him with happiness and excitement. Thus, I determined that the best way to begin my campaign was with a hint of mystery and intrigue, without

allowing any suggestion of the supernatural to show through. A practical man with no experience of such things, Mark was unlikely to take me seriously if I intimated that there were such elements in play.

On the day that he first encountered me, Mark took the subway downtown at 5:37 P.M. with the intention of going to a bar, becoming inebriated, and watching a baseball game on the television. I followed him, without his having any knowledge of my presence, waiting for my opportunity. With some subjects, I would have provided some form of message beforehand; in this case, however, I deemed that counterproductive to my aim of producing a feeling of intrigue and excitement in the subject.

Three and a half minutes after he disembarked the train, he reached the location which I had planned to use. He was walking down a street which, although not empty, was reasonably quiet and not crowded.

I approached Mark from the rear-left quadrant at a casual pace. I had been present in that space for the past thirty-six seconds, but I was confident that he had not become aware of my presence in that time; I would seem, from his perspective, to appear from nowhere. My footsteps were carefully soundless for this purpose, although I would allow them to produce noise once he became aware of my presence. Failure to do so might have unsettled him if he subconsciously noticed it.

The tapping of my cane on the ground, likewise, made no sound as I approached. It would likely have been wiser to do without the cane entirely, as the absence of that sound would be far more likely to perturb the subject, but I found myself unwilling to do so; it was by far the most distinctive accoutrement of those which would accompany the persona which I planned to use with Mark, and I wanted to establish this distinctive appearance as soon as possible.

It is extremely valuable, in such endeavors, to have a singular and very memorable appearance. This creates a strong visual memory in the subject. The cane, which was made of black wood and shod with silver, was quite unusual in this era, and would serve to set me aside from other individuals in his memory. The head of the cane, which was also sculpted from silver in the shape of a serpent's head with small emeralds inset as the eyes, was particularly distinctive. I hoped that it would serve to attract the subject's attention. Additionally, it was possible that the symbolism of this imagery would affect him on a subconscious level, although I did not expect that Mark would notice it consciously for some time.

"Good evening, Mr. Griffin," I said. It is very useful to address the subject as mister or miss when first approaching them, or doctor if applicable. The simple expedient of using a formal mode of address and surname establishes a formal and respectful atmosphere, and most people will automatically reciprocate this respect, which establishes a very useful precedent.

He startled when I spoke his name, and turned to face me. I made sure to smile charmingly at him. A proper charming smile is essential for inspiring trust. I have spent years practicing mine and ensuring that the nuances are precisely correct; when Mark saw it, he immediately lost some of the tension which had been engendered when he was addressed by an unknown voice from behind.

"Have we met?" he asked, eyeing me with some wariness. Not, however, very much; most people do not expect to be attacked by a person wearing a three-piece suit. This was particularly true in my case, as the suit I was wearing, while somber, was of the finest quality, and would have cost several thousand dollars had I purchased it. Ordinarily I would not have bothered, but Mark was experienced enough in such things to notice the quality of the clothing.

There is a reason that, in works which follow the precedent established by Faust, the devil figure is almost always presented as wearing fine clothing and possessing other expensive accoutrements. These evidences of wealth and refinement serve to set the person possessing them apart from less striking individuals. This is not only useful as a fictional device; it also helps to inspire trust and respect in the subject, causing the subject to have faith in one's competence. This is, obviously, most useful in a rural or impoverished subject, but it can have a remarkable effect even on individuals such as Mark.

I adjusted my smile slightly, introducing a certain amount of mystique into the expression. "We have a mutual acquaintance," I said, moving up to walk beside him. It is never wise to follow a subject; it establishes an entirely undesirable precedent in their subconscious.

What I had said was true, provided one has a reasonably flexible definition of "mutual," "acquaintance," and "true." It was, at least, not actually a lie. I take great pride in not lying to the subject. Anyone can deceive and manipulate a man through the use of falsehood. It requires a certain degree of artistry to achieve the same result through the use of solely true statements.

And I am nothing if not an artist.

"This is hardly a civilized place for a discussion," I said, with another winning smile. "Would you like some coffee? On me, of course."

At this point Mark was confused, having little to no idea of who I was, what I wanted, or how I knew his name. This confusion rendered him indecisive, however, and in the face of my confident and firm manner he was swept along.

Seven and a half minutes later we were both sitting at a table in a small coffee shop on the same block where I had intercepted him. I had a small, unsweetened black coffee, from which I sipped occasionally. Mark's drink, purchased at my expense, was larger and somewhat more lavish, and he appeared to be enjoying it. I observed this with no small feeling of satisfaction; even a minor sense of obligation can produce a degree of respect and compliance in the subject far in excess of the actual task performed.

"I understand you lost your job recently," I said, sipping coffee. "Quite unfortunate."

Mark regarded me warily. "Where did you hear that?"

I smiled a small, bland smile. "Oh, I have my ways," I assured him. This statement was deliberately, obviously a refusal to provide information. By doing this, I hoped that I would enhance my status as a mysterious figure. It would also provide his mind with a seed to build from as he pondered

how extensive my capabilities were. Given sufficient time, I was confident that a mind such as his would produce a more impressive narrative regarding me than I could have provided at that time.

He clearly did not appreciate my refusal, but did not press further. "What's it to you?" he asked instead, in a confrontational tone of voice.

I directed my gaze out the window. "What would you say," I said musingly, "if I were to tell you that I could, if so inclined, undo this particular turn of events?"

"I would ask what reason you could possibly have to do something like that."

I knew, from my research, that Mark was a relatively cynical person, and unlikely to respond favorably to any response involving charitable or otherwise selfless motives. Thus, instead, I changed my expression slightly to a coy smile, although I did not turn my head to look at him. "Let us say," I said, "hypothetically, that I am employed by a certain firm. Let us say that this establishment may, at some point in the future, find itself in a business partnership with the organization which until recently employed you. Is it not the case that, if this partnership were in fact to come to pass, someone in my position might desire a source of information beyond that which the formal representatives of the company are eager to provide?"

The wording of this proposal was a very delicate matter, and one to which I paid a significant amount of attention. The request of an illegal activity is, if phrased bluntly, often repulsive to those not accustomed to engaging in such, and I did not want this repugnance to cause Mark to reject my offer. Thus, I used refined language and numerous qualifiers, in order to keep the actual dishonesty involved from being obvious and offensive. However, it was also important for my purposes that Mark become involved with the full awareness and understanding of the ethical implications of his actions. Shared involvement in an illegal or unethical venture can be a powerful tool in guiding a subject to feel fondness or dependence towards one, but only if the subject cannot explain away this involvement to his or herself by denying full knowledge or willingness to cooperate in these activities. Thus, I was careful to keep what I was saying clear enough that not even a relative innocent would be able to claim to himself that he did not understand.

This was also why I was approaching him in this manner. I knew that Mark felt little loyalty to the company for which he worked, nor did he have any emotional or financial investment in the work they did. Hopefully this meant that he would be more willing to betray them, in a small way, than a person or organization to which he felt a greater connection. It is important, with a new subject, to start small.

"What kind of information?" he asked guardedly.

"Nothing too serious, I expect. I would only want to confirm that the official representatives of your company were providing accurate and honest information. If, that is, I were a person of the sort we are describing."

"If you were," he said slowly, "a person in my position might be amenable to such an agreement. If."

I smiled and drained my coffee before standing. "Well, then," I said, tossing the cup into a trash can eighteen feet away. "I do not suppose there is anything else to discuss, is there?" I turned to leave the coffee shop.

"I never got your name," Mark said before I could take a third step.

I smiled thinly. I was facing away, but it was possible that he would see my face in the reflection in one of the windows, and it is best to be thorough with such things. "No," I said, in a tone which was carefully designed to be mysterious and a touch smug. "You did not." I walked out of the building before he could ask any additional questions.

By the time that Mark had exited the coffee shop, I was nowhere to be seen. It was plausible that I had arranged to have a vehicle waiting, or that I had simply walked down an alley and out of sight. I expected that Mark would account for my absence with one of these excuses, or a similar one. However, I also expected that he would on some level begin to wonder whether I was more than I seemed. This was all to the good; I did not want to challenge his understanding of the world, but it is often wise to begin planting the seeds of later developments early.

And from that moment forward, Marcus Dominic Griffin was mine.

Interlude One

Shortly after I first spoke with Marcus Dominic Griffin, I met with my opponent to discuss the events of the past several months. At my opponent's request, we met in a small cranny of the Otherside which was seldom frequented except by those desiring an atypically high degree of privacy.

On this occasion, my opponent chose to manifest in the form of a small female human with blond hair. She turned to smile at me as I approached. It was a reasonably polite smile, although slightly too smug to be pleasant. I seldom have an use for such an expression; smugness, unless shared, tends to alienate the subject.

"Good day," I said, nodding slightly.

"It's morning," she said, smirking. My opponent was inclined to expressions of smugness when she thought she had an advantage, and frequently irked by my refusal to acknowledge them.

"This section of the Otherside does not conform to a regular solar cycle. The use of a generic greeting is thus appropriate regardless of which period of the day it is currently imitating."

She rolled her eyes. "Why do you do this?" she asked, clearly not expecting an answer.

"This language is intrinsically ambiguous. If we must use it to communicate at this time, it is better to ensure what clarity I can by the use of clear language in order to prevent misunderstandings."

My opponent clearly did not agree, but did not argue further. "So," she said instead, leaning back against the masonry wall which was the only distinctive feature in the immediate area. "A human? *Really?* Are you even trying to win?"

She knew, of course, what I had done since the last time we met, much as I knew what actions she had taken. Our motives, plans, and strategies could be hidden; the actions we performed could not. This was the rule. In our game, bluffs were made with the cards face up.

"Not all that is human must remain so."

"Granted, but I already have a four-hundred-year lead."

"As a result of a tactic which can charitably be described as an unsportsmanlike exploitation of the agreed-upon rules."

"It was legal," she said quickly.

"Many things are legal. Not all of them are wise."

She waved my statement away. "In any case. You can't think you can advance a human quickly enough to catch up to me."

"Look to your own candidate," I snapped. "Oh, wait. She died last week. That may be problematic for you."

My opponent shrugged casually. "I like the Sidhe, but I have to admit, their constant wars are a little frustrating. I'd invested years in that candidate."

"The cost of choosing a tool which is already being used by another. I could have warned you of such a consequence."

"I don't suppose that you were responsible?"

"That would be a violation of the rules," I chided. "And also unnecessary. When one has intelligence and a reasonable understanding of the situation, patience can be a more efficient assassin than any fool with a sword."

She considered me for a moment, then sighed. "I never know how much to read into these things you say," she complained.

I smiled. It was a reasonably polite smile, but cold. "I know."

Chapter Two

For seven months following our first conversation, Marcus Dominic Griffin's life was reasonably smooth. This was very deliberate; in order to alter the course of a wheel with delicacy and control, it is necessary to first remove the unpredictable influence of extraneous disorder, so that the result of a precisely placed obstacle may be carefully controlled. The same principle may be applied in this case.

In order to properly guide a subject to the desired end, it is necessary to know when to be patient, and when to act decisively. The key to success lies not in acting quickly or forcefully, but rather in ensuring that a small nudge takes place in precisely the correct place and time.

The day following our conversation, Mark's job was reinstated. The timing of this was delicate, and I spent no small amount of time thinking before I decided on it. By making my response so rapid, I hoped to demonstrate to him the power that I was capable of exercising. Given that Mark was a reasonably cynical person, I was aware that he would very likely be made suspicious by this speed; it was quite likely that he would assume, correctly, that I had been responsible for the initial loss of his position. However, I deemed this to be an acceptable outcome; while I was primarily working to inspire respect at this point, a certain amount of fear was not an intolerable admixture, and was in any case likely inevitable. Mark was reasonably intelligent, and any such person would eventually come to regard an individual in my position with healthy and rational terror.

Over the next several months, Mark's life slowly but steadily improved. He received a raise shortly after being rehired, the first such he had received in more than two years, and less than a month later was promoted. No explanation was given for this generosity. I was confident, however, that he would correctly attribute it to my influence, hopefully engendering both respect and a certain amount of gratitude in him.

He would not have trusted a pure gift, however, and as a result I was careful to ask him for what I had implied I would require in exchange for my assistance. I always appeared in person, so as to maintain my status as a mysterious benefactor; for the same reason, I was careful not to interact in any way with anyone else in the office. My appearances were not in any way consistent or regularly scheduled, either; I did not want Mark to think of me as something that could be predicted or controlled.

Every time, I was careful to follow the same format. I asked for a single, specific number from one form or another, sometimes the result of a calculation, sometimes the input. I never asked for more than one number, nor did I ever ask for any additional information or interpretation; I did not want Mark to think of assisting me as an onerous duty.

During this time, the company by which Mark was employed did not enter into any significant agreements with another corporation. Certainly there was no partnership of the sort that I had

suggested might come to exist. As I expected, Mark did not follow the affairs of his employer closely enough to recognize this, and thereby grow suspicious of my purported selfish motives.

Fortunately, Mark formed no relationships or other attachments during this period. This was not unexpected; a major part of the reason I chose Mark in the first place was that he was not typically close to other individuals. His was a life lived with acquaintances rather than friends, and while he had been in several romantic relationships none of the individuals involved could be described as a lover in the truest sense of the word.

Such things are never entirely predictable, however, and it was a relief that he did not break the pattern now. For Mark to become entangled in a relationship at this point could only complicate my plans. It was, of course, possible for me to interfere in such a relationship, but I was glad that this was not necessary; in my experience the results of such interference are seldom quite what one desires, and never predictable. Human emotions are notoriously contrary, and the rules of the game prevented me from acting with too heavy a hand.

Finally, after seven months of this, I decided that enough time had passed for me to implement the next stage of my plan.

The first mention of the next key event in my plan came, not from me, but from Mark's immediate supervisor. This person informed him, seemingly in passing, that the company had hired an external accounting firm to audit their finances. This was said very casually, as though it were nothing more than corporate gossip, and was not discussed further. Considering Mark's typical disinterest in corporate affairs, I thought it likely that he would not consider this news at all beyond the immediate conversation in which it was mentioned. Still, the seed had been planted.

Eleven days later, he received a polite instruction to come to a certain meeting room which he had seldom had cause to visit previously. Once there, a woman in a cheap suit spent several minutes chatting with him about unimportant topics before coming to the point of this interview. She informed him that it appeared there were certain financial irregularities in the section of the company in which he worked. A reasonably large amount of money which, based upon her calculations, should be present was, in fact, not. It appeared that this money had, as it were, gone missing over the past five and a half months. Were there, she wanted to know, any employees which he thought she should particularly investigate?

After a suitable pause, Mark informed her that he had no knowledge of such things, and there were no employees he considered particularly untrustworthy or inclined to steal from the company. The accountant was quiet for several seconds, as though waiting for him to add to this statement, then thanked him insincerely and informed him that he was free to go.

Mark returned to his office, deeply troubled. He was confident that this absence of money was not his fault, nor his responsibility. However, he was also wise enough to know that often fault and

responsibility in such matters are more flexible than one might prefer, and the party which takes the blame is often guilty of nothing more than poor fortune. He had also realized, as perhaps the accountant had as well, that if these losses had been ongoing for five and a half months, they had started shortly after he was promoted to his current position. This was, he suspected, more than enough of a circumstantial connection to cause serious problems for him.

I felt that it would be wise to present myself as being in some ways limited, and I did not wish to further encourage Mark's suspicion of my responsibility for his troubles, so I did not speak with him that day. The timing of such a visit could only have been counterproductive to these aims.

The following day, however, I arrived at the office in the same manner as had been usual for the past seven months. On this occasion, however, I was careful to present myself as less all-knowing than had been the case in the past. My suit was slightly ruffled, as though I had been wearing it for some time without concern for my appearance, and my expression was somewhat harried. Only somewhat, however; the appearance of excessive concern would undo a significant amount of the work I'd done creating a feeling of respect and confidence in my abilities in Mark.

When I approached him, Mark was sitting at his desk staring at a computer but not working on anything. His mind was clearly occupied with the danger he was in; he did not even notice my presence at first. I cleared my throat, and when he looked up at me I smiled. I was careful to include a certain amount of strain in the expression; that would help convey the impression of stress and fatigue I wanted to give Mark.

"Good day, Mr. Griffin," I said. "Would you care to walk with me?"

This was unusual. I had not made such a request at any point since our first conversation. Mark would be suspicious if I were willing to discuss this matter in the office, however, and in his current predicament I was confident he would be willing to leave work in order to talk with me.

Nor was I disappointed; Mark did not make any argument, and was entirely willing to come with me without requiring me to state any reason for this.

Several minutes later, we were seated in another coffee shop. I often stage conversations with subjects in such places; the neutral atmosphere removes tension without giving the subject the feeling of control or power which can be engendered by meeting with them on their own territory. This decreases the likelihood of confrontational interactions, which is always desirable with a new subject in particular.

"Okay," he said, staring at his expensive blended drink as though not entirely sure what to do with it. "What's this about?"

I sipped my coffee. "A situation has arisen which may be of concern to you, Mr. Griffin. I felt that you should be made aware of it, in case it becomes serious or problematic for you."

"Does this have something to do with the company you work for?" he asked. His voice was demanding, even aggressive, but there were notes of uncertainty and fear below that.

"Indirectly. There is another member of the group I am involved with, of stature similar to my own." I kept my voice smooth and fairly quick, not giving Mark the time to notice the ambiguity of my phrasing. "You might say that we are rivals. She has recently discovered my investment in you. It is possible that she will take some kind of action against you, in an attempt to undermine me."

"Shit," he said.

"Language, Mr. Griffin," I reproved him. I am not offended by foul language, but it fit with the image which I was presenting to him. Besides which, the use of such terms is a poor habit, and it was possible that it would cause problems later on in my plans for him.

"Right," he said, sounding unsurprised by my displeasure. "Look, uh, is there any chance that this rival of yours might have framed me for embezzling?"

I frowned deeply. "It is well within her capabilities," I acknowledged. "And, if she moved quickly upon learning of you, she would likely have had enough time by now to arrange it."

Mark started to swear again before catching himself. "Oh, man," he said instead. "This is really bad. I mean, I could go to jail for this."

"I do not think that is likely," I said, in a somewhat reassuring tone. "I will look into this and see what can be done to help you. Try not to worry about it."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Right," he said, standing up. "Right. Thanks. I need to get back to the office, I guess." He left directly after saying that.

It is moments such as this one which remind me why I enjoy this game. Every word I spoke was true, every statement and implication was honest, but what Mark heard did not closely resemble what I said.

Truly, this work is an art.

Two days later, I met with Mark again. This time, he followed me out of the office without requiring a direct request. This was good; I wanted to establish a pattern of Mark following my lead without question, and this was another step in that direction. I led him to the same coffee shop as the last meeting had taken place.

Once there, I laid out the situation, simply and without sugarcoating. Several accounts had been established in his name, I informed him, containing a sizable amount of cash. It was likely that they would be discovered in the audit, and in any case, my rival was certainly capable of revealing them.

I did not mention how I learned of these accounts, and Mark, preoccupied as he was, did not think to ask.

"Oh, man," he said instead, gripping his latte as though it were a lifeline. "What am I going to do?"

"The accounts must be closed," I said calmly, sipping coffee. "It would be best if you did not take the cash yourself; such an increase in funds would almost certainly be noticed."

"I don't need the money," he said, sounding lost. "But how do I...." Mark trailed off, clearly not sure what to say or do. He was quite out of his depth now, as I had intended.

"I can give you the account information," I said. "Or, if you prefer, I can take care of it myself."

"That would be good," he said, sounding hopelessly grateful. "Less likely to be noticed. Yeah."

"Very wise," I said, concealing my satisfaction. Any precedent of Mark ceding responsibility to me was good. "There is, however, one more matter to be considered. Namely, this audit. If my rival has framed you for embezzling, she will most likely have placed evidence for them to uncover."

"Could we get the audit stopped?" Mark asked.

"Such an action would immediately draw notice to you," I said reprovingly. I was, however, glad that his first thought had been to eliminate the problem; that boded well for my plans. "No, I am afraid I see only one solution."

"What?"

"You must leave the company."

"Wouldn't that make them just as suspicious?" he asked.

"Under ordinary circumstances, it would," I said. "However, if the embezzlement continues after you have left, they will assume that, while you may have had knowledge, you were not personally responsible. Without more evidence, they are unlikely to proceed against you under those circumstances."

It took Mark a few seconds to figure out what I had just said. When he did, he paused, and his expression became almost frightened. "You can do that?" he asked.

"I doubt that it will be necessary for me to intervene," I said, sidestepping his question neatly. "Someone is actually taking the money. It is unlikely that they will cease doing so when you quit."

"Right," he said. "So I guess that's it. Tomorrow will be my last day." His voice was almost wistful, as though he'd often dreamed of saying those words but hadn't meant for it to occur like this.

"No," I said sharply. "You absolutely do not want to make your departure seem remarkable or rushed. Give your superior appropriate notice. Provide him with an appropriate excuse for your resignation."

"What should I tell him?"

"You are the one who will be telling the story," I said. "Should you not be the one to invent it?" Ceding responsibility to me was one thing, but I certainly did not want Mark thinking of me as the answer to all his problems. For him to think he could give me instructions would undo much of my recent work.

"But what should I say?" Mark asked, somewhat pleadingly.

"I hardly think it requires a great deal of creativity," I said, with just a touch of dismissiveness. "You have had occasion to inform employers of such events in the past, have you not?" In point of fact, I was of course aware that Mark had never resigned from a job in his life. I was reasonably confident that he would regard this with some embarrassment, however, and would not hurry to inform me of such.

Nor was I disappointed in this regard. "Right. Of course," he said, standing up. He looked around aimlessly, as though lost, then threw most of his drink in the trash. "I guess I'll go get started on that, then. You know. Lots to do."

"Naturally," I agreed, also standing. "I will close out those accounts, of course; you need not concern yourself with the matter. Do you have a preference regarding which charitable foundation should receive the funds?"

He paused, then shrugged and said, "Some kind of animal rescue organization, I guess. I've never really thought about it."

Considering what I knew of Mark, this answer was not particularly surprising. It was another data point, however, which is always of value. It also boded well for several of my future plans regarding Mark's development. Thus, I had to restrain a certain amount of satisfaction as I said, "I can certainly do that. I know of a nonprofit animal shelter in Philadelphia that could use the additional funding, if that would be appropriate."

Mark hesitated, then nodded. "Right. Do it somewhere far away. That's a good idea. Right."

I smiled. I had been hoping that Mark would reach the conclusion that investing this wealth in the same region he lived in would be unwise, but I had not seriously expected that he would do so. Mark was proving to have an unanticipated facility with deception; this would undoubtedly come in useful at a later time.

"Precisely so, Mr. Griffin," I said. "Now, I think we both have our work cut out for us. Let us be about it, shall we?"

He nodded and left the coffee shop.

Interlude Two

"Really," my opponent said. "Even for you, that was petty."

"To what do you refer?" I asked, leaning against the handrail. Currently we were standing in the atrium of a large shopping mall, populated only by bipedal rodents with pumpkins in place of heads. I confess the symbolism was lost on me; frankly, I think the Otherside would be a rather more pleasant place if fewer people of that sort were given the ability to create domains for themselves.

"Screwing your candidate out of his job," she said, as though it should be obvious. "That was a bit of a dick move, don't you think?"

"The rules do not require me to behave in a polite and supportive manner towards my candidates."

"Granted," she said, waving a hand. The meaning of this gesture was somewhat obfuscated by her current manifestation; when an anthropomorphized feline with bandages over her eyes is waving her hands around, parsing the precise intent of the movement is quite difficult. It hardly mattered, in any case, given that the nature of her manifestation conveyed far more meaning than the gesture would have in any case. "Still a bit much, though."

"You assume that it was an act of malice," I countered. "I would argue that this is not the case, as no malicious intent was present and he will not suffer serious or irreparable harm as a result of the action. It is not as though he was fond of the job in any case."

"That's a fair point," she acknowledged. "Although I'm not sure what you're trying to accomplish, anyway. This is a strategy game, not a dating sim."

"I do not understand your point."

She rolled her eyes. "You might need to actually do something," she said. "At some point."

"I would think you would welcome the chance to increase your advantage."

"I've had four centuries to build a lead," she said dryly. "It's starting to get boring."

"Patience is the key to success," I chided.

"Decisive action in the early game is equally important," she said. "As I demonstrated by beating you four hundred years ago. The fact that you still refuse to acknowledge that the game is over doesn't change that."

"It seems a touch premature to say that the game is over, when you have not even replaced your primary candidate."

She made an expression of distaste. "I don't think you can blame me for that. It's hardly my fault that my favorite backup came down with rabies."

"True. Quite fortunate that she survived the experience."

"I could hardly let her die," she said, shrugging. "I'm not *totally* heartless. Besides, it hardly took any power at all."

"I know." Of course I did. We had few secrets from each other, after all. She could no more conceal the extent of her intervention in the course of the disease than I could disguise the amount of effort I had taken meddling with Mark's employment. The only lies between us were those told with too much truth.

Chapter Three

Mark's resignation was, if not terribly adroit in its execution, at least not as graceless as I feared. Certainly smoothing over any negative consequences thereof was well within my capabilities, even within the rules of the game.

Eleven days after he completed the resignation process, I met Mark while he was on his way to a restaurant. I used the same means of approach as on our first meeting, appearing directly behind him without warning.

"Good evening, Mr. Griffin," I said. I noted with some satisfaction that he hardly jumped at my voice, and exhibited much less of a reaction to my sudden appearance than on that first occasion.

He did, however, still regard me with some wariness. This was good; it suggested that he was beginning to consider me dangerous, on some level. Anything else would have spoken poorly of his intelligence at this point. "Oh," he said, without any overabundance of warmth. "You."

"Yes, Mr. Griffin, it is indeed. Now, I believe that we have some matters of considerable importance to settle. If you would care to discuss them over dinner? I will, of course, be pleased to provide the necessary funding."

He took his time answering, although we both knew what his response would be. "Fine," he said at last. "Where?"

I led Mark to a nearby restaurant, one which was relatively exclusive and considerably more expensive than anything he had considered. I was reasonably confident that he had never been inside the establishment before; as has been previously stated, Mark was typically relatively frugal.

Inside, I strode directly to the maître d'hôtel, who was standing at a desk near the entrance of the dining room with a bored expression. "Good evening," I said to her. "Griffin, party of two."

She glanced perfunctorily at the book in front of her and then nodded. "Of course," she said. "Right this way, gentlemen."

She led us to a secluded table in the rear corner of the room and asked what we would be drinking. I requested water, while Mark inquired what types of beer they served. After some consideration, he settled upon a relatively expensive brew imported from Europe.

"So," I said after she left. "Did the resignation go well?"

"I think so," he said gloomily. "Nobody asked too many questions, anyway. What about your part?"

"A certain animal shelter recently received a considerable anonymous donation," I said. "I do not expect that they will ask any undesirable questions regarding the source of this money."

"So that's it, then," he said.

"It should be. I will, of course, keep an eye on affairs at your previous place of employment for some time. I do not expect that they will attempt any reprisal against you, but it is best to be certain in such matters."

"Right," he agreed fervently. "So what now?"

"Following the loss of your position, it would appear that our business is concluded," I said, with no particular inflection. "However, there is one matter which I should inform you of. You recall, I am sure, my rival? The one whom we were discussing at our last meeting?"

"Yeah," he said, shuddering.

"As I said, she is the type to hold a grudge. It is not impossible that she will continue to act against you, even though you are no longer providing information to me regarding that company. I do not expect her to do so, but I have learned that underestimating her willingness to perform such actions is unwise."

"Oh," Mark said. "Great. So what will she try and do to me?"

"I truly do not know," I said. "She is, as I believe I have mentioned, quite resourceful." I produced a business card from my pocket and handed it to him. It was jet black, with a phone number printed on it in white. There was no other marking on the card. "Should you have reason to suspect that you are being targeted, please call that number. I will provide what assistance I reasonably can. Do not hesitate to contact me if you notice anything odd or threatening."

He took the card. "Thank you," he said. His voice, for the first time this evening, had lost its hostile tone.

I did not smile. "It is the least I could do," I said. "Now, unless you have another matter to discuss, I will take my leave. Do not concern yourself with the bill; I have already taken care of it."

He did not object, and I left before the drinks were served. None of the wait staff commented on my absence; indeed, based solely upon observations of the employees, one would imagine that Mark had always been the only customer at that table.

It is the small touches which transform this business into a work of art.

Following this event, I arranged for Mark to acquire another job. This position was in a low-level managerial post at a telecommunications company's local office. The authority was comparable with his previous position, and the pay was slightly lower. Unusually, I made no attempt to conceal that my influence was behind this job offer; on the contrary, I included a note quite openly stating that I was responsible.

There were several reasons for this. First, of course, I did not want Mark to regard me with distaste for having caused his loss of employment; an overt attempt at making amends should demonstrate contrition, hopefully averting this reaction. Doing so additionally allowed me control over his next job. The nature of the position I chose for him was intended to limit the formation of attachments to other individuals, keeping him isolated, while the slight pay cut kept him slightly dissatisfied.

For the next four months, nothing of import occurred in the life of Marcus Dominic Griffin. He learned the obligations of his new job, a process which became significantly easier when he realized that they did not actually exist, and in fact he was fairly confident that if he stopped showing up for work it would be several weeks before anyone noticed. He moved from his previous apartment to a slightly smaller one closer to his new workplace, which was satisfactory except for the offensive paisley pattern of the sofa and a faint but pervasive scent of cat urine. He studied French for the first time since college, and learned to juggle.

In all this time, Mark did not hear from me, nor did he see or hear anything which caused him to feel a need to contact me. He told himself that this was a good thing, that I had been a strange and dangerous person who had cost him a considerable deal, and that he would be just as glad never to have cause to associate with me again.

And, most of the time, Mark believed this.

There were times, however, when he found this more difficult. There were times when, lying on his bed in the dark and wondering whether he should call some sort of professional cleaner to deal with the offensive odors of his new apartment, he found himself feeling offended at this change in circumstances. There were times when he asked himself whether his experiences with me, the borderline espionage and the risk, had not been among the most exciting in his life. He asked himself whether he might, in the morning, call the number I had given him, and demand answers to his questions regardless of the cost.

And then he slept, and woke, and went to work for another day, and did not call me.

During this time, I watched, and waited, and smiled. Everything was proceeding to plan. The taste of intrigue and excitement I had offered Mark had whetted his appetite, as I had expected, and sharpened the hunger he felt for meaning and passion. The interlude of boredom and safety, meanwhile, softened the edges of his memories, making the intrigue seem more engrossing, the dangers less frightening.

I have said it before, and will say it again. Patience is the key to success in this work.

I would, by preference, have allowed this stewing process to continue longer, perhaps for as long as a year. In this case, however, my hand was forced. One of the frustrating aspects of the game we played was that, due to limitations imposed by the strictures of the rules, my power was significantly less than it would otherwise have been. Thus, I exerted only a limited influence over the other players in

this scheme. While I could still ensure that all necessary elements of my plan would occur, it was sometimes necessary to adapt them to changing conditions.

Thus, while I would have preferred to wait longer, circumstances prevented me from doing so. The next intervention in Mark's life required the active involvement of other participants, and my control over those participants was minimal at best. Thus, when extraneous factors caused them to act sooner than I had anticipated, I deemed it simpler to accelerate my plan rather than attempt to force conditions to conform to my wishes. In the execution of any complex plan, it is necessary to remember that it is only a means to an end; if the conditions no longer suggest that the original plan is the most efficient way to achieve that end, it is necessary to adjust the plan.

So. Let us continue, then, with the tale of Marcus Dominic Griffin. Or, from another perspective, to begin it. While this was not the first time that I meddled in the course of his life, it is in some sense when my plan began. This was when, as my opponent so eloquently phrased it, I began to actually do something.

Mark's day began quite normally on the ninth of May, slightly less than a year after I first spoke with him. He went to work, where he spent several hours reading about juggling tricks on the Internet. He left work in the evening and went to the bar. He was accompanied in this by another man from work who, while not a friend, was a close enough acquaintance that the evening had been reasonably enjoyable. He rode the bus to the nearest stop to his home, and then walked the six blocks between the bus stop and his apartment.

On this walk, he did not see another living thing, with the exception of some sickly trees, overwatered lawns, and heavily pruned bushes. It did not occur to him that this was somewhat unusual.

His apartment at that time was in a relatively small complex. Unlike many such establishments, the apartments in this complex did not open into a central area. Rather, as in a motel, each residence opened onto the exterior. Mark had been attracted to the establishment largely because of the promise of privacy which this arrangement afforded.

In this respect, he was not disappointed, and indeed his new home provided more solitude than he had even hoped for. His apartment was on the ground floor, but relatively far from the stairs, so that few other residents had cause to pass near it. The unit to the east of his was home to a thin young man who slept during the days and was seldom home otherwise. In the three and a half months that Mark had been living in that apartment, he had not exchanged ten words with the man, and had received the distinct impression that the man would just as soon never exchange ten more. The unit to the west was presently untenanted, and likely to remain so for several months at the very least.

The end result of this was that Mark's door was the only one in this section of the apartment complex which had a welcome mat out front, although in his case this was perhaps a misnomer, as this mat was not particularly welcoming. It was green in color, a shade of green which might be compared to

both mashed peas and vomit, and read *Leave* in plain black letters. It had originally been given to him as an ironic gift by one of his new coworkers. Mark was still not entirely sure why he had accepted the mat, except that it seemed to him that a door should have some sort of welcome mat before it, and he found this one oddly amusing. Thus, over the past several months, the sight of this singularly misanthropic welcome mat had become welcoming indeed, a sign that he had reached his home and could rest.

On this evening, however, he noticed from some distance away that there was something odd about his welcome mat. Namely, there was a person on it. This figure, made anonymous by distance, seemed to be sleeping in his doorway. At first he assumed that it was a vagrant in search of a warm place to sleep, and intended simply to recommend that the vagrant instead move into the doorway of his vacant neighbor.

As he moved closer, however, he began to see other details. He observed that the vagrant was female, and that she appeared to be quite small and slight. While it was difficult to be certain without seeing her face, Mark thought from her build and dress that she was likely a teenager. At that point he thought that he might invite her inside, provide her with a warm meal, and perhaps attempt to contact her parents or a protective agency if she were a runaway.

Then he moved closer still, and noticed the blood, and started to run.

The quality of the lighting was poor enough that he could not make out details until he was close enough to touch her. When he did, he was dismayed and revolted; Mark was at this time still quite sensitive to such things, having never before seen serious injuries.

And this girl's injuries were, to be certain, serious. The left side of her face had been severely damaged, with the ear and much of the cheek torn away. Her left hand and part of the forearm was bloody, although Mark did not immediately see what injury might have been responsible for that. Blood stained her chest, as well, lending a sort of horrifying authenticity to stereotypically gothic clothing.

As he approached, she stirred slightly, although she seemed barely conscious. She muttered something, under her breath, which was difficult to interpret but might have been, "Help me."

"Oh God," Mark said, fumbling in his pockets for his phone. "Oh God, you need an ambulance."

As he said that, the girl suddenly seemed to revive. Her eyes opened, a shade of green which was vivid almost to the point of being unsettling, and which was even more so against the bloody mask of her face, and fixated upon him. "No," she said, her voice a great deal stronger than what it had been only moments before. "No doctors."

Mark hesitated, his hand on his phone. Then he quailed under the force of that gaze, and unlocked his door, and gently carried her inside, and set her on the floor. He closed and locked the door. Then he turned on the light and examined the girl.

He soon saw, in the better light, that this was indeed the correct term for her. Mark was hardly an expert on such things, but he estimated that she could be no more than thirteen years old. He

learned, afterwards, that he was in fact incorrect, and she was actually fourteen years and seven months of age, a distinction which she felt was terribly important.

In this moment, however, she was unconscious, and quite unable to tell Mark anything at all. He briefly considered going against her wishes and calling an ambulance anyway, then ruled against it, at least for the moment. He had no idea why she would not desire professional attention, but she had seemed rather insistent, and he thought it might be better not to overrule that sentiment until the situation became clearer.

Instead, he decided to take a look at her injuries, and see whether they were perhaps less severe than he had initially thought. The wound on her head was the most dramatic, but also seemed to have stopped bleeding, and he recalled hearing somewhere that head injuries typically look worse than they are. Thus, he decided to ignore that, and move on to the other injuries instead.

The first thing he examined was the blood on her arm. This, he discovered, came from a deep puncture midway up her forearm. Again, the bleeding seemed to have stopped. Having little knowledge of what to do for someone, in a medical sense, beyond stopping the bleeding, he was at a loss for what the next step of treatment should be in this case, and thus moved on.

Her right leg was also bloody, which he had not seen outside, and so he examined that next. There were several holes in her lower leg, below her skirt, which to his untrained eye looked uncomfortably like a bite. These were still bleeding sluggishly, so, on somewhat more comfortable ground now, he washed them out with water. He knew that it was important to wash wounds in order to prevent infection, and he remembered that the use of hydrogen peroxide was no longer advised, but could not confidently say what they had suggested he use instead. The water, then, was something of a stopgap; while he was not certain it would do any good, he was at least reasonably sure it could do no harm.

The wound thus, to some extent, cleaned, he pulled out the medical kit which he had never before had cause to use, and found some gauze pads and adhesive tape. He used this to improvise a clumsy sort of dressing over the wound, which was awkward, bulky and unaesthetic, but which seemed to slow the bleeding. He regarded this with some satisfaction.

Then, with no satisfaction whatsoever, he turned his attention to the girl's chest. This, it seemed to him, was the moment of truth; the chest wound was likely the most serious of the injuries, considering its location and the amount of blood involved. It was also the most inconvenient to access or treat. This, he thought, was when he had to make a choice. He could still call an ambulance, and explain what he had done. Once he proceeded any further, that explanation would be a good deal less satisfactory. He was fairly confident of that.

Mark thought for a few moments. Then he went and found a pair of scissors.

He felt distinctly uncomfortable cutting the girl's shirt off, but he was reasonably sure that was the appropriate thing to do. He thought that he had heard, at some point, that attempting to undress an

injured person in the normal way posed the risk of worsening their injuries, which seemed rather counterproductive to him. And, in any case, the clothing was already ruined. He doubted that even the most dedicated Goth would gladly wear something so thoroughly stained with blood; if nothing else, the reminder of such serious pain and damage could hardly be welcome.

He would likely have felt worse, except that he really had very little to do. The site of the injury was already quite clear; the girl's black shirt was nearly shredded on the left side, near the bottom of the ribcage, and this was also the center of the blood. With all the damage the fabric had already sustained, it was not difficult to clear the rest of it out of the way with the scissors. Mark also felt an odd, selfish sort of gratitude that the wound was located where it was. Undressing an unconscious teenage girl any further would have been distinctly uncomfortable. Even looking at her ribs seemed to Mark deeply inappropriate, and he found himself wondering how doctors felt about such things. Perhaps they were inured to it, the sight of human flesh rendered meaningless by their work.

Then he had a clear view of the wound, and all such thoughts fled his mind, replaced by an overwhelming urge to vomit.

The girl's ribcage had been mauled, to an extent which seemed unreal to him. An area of flesh perhaps forty square inches in area had been shredded and torn apart. Large chunks of flesh seemed to be missing, and Mark could clearly see the ivory curve of rib bones in several places. It seemed preposterous, in that moment, that the girl could still be alive with such a grievous injury, let alone that she could have been conscious and coherent only minutes earlier.

And yet, here, too, the bleeding seemed less than he would have guessed. The wound was still bleeding, but there was no force behind it, and in several places it seemed to have stopped entirely.

This was, Mark was fairly confident, not a normal response to this sort of damage.

At first he thought to dress this wound in the same way that he had the girl's leg. Then he realized how ridiculous that was. His medical kit was quite small, intended for ordinary household use; it certainly was not up to this sort of task. He did not have nearly enough gauze to cover the entirety of the wound.

Thus, feeling rather inadequate, he placed gauze pads on those sections which seemed to still be bleeding, then went and fetched a clean T-shirt from his closet. He folded this and placed it over the wound, then taped the whole thing securely into place. It seemed a rather pitiful gesture, but the pressure did seem to help with the bleeding, and in any case he was not sure what else he could do.

The immediate problem thus resolved to the best of his ability, Mark stood and washed his hands. It seemed to take a very long time before the water ran clear. He dried his hands, the motions mechanical, and then went back out into the living room to stand over the injured girl. He took out his phone and stared at the screen for some time.

Mark knew, even at the time, that this was a pivotal moment. He knew that the exact moment he was in was the sort of moment he would later look back on as a key choice, one that would define

the course of his future. He could call the hospital, watch the girl be loaded onto the ambulance, and then go back inside and go to bed and not sleep. It would take some days, but he knew that he could put this whole incident behind himself. He could go on with life as it had been.

Or he could do what the girl wanted, and perhaps be drawn into something which, he already sensed, was stranger and more dangerous even than it appeared.

Mark stood there and looked at his phone. Then, very slowly, he crossed the room to his desk. He took a simple card off the desk, black with white lettering. And then he began to dial.

Interlude Three

Shortly before that eventful night, I was standing beside a lake. The lake was in the midst of a fairly spacious park, and surrounded by fencing in a halfhearted attempt to prevent visitors from getting in the water. At present there were several ducks in the lake, most of them migrants, although soon they would return to their nests for the night.

The man standing next to me tore off a piece of bread and threw it into the water. The bread was a heavy, coarse variety, but more flavorful than it at first appeared. This was, I thought, rather amusingly appropriate, as the man himself embodied those qualities to a great extent as well. "Hell of an odd thing to ask," he said. His voice was slow and deep, with a Russian accent, giving the deceptive impression that he was not intelligent. "Even for you. Why do it?"

He spoke relatively loudly, but I did not reproach him. There seemed little point; the park was occupied at this time of day primarily by joggers and individuals walking dogs, none of whom seemed inclined to approach us closely. This is likely attributable to my companion, as his appearance was not one to encourage trust or friendliness. Quite to the contrary, his face inspired thoughts of violence, and I imagined that most observers assumed that he had spent a significant period of time in prison, likely because he had.

I smiled at him. It was not my charming smile. "You will do it because I told you where to go when you were lost. You will do it because I saved your life when you and your kin would, without my assistance, most certainly have died. You will do it because these are debts which you have yet to repay. You will do it, Mr. Christiansen, because I told you to do it."

He grunted. "Should have listened to Tanya," he said mournfully. "Should have never taken your deals."

"Perhaps. But you made your choice."

"Right," the man sighed. "So. You want me to maul a kid and dump her on a doorstep? I got that straight?"

"No," I corrected. "I want you to maul a very specific person and leave her on a very specific doorstep. The distinction is rather important. Should you forget it, you will be owing me a forfeit significantly greater than the debt you currently do, and I will not be nearly so polite about collecting it."

"I know," he said, tearing off another chunk of bread. "I know." He was silent for a long moment, watching the ducks eat the bread. "She doesn't like us working for anyone else," he said at last, gloomily.

"That is immaterial. You owe me a debt. What she desires is not important, and she is as aware of that as I am."

He shook his head. "Hell of an odd thing," he said again. "Why you want me to do this?"

"It is really quite simple," I said, looking out over the lake. A pair of mallards fought over a piece of bread, squawking and splashing. "I am engaged in a contest. The individual you are going to ensure finds this girl after she is mauled is, as it were, a game piece. I am hoping that the event you are arranging will provide him with a certain, shall we say, motivational experience."

"Lot of work for a motivational experience."

"Necessarily," I agreed. "I cannot actually force him to do anything, you understand. The choice must be his. That is one of the rules of the game."

He grunted again. "Some game. What are you playing for?"

"Ah, Mr. Christiansen, you have indeed asked the correct question," I said, still looking at the water. "This game is being played for considerable stakes, of the sort that even a god cannot lightly ignore. The sort of stake, indeed, which might cause even me to spend resources quite recklessly, in the hope of achieving it."

He waited a moment, then shook his head. "You aren't going to tell me."

I smiled. "Once again you demonstrate that singular wisdom which I have come to expect from you. I could, if you desire, tell you precisely what the stakes of this game are. I am afraid, however, that if I should do so I would, regrettably, be forced to kill you."

He considered that for a moment. "Not that curious," he said, although he did not sound sure.

"A wise choice, Mr. Christiansen. Now, we both have a great deal of work in the days ahead of us. Unless you have any additional questions?"

As expected, he looked at me directly for the first time since this meeting began. "Did you kill her?" he asked, as he always did.

And, as always, I looked at him, and did not smile. "I did not kill your mate, Mr. Christiansen," I said, as I always did. "Nor did I instruct another to do so. If she is truly dead, it was not at my hands."

And, as always, he looked at me, and did not believe me. And then he grunted, and turned, and walked away, while I stood and watched the sun set over the water.

Chapter Four

Twenty minutes after Marcus Dominic Griffin made that fateful call, he heard a rapping on the door.

He went to look through the peephole, leaving the girl on the bloodied sofa, and was somewhat disturbed when he felt relieved at the sight of me. He unlocked the door and removed the chain, although he did not actually invite me in.

I stepped inside, resting my cane against the wall. It was positioned in such a way that the stones in the serpent's head caught the light, seeming almost animate.

"Good evening, Mr. Griffin," I said, although it was in reality closer to midnight at this time. "What seems to be the problem?" I had been quite pleased with Mark's progress when he refused to discuss the issue over the telephone. This suggested the development of a healthy paranoia.

"Someone left this girl outside my door," he said, wringing his hands agitatedly. "She's...well, she's in pretty bad shape."

I walked over and looked at her. The bleeding had mostly stopped by this point, although the bandages still looked very dramatic. "Indeed she is," I agreed. "Would it not be preferable to contact the authorities, however?" The inclusion of this offer was in many ways the most important part of the entire process. I needed Mark to openly acknowledge that what he was doing was a violation of societal norms. This lack of self-deception would, I hoped, serve to enhance the cognitive dissonance which he felt after this action, thus maximizing the resultant changes in his mentality.

He looked away from me. It was brief, but very telling, and a promising sign; this indicated that he did, on some level, feel guilt for this violation of norms. "She said no doctors," he said, in an almost apologetic tone. "And I didn't want to do something she didn't want me to."

"I see," I said mildly. "I am not, however, certain why you would think that I have the ability to assist you in a medical matter."

"It's not that," he said. "It's just...you said I should call you if I saw anything weird, and this is some weird shit."

"Language, Mr. Griffin," I said absently. "There is an adolescent present, after all, even if she is not currently conscious."

Mark flushed. "Right," he said. "Well, this is some seriously weird stuff, then. I mean, she isn't even bleeding anymore. I'm pretty sure bleeding isn't supposed to stop that easily."

"Indeed," I agreed. "From all that I know of such things, I would say that such behavior would be quite atypical of normal human healing activity."

"So it's not just me?" he asked, somewhat pleadingly. Mark very much needed not to be wrong at that moment. "This is weird?"

"Indeed," I said. "Furthermore, have you inspected her injuries? They do not, to my eye, seem to readily conform to the patterns which are typical of knives, or guns, or indeed any other weapon. On the contrary, these appear to be the work of an animal of some sort."

"Yeah," he said. "I noticed that too."

I stood there and regarded her meditatively for a long moment, my hands clasped behind my back. "It occurs to me," I said, "that there is a certain precedent for an individual who appears to have been grievously injured by an animal, to such an extent that it would appear that the individual should by all rights have died, but who nevertheless survives, and indeed appears to heal at a preternatural rate."

Mark took a moment to parse that statement. "Are you saying she's a werewolf?" he said at last, sounding scared and uncertain. Mark was, as has been said previously, entirely unacquainted with the supernatural, and in fact was not even particularly superstitious. The peculiarities of our previous interactions had caused him to question these assumptions, however, and the events of this night had shaken his confidence severely. Thus, while he was incredulous and frightened by the idea, he was at least willing to consider the prospect.

"On the contrary, Mr. Griffin," I said. "At this time, I would think that such a proclamation was rather premature. I am merely stating that there appears to be some reason to consider the possibility." I paused. "Of course, there is a simple way to test such a claim."

"There is?" he asked.

"Indeed," I said. "Do you, by chance, have any antique silverware?"

"I don't," he said. "But the last tenant in this apartment left a set."

I was, of course, well aware of this fact. It is surprisingly easy to convince someone to leave an heirloom behind when moving, particularly when that heirloom is not one which they are terribly fond of.

The silverware was fetched with all swiftness, and only a few moments later I was standing beside the girl with a fork in one hand. Mark had exhibited extreme reluctance to perform this task himself, and I deemed pushing him to do so to be excessive and unnecessary at this time.

I took the girl's right hand, which was not injured, and pressed the fork against the back of her hand. I held it there for several seconds, until the girl stirred, moaned something, and pulled her hand away from the silver. I did not oppose this motion.

Mark could clearly see, after this happened, the mark on the girl's hand. It was red, as though it had been badly sunburned, or exposed to a caustic compound. The burn was clearly visible, and in the precise shape of the fork's tines.

Approximately three and a half seconds after I removed the fork, the burn began to fade. This process was quite fast initially, and in less than five seconds the mark had faded enough that it would not be visually distinct enough to be noticed at a glance. The healing slowed after that, but was still a great deal more rapid than would be expected of a normal human. Within a minute, there was no apparent evidence that the burn had ever been there.

Both of us stood there and considered this for several seconds. "Well," I said. "It would appear that we have confirmed that this situation is, as you so eloquently termed it, weird."

"Is this something to do with your rival?" he asked, looking over his shoulder as though he expected werewolves to leap out of the shadows and devour him.

"It is remotely possible," I said. "But I would say that it is extremely unlikely; this sort of thing is far outside her normal purview. I will look into the matter and ensure that this is not the result of her interference. In the meantime, I would advise you to get some sleep. When she wakes, perhaps the girl will be able to tell you more regarding how she came by those injuries."

"Right," he said. "That makes sense. Thank you."

I smiled, and collected my cane, and left.

Samantha Nicole Jackson was, in many ways, quite ordinary. She plays a relatively important part in this account, however, and is also somewhat interesting in her own merit. As such, I judge that a certain amount of information beyond that which strictly relates to the story being considered here is worthwhile to include.

At fourteen years and seven months of age, she was in that peculiar liminal state in which she was not yet adult in her attitude or bearing but could no longer reasonably be termed a child. The resident of a local suburb, her situation was fairly typical for the area. Her mother was a business executive working with a local real estate company, while her father taught political science at a nearby private university. The result was that Samantha had wealth and safety in her childhood, along with a plethora of other luxuries, but had relatively little chance to interact with her parents. She was an only child, and never developed strong social skills, being shy by nature and largely isolated.

You may note that this set of conditions is very similar to that experienced by Marcus Dominic Griffin in his youth. This resemblance was a part of why I had chosen Samantha Jackson for this endeavor, albeit a minor one in comparison to certain other aspects of her nature and personality.

At this point in her life, Sam was not as isolated as she had been previously, having formed relatively strong bonds with a small group of other students at the private school which she attended. This group was united largely by their involvement in the Goth subculture and a shared interest in related topics. The degree to which Sam personally shared this interest is debatable; while there were undeniably aspects of the culture which she found fascinating, there were also aspects which she found repulsive or pathetic. On the whole, it would be reasonable to state that her involvement with this subculture was a genuine reflection of her attitudes, although there were considerable reservations on the topic.

The debate of nature and nurture is beyond the scope of this discussion; it is, however, safe to say that there are reasonable arguments supporting both positions. Thus, it is also reasonable to state that some of the responsibility for Sam's personal attitudes and habits was innate, while other influences can be attributed to her environment. Such a debate is complicated for her, in particular, as a result of several unusual attributes which she possessed, although these are largely irrelevant to the topic at hand and will not be discussed further herein.

Regardless of the origin, it is undeniable that Sam exhibited several traits atypical of human females of her age and social position. The most readily apparent of these was an intense need for control. Sam required strict order to feel comfortable. In particular, she required consistency and predictability. Thus, it is possible to describe her typical behaviors with a high degree of accuracy, as these behaviors varied little.

Sam woke each morning at five. She brushed her teeth and dressed in comfortable clothes suitable for physical exercise. She then left the house in which she lived with her family, carefully locking the door behind herself. She checked the lock three times to ensure that the door was actually secured. She then began to jog around the neighborhood, building to a more rapid pace over the course of three minutes.

Precisely why Sam insisted upon this morning run was a question which she was not able to answer adequately. Part of it, of course, was simply the desire for physical fitness. Certainly this was why she had started performing this ritual. Over the past nine months, however, she had increasingly come to see running as an end in its own right. The action of running itself was comforting to her, in particular to the extent that she was able to cease organized mental activity and focus purely on the physical requirements of the exercise.

For whatever reason, this morning run had become an essential part of Sam's life, and she did not fail to perform it except for reason of serious illness or dangerously inclement weather. The route she followed varied, largely to account for the difference in her speed between days. Regardless of where she ran, she always returned home no earlier than six-thirty in the morning. At this time, both of her parents had already left for work. On weekends, when they did not go to work, she typically did not return to her home until after seven, by which time they would both be engrossed in their personal projects.

Regardless, upon returning home, her rituals were the same. She unlocked the door and opened it, entered the house, then shut and locked the door. As when leaving, she checked this lock three times before continuing. She then proceeded upstairs to her bedroom, where she took a shower. She then got dressed for her day, typically in comfortable, practical clothing. There was a preponderance of black in her wardrobe, but not such an extent that it would be immediately apparent to an uninformed observer.

Having gotten dressed, she proceeded downstairs to the kitchen. Once there, she prepared cold cereal for herself and ate it. On weekends, she instead fried eggs and ate them with either bacon or sausage and toasted sourdough bread.

This allowed just enough time for her to collect her belongings and ride the bus to her school. On weekends, she instead returned to her bedroom, where she would spend most of the day on whatever project she happened to be involved in at the time.

For the past nine months, Sam's days had begun this way. She did not deviate from the pattern.

On this morning, then, it is unsurprising that Samantha Nicole Jackson did not immediately realize how drastically different her morning behavior would be. She woke up without requiring an alarm, as she usually did. She sat up. She began to consider where she would run this morning. She rubbed her eyes, noticing an odd stiffness as she did.

It was at this point that Samantha Jackson noticed something wrong. She was not in her bed. She was not in her bedroom. Instead, she was lying on an aesthetically challenged couch with a foul smell, in a room which she did not recognize.

Samantha did not know how she had gotten to this room. She did not remember having done so.

Concerned, Sam stood up, swaying slightly. She noticed, vaguely, that she was wearing a robe considerably too large for herself. This did not seem important to her.

There was very little light in the room, as the curtains were tightly drawn. Sam, however, could see the outline of a door across the room, with light coming in from the exterior. She started for this door, somewhat unsteady on her feet.

She had taken three steps when a male voice said, "Hey, take it easy." Sam recognized this voice, but was not at all sure why. She turned to regard the source, and saw the silhouette of a large man standing near the door. A moment later a lamp turned on, and she got a better view.

The man in question was perhaps four inches above six feet and fairly stocky in build. He was wearing black sweatpants and a white T-shirt, and his hair was disheveled. He did not appear to have slept well, if at all.

"Take it easy," he said again. "You should probably sit down."

Sam would have liked to reject this statement, but could not easily do so. She was increasingly unsteady on her feet, and had begun to feel the not-inconsiderable pain of her injuries. At that point, Sam could not deny that the idea of sitting had considerable appeal.

She did not, however, wish to make herself vulnerable in the presence of this man, not without a good deal more information than she currently had. She was feeling frightened and nervous at this point, but not genuinely panicked. A quick glance had sufficed to inform her that the door was not locked, and even in her current condition Sam was confident that she could move quickly enough to get out the door if necessary.

"What happened?" she asked. Her voice was unsteady and slightly slurred, but was understandable.

"I don't know," the man said. "I found you on my front porch last night looking like you were about to die. You asked me not to call an ambulance, so I brought you inside and tried to do something about your injuries."

This reminder was sufficient to bring back the memories of what had happened the previous night. Sam walked back to the couch and sat down without further argument.

"Thanks," the man said, sounding distinctly relieved. "Um...what's your name?"

"Sam," she said, somewhat woodenly.

"I'm Mark. Do you want something to drink?"

She was about to refuse this offer when she became aware of an intense, almost debilitating hunger. "Food?" she said instead, feeling incapable of a more nuanced vocalization.

"Right," he said. "I'm not a very good cook, but I should be able to make some eggs, at any rate." He paused. "The bathroom's down that hall," he said, sounding unsure. "If you want to wash up. And I left some clothes out. They won't fit you, but they're clean, and better than what you're wearing." That said, Mark proceeded into the kitchen, where he began rummaging through various cupboards.

Sam took his advice, and went to the bathroom.

Once there, she got her first view of what had happened to her. The robe, which she realized must belong to Mark, was hanging open enough for her to see that her clothes had been reduced to bloodstained tatters. Dried blood had formed a brownish crust on her arm, her leg, and much of her torso. Bandages, long since soaked with blood and largely dried, wrapped one forearm, her leg, and her lower torso.

None of this, however, was as distressing to Sam as seeing her face. Her skin was covered with blood above the neck, a brownish mask that seemed to crinkle with the movements of her face. There were several gouges clearly visible in her face, as well, and she was missing most of her left ear.

It occurred to Sam that she looked like an extra in a horror film.

She would have expected to feel terror, dread, and disgust upon seeing herself in such a state. She was not disappointed on any of these counts. She felt as though she were going to vomit for several seconds. Most of the reason she did not do so was that she was well aware of how intense the pain this would cause her injured ribs would be.

At the same time, however, Sam realized that there was something odd. She was not bleeding. Furthermore, the pain was less severe than she would have guessed. It was not by any stretch of the imagination pleasant or comfortable, but compared to the extent of her injuries, it seemed oddly minimal. Based upon sight, she would not have guessed that she would be able even to stand.

Sam considered this for a moment. Then she stripped off the rags of the previous night's outfit, dropping them on the floor. This caused her some pain, but less than she would have expected, largely because there was very little holding the scraps of cloth in place as it was. Then she got into the shower and turned it on as hot as it would go, which was not very.

The water washed much of the blood off, and she was able to delicately scrape most of the rest away. She stayed in the shower until the water dripping off her skin ran clear, then turned it off and stepped out.

The clothing which Mark had provided was, as he had said, not terribly suitable. It consisted of a long-sleeved shirt and flannel pants, both of which seemed clearly to be sized for him. Compared to her much smaller frame, they were comically oversized. They did, however, have the distinct advantage of being easy to don, and concealing everything other than the facial damage.

By the time Sam exited the bathroom, the food was finished, and she was so hungry that she was feeling physically weak as a result. She was more worried by the hunger than the pain; while the pain was more distressing, it was also easily explicable. The hunger was less so, considering that she clearly remembered having eaten the previous evening.

When she emerged, Mark was sitting on a cheap office chair balancing a plate on his lap. This plate contained two eggs, toast, and sausages. A matching plate was sitting on the sofa opposite. The eggs were slightly undercooked, the toast was burnt, and the sausages had soaked up a considerable amount of grease. Sam thought that the food smelled and looked delicious.

"So," Mark said as she sat down and picked up the food. "Do you remember what happened to you at all?"

"Some," she said. "I was at a concert with a couple of friends. We were having a pretty good time until around eight. Then I got a call from the hospital. My parents were in a car wreck, and they weren't sure how long they were going to last."

Sam expected to break down crying upon acknowledging that her parents were dead. She expected to choke up, or at least feel crushing despair at this fact. She did not do any of these things. On

the contrary, she felt a sort of distant numbness, as though the reality of what had happened had not yet penetrated. Underlying this was, if anything, relief, mixed with guilt at this relief.

"Jesus," Mark said. "Did you leave the concert?"

"No shit," Sam snapped. Then she rubbed her forehead. "Sorry. I know you're trying to help. Yeah, I left. Max and Cheryl didn't want to leave the concert, and Max is the only one with a car, but I figured I could catch the bus or something."

"What happened then?"

"I made it about three blocks," she said. "Then something jumped me. It looked like, just, this *huge* dog. It started biting me, and I tried to run but it was a lot faster than me. Then I woke up outside your door."

At this point Sam became aware that she had finished her food. She was not, however, noticeably less hungry than before she began; on the contrary, the plate of food seemed to have whetted her appetite. "Do you have anything else to eat?" she asked.

Mark handed his largely-untouched plate over without a word, and Sam began shoveling the contents into her mouth. "Do you have any idea what attacked you?" Mark asked.

"Like I said," Sam said. "It looked like a freaking enormous dog. I didn't get a chance to see much else."

"Um," Mark said. "This is going to sound crazy, but do you believe in werewolves?"

"No," Sam said. "Do you?"

"Well. Not exactly. I mean, I *don't* believe in them. But you got attacked by a big dog, and now you're healing a lot faster than you should be. You just ate two plates of food in about five minutes. And silver burns you."

Sam stuffed the last piece of sausage into her mouth, chewed for approximately three-quarters of a second, and swallowed. "It does?" she asked. "The silver thing, I mean."

Mark nodded and then fetched the same silver fork which we had used the previous night. He held it out to her wordlessly. Sam took the fork and held it for slightly more than five seconds before her fingers convulsed and she dropped the fork. She then held her hand out.

Both of them could clearly see that her fingers and palm were red, clearly burned. Her hand was curled into a claw, and twitched slightly. Her muscles relaxed over the course of the next ten seconds, and the burn faded in much the same manner as that which Mark had observed previously.

"Fuck," Sam said, watching this. "I mean, fucking *shit*. I might have to reconsider that werewolf explanation."

"Yeah," Mark said. Judging by tone, it was difficult to estimate which of them found this more disturbing.

"Do you have any more food?" Sam asked.

"Let's go out for something," Mark said. "Wear a hat and we should be fine."

"Sounds good."

Interlude Four

"A werewolf," my opponent said. On this occasion my opponent had chosen to manifest in the form of an adult male human. His suit was a vibrant orange in color, and he was wearing a matching feather boa. A mockery, I expected, of my own more understated garb.

"Several of them," I said.

"A werewolf," he repeated. "You're going to advance your human candidate by turning him into a werewolf. What a stunningly original play. No one could have seen such a shocking maneuver coming." He paused. "Oh, wait. That's right. Literally everyone saw this coming."

I sighed. "Your wit is not as amusing as you think it is."

"Well, obviously not to you," he said. "You don't even *have* a sense of humor."

"This is inaccurate. As, I might say, is your prediction of my plans."

"Of course it is," he said, wandering off through the forest. At my request, this meeting was being held in a more traditional sector of the Otherside; there were no artificial structures in sight. He did not look back, knowing that I would be forced to follow him in order to finish the conversation.

I added this to the tally of insults for which I owed my opponent due redress.

"I mean, really," he said. "I think I know your playing style by now. You wouldn't make a move that transparent. Hell, I doubt you'd even *want* to switch to a werewolf. The vulnerabilities are a little too obvious for your taste."

"Thank you. Although your guess is not entirely inaccurate. It merely fails to consider several important factors."

"That's how it always goes with you," he sighed. "You see it all coming, but there's a twist that makes all your preparations a waste of time. Lose the battle, win the war, that's your style."

"Indeed. And tell me, how is your recruitment process going?"

"Very well," he said happily. "I've got a witch lined up as my primary candidate, which I think could lend itself to some very interesting applications. My valravn is still on the table, too, and I've started on a yuki-onna and a vampire."

"A broad spectrum of abilities," I noted.

"Kind of have to, don't I? If all I had were bruisers, you'd be liable to pull some sort of harrier out and take them to pieces. This way, no matter what direction you go with your human, I've got something ready to handle him."

"You stand to lose something in focus, however," I said. "Your preparatory work can only go into so much detail, if you focus on four different strategies."

"Granted," he said. "But let's get serious here. I've got a pretty epic head start on you. As much time as I've had to build it, I can put, what, ten times the power into them that you can? Maybe fifteen? That's pretty hard to beat, even for you. Way I figure it, basic prep with that much of a lead should be more than enough."

"That is a valid line of reasoning," I admitted.

"Besides," he continued, relentlessly. "You only have one candidate lined up. *One*. I know how fast you can move when you're motivated, but there's only so much even you can do to surprise me with one candidate. I'll have plenty of time to counter your avatar before you can get rolling."

"That is a logical conclusion."

"So that's it, then?" he said. "You finally ready to forfeit?"

"On the contrary," I said quietly. "You will find, I think, that this game is far from over. Indeed, it is hardly begun. Now, if you will excuse me, the next step in my plan is about to unfold, and I would like to observe it more clearly."

"Fair enough," he said. "But you think about what I said. When I'm crushing your avatar's face into the dirt, remember that I would have let you back out of this."

Chapter Five

Marcus Dominic Griffin and Samantha Nicole Jackson ate at a chain restaurant located three and a half blocks from Mark's apartment. Sam's injuries were not noticed during this time; with the blood washed off, the only easily visible sign of the attack was the damaged ear, which was covered by the hat. While she did attract some looks, this was simply the result of seeing a fourteen-year-old girl dressed in clothing which was large by the standards of adult men. Some bystanders considered intervening to determine whether the situation reflected something unsavory, but were convinced otherwise by the time, the locale, and the benign attitudes of both parties.

There was little to no conversation during this meal. Neither Sam nor Mark had a concrete idea of what needed to be said, and neither was in any great hurry to say it.

Sam ate three full entrees before feeling full, whereupon she immediately began to feel drowsy. The two of them returned to Mark's apartment promptly at this point, making the journey without incident. Once there, Mark offered to let Sam sleep in the bed. Sam refused, citing a preference for the couch, and sat down. She then attempted to think of an amusing, somewhat obscene explanation which she could give to explain this preference. Before she had settled on one, she was asleep.

Sam slept for the next six hours and twenty-three minutes, which time Mark spent sitting in the same room. This was done out of a desire to be present should she wake and require assistance of some sort. While he was initially concerned that she would be unable to sleep with him in the room, it quickly became clear that this would not present any difficulty.

Sam's sleep was interrupted early in the afternoon by a knock on the door. The person standing outside knocked three times, spacing each knock by precisely one and a half seconds. This sound was not intrusively loud, but was sufficient to wake the sleeping girl. She startled slightly at this, clutching at the secondhand blanket which Mark had placed over her, but did not make any noise.

There was an interval of three seconds following the knocking, during which time Mark attempted to decide whether he should answer the door. He had just reached the conclusion that it would be wiser to remain silent and hope that the visitor left when someone spoke outside the door.

"You might as well open up," he said. His voice was in the low baritone range, with no discernable accent. "We know you're in there."

Mark glanced at Sam, who nodded slightly. He then stood and walked to the door, opening it a crack.

On the doorstep, Mark saw three individuals. The first, who had knocked on the door, was a slender man dressed in a casual suit. The man's jacket and pants were black, with the only color being a pink shirt. He had shoulder-length brown hair and a neatly trimmed goatee, and wore horn-rimmed glasses. Mark disliked this man on sight, and was not certain why. Part of the reason was that Mark

unconsciously observed a certain resemblance between his features and my own manifestation, although this resemblance was strictly coincidental.

Standing directly behind this individual was a second man. This individual was slightly taller, and wearing a more expensive suit. His was a rich cream in color, however, and somewhat more formal in cut and style. He was wearing several rings, and Mark noticed a pair of gold cufflinks as well. His black tie was pinned with a large gold tie pin in the shape of a spider. The body of the spider was set with a chunk of red amber, which itself contained a second spider in the form of a very well-preserved inclusion.

Behind this extensive ornamentation, the man's actual appearance was largely occluded. His features were average, although Mark did notice that his eyes were nearly black, and his smile did not appear to reflect an honest emotion.

The final person in the group was a female, standing behind the other two. Her appearance represented a distinct divergence from the other two. She was not wearing a suit; on the contrary, she was dressed in jeans and a tank top, both stained and worn. The skin thus exposed was a dark tan in color, and her short-cropped hair was black. The overall impression thus conveyed was that of a Hispanic woman, although Mark was aware that her skin tone could reflect a wide range of ethnicities.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Griffin," the man in the pale suit said. "May we come in?" When Mark hesitated, he hastened to add, "You don't need to worry about your guest. We won't be any trouble."

With some reluctance, Mark stepped out of the way, although he did not actually invite them in. They did not seem to notice this lack; the man in the pale suit stepped across the threshold without hesitation, followed closely by the other two.

"Thank you," he said, with a smile which reflected no emotion at all. "And hello, Miss Jackson. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Sam did not respond. She was sitting up on the couch, now, her whole body tense.

The man in the pale suit did not seem to care. "My name is Michael Berg," he said, sitting in the chair recently vacated by Mark. "These are my assistants, Jack Swift and Maria."

Said assistants were currently standing by the door. Primed by the stress of the situation, Mark could not help but see this positioning as somewhat threatening.

"What's going on?" he managed to ask.

Michael Berg did not look away from Sam as he answered. "My team is currently on the trail of a very nasty gang," he said. "I was hoping that you could provide us with some information."

"Are you cops?" Sam asked.

"In a sense," Berg said, smiling. "But we deal with a very different group of criminals than your typical police force."

Mark was not particularly wise in the ways of such things, but he still recognized that this was essentially a confirmation that they were not, in fact, police.

"Now," Berg continued, before either Mark or Sam could decide what to say. "I don't mean to rush you, but any delay at this point could be critical. So. Miss Jackson, would you please tell us what happened last night?"

"I went out to a concert," Sam said, sounding bored. "It was late when it finished. Mark was nice enough to let me stay the night here."

The man in the pale suit sighed. "I know you were attacked yesterday," he said. "You might as well just give us the details." When she hesitated, he added, "We don't require your cooperation. It just makes the process easier on everyone involved. Particularly you."

Sam considered this statement for a moment. It was clearly a thinly-veiled threat of some sort, but precisely what he was threatening her with was less apparent. At first she dismissed the statement as a bluff, but then she realized that the man in the black suit, who had been introduced as Jack Swift, had a curious expression on his face. It was not hostile, precisely, but it also very definitely was not friendly. Furthermore, she noticed that he was carrying a small knife on his belt. For her part, the woman introduced as Maria was looking away slightly, as though she were uncomfortable with the current line of conversation, but not inclined to take action as a result.

It seemed to Sam that everything indicated that these people were very serious, and had the potential to actually follow through on that vague threat. Furthermore, there was very little chance that she and Mark could stop them from doing so, even if Mark were inclined to help her, which she was not entirely confident of.

Sam deflated visibly, slumping back against the sofa. "It was some huge dog," she said, her tone sullen and scared. "A few minutes after I left the concert."

Michael Berg nodded approvingly; clearly, he was not surprised by this answer. "Was this dog around two hundred pounds? Dark, greyish brown fur?"

"That's the one," Sam answered.

"Christiansen," Maria said. She did not sound surprised.

"She's not his usual type," Jack Swift said. His voice was bored.

"No," Berg said. "Likely that the boss was responsible. I'm guessing that she was a wrong place, wrong time victim." Turning his attention to Sam, he then said, "Miss Jackson, have you contacted your parents since this event?"

"No," she said. "I think they might be dead. I got a call from the hospital right before I left the concert. That's why I left."

"I see," Berg said. "Jack, could you confirm that?"

The man in the dark suit produced a cell phone and tapped the screen several times. Less than two minutes later, he said, "Yeah. Looks like both of them were brought in last night after a car wreck, went straight to ICU. She died around midnight. He lasted until about an hour ago."

At this sentence, Sam felt the emotional reaction that she had expected to experience sooner. The knowledge that, had she prioritized it more highly, she could have seen her father before he died caused her significant emotional distress.

More surprising to her was the way in which she reacted to this distress. She fixated, quite unintentionally, on the casual, heartless way in which Jack Swift had described the situation. She could not stop thinking about this, and her reaction grew more intense as she thought about it. Within a few moments she found herself standing, almost snarling. She did not feel the pain or stiffness she had anticipated as she took a step towards Jack Swift, with no clear idea of what she intended to do.

"Take her down," Berg said, sounding entirely unworried. Sam looked toward him, wondering what he meant, just in time to see Maria draw a small metal object from one of her pockets. The object was roughly spherical in shape, with a diameter of two and a half inches, and appeared to be made of silver. Maria twisted one half of the device and then tossed it at Sam. It hit the ground at her feet and she immediately lost consciousness.

"What did you just do?" Mark asked, his voice somewhat panicky. From his perspective, it seemed that the girl had stood and begun advancing on one of them for no reason before collapsing after another of their number threw something at her. Small wonder, then, that he had begun to feel increasingly concerned regarding what they were planning and what was happening.

"Knocked her out," Maria said. "It won't hurt her."

"Indeed," Berg confirmed. "Now, Mr. Griffin, I have a few questions for her. Based upon her reaction to that toy, I'm guessing the girl is a werewolf?"

Mark hesitated, but the man had sounded very matter of fact about it. In the face of such an attitude, it was difficult for him to maintain his earlier skepticism. "Yeah," he said.

Berg sighed. "That makes things more complicated," he said. "Maria, contact the Khan for a pickup. Tell him we're buying."

"The budget won't like that," she said, although Mark noticed that she was already pulling out her phone.

"The budget can cope."

"Excuse me," Mark said. "But what are you talking about?"

"Arranging for another werewolf to come and collect her," Berg said.

"Doesn't that seem a little presumptuous?" Mark asked.

Berg sighed, in a manner which suggested that he was feeling quite put-upon. "What would you do?" he asked. "You just saw ample evidence that she's a danger to herself and others right now. None of us are in a position to help her. It's not like she's got a home to go back to, if her parents are dead. I try to avoid eliminating witnesses where possible, and our usual methods aren't suitable for this case."

"What are those usual methods?" Mark said, trying not to think about the fact that the other man had just casually mentioned eliminating witnesses. There were not many ways to interpret that phrase.

"A strong amnestic agent followed by relocation," Berg said. "Obviously that doesn't work so well when we'd be transplanting a potentially violent werewolf."

"Of course," Mark said, attempting to cover the fact that he did not have a concrete understanding of what this meant. "What about me?"

"You didn't interact with the werewolf directly, correct? You weren't bitten?"

"No."

"Then you should be fine," Berg said. Behind him, Maria was talking on her phone; her voice was hushed, and Mark could not clearly hear what she was saying. "We'll be leaving shortly, and someone will be by to pick up the girl not long after. You can just try to forget this ever happened and go on with your life."

Mark considered this. He looked at Sam, who was lying on the ground without even twitching. He could not see her injuries, but they were etched quite indelibly into his memory, making this inability largely immaterial.

It is difficult to explain just how many factors went into what happened next. There was Mark's own psychology, which, as has been stated several times, left him vulnerable to any suggestion of meaning or excitement. There was the lingering memory of how seriously injured Sam had been. There was the awareness of how difficult it would be for him to pretend that nothing had changed, knowing what he now did. And, last but not most certainly not least, there was the subtle manipulation which I had engaged in up to this point.

In essence, the groundwork was well laid in preparation for this moment.

"I feel like I should do something more," Mark said.

Berg was quiet, looking him over. "There might be something," he said at last.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Jack Swift said. "*Him?*"

"He has potential," Berg said calmly. "And we have an open slot."

"What are you talking about?" Mark asked.

"It's quite simple, really," Berg said. "As you might have guessed from what we're working on right now, my team deals with threats that other people can't handle. Rogue werewolves is only the first part of our business."

"How?" Mark asked, bewildered. "How do you *deal* with things like that?"

"Ah," Berg said. "That's where I come in. Tell me, Mr. Griffin, do you believe in magic?"

"No," Mark said. "But I could be convinced, after today."

Michael Berg smiled a broad, vaguely crocodilian smile. "That's a good start," he said. "For the sake of argument, can you assume that magic exists? That a certain proportion of the human population can influence this magic, and bend it to their will? That the powers these people gain as a result act in accordance with certain rules?"

"I think I could do that," Mark said after a moment.

"Then you're more than halfway there," Berg said. "I am one of these people, these mages. One of the rules which the magic operates by is that people like me always have a specialty. A knack, you might say, an application of magic which comes naturally. My particular gift lies in augmentation."

"You make things stronger?"

"I work with *people*, Mr. Griffin. I make them better, faster, stronger. I require certain starting materials, however. My power only has a significant effect on those who already have the potential to utilize magic themselves. You, Mr. Griffin, are one such person."

"Wait a second," Mark said. "You're saying I can do *magic*?"

"Not at all," Berg said irritably. "I said that you have the *potential*. A great many people have *potential*. Most of them, particularly those with less intrinsic power, never become aware that potential. It takes severe or prolonged stress to trigger magical ability in most people, and many individuals never experience that degree of stress. Of those who do, a significant proportion aren't capable of doing anything dramatic enough to notice. They go through life assuming that they're simply very lucky, or have a knack for something, and never recognize what they're really doing."

"Oh," Mark said. He was not sure whether this revelation was comforting or disappointing. "So I won't be able to actually do anything with it."

"I did not *say* that," Berg said, clearly irritated now. "In addition to its other effects, my work has a tendency to trigger latent magical abilities. If you join us, there is a high chance that you will develop some degree of power."

"Oh," Mark said again. He was not certain that he was really taking all this in. "So...the people who work with you...." He trailed off, unsure how to phrase his next question.

"Everyone in my team has some extent of magical ability," he confirmed. "Although, naturally, the details only come with team membership."

Mark sat down. He did not say anything for several moments. None of Berg's team seemed discomfited by the silence. For her part, Sam had not shown any signs of returning to consciousness.

"This is kind of a big decision," he said at last. "I don't know if I'm comfortable making it without more information."

"Very fair," Michael Berg said, also taking a seat. "Feel free to ask any questions you might have. As I said, some of the details are classified, but I'll tell you anything I reasonably can."

"You said you deal with threats," Mark said. "You mean people like this?"

"Werewolves make up a certain proportion of our tasks, yes," Berg said. "But most of the time that's handled internally. We only get involved when there are...complications. Other than that, we handle a great many fringe threats. The occasional vampire or troll. Primarily, however, we deal with rogue practitioners."

"Practitioners," Mark said. "You mean wizards?"

"And other types of mage, yes. Wizards are typically fairly low-threat."

Mark still felt overwhelmed and confused, but he thought he was starting to get a grasp on things. These people seemed to be vigilantes of some sort, although some of the things Berg had said implied that there was a more official backing going on. Either way, it seemed clear that they were filling some kind of police role.

"You said something about eliminating witnesses, a minute ago," he said after a moment.

Berg sighed. "Yes. It's...sometimes necessary, although I try to avoid it where possible."

"I'm not comfortable with that," Mark said.

"I would be concerned if you were. Like I said, we don't do that sort of thing unless it's absolutely necessary. I wouldn't require you to participate in that aspect of our work, if you aren't willing."

"Seriously?"

"Of course," Berg said earnestly. "Everyone has limitations. It would be foolish to expect you to participate in that sort of thing if it isn't something you can handle. The reason we're so successful is that I know how to use my team to its full potential. Everyone contributes where they can, and elsewhere we cover for each other."

"Okay," Mark said. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Joining us would require a certain amount of commitment," Berg said. "We travel frequently. The work is intrinsically dangerous, although we always operate as safely as possible. As you might imagine, much of what we do is very much secret; you would be expected to maintain full confidentiality."

Mark thought about that for a moment. None of it seemed particularly off-putting to him. He could not think of anyone he could discuss this with without being committed to a mental institution, which rendered the confidentiality agreement moot. Travel was not a problem for him, either; it was not as though there were anything in his current home city which he particularly valued. Regarding the possible danger, as discussed above, Mark did not feel content with his current life. As such, he considered trading in confidence that said life would continue for the possibility that it would provide some satisfaction to be a quite reasonable offer.

"That's fine," he said.

"Good," Berg said, smiling. "I'll provide you with a salary and reasonable operating expenses, of course. I expect you to defer to my judgment, particularly until you get some experience with our operations, but your input is welcome. Is that acceptable to you?"

Mark shrugged. "Sure."

"Excellent. If there is anything you'd like to do before you start, I recommend you do so now. I can't guarantee that you'll be coming back here again. You can meet us at our current headquarters by dark."

Mark thought about this for several seconds. He could not think of anything that he particularly desired to do before starting his new life. He felt no great need to inform his parents of his choice; it had been years since they were a significant part of his life, and he doubted that they would particularly care if he ceased communication with them. He did not care about his work; as stated above, he strongly suspected that they would continue paying him for at least a month before realizing that he had stopped performing his duties. He had no close friends to inform.

"Will Sam be okay?" he asked.

"There might be some mental trauma as a result of what she's been through," Berg said. "But physically? She should be fine. How long will she be out?"

Maria shrugged. "Another four, five minutes."

"And when will the Khan's pickup get here?" Berg asked.

"He just hit the edge of town," Jack said, not looking up from his phone. "Call it another twenty minutes to get here."

"Okay," Mark said. "Give me a couple of minutes and I'll come with you."

Mark packed a simple bag. He was not sure what to bring with him, as it seemed that they were going to provide him with equipment, and in any case he did not have anything which seemed particularly appropriate for his new career. In the end he brought only clothing and toiletries. He considered taking the statuette of an angel which had been a gift from his first girlfriend, but eventually decided otherwise. It would be unnecessary bulk, and considering how much travel it seemed he could expect that was likely not wise.

Besides which, Mark was aware that the sentimental value of the memento had long since faded. At this point he kept it more out of habit than any other reason. This seemed as good a time as any to drop the habit.

This done, he wrote a brief note to Sam explaining what was going on and what he had chosen to do. He had considered waiting for her to wake up and explaining it verbally, but decided that it would be too awkward. Even writing the note he felt uncomfortable; this was all too new and strange, and when he actually wrote it out he felt crazy.

She was still unconscious when he finished. He left the note near her, where she would be sure to see it, and then exited the apartment.

Michael Berg, Jack Swift, and Maria were standing near a nondescript black sedan parked outside. "Are you ready?" Berg asked.

Mark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah," he said. "I'm ready."

Berg smiled and opened the rear door for him. Mark hesitated briefly, and then stepped inside.

Interlude Five

"Magical augmentation," my opponent said. She was manifesting a female body again, although this one differed in appearance considerably from her usual choices. It was broad, with dull brown hair and homely features, dressed in a simple grey suit. I wondered whether it had been chosen specifically to mock my ongoing use of a single, relatively plain manifestation. "I really didn't see this one coming."

"I did not expect that you would," I said.

"It's pretty impressive," she continued. "We're talking about actual alterations here, right? It isn't just an artificial trigger?"

"No," I said. "The alterations are strictly physical. The stress of the process is intense enough to trigger development in relatively repressed subjects, but the actual trigger is natural."

"Fascinating," she said. "Rather an exotic way to advance your candidate. I had no idea they were doing this sort of thing."

"He is the only such, as far as I am aware," I replied. "Most people would hesitate to tread so near the Watchers' ban of necromantic research. They have very little tolerance for biological alteration in general, and transhumanism in particular."

"He's willing to chance it, though."

"He is employed in the Guards. That lends a fairly considerable margin of safety."

"Ah," she said. "The hypocrisy inherent in a bureaucratic government. Always reliable."

"Indeed," I said. "I would appreciate if you did not kill him."

"Why?" she said, too innocently.

"He is unique," I said. "I am looking forward to seeing what directions he takes with his work in the future. To cut short his career now would be a crime against art."

"There will be others," she pointed out. "Now that he's paved the way, the Watchers would have to allow others to do the same or admit their hypocrisy. Besides which, with the direction things are taking now, it won't be *that* long before things like this are more mainstream."

"True," I acknowledged. "However, there is little or no tactical advantage to be had from the action, in any case. He has already achieved what I brought him into the situation to do. His role in my candidate's development from here forward could be played by other agents without serious loss."

"All right," she said, pouting. It was an odd expression on her manifestation's face. "I'll leave him alone for you. You deserve some reward for surprising me like this, anyway."

"Thank you. Although I think you are downplaying your own recent achievements. You advanced your avatar another rank, did you not?"

"I did," she said smugly. "That gives me, what, six ranks on you? Seven?"

"Seven," I said. "As you knew."

She nodded. "Seriously, though, how long are you going to keep doing this? Seven ranks, man. That's too many, even for you. I could kick back and relax for the next ten years and you wouldn't be halfway to catching up. Especially with all the effort you're putting into your candidate."

"As I have often said, power is not an adequate guarantor of success in the absence of superior tactics."

"Fair enough," my opponent acknowledged. "I think we saw that in the last game. Four ranks down, but Coyote pulled out a *staggering* victory. Crushed the opposition before they knew what hit them. Wasn't even a contest." She paused, drawing it out for dramatic effect. "But, honey, there's a key difference there. You know what it is?"

"Yes, but I expect you are about to tell me regardless."

"Surprise," she said, ignoring me completely. "Coyote had an entire army tucked up his sleeve that they didn't even know about. What have you got? Not a lot. You don't even have a second candidate to pull out. I mean, props to you for this augmentation trick, truly did not see that coming, but it's still early in his advancement. That gives me plenty of time to adjust to whatever he got out of that ritual."

"I recommend you mind your history," I said quietly. "Coyote's opponent thought that he had won, also. There is more than one way to surprise one's enemy, and not all paths to victory require surprise in any case." I tipped my hat to her and collected my cane from where it rested against the railing. "Good evening."

"And good riddance," she muttered, looking back out over the pit. I noted that her voice did not exhibit the same degree of confidence it had before we spoke. From below, I heard a scream as one combatant performed a particularly successful maneuver against the other. A moment later, the blood began to flow.

Many paths to victory. The challenge, then, becomes choosing a single path which leads to the desired end. The art becomes allowing one's opponent to then herd one down the desired path, thinking all the while that it was their own choice. Sometimes the manipulation is simple, a misdirection, a key piece of information withheld at a critical moment. Sometimes it is more complex, with layers and stages. Encouragement of a state of overconfidence leads the opponent to overextend their resources. A precisely timed moment of doubt causes the opponent to question their victory, ensuring that they seek a counter. The nature of the stimulus is precisely gauged in order to engender exactly the choice one desires.

In the end, this game is all about choices.

Chapter Six

It was nearly sunset when the sedan parked in front of a small warehouse. The building did not look abandoned, but was also clearly not in regular use.

Mark exited from the vehicle and looked at the building. "This is where you're staying?" he asked.

"Presently," Berg said, stepping out and standing beside him. "We aren't planning to stay in this town very long. Our organization maintains properties in most cities, though, for any teams that happen to be passing through."

"Organization?" he asked.

Berg smiled. "Again, I'm afraid that details are only available to joiners. It will all become clear soon enough, I promise."

"Speaking of," Jack said, closing the driver's door of the sedan. "You mind getting behind wards? I'd just as soon *not* have to fight off their crew right now."

"We don't present a strong enough signal for them to home in on," Berg said.

"That's what you said last time," Jack said dryly. "Then we got jumped by Ironside."

"That was a special case. And Ironside is still occupied in Chicago." Mark noticed, however, that Berg did not continue conversation, moving directly toward the warehouse.

The door opened approximately half a second before they reached it. Standing on the other side was a man with dark skin and hair, wearing a flannel shirt and jeans. He did not seem surprised to see that Mark had joined the group, nor did the others show any reaction when he opened the door before they knocked.

"Hey," the man said. "How'd it go?"

"Could have been worse," Berg said. "We talked to the victim. Didn't get much, but every bit helps. Might have found a new recruit, too."

The other man looked at Mark, then nodded and stepped out of the doorway. Berg stepped into the building, followed by the rest. Mark felt an odd tingling sensation as he crossed the threshold, as though he had passed through an electrical field of some sort.

Inside, he found himself in a large, mostly empty room, lit by a pair of large skylights and a number of fluorescent lamps. The interior of the warehouse seemed to be a single room, without furnishings of any kind. Berg's team had clearly made some efforts to alleviate that condition, however; there were several cots scattered around the room, as well as a large desk with a laptop sitting on it. In

addition to the dark-skinned man, a tall, stocky woman with long black hair was sitting at a workbench against the wall. She did not stand as the new arrivals entered the building.

"I believe some introductions are in order," Berg said. "This is Watson, and the lady over there is Peacemaker."

"Andrea when I'm not in character," the woman said, still not turning around.

"Of course," Berg said smoothly. "This is Marcus Griffin. He's considering joining our little family."

"Call me Mark," he said awkwardly.

"When do you want to do the ritual?" Andrea asked, ignoring Mark entirely.

"Tonight," Berg replied. "She's planning something, I know she is. I don't want to give her any more of a lead than she's already got."

Andrea grunted and shoved her chair back from the workbench. "You'll want me to start doing prep work, then."

"It would be appreciated. Your stun bomb worked like a charm, by the way."

Andrea grunted again and reached into one pocket. Mark tensed at first, thinking that he was about to see a repetition of that event, but the woman pulled out a grimy twenty dollar bill. She handed it to Watson, saying, "You win. Wouldn't have guessed he'd need it. Looks pretty scrawny." It took Mark several seconds to realize that this referred to him, the first time that Andrea had done so directly.

"It wasn't for him," Maria said. "The victim was one of Christiansen's this time. Girl, maybe fifteen."

Mark was somewhat surprised when this statement got more of a reaction from Andrea than anything else he had observed. The woman blinked, then shook her head. "Damn. I'm impressed she needed the stun bomb. One night of healing?"

"Yes," Berg said, interrupting. "But she'd had a hard day. Both of her parents died in a car crash just before she was attacked. Jack reminded her of it, and she got...somewhat overwrought. One of the Khan's people picked her up. She should recover fully, I think."

Andrea nodded. "Good. Thanks. I'll have to make some more of those things."

"Wait a second," Mark said. "You made that?"

She grunted. "Yeah. Fancy taser, basically. You used the modified one, right?" Maria nodded, crossing the room to a large refrigerator. Jack was already standing nearby, holding a can of ginger ale.

"Figured so," Andrea continued. "I adjusted that one to work on the same wavelength as silver. I'd rather have something a little less stressful, but it shouldn't have hurt too much after one night."

Mark remembered the way that Sam's skin had burned on contact with the silver fork, and had his doubts. All he said, however, was, "How do you make something like that?"

Andrea had seemed to be growing more communicative, but at this sentence she became considerably less so. She shrugged and grunted, then turned and walked back to her workbench, where she began rummaging through a large wooden crate. Watson joined her after a moment, talking too quietly for Mark to overhear.

"Andrea is what my organization calls a maker-class," Berg said, seemingly oblivious to the social interplay. "That means that her magic lends itself well to building, adapting, and enhancing objects. She primarily stays here and designs tools for the rest of us to use. Her abilities are far more valuable in a support role than in the field."

"And you?" Mark asked.

Berg smiled. It was a thin, cold smile, not cruel, precisely, but very sharp. I made note of it, in case I wanted to borrow the expression later. "I'm also a maker," he said. "But I work in very different materials. Now, you didn't sleep much last night, I'm guessing."

"Not at all," he admitted.

"Right. In that case, you should try and get some sleep. You'll want to be rested for what comes next." Berg indicated a cot which was tucked into the opposite corner of the room. That section of the room appeared to see less regular use than the rest of the area, and Mark suspected it was used primarily for storage.

He did not think that he would be able to sleep under the circumstances, but he obediently walked over to the cot and lay down. The others bustled around the room, clearing up the central area of the room and pulling things out of crates, while Berg supervised their activities with a watchful eye.

Much to his surprise, Mark fell asleep only seventeen minutes later.

Mark became aware of his surroundings again after an interval of five hours and twenty-one minutes when someone grasped his shoulder and shook him gently. He blinked and sat up groggily before remembering where he was. In the dark, he was not sure who had woken him.

This confusion was resolved a moment later when he heard Maria say, "They're ready for you." Her tone was vaguely concerned, although Mark could not pinpoint the meaning of the emotion he heard.

Looking past her, he saw that the center of the warehouse had been dedicated to whatever ritual Andrea had mentioned, which would turn him into what they were. A circle had been drawn in chalk, twenty-seven feet in diameter. The chalk seemed to glow, although Mark was prepared to write that off as a trick of the moonlight coming in through the skylights.

Inside the circle, much of the space was filled with more drawings in a variety of colors of chalk. They seemed to be geometric in nature, although Mark could not follow any one line long enough to determine what the nature of the shapes were. The overall impression was of a many-pointed star, with an empty space at the center. The space was surrounded by a second circle, this one formed of wire braid.

In that circle were Berg and Andrea, both standing by a large table. A small wooden chest was securely closed and sitting on the ground beside the table. A relatively large fire burned in an iron brazier between Berg and Andrea. The colors of the flames seemed to Mark to be strange, tinged with green and violet.

"Go on," Maria whispered to him. Mark stood, feeling oddly lightheaded, and stumbled forward. He realized as he moved that he was naked, but felt no reaction to this realization.

He felt an odd tingling sensation as he stepped across the line of chalk, not unlike that which he had experienced when entering the building, and a stronger variation when he crossed the wire.

"Are you ready?" Berg asked. His voice was not loud, but seemed to Mark oddly penetrating.

"I don't know," he said. "What do I do?"

"Lie down," Andrea said, indicating the table. She was mixing the contents of two vials, both of which were vividly colored.

Mark sat on the table, then laid on his back. He was starting to feel both cold and awkward as a result of his nudity, but there was something odd about the feeling, as though it were not truly associated with him. He wondered whether they had drugged him to get him to sleep, and he was feeling the lingering effects.

"What happens next?" he asked. Lying on his back, he could not see either of them. Instead, he looked up and out of the skylight, directly into the half-full moon. He could hear the crackling of the fire, but it sounded muted, as though it were much further away than it was.

"I'm going to do my thing," Berg said. "It won't feel very good, but it won't hurt you, I promise. And it *will* make you stronger. When it feels like you're going to die, remember that. This *will* pass, and it *will* make you stronger."

Mark took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Okay," he said. "Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Nothing," Andrea said. "Just lie still. I've almost got this mixed up."

"What is it?"

It was Berg that answered him. "My magic is very delicate. If you were to move at the wrong time, it could go badly wrong. Andrea is mixing up something that will keep you from moving."

"Oh," Mark said. "I'll be paralyzed?"

"Only temporarily," Berg said soothingly. "Whatever happens, just remember that. This is temporary. It'll all be over soon."

"Ready," Andrea said. She tied off one of Mark's arms, her motions firm and swift. The rubber tie she used felt cold against his skin. He became aware that he was sweating, although he did not feel warm.

"Are you ready to start?" Berg asked.

Mark did not think that he was ready. He did not think that he would ever be ready.

"Yes," he said.

He heard a foil package tear. Then Andrea was wiping the skin of his elbow with an antiseptic pad. It smelled sharply of ethanol, and felt very cold against his skin. It went away a moment later.

"Comfortable?" she asked. Her voice was still gruff, but there was more depth to it now. He got the impression that she was genuinely asking, and momentarily he was touched that she cared.

"Yeah," he said.

"Good," she said. "Now hold still."

She stepped up beside him, holding a syringe in one hand. She was wearing blue latex gloves and a paper mask, and Mark almost laughed, although he did not know why he would think this was funny. She held his arm with one hand, and the other moved the syringe into place at the crook of his arm.

The needle slid inside his arm. It felt cold, but there was almost no pain. Rather, Mark was aware of a sense of intrusion, an acute sense that something alien was penetrating into his body. Then Andrea began to depress the plunger, and he felt something else, a sensation of pressure being exerted from within his body, rather than from the exterior. His arm began to feel cold, and this sensation moved up his arm into his chest, whereupon it slowly began to spread through his body.

Andrea withdrew the syringe. He could see, in his peripheral vision, a drop of his blood hanging from the tip. It slipped off a moment later, falling onto his cheek. Andrea set the syringe down and then taped a gauze pad over the insertion site. "Okay," she said. "Let that work for a few minutes."

Mark tried to agree, but his mouth felt clumsy, and he was confident he would mangle the words. He nodded instead, the motion jerky.

He heard a clicking noise, then a thunk, as Berg opened the chest. This was followed by the clinking of glass as he removed various implements and set them on the table. Mark could not see any of them, but he felt it when one of them brushed against his side.

He realized, at that point, that whatever Andrea had injected into him had done nothing to dull his physical sensations. He attempted to speak, in order to communicate this to them, but he was unable to do more than twitch his mouth and make a faint gurgling noise.

The paralytic agent had worked, he realized. It had worked so smoothly that he did not even notice until it had already finished its work. He was conscious, though, and not in any way anesthetized.

"Shh," Andrea said absently, watching him. "Don't worry. It'll be over soon."

No, Mark wanted to say. *Not soon. Make it end now. I can't do this.* But, of course, he could not say this. He could not say anything.

He had realized, at this point, that it was not an accident that he was not unconscious, or numb. He had put together the clues which had been provided, in the form of things that Berg had said, and Andrea's attitude. He had some idea what to expect.

He could not see her, but he heard the sound of footsteps as Andrea walked away, leaving him alone with Berg.

A moment later, he stepped into Mark's field of view. He was wearing gloves as well, although not a mask. He held a paintbrush and a small black vial. "I'm about to get started," he said. "Remember, this won't last as long as it feels, and it won't really hurt you. The markings are just a concentration aid for me. They'll wash off. None of this is permanent, except for the improvements."

This was little comfort to Mark. At this point he felt as though the others had emphasized this point so frequently that it had built up a disproportionate dread in his mind. He felt as though it could not possibly be as bad as what he was anticipating that it would be.

He was, of course, entirely correct in this estimation. It was, as he discovered shortly thereafter, considerably worse than anything he was capable of anticipating at this point in his life.

Berg stepped out of view, and Mark was once again staring up into the moonlight. There were no clouds, and he had an exceptionally good view of the moon. He looked at the lit half of the circle, and the barely-visible darkened portion, and idly wondered which was a more meaningful omen of what was to come.

Then he felt the brush touch his ribs. It was wet with ink, but felt no colder than his skin. It slipped to the side, a quick stroke of only a few inches, then made another stroke perpendicular to the first.

At this point Mark felt the first stirrings of Berg's magic. It felt odd, almost as though his skin were itchy, but more intense. Then his skin began to feel as though it had been sunburned. At the same time, he felt an ache start deeper in. The sensation was not unlike a bruise.

The brush made another stroke, a long arc that crossed four of his ribs and curved up onto his chest. Simultaneously with the movement he felt a sharper, stabbing pain as a spasm went through the muscles of his side. The ache intensified and became more strongly associated with his bones. The itching, also, became more intense, until Mark could stand it no longer and attempted to scratch his ribs.

His arm did not respond to this direction, not even in the form of a rudimentary twitch. A surge of fear went through him as he realized how utterly helpless he was.

He focused on the moon, grateful that he could at least control the movements of his eyes. The brush drew more lines, curving along his ribs and sketching a more intricate symbol on his sternum, and the pain took on new tones. The ache was there, but it intensified still further and moved deeper into his body, until it began to resemble his memories of food poisoning. The burning, itching sensation became stronger. He felt an odd twisting, as well, as though portions of his body were being forced to move without the cooperation of the neighboring parts. The brush stroked over his scapula, and the joint suddenly felt too tight, with a deep, stabbing pain in the bones.

All of this became more and more intense as the brush continued. The designs it drew on his ribcage became increasingly complex, with multiple layers. The intricate markings on his sternum were overwritten with sharper, more angular patterns. Narrow lines formed a spiral around his shoulder and then flowed down his arm.

Everywhere the brush passed, the same thing happened. First came itching, followed by burning. After this the ache started in his bones, then the twisting of muscles. All of these sensations intensified over the course of the next several seconds, and did not become weaker when the brush continued.

Mark kept his eyes focused on the moon throughout this process. It did not become easier to cope with as time went on, but he found that the pain began to seem less important than the helplessness. His own inability to move, to speak, to take any sort of action to alleviate the suffering, these things tormented him more than the pain itself.

The brush painted delicate stars on the backs of his hands, lines radiating out to the tips of his fingers, and the pain grew far worse. Every joint felt much too large, as though it were about to tear his skin apart, and there were a great many joints in his hands. It felt as though his nails were being pulled out, slowly and inexorably, and he was not sure that this impression was false. He could feel the slow movement of blood across his skin.

At this point Mark became aware of the odor of urine, and realized that there was only one plausible source for it. This, too, bothered him in a way that the pain did not. It was bad enough to be defenseless, but to be unable even to keep from urinating on himself was an added indignity.

The brush finished with his hands. There was a brief reprieve, during which he was free to focus on the ongoing pain everywhere it had touched, and then he felt it brush delicately against his clavicle. It traced the course of each bone, leaving agony in its wake, and then sketched a starburst in the suprasternal notch.

Following this it proceeded up his neck, drawing a thick line to either side of the trachea, before branching across his chin. A heavy line followed the course of the mandible to either side, followed by an angular design in the laryngospasm notch, directly behind each ear.

Throughout this process, Mark continued to stare at the moon. He attempted to keep his breathing even and calm, and was more successful than he had anticipated, as a result of the drug which had been injected previously. The pain was worse, now that it was on his face, but he felt that he was starting to come to terms with it.

At this point there was a brief pause. Then a gloved hand pressed a gauze pad to his face, wiping the tears away from his cheeks and eyes.

The skin thus prepared, the brush continued up and across his cheeks. The brushstrokes were quicker, now, not covering the skin as densely as they had on the torso, arms, and neck.

There was another brief pause. Mark heard a tearing sound but did not immediately identify it.

Then a hand deftly pulled his eyelids closed before taping them in place.

Blinded, Mark began to panic. He attempted to reach up and tear the tape away, before remembering that he was paralyzed. He forced himself to relax, insofar as that was possible, but found it more difficult than it had been. Without the ability to see the moon, he was deprived of the anchor which he had been using to stabilize himself. Blindness also exacerbated his ongoing feelings of helplessness, which in turn limited his ability to cope with the pain.

The brush then began drawing a small but very complex design on his closed eyelid. The skin began to itch and burn, as before, but now it was accompanied by another sensation. His eye felt as though it were twisting, being in some way stretched.

The pain of this was very intense, but even more so was the feeling of fear that came with it. Mark felt much more of a personal connection and a much stronger sense of possession with respect to his eyes than to his limbs. He had, in his more morbid moments, imagined what life would be like without a hand, but he had never been able to truly conceive of permanent blindness. Vision was too essential to his life and his sense of self.

As the magic took hold of his eyes, he felt an intense terror. He attempted to reach up and push the brush away, convulsively, but was once again incapable of moving even slightly. He attempted to choke back the fear and dread he felt, but failed. The feeling of helplessness rose to a crescendo, and in that moment Mark knew that he would do anything to make the pain cease, to remove that feeling of helplessness.

But there was nothing he could do. He could not move. He could not speak. He was helpless even to direct his vision.

Deprived of its usual outlets, his mind strained for something it could do to end the suffering. Instinctively, driven to desperation by the fear, pain, and helplessness, he reached for something without knowing what it was.

A moment later something seemed to break, inside his mind. The sensation was in a way even more painful than the magic being worked on him, although he could not clearly explain what that pain was.

Mark hardly noticed the pain, however, in comparison to the rush of power that followed it. It was intangible, an entirely mental construct, but it still felt cool, somehow comforting in the wake of the pain.

There was a pause, then the brush lifted from his skin. "Ah," he heard, distantly. "That's it. Andrea?"

A few moments later, he felt a tugging at his skin, hardly noticeable through the pain and the entirely new mental sensations he was currently experiencing. Then a slightly more noticeable chill seemed to run through him.

Eleven seconds later, he was unconscious.

Interlude Six

The men with guns tensed as I approached. They were standing at attention, the postures crisp, identical, and unchanging. There was an underlying stiffness, however, which betrayed the unnaturalness of the position. To the discerning eye, it was a rather inadequate guise.

Broken, both of them, on a fundamental level. I felt mild disapproval at the sight, though I did not show it. Sloppy work, unprofessional and entirely unartistic.

I did not speak to or acknowledge them as I proceeded through the door. Neither was capable of meaningful interaction, and attempting to interact with them regardless would send the wrong image. I wondered briefly whether their master might attempt to shoot me, but evidently she was more intelligent than to do such a thing.

The door was locked, likely with the intent of forcing me to wait for one of the residents to open it for me, thus giving them the advantage in the interaction and shifting the balance of power to them in negotiations. As this was not suited to my purpose, I chose to simply open it instead. The confusion as they attempted to determine how I was able to do so would be valuable in my efforts to set the right tone. Should they actually look at the mechanism, the effect would only be further pronounced.

On the other side of the door was a narrow hallway, made of concrete and unlit. Likely her expectation had been that I would be forced to stumble without lighting, making me appear weak and giving her a stronger position.

My opinion of the person I was here to meet decreased further. An amateurish mistake, giving me an opportunity of that sort. What was intended to cause embarrassing weakness rapidly becomes a point of strength and intimidation when it fails to have an effect.

I made the sound of my cane against the floor louder than it would naturally have been as I proceeded down the hallway. This was not done out of courtesy, or a desire to warn them that I was coming. Rather, I intended the steady, metronomic sound to inspire fear and uncertainty in the listeners, and allow them time to lose confidence as I approached. This would give me a better position.

The door swung open before I reached it, a piece of minor showmanship which backfired almost immediately when I failed to react with surprise. Rather, I walked through with perfect confidence, not altering my stride, as though I assumed that this was simply my due. This would cause many observers to subconsciously assume that it was.

"Good afternoon," I said as I walked through the door.

There were seventeen people in the next room, a large, poorly lit chamber. They were arrayed against the opposite wall, with one woman sitting in a large chair in front of the rest. All of them were on a raised platform eleven feet above the ground, allowing them to look down at me as I entered. I

imagine most people entering such a room would have been gratifyingly intimidated. I declined to indulge them in such a manner.

All of them were wearing masks, of varying styles. I recognized several of them regardless, though only one recognized me.

"Good afternoon," the woman said. "You know why you're here?"

"Yes," I said, neglecting to state what that reason was. "Tell me what you would bargain for, Martha Pinckney."

She flinched visibly when I said this. This was not without reason; she had gone to considerable lengths to keep her name secret, to the extent that none of the people behind her had known it. For me to so casually inform her that I knew this secret suggested that I might know many others, which was a frightening prospect for her.

She recovered quite well, however, rising slightly in my estimation. "Christiansen says that you can work miracles," she said after only a few seconds. "That one can buy anything their heart desires from you."

One of the men behind her spoke up at that. "If you're going to quote me, get it right. You can buy anything your heart desires, but it's wiser not to."

"I don't give a fuck about wise," she snapped, speaking more to me than to him. "Tell me what it would cost."

"To escape your current predicament?" I said. "You would owe me one favor, to be claimed in a manner and at a time of my choosing. In return, I would arrange a means by which you could escape your pursuers."

"And you get to decide what that means is," she said dryly. "That doesn't seem like a very good move to me. What guarantee do I have that I wouldn't have gotten away anyway?"

"I do not offer guarantees," I said calmly. "However, I assure you that if you do not take this bargain you will die in fifty-seven days. If you do take the bargain, you will live at least four days longer than that."

"Bullshit," she said. "Even you guys can't see the future."

I sighed. "There is a distinction to be made between precognition and prescience."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that an inability to foretell the future does not prevent me from knowing precisely what will happen to you without my assistance. You will die in fifty-seven days. The cause of death will be acute blood loss. Your final words will be a question. You will never receive an answer to this question. Would you like me to continue?"

She attempted to conceal her emotional reaction to what I had said, but did not succeed. "Doesn't seem to be much point," she said lightly.

"As you wish," I said, smiling. "I am willing and able to prevent this event from coming to pass. Would you like to make this bargain?"

She considered me for several seconds, then sighed. "Yeah," she said. "Fuck me. Deal."

I smiled more broadly. "Bargain struck," I said. Immediately after saying this, I vanished, more quickly than any of the observers could track.

Cheap showmanship. But sometimes even the cheapest tricks have a place.

Chapter Seven

When Mark regained consciousness, he was lying on his back on a cot, covered in a wool blanket. He was aware of his surroundings and remembered the events which had led to his losing consciousness immediately, which struck him as odd.

In all probability this rapid recognition of his present condition owed a considerable amount to the distinctiveness of those surroundings. When he woke, he was surrounded by all of the members of the gang which he had recently joined.

These individuals did not appear particularly friendly. In point of fact, they appeared to be prepared for violence. Jack Swift was holding a knife, which Mark did not think was the same knife he had been carrying the previous day. The blade was eight and a half inches long, very brightly polished, and appeared to be etched with a complex geometric pattern. Standing directly to his side, Maria was carrying a baton of the sort commonly used by police forces desiring a nominally nonlethal weapon which was nevertheless quite dangerous.

On the other side of his cot, Watson was holding a large pistol. The gun was at his side, but the tension of his posture made it clear that he was prepared to move the weapon into a firing position at a moment's notice. Standing to his right and slightly behind him was Andrea, who was holding a gun of approximately the same general shape as the pistol. It was, however, clearly not the same type of weapon; the material was much different, being a dark green metal which Mark did not recognize, and there was no visible aperture by which a bullet could exit the gun.

Michael Berg was at the head of the cot. Alone of the group, he was not openly displaying a weapon. His posture, however, was equally tense, and Mark did not doubt that he would react to any threat more swiftly and far more dangerously than any of the others.

"Hey," Mark said, then coughed. His voice felt odd, scratchy and quieter than he had intended. "Hey. What's up?"

Maria and Watson relaxed marginally at this question. The others did not. "My ritual can occasionally have adverse side effects," Berg said. "We try to be prepared. Just in case."

"Side effects?"

"It only happened once," Watson said. "But it was the kind of thing you don't forget soon."

"What happened?"

It was, again, Watson that answered him. "Christine had a really bad reaction when her powers first came online. She's recovering, though. The therapist says she's doing much better these days."

"Oh," Mark said. "So...am I cleared, then?"

"Not quite," Berg said. "I need you to demonstrate that you can actually access the magic without any unfortunate side effects."

"He's clear," Watson said. "And he's *him*."

"You *are* wrong occasionally, Watson," Berg replied. "I would rather have direct confirmation. Now, Mark. Do you remember making contact with the magic? Do you remember the *power*?"

"I felt...something," Mark said slowly. "Right before you guys knocked me out. I felt some kind of power, maybe. But I don't know how to get it back."

"That's fine," Berg said. "I can walk you through it. Close your eyes and listen to me."

Mark did so. He felt odd with his eyes closed. It seemed to him that he could still see, on some level. Faint lights appeared behind his eyelids, the arrangement too steady and organized to be a figment. They were particularly strong around the people, and further up he could see that the skylights were glowing more strongly than the background as well.

"I want you to remember," Berg said. His voice had taken on an odd monotone quality, the cadence very even. "I want you to remember how you felt before we put you under. Think about what you were feeling. Do you remember it?"

"I remember," Mark said. Recalling that sensation caused him to feel a strong, if somewhat aimless, anxiety.

"Describe it for me," Berg said.

"I felt cold," Mark said. "I couldn't move, and I felt very helpless. Then I couldn't see, and that really got to me. I couldn't cope very well with it. After that happened I started to panic, but I couldn't do anything. It felt like something tore, but I'm not sure what. Then I felt something weird, I guess it must be this power you're talking about. It felt cold, too, but in a different way, like it wasn't uncomfortable."

"Good. Now think about that feeling. Remember that rush of power. Remember the way it made you feel. Can you remember it?"

"Yes."

"That power is *your* power," Berg said. "That magic is *your* magic. Reach for it, reach for that feeling, and *call* it. Make it yours."

Mark hesitated. "I'm not sure I can."

"Listen to me, Mark," Berg continued. His voice was still monotone, still oddly cadenced, but was more intense now, deeper and slightly louder. "I am telling you that you have *power*. The magic is there. *Use it*. You made the choice to release it. That makes it yours. Reach out to that power, that feeling, and bring it to you."

A choice. Mark had not previously considered this in that light. It had been a choice, abandoning his life to join these people on the basis of almost no thought. Not the best choice, perhaps, but he had *made* it.

As one might imagine, for an individual with Mark's particular psychological idiosyncrasies, this realization was a powerful one. The idea of making a meaningful choice with long-reaching consequences was in many ways the antithesis of the aimless, drifting lifestyle which he had so deeply resented in the past.

As Mark thought about this distinction, and about the possibility that his actions over the past day had represented a significant step towards altering the personality traits which he did not care for within himself, he began to feel increasingly empowered by having made this choice, even if he had chosen poorly. He began, in fact, to approach that state of confidence which Berg had been describing.

As he did so, he again felt the surge of energy in his mind as power rushed to fill the void within him.

"Yes," Berg hissed. His voice was not monotone now, instead reflecting an intense satisfaction.

Mark did not notice this. He was preoccupied with the sensations he was currently feeling. As before, the power felt cool, somewhat akin to stepping into a pool of fresh water on a hot day. Now that he was in a somewhat less extreme emotional state, however, Mark was able to note several additional aspects to the sensation. The power felt still, in a manner which was suggestive of deliberate stillness rather than simple lack of movement.

"Is it getting darker in here?" Maria asked. Her voice was curious, and slightly afraid.

"Mhm," Jack agreed absently. "Colder, too. At least a few degrees."

"Yes," Berg said. "That's enough, Mark. Let it go. Relax."

Mark did so, allowing the state of mind which had precipitated this change to slip away. It did so readily, taking the power with it. In its absence, he felt more fatigued than before, but his mental functioning seemed improved, and he felt more alert. Sitting up, he saw that the skylights were now admitting sunlight. Based upon their positioning, he estimated this to mean that it was no earlier than noon, suggesting that he had been unconscious for a minimum of twelve hours.

"Shadow-class, then?" This was, again, Maria. Her bearing seemed more interested than that of the others present.

"Likely," Berg agreed. "And almost certainly a sector rating. I wouldn't be surprised if he can fill a cannon role, either."

"Good," Andrea said. She had produced a cylinder of matte black metal, three and a half inches long and half an inch in diameter, and was prodding it with a screwdriver. "Team needs a sector."

"Yes," Berg agreed. "Although I wouldn't expect him to fill the role that Spider did. It will take some time for Mark to find his niche in the group. Don't alter your tactical planning until then."

"Right," Andrea sounded absent, to such an extent that Mark wondered whether she had even heard him. She was currently prying at the device in her hands with an enthusiasm which he found somewhat concerning, considering what the last object he had seen had done when triggered.

"I need to make my report," Berg said suddenly. "Start working on equipment for Mark and considering tactical options. We move out in two days."

Mark opened his mouth, thinking that he would ask questions regarding the terms he had heard and instructions which he did not entirely understand, but Berg had already turned away. Within three seconds, he had left the building. Moments later, the others began to disperse. Andrea returned to her workbench, where she pulled a notebook off a shelf and began flipping through it. Maria walked to a cot, sat down, and retrieved a book from underneath. Jack Swift lay down on another cot with the apparent intent of sleeping.

"Confused?" Watson asked. He had not moved.

Mark nodded.

"I'll explain. You up for a walk?"

Mark considered this. He still felt tired, but it was an odd sort of fatigue which he had not previously experienced. Physically he felt fine, and in fact he thought that he might feel physically stronger than he had before he underwent the procedure. His exhaustion was entirely mental in nature, and he thought that physical exercise might be a wise response.

"Sure," he said.

"Good," Watson said. "Come with me."

"What did those words mean?" Mark asked as the two of them exited the building. "Shadow, sector, cannon. What were they talking about?"

"It's a system of codes we use," Watson said. "When we need to know what kind of threat we're dealing with. Shadow-class means you're good at sneaking around. Sectors affect large areas. Cannons are self-explanatory."

"What are you?"

"Seer. That means I can access and process a lot of information. Berg and Andrea are both makers, Maria is a tank, and Jack's a mover. Can you guess what that means?"

"I think so," Mark said hesitantly. "A tank is hard to kill, and a mover can get around really fast?"

"Basically. We have a fairly rounded group, all things considered. It helps that Berg's alterations make all of us stronger and tougher than we normally would be."

"I don't get it. Berg said mages have specific talents, and what he does didn't seem much like Andrea. How are they both makers?"

Watson sighed. "The categories we use are intended to give us an idea what we need to worry about. The thing to remember about a maker is that they're incredibly dangerous if you give them time and access to materials, and not that bad otherwise. It doesn't really matter what *kind* of material they need, the strategy is the same. So we put them in the same category."

"I think I get it," Mark said.

"Good," Watson replied, clapping the other man on the back. "Come on, let's get you some food. We'll have plenty of time to go over this later."

Mark spent the next forty-three days with this group of people, discovering the nature of the world he had found himself in and learning how to properly use his developing powers. During this time they traveled extensively throughout North America, passing through four major cities and several smaller towns. His adventures during this period were interesting, but largely irrelevant to the focus of this narrative, and as such will be discussed only briefly.

Mark was informed that they were attempting to track down a group of criminals referring to themselves as the Cranky Bastards, which in spite of the ridiculous name were quite dangerous. Their leader was a witch specializing in exercising control over others, making it difficult to determine how many of the members were there by choice and how many had been compelled; however, Berg's team knew that the enemy was numerous and varied.

Christiansen was only one of several werewolves in the group, and was one of the few whom they knew to be there unwillingly. Mark found it oddly comforting to learn that the creature which had mauled Sam was not evil by choice, or at least not entirely. He was not sure why this should be the case.

I monitored the situation closely during this time, but did not intervene or make my presence known. Berg and his team skirmished with the Bastards several times, particularly the half-kobold known as Ironsides, although none of these conflicts were decisive. Mark developed and exhibited some combat abilities during these skirmishes, although he functioned primarily in a support role. This was due partially to the nature of his talents, but primarily a result of his inexperience; having observed him, I fully expected that he would eventually be competent enough as a fighter to serve my purposes.

During this time he came to know the other members of the team. Michael Berg was clearly the leader, and kept himself suitably remote; while he was pleasant and approachable, there was no question that it was not a relationship of equals. Jack Swift was violent and aggressive, prone to outbursts of temper, and seldom expressed concern for the wellbeing of others. Maria was more

supportive, often acting to help the rest of the team, and was uncomfortable with the more extreme acts of violence which they performed. She often came into conflict with Jack. Andrea was aloof, more interested in her own work than in interpersonal relationships. She made it clear that she was not looking for a friend, and Mark did not argue with this.

As I had expected, he formed the closest relationship with Watson, who was the most personable of the group by a wide margin. This did go further than I had anticipated, however, verging on actual friendship. I debated stepping in, but decided that I would be better served by allowing it to progress. I fully expected Watson to die before much more time had passed, and a closer relationship would make the impact of this event greater, hopefully producing an even more beneficial response in Mark's psyche.

After forty-three days, I decided that further delays would not serve my purpose. Mark had formed the desired connections, and received the basic training and combat experience which I had placed him in this group to acquire. As such, I put the next stage of my plan into motion.

The next evening, Mark and Watson went to see the premiere of a movie. The other members of the group had been invited, but all declined. Berg and Andrea were not inclined toward such things, and I had arranged for both Jack and Maria to have other obligations on this occasion.

By the time they were returning to the hotel in which they were presently making their headquarters, it was nearly midnight. The full moon provided plentiful light, although neither required it. Berg's alterations had improved their eyesight considerably, particularly in low-light conditions.

Due to the late hour, neither man considered it surprising that the streets were largely empty. As such, they did not notice when those streets became entirely empty. Relatively few well-placed detours had sufficed to reroute traffic both vehicular and pedestrian around their location. Witnesses were undesirable at this time, for a variety of reasons.

At this time, a large canid approached them from the rear at approximately thirty miles per hour. Her name was Beverly Anderson, and she is largely irrelevant to this discussion. For the purposes of this narrative, her only salient features were that she was a werewolf, and that she owed me a significant favor in payment for my having saved her life when she would otherwise have been killed and eaten by a tribe of pixies.

A slight influence on my part ensured that Watson did not become aware of her until she was less than twenty feet behind them, allowing just enough time for him to get a good look at her before she struck him on the head.

She followed my instructions perfectly, barely tapping him. The unconsciousness that followed had nothing to do with the impact, being caused entirely by another action on my part. She then leapt at Mark before he could react, bearing him to the ground. I removed him from consciousness as well, after which the werewolf began to feed.

Interlude Seven

"That will suffice, I think," I said, approaching the pair. "Thank you for your assistance."

The werewolf promptly dropped Mark and backed away, spitting out blood. I looked at Mark, examining him. As expected, lycanthropic magic had already begun to infiltrate his body, although it was clashing violently with the power which was already there. I nudged it absently into place, helping the process along. It would have concluded without my assistance, most likely, but it would have inflicted undesirable damage in the process.

The werewolf finished changing and stepped up beside me as this happened. "Do you have any water?" she asked, oblivious to the work I was doing.

"They do," I said absently. "In the other man's pack."

She nodded gratefully and fetched the water bottle, rinsing out her mouth and spitting several times. She continued for several repetitions after the water ran clear. She then stepped up behind me. "What are you doing?" she asked, looking over my shoulder.

I was somewhat annoyed by this distraction, but it was almost certain that she would be a useful tool again in the future. Efforts should always be made to avoid alienating such individuals where possible. Thus, rather than commenting on the rudeness she was exhibiting, I said, "I am ensuring that the change takes, and making certain adjustments."

"Adjustments?"

"Yes. A typical lycanthrope would not fill my needs. What I am doing will limit the psychological effects of the condition and alter the physical manifestations."

"Oh," she said, sounding wistful. "Could you do that to me?"

"Yes. However, the adjustments would not have a strong effect so long after the initial change. There would also be undesirable side effects."

"Of course there would," she sighed as I finished my work and stood up. As anticipated, Mark was already healing; within three days there should be no physical impairment.

"Come," I said to Beverly. "They will wake shortly. It would be more convenient for both of us to be elsewhere when that happens."

She did not argue, following me without question. "Why did you need me to do this?" she asked, sounding mildly interested.

"I have a significant stake riding on that man," I said. "Lycanthropy was a natural step in his progression, and is additionally necessary for several of my other plans for him. With my adjustments, it should serve numerous purposes, with minimal side effects and few complications."

"I got that," she said. "I was asking why you needed *me* to do it. I mean, I flew halfway around the world to get here on your schedule. You traded a *major* favor for this. Why?"

"I would have expected you to know that, Miss Anderson," I said disapprovingly. "I used you because it suited my purposes to do so. More than that you do not need to know."

"And I'm not asking," she said easily. "I just paid my debt. I think I'd like to wait a while before I incur another one."

"A wise choice. You will find clothing in that building, along with a modest payment for your inconvenience. Good evening."

"You too," she said cheerfully, proceeding into the building I had indicated. "See you around."

Chapter Eight

Marcus Dominic Griffin spent the next four days unconscious. When he next woke, it was in an unfamiliar location, although the situation was very familiar. Once again, the other members of the team were surrounding him, all of them clearly ready for a violent response when he woke.

"Hey," he said muzzily, slurring his words slightly. "What's up?"

"You and Watson were attacked by a werewolf," Berg said dispassionately. "Not one of their usual people. It looks like they've been recruiting."

Mark blinked and looked around more alertly. "We were?" he asked. "What happened?"

"I wasn't hurt," Watson told him. "But you were mauled pretty heavily. You've been out for a few days."

"More to the point," Berg said, "there's reason to believe that you were affected by the attack on a more permanent level."

"You mean I'm a werewolf."

"That isn't entirely clear," Berg said, sounding more interested. "Lycanthropy can interact oddly with other forms of magic, and we've never examined how someone I've improved responds to it. Watson's analysis was inconclusive, and I haven't been able to determine the results any more clearly. At this point, there's only one way to find out for sure."

"Right," Mark sighed. "Give me some space."

As a result of his training in the past month, Mark found it comparatively easy to initiate the change. The process took slightly more than eighteen minutes from beginning to end, and was considerably less painful than he had anticipated. It was not by any means comfortable, but in comparison to the ritual he had undergone prior to being inducted into the group it was relatively mild.

One of the more obvious of my alterations to the typical progression of the condition. A painful, prolonged change would not suit my purposes. Adjusting it in this way would limit the effects, but that was not a serious problem under the conditions.

At the end of this time he stood, with understandable difficulty considering that it was his first time doing so on four feet, and looked around. The other individuals were looking at him with varying degrees of surprise and amusement. Watson and Maria were actually laughing.

"You look like a dog," Berg said in response to his clear confusion. "I don't know what kind."

"Golden retriever," Jack supplied, sounding amused. "You're a dead ringer."

Mark exhibited what he hoped was an indignant expression and vocalization, with mixed results. Internally, however, he was not entirely displeased by this turn of events, regarding it as a less unpleasant outcome than many which might have occurred.

"It looks like you're healthy, at any rate," Berg said. "Which is good. We've got the Bastards on the run now. We destroyed their operations in Chicago while you were out, which puts a serious dent in their funding. At this point I think we have a good chance of ending them entirely in the near future."

Mark whined in what he hoped was a happy and encouraging manner. The meaning was conveyed successfully, although this had more to do with context than a natural ability to communicate via canid vocalizations.

"In any case," Berg said briskly. "You should take a few days to rest, get to know your new body, and make sure there were no harmful effects. We'll plan to start getting you back into action next week."

Over the next week, Berg's team scored several major victories. Jack Swift killed Ironsides during a skirmish in Seattle, assisted by a local Watcher of no further significance to this narrative. An assassination the Cranky Bastards had been hired to carry out was foiled, which caused serious harm to their reputation, and another drug smuggling operation was shut down.

I intervened only mildly during this time, ensuring that they were provided with accurate intelligence and interfering with the Bastards' recruitment. The gang had largely served its purpose at this point, and I had no desire to drag the conflict out longer than necessary.

Mark swiftly found that he was considerably stronger than he had been previously, which, when compounded with the results of Berg's magic, made him much more formidable than most humans. He had little difficulty adapting to his condition, quickly learning how to handle himself on four feet. He had been warned that there might be changes to his personality; however, as a result of my alterations, he did not notice anything of the sort. His senses were better than they had been, but not nearly so much as many werewolves improved in that respect. This was another of my adjustments; I had little need for expanded sensory capabilities, and was concerned that they would significantly increase his difficulty in adapting.

Five days after he awoke, he was deemed sufficiently recovered to participate in the next fight. He performed adequately, killing one opponent with his teeth and debilitating several more with a combination of physical violence and magic. He was not injured during this conflict, and it was agreed by all that lycanthropy had in fact considerably increased his effectiveness in combat. Berg even considered arranging a similar event for the other members of the team, although he eventually determined that the risk was too high and the return would likely be considerably less for the others.

Five days later, the Bastards had retreated to their fallback hideout in order to recover. This location was a minimally fortified complex hidden in an isolated area of the Appalachian mountain

range, relying primarily upon remoteness and concealment for its defenses. As a result of my influence, however, Berg's team knew where this hideout was. It was thus determined that they would launch a surprise assault on the location in order to permanently destroy the enemy.

Andrea and Watson did not generally participate in field activities, being more useful in a support role. However, Berg felt that this task was important enough to merit their direct involvement. As such, all six members of the team approached the target, shortly after sunset. Mark was already in canid form, it having been determined that this was considerably better for violent purposes than his human body. The others were carrying various weapons, the details of which are not important.

Maria led as the group approached the entrance of the complex, flanked by Mark and Jack, while the other three followed at a moderate distance. Maria and Jack broke down the door with a small ram and proceeded inside.

Two human guards were stationed twenty feet inside, both of whom had the distinctive stiff posture of an individual under mental control. Mark immediately exerted his will on the area, inhibiting their vision and removing power from any alarms in the vicinity. Jack approached them and killed them both before they could react to the intrusion. None of the group detected any traps or other hazards in the immediate area, and as such they promptly continued into the complex.

Continuing onward, they encountered three additional groups of guards and eliminated them similarly. At this point they had proceeded more than halfway to the central area of the complex without any alarm being raised. I was concerned that they might be able to reach the main group of the Bastards while retaining the advantage of surprise, which went against my intentions. As such, while they were eliminating the third group of enemies, I arranged for an alarm to be triggered.

Being aware that the enemy had been alerted, they proceeded more rapidly after that point. I eliminated and removed several more human guards, in order to maintain the proper pacing and ensure that they would be able to reach the Bastards' leadership before they escaped; as has been said, I had little desire for this conflict to continue any longer.

Approximately one hour after entering the complex they reached the central area, a more heavily fortified group of rooms located approximately one hundred and fifty feet underground. The doors had been locked and barricaded, an obstacle which was removed easily via the use of explosives. This blast also killed or knocked prone the majority of the individuals on the other side, limiting the damage inflicted by the counterattack and providing an opportunity to move into the area.

Reprisal was immediate in the form of bullets and magical fire, the vast majority of which struck Maria. She was knocked down by the impact and suffered serious physical damage, but was not killed and immediately began to heal. Mark promptly removed much of the light from the other room, limiting the enemies' ability to aim, and drew away much of the power which was causing the flames.

Jack was the first of the group to enter the next room, moving more quickly than a human eye could follow. His magic adjusted how he interacted with space in an interesting and rather exotic

manner, effectively allowing him to move between two points without interacting with all of the area in between. In addition to very quick movement, this also made it extremely difficult to target him, which afforded a considerable margin of safety while moving into a hostile area.

With little to no ability to see his targets, Jack moved on a near-random path through the room, stabbing or slashing anyone he encountered. In this manner he killed four people and injured eleven others before Mark allowed the light to return as he entered the room.

On four feet he was able to move quickly enough to avoid most attacks. Proceeding into the crowd of humans and quasi-humans in the room, he jostled or tripped many of them, preventing them from aiming accurately. This, in turn, interrupted the suppressive fire being directed at Maria, providing her with a window of opportunity in which to heal and follow him into the room.

At this point, Mark became aware of a group of people in the center of the room who seemed more collected than the others. They were all wearing masks, and he could clearly see that at least one was a mage of some sort. As such, he correctly guessed that this was the leadership of the Bastards.

Jack was primarily occupied with avoiding enemy attacks at this point, and Maria had not yet healed sufficiently to be of use. This left only Mark to attack the enemy leaders, which he did. He first removed the light from the area, chilling and weakening the enemy in the process, and then charged in. He knocked several enemies over and bit two, tearing large chunks of flesh away, before being shot. As a result of Berg's alterations, the bullet failed to penetrate his skin, and he continued.

As he did so, another of them countered his magic, producing a small area of normal lighting. As a result, he could see that she matched the description of the ringleader, making her the highest priority target in this raid. In response, he adjusted his course towards her. He reached her before she had recognized his presence, leaping on her and biting.

She collapsed under his weight, bleeding heavily from the abdomen and face. "I don't understand," she said, the words easily understandable to Mark despite slurring as a result of the facial injury. "Why did you let this happen?"

At this point I removed her to a safe location, using an application of space magic esoteric enough that I was confident it would go unobserved. Watson could conceivably have recognized it, having a particularly impressive gift for observing how magic interacted with the world; however, at much the same time, I was altering the path of a ricocheting bullet to strike him in the head. As such, I felt confident that he would not notice.

At the same time that I removed the leader of the group, I also disrupted her magic, removing her control over many of the individuals in the crowd. As such there were suddenly a large number of people who were confused, disoriented, and no longer contributing to the fight. Those who had been controlled more tightly or for a longer time lost consciousness entirely. It took only a short time for Berg's team to disable or kill the others.

At this time, Mark began the process of returning to a human form, it being clear that there was no longer a realistic need for him to remain a canid. The others disarmed those of the enemy who had surrendered and herded them into one group.

"I had her," he said once he was capable of speaking. His words were slurred somewhat, and he spat out a mouthful of blood. "Tore her up pretty good. She disappeared somehow."

"Very good," Berg said. "Are you injured?"

"No, I don't think so. Is everybody else okay?"

"Most of us," Berg said. "Watson's dead. One of them shot him somehow. He should have been out of sight, but they managed to put a bullet into his eye."

Mark had an entirely predictable emotional reaction to this. As stated previously, Watson had been by far his closest friend among the group, and arguably the only friend he had ever had. For him to die so suddenly was relatively traumatic, particularly when contrasted with the cavalier attitude which the entire group had previously had with regards to the violence of their profession. To be reminded that it was not a game was a sobering experience for Mark.

The next event of note occurred approximately four minutes later, when Christiansen woke. The werewolf looked around for several seconds in an apparent panic, then relaxed. "You won," he said.

"Yes," Berg replied.

"Good."

"You're glad?" Mark asked hoarsely. "You're *glad* that you lost?"

"I didn't," Christiansen said dryly. "Never wanted this. Didn't want to sign up with her. Just keeping my people alive." He looked at the pile of corpses, which included several werewolves. "So much for that."

"How did this keep people *safe*?" Mark was incredulous, and sounded it.

"We had enemies in the old country. They were...well, people died. So I made a deal. Got most of us out." He sighed and looked at the bodies again. "Not for long. Can't save people for long."

"A deal," Berg said, latching onto that detail. "With whom, precisely?"

"Don't know," Christiansen said. "He said he'd get us out, and all he asked for was a favor. Just one." He sighed again. "Spent years in this hell, waiting to pay that, and what's he ask for? A girl. Just some girl."

"Is *that* what that was about? We were wondering. She didn't seem like your usual type of victim, and we couldn't find a clear motive for your boss to do it."

"Not my boss," he said, with a hint of a snarl. "And I don't have *victims*. But yeah, that's that. He wanted to screw with somebody, so he had me maul the girl and leave her at his door."

Mark startled at that. "That was me," he said.

Christiansen looked at him critically for a moment and snorted. "You don't look like all that," he said. "Guess there's more there than meets the eye. Whatever, he wanted you for something. Some kind of game. Said it had to be your choice, so he couldn't just *make* you do it."

Mark began to feel an unpleasant sensation at this point, as though his understanding of the world were being dramatically restructured. "This person," he said. "Is he a pale guy? Like, looks like he doesn't see the sun, ever? Wears really expensive suits? Carries a cane?"

"That's the one," Christiansen said. "You've met him?"

"Yeah. He's kind of the reason I got into all of this stuff. Kind of."

"That's how it goes," Christiansen said gloomily. "It's easier if you don't fight it. You can't win anyway." He looked at the corpses again and stood up. "I've got people to mourn. If you don't mind, I'm going to take my wolves and find something to drink."

"That's fine," Berg said. "Someone will be in touch."

"Do whatever you want," he said. "There's no winning this game anyway." He collected several other werewolves, most of whom were semiconscious at best, and left.

Interlude Eight

Four days later, I was sitting in a bare room with an unconscious woman.

A small exertion of power on my part was sufficient to alter that state. "Good morning, Miss Pinckney," I said as she began to wake.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Where am I?" Her voice was confused, although not as much so as I had expected.

"As agreed, I provided you with a means of escape," I said. "I am now requesting the favor you agreed to owe in return."

"What do you want?"

I explained it to her, in simple terms. She did not enjoy hearing what I had to say.

"This is bullshit," she said. "You tore me down. Everything I had, the money, the influence, it's all gone. And now you're asking me to do something fucking suicidal as payment?"

"On the contrary, I have no particular reason to wish you dead. I do not expect that this task will cause your death. Additionally, I am not asking, I am informing."

"And if I disagree?" she said, trying and failing to sound bold and dangerous.

"You misunderstand," I said calmly. "You *will* perform the task I have assigned to you. You are something of an expert when it comes to the use of magic to compel others to behave in a desired way, Miss Pinckney, so perhaps you will grasp what I mean when I say that there is no alternative in this matter. You *will* do as I have instructed. The only factor which remains to be decided is what condition you will be in afterwards."

"I don't understand," she said, sounding lost. "Why? Why would you do all this just to throw me away like this? Why would you be willing to break me for something so petty?"

"That, Miss Pinckney, is your problem. You think that I am manipulating you for some greater purpose, or that you have intrinsic worth. That is not the case. Everything I have done to you, giving you power and taking it away, building you up and breaking you down, has been to achieve my aims. You are an instrument I used to achieve other goals. Now that you have served your purpose, I care very little what happens to you."

"If you care that little," she said, with a shadow of her former defiance, "why are you telling me about it?"

"That is also to serve a purpose. It would be more convenient for both of us if you perform your final task willingly and go about your way. I do think that you will be able to survive and make a new life for yourself, if not one of the same extravagancy as you have grown accustomed to."

She was silent for several minutes. Then she agreed, as we both knew she would.

A harsher approach than I typically use. Then again, what I had said was true. She was a tool, and not a terribly useful one at that. There was little need to use subtle or delicate tactics with her.

All things serve a purpose. To forget that, to assign value to the thing itself in absence of the function from which that value was derived, is nearly the definition of insanity.

Chapter Nine

Following the assault on the Cranky Bastards' compound, Berg's team spent several days in rest and mourning. As Mark was the only member of the group who had not previously experienced the death of a team member, he was largely left alone to come to grips with what had happened. He was largely unsuccessful in this endeavor.

On the fourth night of this, Mark was awakened by a cool breeze and a quiet creaking noise, both of which had been produced by me. He looked around and saw a feminine figure approaching, visible only vaguely in the moonlight entering through the window. He could, however, see that she was wearing a mask, which was sufficient to inform him of the identity of the intruder.

In case there was any doubt, however, she moved closer and hissed, "You almost *killed* me," thus confirming her identity as the ringleader of the Bastards.

Mark attempted to get up and call a warning to the other members of the group, who were staying in adjoining rooms. He found himself quite unable to perform either of these actions, and indeed could not perform any physical activity. This was also the result of my action; while Miss Pinckney was experienced in the use of mental compulsions, her approach required a significant length of time to function properly, rendering it useless in this case.

"You hurt me," she hissed at him. "You almost *killed* me. Do you have any *idea* what I'm going to do to you for that?"

She was deviating from her script slightly, but it sounded appropriately melodramatic and threatening, so I allowed her to continue. It was most likely for the best, in any case; an obviously scripted speech can be very ineffective, particularly when delivered by someone with relatively little talent for such things.

At this point in time, she began approaching the bed in which Mark was lying. He attempted to stand, and once again found himself incapable of movement. The experience was unpleasantly reminiscent of his transformation at Berg's hands, which was intended to heighten the fear he felt as a result.

Shortly before she reached him, Jack knocked on the door. "Mark?" he called, just loud enough to be clearly audible. "Are you all right? I felt magic coming from your room."

The woman froze when he spoke, and looked at Mark. "This isn't over," she said to him. Her voice was not as hateful as I would have preferred, but that, generally, is the drawback of using amateur talent.

At that point, I removed her from the room as I had before, simultaneously relaxing my hold on Mark. Jack entered the door a moment later.

Twenty-seven minutes later, all the members of the team were gathered in a nearby restaurant. It was otherwise empty and the staff had been instructed to leave them alone unless their services were requested, so they felt that it was safe to speak in relative confidence. By this time all of them had been informed of the events of the night and the conversation had progressed to a discussion of what to do in response.

"It wasn't a bluff," Jack said. "Not her style." He sounded bored, and was focused more on the food than the conversation.

A considerably better actor than Miss Pinckney. But then, that sort of management is a major piece of this game. Minor roles may be played by the relatively incompetent, but more important tasks require more skilled personnel. In order to win, one must arrange one's resources appropriately.

"I'm concerned that she was able to break in so easily," Berg said. "The wards around that safehouse aren't great, but they should have been enough to slow her down. At the very least, I should have known that she was there."

"It doesn't really matter, does it?" Maria asked. "I mean, she was only scary because of her gang. Any one of us could take her in a fight."

"The problem wasn't that I couldn't beat her," Mark said quietly. "It was that I couldn't *fight*."

"I highly doubt she can maintain that degree of control over more than one person at a time," Berg said. "Maria is right. We make sure that you have someone with you and this shouldn't be a threat."

Mark shifted uncomfortably. "About that," he said. "I was...kind of thinking about leaving. I don't know if I'm really cut out for this, and then what happened to Watson...." He trailed off, clearly miserable.

As I was not physically manifest, I did not have to hide my satisfaction at this statement. I had hoped that killing Watson in that manner would shake Mark's confidence in this venture, but it had not been a certain thing. It would have been awkward if I had been required to establish a more obvious reason for him to leave the group, and would likely have required a considerable expenditure of effort and investments.

"That was a hell of a first job," Jack said. "Especially when you weren't in on this stuff before that. Maybe you just need a little time to adjust."

"Maybe. But either way, I really think I need a break from all this."

"I won't stop you, if that's what you want," Berg said. "I *would* expect you to keep all this confidential, of course."

"That's fine," Mark said. "It's not a problem."

"Maybe," Berg said. "But for you to leave certainly is problematic. You hadn't started using a pseudonym, so there's a possibility that she would be able to link these activities to your civilian identity."

"Wait a second," Mark said. "Pseudonym? None of you guys use pseudonyms."

"I told you on your first day that Andrea goes by Peacemaker," Berg said dryly. "And surely you didn't think a man with a talent for moving very quickly just *happened* to be called Jack Swift."

"Okay. But if that's a thing you do, why didn't I have one?"

"We generally consider the first mission someone participates in to be something of a trial run. And frankly, I wasn't expecting it to be necessary. Most people take several months to make any enemies, at the very least. For us to track the Bastards down so quickly, for you to play the pivotal role in taking them down, for their leader to escape and decide to take revenge on you personally...I don't think I can be blamed for not seeing this sequence of events coming."

"Fair enough," Mark admitted reluctantly. "So...what do we do about it? Do you guys have, like, a witness protection program or something?"

"Something of the sort. You're hardly the first to want out of this business," Berg said. "But that's the problem. We took down her gang, but she still has access to a major criminal network. Any identity we give you, there's a chance that she'll link it to you."

"I might have an idea for how we get around that," Jack said. "You wouldn't like it much, I don't think, but it should work long enough for us to track her down and take care of loose ends."

Mark did not like the idea. It was eventually agreed, however, that it was likely the safest option, and as it was intended to be very temporary it would likely be sufficient.

I smiled, and went to arrange the next phase of the plan.

Interlude Nine

"Do we have an agreement, then?" I asked, sipping from a glass of water.

"Just to confirm," Jack Swift said. "You want me to scare off some guy you think the boss is going to recruit?"

"I do not *think*, Mr. Swift, I *know*. And I do not want you to scare him off, per se. I just want you to maintain a certain tension, as it were. Sugarcoat the realities of your business less than your leader would prefer you do with new recruits."

He snorted. "I do that anyway."

I smiled. It was a friendly smile, slightly conspiratorial. "So now you do it on my orders. As I said, I do not expect this to be particularly difficult for you. Certainly you are capable of what I require, and based on what I know of you I suspect you may even enjoy it."

"Eh," he said. "Can't be that bad. And you can commit to what I asked for?"

"Can, and do."

"Great!" He laughed and tossed back the whiskey he was holding, coughing once afterwards. "Good stuff. I'll call that a deal. So when do I start?"

"I expect him to be recruited within the next several months. May I say, now that the terms of our agreement have been settled, that I did not anticipate what you asked for in return? I expected, based on your reputation, that you would prefer something more individualistic."

"I thought about it," he said with a shrug. "But then I figure, eh, why not? I mean, there's some safety to be had in working with a group. And it's not that bad. The money's good, I sort of like some of them, it's not all bad. This way everyone wins."

"I notice," I said dryly, "that you did not ask for weaponry for the others. Only for yourself."

"Yeah," he admitted easily. "I mean, let's get real. I don't have all that much in the way of offensive capability, you know? And sooner or later, they're going to get tired of me, or Berg's going to let something slip about where he found me, and that'll be that." He shrugged. "So yeah, I'm going to prepare for it. For now we all get some power, we all get some cash, everybody's happy. And if the situation ever goes south, I've got an ace in the hole ready."

"An intelligent analysis," I said. "Keep in mind, however, that none of these rewards will be provided if you do not succeed in your task."

"That's fine. I'll be ready." He grinned and saluted me mockingly with his empty glass. "Pleasure doing business with you. You know where to find me when it's time."

I watched the man leave the bar, pondering him. Jack Swift was a most interesting human, unusually enigmatic. Exceedingly intelligent, but disinclined to apply that intelligence to any practical task. Entirely egocentric, but perfectly capable of helping others when he felt that it was most likely to be beneficial to him in the long run.

He was quite a useful tool, used properly. I had actually considered making him the center of my strategy, rather than Mark, but dismissed it as impractical. Sociopaths are often useful, but they can be unpredictable and difficult to control, making their use as the keystone of any plan a questionable choice at best.

Still, it was interesting. And, much like Berg, I recognized that Jack Swift was an atypically useful sociopath, because he was intelligent enough to recognize the long-term value of an action that he would rather not take in the present.

An easy man to manipulate, if one understood him. He was difficult to threaten, and would respond badly to an attempt, but was quite willing to serve in order to advance his own aims. The carrot, rather than the stick, was called for when dealing with him.

A pity that Michael Berg had failed to recognize this. I expected that Jack Swift would murder his employer in the near future, an expectation which had only grown now that he had requested a weapon which might be capable of doing so quickly and without the possibility of reprisal.

A tragedy, in some ways. As I had said to my opponent, I did not wish to see Berg die. He was an artist, and I looked forward to seeing his future works of art. In addition, the man was himself a thing of beauty on some level, his single-minded focus, his juxtaposition of mercy and callousness.

Then again, it is the nature of beauty to be transient. Mono no aware, as the concept is phrased in Japan. A sense of aesthetic beauty brought on by the awareness that all things are impermanent.

To die in such a manner, brought down by his own soldier as vengeance for a thousand tiny insults and acts of arrogance, was an appropriate end for such a man as Michael Berg. A tragic end, yes, but there is a beauty in tragedy as well.

Chapter Ten

Four days later, Berg, Jack Swift, and Mark traveled to a small town in Maine. The first leg of this journey was made by airplane, an experience which Mark found distinctly unpleasant, after which they rented a van to drive from Boston to Castle Rock.

"Your dog doesn't look very happy," the employee of the rental agency commented, as they finalized the arrangement. Her tone was mild, but there was a tone to it which suggested that she did not consider this to be acceptable, and would consider taking action regarding it. A surprisingly difficult touch, to ensure that there was a passionate dog owner on shift while they were there.

But it is the small, difficult touches which elevate a task into an art form.

"We rescued him from an abusive situation just a few days ago," Jack said. He knew my instructions; lay the groundwork, ensure that the history I had invented for Mark was known. It was unlikely in the extreme that it would matter, but any contradiction was a potential weakness. A careful person ensures that even in the worst possible scenario, every weakness is accounted for and limited.

At once, the employee's attitude went from suspicious and hostile to sympathetic, with a touch of horror. I noted her expression for later use; I seldom have a need for an expression of shocked horror, but it might be valuable in the future. "Oh," she said. "The poor thing. What happened?"

"Dog fighting," Jack said grimly. "If you can believe such a thing."

"Dog fighting," she repeated, sounding doubtful again. "A golden retriever?"

Jack shrugged. "Some people will do anything. I just thank God we got them before it went any farther. Anyway, there's a family out away from the city willing to take him in. Hopefully getting out into the countryside and getting away from the familiar will help him recover."

"I hope so," the employee agreed. She moved as if to pet Mark, saw his expression, recalled that he had apparently been involved in violence, and thought better of it. "Here's the key," she said, handing it to Jack. "I hope he gets better soon."

"Hear that?" Jack said as they walked out to the rental vehicle. He was grinning; clearly, he had enjoyed himself. "You're a poor thing. Just a poor, abused golden retriever." Mark growled at him, and he laughed. "Stop that."

Berg, who had observed all of this in silence, cleared his throat. "It fits your cover," he said. "Just don't push it so far that they won't be willing to take you in. This isn't the *last* place we have to put you, but it's the safest, and probably the most pleasant."

Mark's growl trailed off, and he climbed sullenly into the back of the rented van.

It took nearly three hours to drive from Boston to the small rural town which was their destination. This drive passed nearly in silence, only occasionally broken by Jack speaking about inconsequentialities or Mark whining in discomfort, a reaction to the awareness of impending doom he felt. While he understood that their current course of action was likely to be the most practical, he could not help but feel that it would end poorly.

This was an accurate estimate on his part. In reality, this method for hiding a fugitive was less than brilliant. The likelihood of error, possibly critical error, was such that over a prolonged period it would occur almost surely. I had actually been surprised at how easy it had been to convince Berg into such a ridiculous plan. Another interesting contrast in his character; he was willing to expend resources extravagantly in pursuit of his goals, but would sacrifice much in the pursuit of frugality in other aspects of his life.

At the end of this drive, they arrived at a small house on the outskirts of the town of Castle Rock. This house is of some importance to this narrative, and as such shall be described in some detail. It had initially been built during the late nineteenth century, and while it had been remodeled extensively since that time, the basic structure of the building was largely the same. It had two cramped stories, as well as a small cellar and a smaller attic. The exterior had at one point been painted white but had since faded to dingy grey. The shingles had been leaking water into the attic for nearly twenty years at this time, although none of the residents were aware of it. There was a pervasive odor of mildew and cat urine about the place, which visitors often found repulsive but which the residents were so inured to that they did not notice it in the least.

Throughout its history, this house had been owned by the Sullivan family. For most of their history, the members of this family were farmers, obtaining their wealth by the cultivation of wheat. More recently they had instead worked in a local manufacturing plant. This plant had closed shortly before the present generation reached adulthood, causing a significant economic downturn in the area.

At present, there were four individuals living in the house. Howard Sullivan was the nominal patriarch, a middle-aged man who had never attained any career beyond that of a manager at the local liquor store. His wife Madeline taught English literature to disinterested teenagers at the town secondary school. They had two daughters, aged sixteen and twenty-four, who were respectively named Jacqueline and Victoria, and who were respectively called Jackie and Tori. There had previously been a male child of intermediate age, but he was killed in his youth by a moose. He is of no further importance to this narrative, and will not be considered further.

Of the two remaining children, Jackie was considerably the younger. She was of minimal importance, but it was possible that she would play a role. I had considered removing her to make the situation more controllable, but decided that the results would be more disruptive than was acceptable.

Tori, on the other hand, was of very significant import to my plans for Mark. Indeed, it would be fair to say that she was the lynchpin for them.

When Berg, Jack Swift, and Mark approached the house, only Howard Sullivan came out to meet them. He was the only member of the family who knew about the arrangement which had been made with Berg.

"That the dog?" Howard asked, eyeing Mark warily. He was moderately experienced with dogs, but not by any stretch of the imagination an expert; certainly he was not comfortable being around an animal which had previously been involved in dogfighting.

"This is Griffin," Jack confirmed, grinning. "Take good care of him."

Howard took the leash somewhat gingerly, the delicacy of the motion at odds with his bulky, muscular build. It was an amusing contrast, and one I made note of. This was, again, not an impression I often wish to convey, but there are occasions when it can be useful.

"The money will be deposited into your account at the end of the month," Berg said. "Provided you ensure that Griffin is treated well, as per the terms of the contract you signed."

"Don't worry about it," Howard said. "He'll be in good hands."

"I'm glad to hear it," Berg said. "Good evening, Mr. Sullivan. We will be checking up to make sure that the terms of the contract are followed."

Neither Berg nor Jack Swift looked back as they left.

Inside, the Sullivan family was eating supper. Mother and both daughters were gathered at the kitchen table, which had not been repaired nor replaced for eighteen years and was appropriately rickety. The kitchen itself was a cramped, poorly insulated space, the walls of which were lined with trinkets gathered over the course of nearly one hundred and thirty years. The meal they were eating was an overcooked pot roast, under-seasoned and generally less than appetizing.

There was one additional person present, a male human aged twenty-three years named Gregory Kitchell. He had been a friend of Tori's during secondary school, and as she had recently returned to Castle Rock after several years spent in Philadelphia, he had spent the day with her so that they could reminisce about past interactions and discuss recent events in their respective lives.

In many ways, arranging the timing of these events precisely so was the single most challenging aspect of my plan. There were a great many different sequences of events in play, and orchestrating matters so that they would all reach the appropriate conclusions simultaneously was a very delicate matter.

"What was that about?" Jackie asked as her father entered the room, Mark following obediently at the end of the leash. "Oh, hey. What's with the dog?"

"We're going to be taking care of him for a month or two," Howard said, standing awkwardly in the kitchen. He clearly wanted to sit down, and was just as clearly uncertain how to do so with Mark present. Mark quickly solved this problem by walking to the corner behind the table and lying down.

"I thought you didn't want a dog," Tori said. Her voice was very slightly accusatory.

Howard flushed. "Yeah, well. Somebody's paying us a few thousand dollars to take him in for a little while."

"Where's that kind of money coming from? This sounds really fishy." Tori's voice was now openly suspicious.

"Apparently some business exec bought him as a puppy for his daughter," Howard said, shrugging. "Somebody stole him and sold him to a dogfighting ring. The cops broke it up a week or two ago, found some kind of chip in him. The exec didn't want to have a dog around his kids when it might be dangerous, but he felt responsible for it."

A crude, clumsy cover story. But that, generally, is the most effective kind. Many people, when presented with a smooth and logical sequence of events, immediately begin attempting to find flaws in it. A strange, inexplicable, nearly incoherent story fits more closely with their experience of reality, and thus they are less inclined to question it.

"I thought it would give you something to do," Howard added, his tone a rather pitiful attempt at conciliatory. "Since I know you don't want any of the jobs you could get around here."

Tori was momentarily and visibly angry at this statement before her expression faded into gratitude. "Thanks," she said. "I mean, I...thanks. I'm supposed to meet my parole officer in the morning, but I should be able to take care of him after that."

"Wait up a second," Gregory Kitchell said. "You're on parole? Holy shit, Tori, you didn't mention *that*."

She shifted uncomfortably. "I was going to. Really. It was just, you know. Awkward."

"What did you do?" he asked excitedly. "Did you kill somebody?"

"No," Tori said, rolling her eyes. "I just...I was working at that animal shelter in Philly, right? We got this huge anonymous donation a couple years ago. And it seemed fine, so we took it, but then a month or two ago someone at the IRS told us it was embezzled from some corporation or something. I was the one that made the call to take the donation, so they charged me with fraud."

At this point, Mark was very glad to be in the shape of a canine. Had he been human, his reaction to this piece of news would have been rather incriminating. As it was, it could be written off as the response of an abused animal to raised voices, with no deeper meaning. Howard flinched away when he whined, but Tori reached out and patted him gently on the head. Her motions were automatic, more a matter of habit than a deliberate choice.

"That's absurd," Gregory said, clearly making a conscious effort to moderate his tone. "It wasn't your fault."

Tori shrugged. "That's the government for you. They couldn't prove I knew it was dirty money, so I'm not going to prison. But I'm on probation for a few months, and there's no way I could keep my job after that."

Conversation after that point was muted and essentially irrelevant for our purposes. Mark continued to feel guilty and sickened, and this was reflected in his behavior, which was subdued and clearly unhappy. This would enhance his cover; I expected that Tori would recognize his distress, and attribute it to recent abuse. As his guilt began to fade, it would be assumed to indicate a psychological recovery.

The mark of a well-executed plan is that each action serves multiple purposes. Efficiency and economy are the hallmarks of skilled strategy.

Interlude Ten

"Okay," my opponent said. "Since you're being stubborn about it, I'll bite. What the hell does he actually *do*?"

"What are you referring to?" I asked, watching an animate shadow scuttle down the street. We were in a darker recess of the Otherside, a place broken and unwanted things went to die or be reborn. A recycling center, of sorts, and a place with which I felt a certain kinship.

A misshapen, reptilian humanoid crept along the rooftop, watching the shadow as it passed. It was a predator, feasting on energy and the vestiges of life which could survive in this place rather than flesh and blood. A minor effort on my part was sufficient to cloud its gaze and turn it aside to seek other prey, while the shadow continued about its way. Wasteful, perhaps, but one must look after one's own.

"You know what I mean," my opponent snapped, her tone annoyed. She was, naturally, correct, but I was enjoying her frustration, a small but fitting recompense for the indignities she had subjected me to. "Your candidate has power, but it isn't one of the standard applications. What's he actually *doing* when he throws his magic around?"

"As you know, human magic is generally defined by a strong association with a single concept. The expressions of that concept may vary widely, leading to divergent applications of magic, but there is typically a unifying factor which relates them."

"I didn't ask for a lecture."

"You asked for an explanation," I said calmly. "I am providing it. In the case of Marcus, the unifying concept is one of *void*. His psyche is defined by absence, more than any other factor. The application which comes most naturally to him is one of removal, in which he shunts energy out of an area."

"Removal," she mused, sounding intrigued. "Removal to where?"

"I believe I mentioned a connection to the void less than a minute ago," I murmured dryly.

There was a brief pause, then her eyes widened. The expression was particularly dramatic on her current face, which was heavily tattooed with scenes of fertility rites and sacrifices. "You're shitting me," she said. "He's getting his power from the Void? Like, capital-V Void?"

"All magic derives from the same source," I said. "But yes, his connection is slightly more direct than is typical."

"That's ballsy," she said, a note of unwilling admiration entering her voice. "Even for you. Something like that...you could get in trouble for that. Breach of treaty and such."

"I consider it a remote possibility. The specific nature of his power makes it highly unlikely that it will cause serious harm to any of us. Now, if I have sated your curiosity sufficiently, I believe you have an event to be attending."

"True," she said. "And I must admit, I'm looking forward to this. It's been a while since I really did anything to advance my candidates." She nodded to me and then ceased to manifest herself.

I remained manifest in that place for some time, watching the residents go about their business. It was a fascinating microcosm, and one of the few domains I had ever been truly interested in. It was old, as well, one of the eldest true Otherside domains; even most of our personal domains were not as old as this place. The compost pile of the universe, where things no longer of use went to be repurposed.

One of the more useful domains, as well. Many of the more prevalent beings had found their start here. Danu had based her goblins on one of the earlier products of this domain's ecosystem, and I strongly suspected that the creator of the original vampires had found inspiration here as well.

I remembered again the animate shadow I had saved. A scavenger, which was not to my usual taste, but it could be easily repurposed in a more artistic form. A thought for later, perhaps, after my victory. It is important to plan for the future, after all; when one's plans end with the final move, one can easily be caught unprepared when it comes time to reap the rewards of success.

Chapter Eleven

In the weeks following their initial meeting, Marcus Dominic Griffin and Victoria Sullivan spent a significant amount of time together, averaging approximately seven and a third hours per day. Tori found relief in the feeling of competence which performing a familiar task, finding it a welcome contrast from the stresses of being named a scapegoat and forced to return to the home of her youth. Mark found a pleasant simplicity in a relationship which demanded little and involved little moral ambiguity.

In light of these statements, it should not be surprising that they developed a relatively close bond over this time. Unfortunately, brevity's sake prevents us from examining the interactions between these individuals in any significant detail; let it suffice to state that Mark felt it was the first meaningful friendship he had formed which was not mingled with violence and corruption, while Tori found it to be a refuge from a world which she had ceased to feel any great faith in or fondness for.

There remained, however, three sources of stress which tainted Mark's perception of this time as paradisiacal. The first of these was the knowledge that he had been responsible for Tori losing her job, nearly being imprisoned, and suffering the other losses which had resulted from the damage to her reputation. The second was an ongoing reaction to the violence and death which he had been surrounded by during his time with Berg and his team, akin to a mild form of post-traumatic stress disorder. The third was the memory of Christiansen's parting words, in which he had said that Mark was being used in a game of some sort. This was vague, but ominous.

It was a delicate balance. On one hand, I wanted Mark to feel happy and establish positive connections with others during this time. On the other, I wanted to maintain an edge of stress, ensuring that he did not become complacent or lose his motivation. On the whole, I felt that I had succeeded in this task.

Tori was reasonably observant, and both practiced and trained in understanding and comforting abused animals. While Mark was not in any meaningful sense of the word an animal, his body was one which she was familiar with, and many of the nonverbal cues carried over without his being aware of it; as such, her competence in this field applied. As a consequence, she was very aware of his distress, although she continued to misattribute the cause.

Naturally enough, during this time, Tori began to regard him increasingly as a friend and confidante. In many ways she recognized in Mark a kindred spirit; like her, he had been damaged by the world, punished unfairly. She took to confiding in him, sometimes spending hours discussing the trials and tribulations of her life. While she knew on a logical level that he was incapable of understanding her, that he was not intelligent and did not truly comprehend what she was saying, she often felt that he was genuinely interested, and that he was capable of understanding what she said.

She was, of course, correct in this belief. Mark was at best a mediocre actor, and quite incapable of concealing his intelligence. It was fortunate that he didn't interact with anyone else to any

appreciable extent during this time, or I expected that his cover would collapse rapidly. As it was, Tori was quite unlikely to share her suspicions with anyone for fear of being regarded as mentally unstable.

Michael Berg came to visit twice during this first month, making no effort to conceal these visits. Ostensibly, he was there to ensure that the animal was being cared for appropriately. In reality, his primary concern was keeping Mark up to date regarding his situation. The ringleader of the Cranky Bastards had proved unexpectedly elusive, and they were having difficulty finishing the job. They had largely dismantled the criminal network, and it might be safe for Mark to move into a more conventional sort of protection program, but he couldn't guarantee this.

Both times, Berg asked whether Mark was happy with his present condition, with a subtle offer that he was welcome to rejoin the group, and his assistance would be appreciated.

On both occasions, Mark indicated that he was content to remain where he was, and pretended not to notice the offer. While he was not comfortable admitting it, even to himself, he was actually quite happy. Spending all of his time in a canine body limited his choices severely, but it also limited his responsibilities, and ensured that people expected little of him. Between this, the relative safety, and the connection he was forming with Tori, he felt carefree in a way he did not remember experiencing since his childhood.

There was an odd pleasure in watching his happiness. I almost felt guilty when it came time to implement the next step of the plan.

Interlude Eleven

"This is crazy," the veterinarian said. "These numbers are completely wrong."

"Maybe it's my fault," the aide said tentatively. "When I did the blood draw, maybe I screwed it up? It was harder than usual."

The veterinarian shook her head. "I was there," she said. "You didn't do anything wrong. This dog is just messed up or something. From this blood count, it should be all kinds of sick, but it seems totally healthy."

I cleared my throat and walked into the room. "This area isn't open to the public," the veterinarian said, not looking up from the paper she was examining. "The bathroom's across the hall." Then she paused. "Wait. We aren't even open today. What are you doing here?"

"I have an offer," I said. "One I would like for you to consider very carefully."

"Is this some kind of prank?" she said suspiciously.

"Not at all. I can offer you wealth, power, fame, knowledge...the possibilities are nearly infinite. All I ask is that you not consider this particular animal too closely. Tell the Sullivan family that he is healthy, normal, and appropriately vaccinated, and then forget about any oddities you may have noticed."

"I can't do that," the veterinarian said. "It would be dishonest."

I nodded. The Sullivan family had used this veterinarian for several decades; obviously I had not overlooked her in my planning. It was not unexpected that she would be resistant to my offers.

Still, it was best to be certain. "Are you sure?" I asked. "There is nothing I could say, nothing I could offer you, that would convince you otherwise?"

"Nothing," she said decisively. "Now get out of my clinic, and don't come back."

"Very well," I said. "I wish you to know that I hold no grudge against you, nor do I take any particular pleasure in this."

A moment later, she collapsed. I caught her life and her essence, that portion of her which could imprecisely be termed her soul, as she fell; after I was finished here I would release her in the same domain in which I had recently met my opponent. She was strong-willed and intelligent, so there was a chance that she would survive that environment and be made over into something stronger.

A slim chance, perhaps, but more efficient than consigning her to oblivion. More merciful as well, although some of the residents of that place would disagree. It is not a kind environment.

"Oh my God," the aide said, staring. "Is she...dead?"

"For all practical purposes, yes," I said. "Unfortunate. Would you be willing to take the bargain I offered her? I could place someone else here, but it would be a smoother transition if it were someone who already works in this clinic."

"I'm just an intern," he protested. "I can't...I couldn't...*do* this."

"I expect the licenses will not be an issue," I said. "And regarding your lack of experience, I would not be concerned." I raised one hand and snapped my fingers, exerting my will slightly. A spirit manifested itself in my hand, taking the form of a small bird, and I directed it to fly to the young man. It did so, perching on his left shoulder and preening. To his credit, he barely flinched from it.

It was an unusually straightforward bargain, in which the favor it requested and the task I required as payment were one and the same. It received embodiment, until it was destroyed and returned to incorporeality. I received a servant to perform this task, which was minor but possibly important.

"If you are unsure what to do for an animal, ask the bird," I said. "You will find its advice to be good."

"This is crazy," he said weakly. "Like, I'm going crazy, right? That's what's happening?"

"Not at all," I said with a smile. "And, I assure you, if you do as I ask, there are more rewards in your future. All you have to do is overlook a single abnormality."

He looked at the dead veterinarian, and then at me. "I'm making a deal with the devil, aren't I? Those stories were real. I'm making a deal with the fucking devil."

"No, Mr. Hickert. You would have gotten a better deal from the devil. But I keep my word, and I can be good to those who serve me."

He took a deep breath, and then nodded. "Okay. Fine. I'll do it."

I smiled again, and vanished, taking the corpse with me. It would be a simple thing to relocate it to her home and allow the authorities to explain it away as a case of heart failure.

Chapter Twelve

Events proceeded in the manner described for the next thirty-seven days. While Tori spent hours every day in Mark's company, she did have other responsibilities, and occasionally she wished to be alone. During these times, Mark took to either napping or going on long, rambling walks through the countryside.

It was during one of the latter episodes that I next approached him. I allowed the tapping of my cane to cause a sound as I approached, although it would not normally have done so on the relatively soft soil which it was impacting. This was partially to engender the sense of impending doom which I often used the metronomic sound to engender, and partially to ensure that he was not caught by surprise. This would create a friendlier, more pleasant atmosphere, which suited the direction I intended to take our relationship next.

I had expected him to try to outrun me, but he did not, instead stopping and waiting for me to reach him. An interesting choice; I wondered if it indicated an acceptance of the inevitability of my approach.

"Good morning, Mr. Griffin," I said as I walked up beside him. "Are you having a pleasant day?"

As has been stated, Mark was at this time in his canine form nearly constantly. As such, he was not capable of vocalizing normally. Thus, all of his communications during this conversation were purely mental in nature. For the sake of simplicity, however, they will be represented here as speech.

"Thanks for asking, asshole," he said.

"There is no need for that sort of language," I said disapprovingly. "And yes, I can hear what you are thinking."

"Of course you can."

"I am glad that you understand. Now, I imagine you are wondering what I am doing here."

"I know what you want," he said, interrupting me. "You want me to play in some game. Help you win."

"I see," I said. "And may I ask how you know this?"

"None of your business," he said, his voice rough. "Because I know something else, too. I know that you can't *make* me do what you want. Not this time."

"I have never made you do anything," I said gently. "All I have ever done was make an offer. I recall you being quite eager to accept those offers."

"And you knew damn well what would happen," he said. His voice now resembled a growl; clearly, spending so much time as a canid had brought out the werewolf in him. The alterations I had made to the condition should have limited the change which being in that form for a prolonged period would cause, but there are limits. "Was anything that happened really my choice, or were you behind it all?"

"A more difficult question than you realize. But it was always your choice. As I said, I have never forced you into anything."

"That's fine," he said. "Because this time? This offer? I'm saying *no*."

"As you wish," I murmured. "But, Mr. Griffin, I think that you should perhaps think this through before you commit to anything. I would consider carefully whether you truly wish to dissociate yourself from me before you make this choice. I advise you to do so, and ask yourself whether there perhaps I have given you certain things that you would rather not lose."

"You're trying to blackmail me?" he asked.

I sighed. "No, Mr. Griffin. I am informing you that your choices have *consequences*, and those consequences are not always what you might wish them to be."

We walked for nearly a minute with the tapping of my cane against the ground as the only sound. "I'll bite," he said at last, when I had very nearly decided to proceed without waiting for him to say anything. "What happens if I say no?"

"I would no longer be able to use you as my candidate, and would likely be forced to surrender this game," I said calmly. "At which time you would be returned to the condition in which I found you. You would be a human again, largely without magic, although I would provide a life of relative comfort and moderate wealth in exchange for the inconvenience. You would remember little, if anything, of what has happened since we first spoke, and those you have met would not remember you."

"I see," he said after a long moment. "I couldn't negotiate the terms at all?"

"No, Mr. Griffin. These terms are established in the ground rules of the game. If either player admits defeat, the actions they have taken to advance their candidates are undone. Insofar as that is possible, of course, and there are a great many details and niche cases which are covered in those rules, but your case is rather straightforward."

"Damn you," he said. "You have a way of taking choices that should be easy and making them pretty goddamn hard."

"Yes," I said, smiling. "You might say that is the essence of my job description. There is no great hurry, however. You have, oh, let us be traditional and call it a year and a day in which to decide. If you have not done so by that time, I will reject you as my candidate and announce my surrender." I turned and walked away from him.

"Wait," he said. "How will I tell you if I decide?"

"I believe the traditional posture to call on God is on one's knees," I said, not pausing. "And I do consider myself a traditionalist, Mr. Griffin. Have a pleasant day."

Interlude Twelve

"You want me to put some girl on probation for taking a donation?" the judge said dubiously. "I'm not sure I can make that happen. Is that even *legal*?"

"I do not know, Mr. Hardie, nor do I particularly care. Issue the orders, and I will ensure that they are not questioned."

"You don't get it," he said. "We aren't talking about a little thing, here. This is the kind of thing that gets judges *crucified* in the media. If word gets out that I put a pretty girl on probation for taking care of abused animals...." He trailed off and shook his head. "Man, I don't even want to think about that."

"You misunderstand me. When I say that I will ensure that your instructions are not questioned, I mean that they *will not be questioned*. No one will comment on them, and the media will not publish any reports on the topic."

"You can do that?" he asked dubiously. "And get me a seat on the district court of appeals?"

"Yes," I said, with a crocodilian smile.

"Christ," he said, staring at the paper on the desk in front of him. "And she won't be worse off for this? You're sure?"

"Absolutely. She might resent it in the proximate term, but eventually I am confident she will be happier for this event."

He was silent for a long moment before sighing. "Fine," he said. "Do you have, like, a contract that I'm supposed to sign in blood or something?"

"Not at all, Mr. Hardie. Your word is sufficient for me, and I hope that mine is enough for you as well."

"Fine," he said again, extending his hand for me to shake. "I'm going to Hell for this, aren't I?"

"Very possibly," I said, shaking his hand. It was a firm handshake, confident without being aggressive; I had spent several years practicing that handshake. "But Hell is distant, and your future is bright. Do as I have asked, and you might rise high indeed."

He nodded, his expression resigned. "I know," he said. "Now get out of my office. I have work to do."

I smiled and left.

Chapter Thirteen

I left Mark well alone for the next several months, intervening in events only to the extent that was necessary in order to maintain his cover. I was confident that he would reach the conclusions I desired him to, given time, and there was no benefit to be had in rushing things.

The relationship between him and Tori continued to develop in much the same manner. The only particularly notable incident during this time occurred while the two of them were walking through town. A local man who she had known during school approached her, making unwanted sexual advances. Mark retaliated by biting him on the thigh, although he did not do so with anything approaching the zeal he was capable of; no serious harm was inflicted on the man. He was, however, somewhat surprised by the intensity of feeling which precipitated this action.

There were several witnesses to this event, and it was generally acknowledged that his response had not been entirely unwarranted. Even the bitten man refused to press any kind of charges, and as such it was not deemed necessary to take action regarding Mark's behavior. It was, however, a reminder of his history, which served to further alienate the other members of the family; they regarded him as a threatening unknown. The end result was that he was even more tightly connected to Tori, while being isolated from other members of the community.

The entire thing was, of course, orchestrated by me. Mark's response was entirely predictable, and intensifying the relationship between him and Tori was essential to my plan.

The next truly meaningful step in that plan occurred three months and eleven days after my conversation with Mark. It also happened while Mark and Tori were walking, but in a very different location; the previous event had been in the town proper, while this walk was in the uninhabited forest near the Sullivan house. There were trails for hiking and bicycling in the area, but they were largely unused, and generally Mark and Tori did not encounter others there. On this occasion, a minor effort on my part ensured that they would not; this stage in my plan required privacy.

Mark had been aware that Tori was unusually subdued, but had no clear idea of what the problem was. It was typical, in such cases, that she would wait until they were alone before telling him about what had happened. Thus, he was not surprised when she walked to the edge of the path and sat on a small rock, and he readily lay down on the ground beside her.

"Greg killed himself the other day," she said. She sounded somewhat lost, and very alone; it was a good voice, and one which I made note of. It can be useful to play the victim, on occasion. "I don't know if you remember him," she continued. "He was there the night you got here, but I don't think you saw him much after that."

Mark whined and pressed closer to her. She laughed unconvincingly and petted his head. "It's okay, Griffin," she said, her tone soothing. "It's okay. I'm just sad, is all." She laughed again, although it sounded almost more like a sob. "It's funny, really," she said. "I didn't even know him all that well. It's

just that he was my only friend from high school. And then the people I met at school, or working at the shelter, most of them don't want anything to do with me anymore. With Greg gone, I'm alone."

I was impressed by Tori's display of emotion, which was in itself a remarkable statement. For a moment, I almost regretted killing her friend.

Mark whined gently again, and she reached out and patted his side. "I know, Griffin," she said. "I have you. But I don't know how long that's going to last. I mean, theoretically your owner will want to take you back at some point." She shrugged. "And you're a dog. Humans need other humans, too. Even I know that."

Once again, there was a very significant choice before him. It was, as it were, a turning point, a moment in which a single choice determined the course of his future. And, as with other such choices, I had ensured that there were a great many influences pushing Mark in the direction I intended for him to take. There was the intensity of his relationship with Tori, and the natural sympathy he felt for those who were lost and alone, cast adrift in the world. The lackadaisical nature of his introduction to the supernatural had prevented him from grasping the importance which many of its residents placed on secrecy. The very specific form of lycanthropy I had arranged to give him had removed him from humanity only slightly, while still instilling the same pack instinct.

All of these things taken as a whole meant that Mark's choice in this moment was, essentially, a forgone conclusion. He took several steps away from Tori, lay down on the ground, and began to change.

Having practiced, and with my adjustments, it was relatively easy for him to change shapes. It required only nine minutes, and inflicted only minimal pain upon him, leaving his mind relatively clear. When he had finished, he stood, staggered to the side, and fell before standing again. This was to be expected; at this point, it had been several months since he adopted a human form. It would have been deeply unusual for him to exhibit no impairment to his physical dexterity upon doing so again.

"Okay," Tori said, watching this. "So...I'm dreaming, then? Or hallucinating?"

"No," Mark said. "This is real."

"Well, sure," Tori said reasonably. "But that's what you *would* say, right? If this was a dream? So I can't just take your word for it."

"Are your dreams usually this weird?"

"No," she admitted. "But that doesn't rule out the hallucination thing. I mean, I don't *feel* crazy, but that doesn't mean much."

"You're not crazy," Mark said, before pausing. "Well, you're a little crazy. But it's a good kind of crazy, not like a hallucinating crazy."

"Okay," she said again. "So...what the hell is going on, then? Did I, like, eat some funny mushrooms without realizing it or something?"

"No. I'm a werewolf, sort of."

Tori stared at him momentarily, then began giggling. "No way," she said. "You turn into a *golden retriever*, for chrissake."

"Thus the sort of," Mark said dryly. "Although technically domestic dogs are a subspecies of wolf, so it still applies."

"Oh," she said. "Um...so if this isn't a dream, do you think you could maybe put some clothes on?"

Mark looked at himself and blushed. I smiled to myself and ceased to manifest in that area. Things were proceeding well, and I had arrangements to make elsewhere.

It was very nearly time to commence the endgame.

Mark and Tori talked for the next several hours, covering many of the topics one might expect. Mark was open and honest regarding his reasons for being there, although he spoke in generalities and did not violate Berg's confidentiality. Tori remained skeptical, largely convinced that she was hallucinating, but I anticipated that would last a matter of days at most.

As anticipated, Mark did not mention me, or the fact that his status as a werewolf might be very temporary.

Timing was becoming increasingly difficult now, as the various aspects of my plan entered their final stages and aligning the time frames became more delicate. As such, the next phase of this one began sooner than I would have preferred. I would rather that the relationship between Mark and Tori had at least several weeks to adapt to this development, possibly even more than a month. Other events had proceeded more rapidly than anticipated, however, and thus it was only eleven days before Berg visited the town of Castle Rock again.

As before, he approached openly and was welcomed by the Sullivan family. He noted the connection between Mark and Tori, but only in passing; as has been established, he was not strongly invested in Mark's personal life or happiness, and had invested this much in his welfare only for the purpose of maintaining his own reputation. As such, he did not pay sufficient attention to note the intensity of the relationship, and did not guess that Tori had been informed of things she should not have.

After conversing with the Sullivan family, he approached Mark to converse in privacy. "We got her," he said. "Tracked her down to Halifax, of all places. Jack took her head off, and we got her records, everything she was using to manage her network. We're tearing it up by the roots."

Mark barked in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. With the months of practice he had had in imitating a canine, his meaning was much clearer than it had been the last time he interacted with Berg.

"You should be safe now," Berg added. "I've got a decent set of fake IDs for you in case she put something in motion before we brought her down, and enough money for you to get established again. Assuming you don't want to come back to the team, of course. We recruited a decent cannon up in Nova Scotia, sorcerer with a thing for ice, but she could use some help with ranged support."

Mark considered everything that had been said for several moments before barking again. His meaning this time was only marginally less clear.

Forty-three minutes later the two of them left Castle Rock.

Interlude Thirteen

"I don't get it," my opponent said. "You're resigning? After all this?"

"No. I am announcing my surrender at a specified future point, if and only if the contest has not been resolved by that point. There is a distinct difference."

She waved one hand carelessly. "A year, now, it's all the same. What I'm asking is *why*?"

"I would expect you to know that by now," I said.

"I do. You're doing it because you get some advantage from doing so. The question is what that advantage is." She regarded me for a moment. "Put that together with what you told your candidate, and...you wanted to apply pressure?"

"Obviously. Time pressure is likely to produce the series of choices I am trying to arrange."

"You could just lie to him," she said dryly. "No need to *actually* resign."

"I appreciate a challenge," I said, smiling. It was not a smile I use often; too openly predatory for most purposes. "And lying is unartistic."

"Have I ever told you how cute it is that you actually follow that rule?"

"To my memory, you have done so seven hundred and twenty-nine times."

"Ah. Well, there we go, then." She was quiet for several moments, watching the slow dance of the trees around us, and when she spoke again her voice was quiet, almost pensive. "I'm still surprised you even challenged for this, you know," she said. "This sort of thing...it's not something you've ever expressed all that much of an interest in. You're more about *individuals*."

"I do generally work on the personal level," I admitted. "But I have been considering branching out for some time. Perhaps a new medium is what I need to advance my art." I shrugged, although the movement was not a good fit on this body; it had not been intended for such an unsophisticated gesture.

"Maybe. Do you have something in mind?"

"I have thought about it," I said. "Certainly I have some plans for what I might do. What about yourself? Are you planning another race of monsters?"

"I *might* not," she said defensively. A moment later, she said, "Yeah, probably so."

I shook my head. "Why do you even bother? The others will hardly allow you to *keep* them. No more than any of the others you have made."

She shrugged, the motion considerably more fluid than my own. I noted the gesture; it might well be useful to me in the future, as it was just fluid and graceful enough to appear slightly inhuman, without being overtly so. "My monsters might not last long, but they'll upset some plans before they go. Break some of the others' toys. Maybe even some of the *big* toys."

"And that is enough for you?"

"Most days," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm not about making big plans, or long-term schemes. Not like you. If something makes me happy for a little while, why *not* do it?"

"I suspect that this is a topic on which we will simply have to agree to disagree," I said. It was one of many; my sister and I had never gotten on so well.

"That's fine," she said, shrugging. "Maybe next time, you can show me what you were thinking of. The *artistic* side of things."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe this time. The game is not ended yet, after all."

She laughed, and ceased to manifest herself in that place.

Chapter Fourteen

Five days after Berg visited for the last time, a young man arrived in the town of Castle Rock, having moved out from Chicago. He explained, on the frequent questions when he was asked the reason for this emigration, that he had felt a need to get away from the city, and a cousin of his had visited the town several years ago. She had been vocal in her recommendation, and upon seeing it he understood why.

I felt a certain pride at how smoothly he lied. I might prefer more subtle means of deception, myself, but there is always a certain pleasure in seeing your creations prosper.

It was generally agreed that Mr. Mark Griffin was a pleasant young man, and while several of the older residents were convinced that there was something suspicious in his having moved from Chicago to Maine, these concerns were largely dismissed in the face of his polite and friendly demeanor.

Similarly, it was not seen as strange when he and Victoria Sullivan almost immediately became friends. They had both lived in large cities recently, and it was felt that this made it quite natural that they would relate well to each other while living in a rural environment. When they began dating openly ten days later, it was not remarked upon to an excessive degree. The residents of the town did not find it suspicious, although there was some jealousy among the younger females; Mark, as an attractive young man from out of town, had attracted considerable interest.

To the best of my knowledge, no one in Castle Rock connected Mark to the dog Tori had been taking care of. As discussed, he had been isolated from the residents of the town; very few of them had been aware of his name. On the rare occasions that someone noticed that Mark's family name was the same as the dog had been called, Victoria laughed and said something vague about synchronicity.

During this time, it was not entirely clear where Mark derived his funding from. He did not have a job in the town of Castle Rock, and Victoria also had no clear source of income. When pressed, he said that he worked on the Internet and changed the subject. Occasionally he would disappear for a few days, explaining these as business trips to meet with clients.

This was seen by some as further evidence that he was involved in some sort of shady business or organized crime. Those who were suspicious would likely have been surprised to learn how accurate their suspicions were, although Berg operated largely within the law. Mark had made it clear that he was only willing to participate on short-term missions, as he was not willing to be away from Tori for long periods. Berg had initially resisted this, but when it became clear that Mark was not movable on this point, he had conceded the argument.

The next significant moment in Mark's life came after another month. Tori had just arrived at the apartment they were presently sharing, having returned from another meeting with her parole officer. "Jesus," she said, slamming the door behind her. "I can't believe these people."

"What happened?"

She sighed and collapsed on the couch next to him. "They found out I was being paid to 'care for an abused animal,'" she said, gesturing sarcastically to emphasize that the reference to him as an abused animal was false and amusing to her. "Told me that it wasn't *quite* a violation of parole, since I wasn't doing it as part of a nonprofit, but they're extending the term for another two months anyway. Christ, I hate these people."

Mark hesitated, then placed a bookmark in the novel he was reading and set it on the table beside the couch. "About that," he said. "Victoria...there's something I need to tell you."

"How bad is it?" she asked immediately.

"What makes you say it's bad?"

"You called me Victoria," she said dryly. "Of course it's bad. Now spit it out."

Mark took a deep breath and then said, "It was me. I was the person that sent that money to the shelter. I'm the reason you lost that job."

Tori regarded him for several moments and then said, "You're not joking, are you?"

"No."

"But...why?" she asked, sounding more confused than anything.

"I was working at a company," Mark said, looking away from her. "Somebody'd been stealing money from them, and there was a bunch of money in accounts under my name. I didn't know anything about it, and I was scared...I didn't want to go to jail." He shrugged. "Someone offered to make the problem go away. I didn't realize anyone would be hurt by it. I never meant to hurt anyone."

Mark was not looking in her direction, and as such had no warning before Tori embraced him. "It's okay," she murmured in his ear. "I know you didn't mean anything bad to happen. I love you, Griffin. It's okay."

Mark hesitated briefly, then returned the embrace.

In that moment I knew what choice Marcus Dominic Griffin would make, and so, I suspected, did he.

Five days later, at three in the morning, Mark found himself unable to sleep. He lay awake in bed, Tori sleeping peacefully beside him, and thought about the choice I had presented him with.

Nine minutes later, standing in the bathroom, he made his choice. He knelt, somewhat awkwardly, the tile uncomfortably hard under his knees. "Okay," he said. "I'm cracking. There's a burden

on my mind, and I cannot bear it any longer. So hurry up already, because I'm calling your bluff, motherfucker."

"Good evening, Mr. Griffin," I said, manifesting directly behind him. To his credit, Mark did not startle. "And may I say that it *is* a good evening."

"It's night," he said, standing. "So how about it? You going to try and sell me on your deal?"

"Not at all, Mr. Griffin," I said, smiling. A minor effort on my part made my voice louder than it sounded to him, disturbing Tori in the next room. "I would hardly have thought it *necessary* for me to sell you, as you termed it, on a deal so obviously in your favor."

"Yeah," he said. "Here's the thing. You said I lose all this if you lose your game, right? But from what I've seen, the amount of resources you've put into it, you *can't* lose. Whatever you're doing, it's valuable enough to you that you've thrown away favors that you were sitting on for *years* to win. No, not even to win, just to have a *chance* at winning. And if you're willing to invest that much in it, there's no way that you're going to just throw it away to screw me over. You've *got* to have another plan if I don't work out, because you aren't the type to put everything on one horse."

Mark was breathing heavily, and while he was attempting to cover it, I knew that he felt a certain degree of fear. I smiled at him, and said nothing.

I did not have to wait long. "Mark?" Tori said, only a moment later. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, dear. I'll be out in a minute."

"On the contrary, Mr. Griffin," I said, almost purring. There is a certain value to be had in a voice which sounds so self-satisfied that it convinces the subject you have already won. "I think she has a right to know about this. Do you not?"

There was a brief pause before the door opened. When it did, Tori immediately hit me in the chest with an aluminum baseball bat. My ribcage, which was relatively weak, crumpled under the impact, leaving a sizable dent in my chest.

I looked at it and sighed. "Really, Miss Sullivan," I said. "Do you not think this is a little abrupt?" I reached down and took the bat from her unresisting fingers, setting it gently on the floor. A moment later my chest expanded to its normal shape, and I tugged my suit coat into place.

"What's going on?" Tori asked again, her voice weaker now. "What is this thing?"

"I am a friend of Mr. Griffin's, Miss Sullivan, here to present him with an offer."

"He's an asshole," Mark said. "Some demigod or something, who wants to use me as a playing piece in a game he's playing. He wants me to risk my life fighting for him, I think."

"Not at all, Mr. Griffin. You would be in no danger of death for serving me."

He snorted. "Yeah, right."

"I do not lie, Mr. Griffin," I said, my voice very cold now. "I do not deceive. I have never been less than honest with you. There is no danger of dying associated with becoming my avatar. You might be harmed, you might be changed, you might not resemble your present self at the end of your service. But you would not die."

"What happens if he doesn't?" Tori asked. "Work for you, I mean."

"I must have an avatar within approximately seven months, or I will forfeit the game," I said. "In that event, your lives will return to normal, as they might have been without my interference. Mark would be human, with little to no magic, working as middle management in the company he was at when I first approached him. You would be the manager of the animal shelter in Philadelphia, with no criminal record."

"And we wouldn't remember each other." Mark sounded understandably bitter.

"No," I said. "Nor would either of you remember any of the events surrounding recent happenings in your lives. They would be replaced with a framework appropriate to the history invented for you, and your mind would grow to fill in the gaps."

Tori nodded. She did not look surprised. "Is there any chance we'd wind up together again?"

"It is conceivably possible. But it would be no more likely than any other two random individuals meeting and forming a relationship."

She took a deep breath and nodded again. "You said you needed an avatar. Does it have to be Griffin?"

I smiled. "No, Miss Sullivan. It does not."

"I'll do it."

"Wait," Mark said. "Tori, baby—"

"Don't 'baby' me," she snapped. "Look, Griffin. It has to happen. I'm not willing to lose you. He said that it won't kill me."

"But it might *change* you," Mark said. "That's almost *worse*, coming from him."

"Maybe," she said, staring at me. "But I'd rather this change than the other one. Hurry up already."

"You agree, then? You will take this risk for the sake of the one you love, knowing that it could lead to your own doom?"

She nodded tightly. "Yes."

I smiled and retrieved a roll of parchment from a pocket of folded space, along with a small knife. To them it would appear that I had produced them from thin air. "As you wish," I said, holding them out to Tori. "Sign at the bottom. In blood, if you please."

She looked at me for a moment. She kissed Mark. Then she took the knife.

Interlude Fifteen

Nine days later, I stood beside Tori on a vast field, a hundred leagues on every side. On the other side of the field my opponent stood beside her own avatar, a lean, hungry-looking man.

She had settled on the witch, in the end. As I expected.

"Remember what I have shown you," I murmured in Tori's ear. "How to protect yourself with the power I gave you. Remember, we are fighting the long game."

She nodded, her expression nervous. She had never been a fighter, and nine days is not enough time to change that. But she was well equipped, and she had taken to the powers I allotted her as well as I had expected.

A horn rang out, the sound loud and piercing, and I moved to the side of the field as the battle commenced. I was joined by my opponent. She was in a martial form, appearing as a great serpent akin to a dragon. A pointless piece of showmanship; both of our avatars were aware of the powers we wielded, at least in the most general sense. They knew that I was no less dangerous in an expensive suit and carrying a cane than she was as a dragon.

"You really caught me off guard," she commented to me, as we watched her avatar begin moving across the field. Mine was content to remain where she was, waiting. Her shield was braced against the ground, as was her spear. "Switching avatars at the last moment? Ballsy. But I'm not thinking you've got much of a chance. Doing it like that, you couldn't actually advance her, so you're basically just working with a plain human."

"She has a very different suite of abilities than the other would have," I commented. "Something requiring a different strategy, perhaps."

My opponent smiled smugly, the expression somewhat odd on a dragon's face. "That's why I built my avatar for flexibility," she said. "He can adapt on the fly, change a lot of his powers on the spot. I was expecting you to do something like this, after all. Get me to commit too heavily to one plan and then pull the rug out from under me."

"Yes. I know."

We watched in silence as her witch neared Tori and began moving to attack. He attempted to approach more closely, but was fended off by the spear. A thrown knife was deflected by the heavy shield she was carrying. Flames washed over her but were turned aside by the protective barrier around her. Where she was scorched, a small exercise of power was sufficient to heal her wounds.

"Better on the defense than I was guessing," my opponent commented.

"Yes. Her personality is very much a protective and nurturing one. It lends itself very well to defensive applications, and healing."

She nodded, watching the battle unfold. More strikes were made, and turned aside. Tori's counterattacks were clumsy, however, and the witch dodged them easily. Nine days truly is not long enough to produce a combatant.

After perhaps half an hour, my opponent said, "It isn't going to work. She's not doing any damage, and he only has to get lucky once. She can't hold him off forever."

"Yes. I know."

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, Mark woke up as usual. For a moment he thought that it had all been a dream. Then he found a notecard on Tori's pillow, neatly folded, which read "It was not."

I am not above a moment of humor, when it serves my purposes.

That day, Mark went to church for the first time in several years. As might be expected of a rural town in Maine, the most prominent religious institution was a Catholic church which was nearly as old as European settlement in the area. Mark sat through Mass, and then continued to sit there as the church emptied. The church officials regarded this as simply a man deep in prayer, and declined to disturb him.

When he was alone, he knelt on the floor, resting his head on the back of the pew in front of him. "Okay," he said. "You got what you wanted. I get it. I wasn't expecting it to be like this, but okay, I get it. And I want to throw out there that I think you're a *total asshole* for doing it like this, but whatever, I guess you don't care."

At this point Mark became aware that he was speaking more loudly than was likely appropriate, and forced himself to calm down. "The thing is," he said, "there's something we weren't talking about. What if you *lose*? What if she does this, gives up her dream job and *changes*, whatever that meant, and you still lose? What happens then? What happens if she sacrifices all this, and it's for *nothing*?"

"It sounds like you have some problems," an unfamiliar voice said. Preoccupied as he was, Mark had not even noticed the approach of another person. "Do you want to talk about them?"

Looking at the source of this voice, Mark saw an elderly priest regarding him kindly. "No," he said dully. "That's fine. I'm not really *into* all this anyway," he said, gesturing at the church. "I can just go."

"If that's what you want," the priest said gently. "But don't think you have to. Everyone needs someone to talk to, sometimes."

"Even if I don't believe in your god?" Mark asked.

"Especially then." The priest sat on the pew. "Have a seat," he said. "Tell me what's wrong."

Mark did so, although he kept his gaze focused on the floor. "It's kind of a complicated story," he said.

"I have time."

Mark nodded. "Right," he said. "So...this is confidential, right?" He paused, and then laughed. "Ah, hell. It hardly matters."

"Maybe," the priest said. "But it is confidential."

Mark nodded again. "Okay. So...I'm not sure where to start. I guess the best place is back at the beginning. I was working at some company, back in Chicago, it's not important who they are. Anyway, I got laid off, and somebody offered to get me my job back if I did favors for them."

"Criminal favors?"

"Not exactly," Mark said, shrugging. "I mean, I guess, yeah. Technically it was corporate espionage, but nothing major. I guess the easiest way to think about it would be that they were organized crime. Something like that."

"I think I understand," the priest said.

"No, see, that's not the problem. After a while I did some things that I maybe shouldn't have, and there were people who weren't happy with me. So I had to come out here as part of, like, a Witness Protection program. And, you know, the crazy thing is that I kind of *liked* it. You wouldn't think so, coming from Chicago, but it's...nice here. Simpler, I guess."

The priest was silent.

"I started spending time with Victoria Sullivan," Mark said.

"I know her. I know her family."

"Of course. Anyway, I really like her. Maybe I love her, I don't know. I don't really know what that means. But I was *happy*, you know? It's like, all my life there was something missing, and I was starting to finally see what it was, I was feeling like maybe I could find it."

"What happened?"

"Those people I mentioned, the organized crime?" Mark said, his voice bitter. "They found me. They wanted another favor, just one, but it's a *big* one. The kind of thing that could get me in a lot worse trouble than just spending a while in jail. I told them no. They started threatening me, saying they could take the *good* things I'd finally found and take them away." He swallowed, his throat feeling tight. "Tori agreed to do it. Trying to protect me."

"Ah," the priest sighed. "I think I see why you're upset. You feel like you brought her into something bad."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. It's like, she's the first thing that ever really made me *happy*. And I wanted to be something good for her, too, and instead I did *this*." Almost without thinking, Mark punched the pew in front of him, leaving cracks in the wood.

The priest did not seem to notice. "It can be hard," he said. "Seeing the right thing to do. Sometimes we just have to have faith that it will work out in the end." He clapped Mark on the shoulder

and stood. "Do the best you can, son, and trust that it will be enough." He started to walk away, and then paused. "It looks like you dropped something, there," he said. "Don't forget it."

Mark watched the man walk away, and then looked at the floor. There was a scrap of paper by his foot which had not been there when he knelt down. When he picked it up, he found a plane ticket to Oslo in his name.

Mark seemed to hear the priest's words again. *Sometimes we just have to have faith.*

He nodded to himself and left, taking the plane ticket with him.

Of all the individuals I had worked with to arrange this plan, I think I respected the priest the most. He was the only one who did not ask for anything for himself in return for his help.

Mark had no difficulty taking the plane to Oslo. He brought only minimal baggage: a change of clothing, a few toiletries, and some weapons he had been given by Andrea which would not cause alarm in the airport.

Arriving in Norway, he found a bus ticket in his pocket. On the bus, he made his way to a small town on the coast, whereupon he saw a ferry pass in the street. The ferry took him to a small island, where a handful of paths led into the forest. One of the paths had a lit candle at the small shrine marking the trailhead. Following that path, he found himself in a clearing.

"Okay," he said. "What now?"

"Wait," I said, without manifesting myself.

He nodded, clearly not surprised, and sat down with his back against a tree. A few moments later, he was asleep.

When he woke, I was standing in the clearing, next to a large iron chest. "Good morning, Mr. Griffin," I said. "Did you have any difficulties on the trip?"

"No," he said, regarding me warily. "What are you doing here?"

"Making you an offer," I said. "Miss Sullivan just entered combat with my opponent's avatar. She is holding her own, thus far, but she is considerably less powerful than he is."

Mark nodded again. "What do I need to do?"

I gestured at the chest. "You will find equipment here," I said. "Arm yourself, and wait. It will only be a short time, now."

He approached and opened the chest. "You have got to be kidding me," he sighed. "These are useless."

"No, Mr. Griffin," I said quietly. "They are symbolic. Symbols have a very real power, and I would suggest you think carefully before you reject what these items represent."

He looked at me, startled. "Oh," he said. "*Oh.*"

I smiled. "Yes. Now, if you would be so kind, I have matters to attend to elsewhere. When the portal opens, go through, and you will find the opportunity you have craved."

Interlude Fifteen

Tori fell to one knee, her spear falling by her side. She was breathing heavily, and there were cuts and burns on her face and hands.

My opponent's avatar approached warily. He was clearly tiring, but did not appear injured.

"This is it," my opponent said to me. "Are you willing to concede yet?"

I smiled. "No. Not yet."

She nodded, unsurprised, and signaled her avatar. He raised his hand for the final blow, the earth buckling and groaning under his feet as he drew power from it.

A slight effort of will on my effort was sufficient to move this aspect of reality closer to another one, opening a channel through the Void to allow passage from one to the other.

My opponent and her avatar both paused, clearly surprised, and turned to look. A moment later Mark stepped through the portal.

I smiled as I saw their reactions. He was taller than he had been, nearly seven feet in height. The symbols Michael Berg had once painted on him stood out starkly against his skin, and his eyes were those of a werewolf. He carried an oversized sword, and had manacles around his wrists and ankles. Short lengths of chain hung from the manacles, broken off only two and a half feet from the manacles.

He was wreathed in darkness that was more than natural, especially thick around the blade of the sword.

"No way," my opponent said. "You couldn't have."

"On the contrary," I said cheerfully, watching as Mark picked his way over to stand by Tori. The witch threw a handful of fire at him, but it was absorbed harmlessly by the darkness cloaking him. "Someone who utterly rejects their patron, who refuses to serve them but agrees to take up the power in pursuit of their own goals, is eligible to become a Dark Knight under the rules. It is an uncommon track to advance one's avatar on, as it is difficult to arrange and often inconvenient, but it is very much a legal track."

"But you already *have* an avatar!" she exclaimed, rounding on me with surprising grace considering her size.

"There is nothing in the rules which prevents one from having multiple avatars," I said.

"But you only have so much power to invest in them."

"And, due to the increasing rewards at higher levels of investment, it is generally more valuable to only maintain a single avatar," I agreed. "But under the right circumstances...well, let us see what happens, shall we?"

The witch drew power from the earth again, but Mark exerted his will, sapping the energy from the area. The witch staggered to the side, startled by the sudden weakness in his muscles, and Mark leapt at him, swinging that massive sword wildly. My opponent's avatar was barely able to doge away in time.

"You see," I said mildly, as my opponent stared at the action, "you invested your resources in versatility. In making your avatar able to adapt, to respond to any sort of threat. I, on the other hand, invested in *specialization*. Miss Sullivan is protective and nurturing, and as such she is able to heal, to defend. I provided powers to her which are in accord with that personality. Mr. Griffin, on the other hand, is aggressive, empty. He is not unlike a berserker, although his anger is more internalized. Between that and his connection to the void, he is extremely optimized for purposes of debilitating and damaging his enemies."

As we watched, her avatar landed a strike on Mark. Bones broke, but the attack had clearly done less than anticipated, and Mark's counterattack was devastating. The witch dodged the sword, but the trailing length of chain struck him on the head, sending him staggering back. He shook his head, trying to clear it, but could not. I knew that the void enveloping Mark had *taken* something from him, drawing it away just by contacting him.

A moment later, Tori stepped up beside Mark, pressing her hands to the broken ribs. When she removed them, the damage was gone.

"Your avatar could handle either of them, individually," I continued, relentlessly. "Against Mr. Griffin, he could focus on mobility and counterattacking, wearing him down. Against Miss Sullivan, his greater offensive capacity would allow him to win eventually. As it stands, however, he cannot focus his abilities on either one long enough to succeed. He cannot attack Miss Sullivan powerfully enough to penetrate her defenses without leaving himself open, and he cannot protect himself against Mr. Griffin without effectively removing his ability to harm either of them."

"You bastard," she whispered to me. "You magnificent *bastard*." She looked at me, grinning. "You actually pulled it off. *Damn*."

"You concede, then?"

She looked out at the field. Her avatar was on the ground. Mark was standing two feet away, sword raised, still wreathed in the void. Tori was on the other side of my opponent's avatar, holding a spear to his throat.

"Yeah. I concede."

Epilogue

"Well, then," I said, somewhat exuberantly. "It is done."

Mark looked at me suspiciously, then lowered his sword. We were currently standing in a field outside of Castle Rock, where no one would see us by accident. "That's it, then?" he said. "We won?"

"Yes, Mark, we did. I believe you will already be feeling the absence of my power from your body."

"Yeah," Tori said. "I do."

I nodded. "I have provided you with a certain degree of magic," I said. "As a parting gift, one might say. You will not be able to do the things you have learned, in the past days, but some gift for healing and protection will remain."

She nodded.

"So what happens now?" Mark asked.

"Nothing, Mark," I said. "You are a work of art, a wonderful story I have told the world. But it is the nature of stories to have *endings*. This is yours. From here forward, your choices are your own."