



CONSUMED

A BUREAU STORY

KIM FIELDING

CONSUMED

A BUREAU STORY



KIM FIELDING



Tin Box
— PRESS —

Copyright © 2023 by Kim Fielding

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Art: Reese Dante <http://www.reesedante.com>

Cover content is for illustrative purposes only. Any person depicted on the cover is a model.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[The Bureau Of Trans-Species Affairs](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kim Fielding](#)

CHAPTER 1



ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST

Pennsylvania

August 1994

Conrad Becker should have known better.

Correction: he *did* know better.

He'd certainly been warned during training, and he'd listened carefully and taken copious notes in his spiral-bound notebooks. He'd studied those notes. When he'd undergone the final round of exams, he'd been able to faithfully recite every word of every rule he'd learned. And this had been one of the Big Rules, one of the obvious ones: *Don't enter unidentified risk situations without backup.*

Duh.

Yet less than a year after he completed his training, his Bureau badge still all shiny and new, here he was. Chained. Naked. Dying.

“And nobody's going to rescue me because I went in without backup. Nobody even knows where the heck I am.”

A skull, lying nearby on the stone floor, chuckled silently. The darn thing clearly found Con's situation pretty hilarious. It probably appreciated the entertainment, considering it had sat inside this cave for goodness knew how long with only a

bunch of other bones for company. By comparison, Con's suffering was a laugh riot.

He turned his head away and groaned, not sure whether he was delirious from fever or simply losing his mind. Either option seemed a decent alternative to focusing on the agony of his wounds. On the grimness of his fate. On the pure stupidity that had put him here to begin with.

"I figured it was no big deal," he continued. Con's throat was dry, so he cleared it a few times but he didn't shut up. Talking felt important, even with no living person to listen. "Bureau gets reports all the time of monsters in the woods, and it almost always ends up being a fox with mange or some guys doing a meth cook." Con's boss had assumed that this particular assignment would end up as nothing but paperwork, which is why he'd sent his most junior agent, solo.

"But it's not Chief Bettaglia's fault I ended up here. I was just supposed to talk to some of the locals and try to figure out if there was anything worth pursuing." *Worth sending in the big boys*, Con had thought wryly at the time. So when he'd arrived in Podunk, Pennsylvania, and four different sources had reported seeing something humanoid lurking among the trees, Con had decided to take a look for himself. At the very least he figured he'd have a nice bust to hand over to the goons at the DEA.

Pride goeth before destruction. Yep, Con could recite Bible passages too—that was thanks to his parents rather than the Bureau—but this one hadn't done him any good either.

When Con rolled his head to look at the skull again, the movement hurt—and the skull was still laughing. But now it felt as if the two of them were sharing a joke, so Con laughed too. It sounded like someone gargling gravel. Maybe whomever the skull had once belonged to had also succumbed to the sin of arrogance.

Or maybe it had been some poor guy just out for a hike, thinking vaguely about bears or snakes or ticks but not having the faintest idea that he might get eaten by orcs.

“Orcs!” Con exclaimed to the skull, which thought that was funny too.

They didn’t call themselves orcs. At least, probably not. Nobody knew what they called themselves, actually, or where they came from, or really much else about them. Just that they started showing up a couple of decades ago in widely scattered locations, and they appeared humanoid and seemed intelligent and for the most part kept to themselves.

Except when they attacked and ate people.

“I heard that someone at the Bureau started calling them orcs after the ones in *Lord of the Rings*. Which I understand were not very nice characters.” Con had never read the books. His parents had believed that fiction was a lie and therefore sinful, and when Con grew up and escaped them, he hadn’t had time for pleasure reading.

He shifted a little on the ground, moaned, and sighed. “I guess that’s one of my regrets—that I didn’t stop to have some fun. I mean, all that studying obviously didn’t do me much good, so I might as well have taken a weekend off now and then. I could’ve tried drinking and drugs to see what all the fuss is about. I could’ve—I *should* have—tried sex.” He sighed again, and this time it came out in a painful shudder.

“I hope you didn’t die a virgin,” Con said to the skull. And even in his confused mental state, he couldn’t bring himself to say the rest: *I hope you didn’t die unloved*.

And then he moved again, and this time the pain was too much and he grayed out.



Water on his face woke him up.

He instinctively opened his mouth and swallowed what he could, and nothing had ever tasted so good or so sweet.

Then Con opened his eyes and wished he was still unconscious.

Six orcs loomed over him. It must have been nighttime, because no light came in through the distant cave opening, but each of the orcs wore some dimly glowing thing on a chain around their neck. They talked quietly, their sounds like grinding gears and lispy snakes, and of course Con couldn't understand a word.

They were built more or less like tall, muscular humans, although their skin was a mottled brownish-gray that probably gave them excellent camouflage among tree trunks. As far as Con could tell, they were hairless. Their eyes had no whites, just large yellowish irises with vertical pupils, like lizards; their ears were large and pointed, like cats; their noses were somewhat snubbed and upturned; and their wide mouths were full of very sharp teeth. Con's parents would have assumed they were demons, but Con had seen demons—twice—and they didn't look anything like these orcs.

The orcs were shirtless, and two of the six had slightly rounded breasts that might have meant they were female. They were all shoeless, revealing large, long-toed feet with thick claws that matched the ones on their fingers. They wore pants—or maybe they were more like thick leggings, made of a fabric that shifted colors, chameleon-like, to match the surroundings.

Now they crouched around him, silent and staring.

Con tried to move away, but even if he hadn't been firmly restrained at ankles and wrists, he wouldn't have been capable of more than a feeble crawl. His entire body was now one giant knot of agony, with extra-sharp pains in his face and legs and chest, and the sensation of a deep pit in his hungry belly.

"Stop staring," he rasped. "Leave me alone."

They didn't listen; not that he'd expected them to. He had no idea whether they even understood him.

On top of his pain and hunger and fear and despair, there were additional stupid layers of shame and humiliation. Since early childhood he'd been taught that nudity was wrong—that he should avoid looking at his own body and should certainly never let anyone else see him unclothed. "Except your wife,"

his father had said, but he'd looked unhappy even about that. And now here Con was, naked as the day he was born, lying in his own waste, spread-eagled like an obscene offering.

Con couldn't tell whether he was blushing, because his skin felt alternately ember-hot or icy cold from the fever. His wounds were badly infected, adding to his overall reek. Not that the orcs seemed to care. They leaned over him, watching.

Then one of the orcs said something. He might have been addressing Con, since the orc looked intently into Con's eyes while speaking. And it was probably the delirium, but Con thought he saw empathy in that gaze, as if the creature wanted him to understand that he was sorry for his plight.

"Then let me go," Con said.

The orc responded with more words in his own language. Then he leaned back a bit, broke eye contact, and spoke again. More loudly this time. It sounded like a command.

All six orcs crouched lower... and bit.

Two on each leg and one on each arm, and the fresh agony cut right through the established pain, making Con howl. He wanted to be brave and stoic, he really did, but he was being eaten *alive* and it hurt and he was terrified and he didn't want to become just another pile of bones waiting for the next victim to arrive.

The black wave of unconsciousness was a mercy.



More water in his face, but this time Con could barely swallow, and he didn't bother to open his eyes. The pain was still there, mostly as a throbbing ache, but it seemed less important somehow. As if it belonged to someone else. His hunger was gone too. He felt fuzzy or floaty or maybe both, a flesh balloon tethered to life by a single weak thread.

Tattered memories floated by like clouds. The living room in his childhood home, where paintings of Jesus gazed down at him sternly and his mother's cross-stitched Bible quotes

reminded him he was a sinner. A pretty dark-haired boy named Marcelinho, who'd worked with Con on a highway road crew and whose shy smiles suggested he wouldn't mind some private time together; Con had never been brave enough to pursue that. The classroom at the Bureau's East Coast HQ and the stacks of notebooks that Con had filled with his careful script. The first human corpse he'd seen, a homeless man who'd been drained by a vampire. The studio apartment in Arlington, with gay porn mags tucked under his mattress even though nobody else ever visited there.

Oh God. The magazines. Once the Bureau figured out that Con was dead, someone would empty out his apartment and surely find his somewhat worn copies of *Honcho* and *Blueboy* and *Men*.

As if dying full of orc bites wasn't bad enough.

Con forced his eyes open.

Only a single orc squatted beside him. The orc didn't have one of those glowing things around his neck, but since it was daytime, Con could see well enough. The creature held something small and metallic in one of his hands, and Con instinctively flinched, assuming it was a weapon that would finally finish him off.

Instead the orc whispered something in his own language as he touched the metal thing with one finger—and the chains at Con's wrists and ankles clicked open. The orc seemed to be waiting for something, but all Con could manage was to blink in confusion.

“Go.” The accent was thick, but the word unmistakable.

Con almost laughed.

After another moment or two of silence, the orc muttered something, stood, and scooped Con up, settling him over broad shoulders in a fireman's carry.

The agony of movement was unbearable.

The last thing Con saw was his friend the skull, still laughing as the orc bore Con away.

CHAPTER 2



BUREAU EAST COAST HEADQUARTERS

Washington, DC

September 1994

The nurse clutched her clipboard tightly against her body and glared. “You refused physical therapy again this morning.”

“It’s not therapy. It’s torture.” Con pretended to watch the wall-mounted TV, which was, ironically, showing *General Hospital*. Luke and Laura were hiding from mobsters.

The nurse, Jill—who was excellent at acting like a disappointed parent even though she wasn’t much older than Con—made an impatient noise. “PT is necessary if you want to climb out of that bed and get on with your life.”

Con made a face. He had no life to get on with. His days with the Bureau were over, his face was a horror, his body would never work right no matter how much he suffered through PT, and he had no marketable skills. His direct supervisor—*former* direct supervisor—had stopped by the previous week and suggested that Con might find work in a call center. Con pictured himself spending the rest of his life trying to sell fireplace cleaning services or informing people that their insurance wouldn’t cover a medical procedure, and he’d almost cried.

Maybe it would have been better if he’d died in that cave.

“Self-pity doesn’t help,” said Jill.

“I don’t care. I’m really good at feeling sorry for myself. It’s one of the few things I excel at nowadays.”

Jill huffed and made a note on her clipboard. “I’ll be back after lunch, and you’re going to PT then even if I have to drag you there myself.” She stomped out of the room before Con could protest, leaving him alone with the stupid TV.

Con had been assured that the little hospital here at HQ had all the latest and best equipment and a top-notch staff. All of that was likely true. But his room was bare. White walls, white floor, white bedding. No window. No cards or flowers from friends or family, mainly because he had no friends and he hadn’t spoken to his family since he was eighteen. He could roll his bedside table so that it straddled the bed, which was handy when he ate. Most of the time, the table held a water pitcher and cup, a Tom Clancy paperback, the TV remote control and, on a shelf beneath the tabletop, a plastic urinal.

Maybe PT would train him to make it to the bathroom on his own. Now, there was a lofty goal.

Con picked up the book, stared uncomprehending at a page for the hundredth time, and threw it across the room. His arm strength was awful, so the book didn’t even land with a satisfying thud.

His bills were paid for. He knew he ought to be grateful for that much, at least. Because he’d been wounded in the line of duty, he’d pull a small payment for the rest of his life. Not enough to live off of, but something. Or the Bureau would pay for him to go to college, which would be great except that Con had no idea what he’d study. As a kid he’d done okay with his education, but only because his parents had homeschooled him and he’d been exceptional at taking notes. And as his recent experience had demonstrated ever so clearly, there wasn’t much connection between neat printing in notebooks and managing in real life.

He’d just sleep, then. It wouldn’t solve any of his problems, but they’d temporarily slip away. He’d been sleeping a *lot* lately, enough to worry his doctors.

In fact, his eyes were closed and his mind poised just on the precipice of unconsciousness when the door whooshed open, bringing the unexpected scents of cigarettes and booze. Con blinked fully awake, ready to scowl at a bureaucrat demanding signatures on yet another meaningless form.

Instead he discovered a man smiling down at him, as if Con were a delightful discovery.

The stranger was somewhere in his fifties or sixties, his conservative gray suit straining against his bulk. He wore a hat—possibly a fedora, although Con wasn't sure—like a guy in an old movie, but even as Con watched, his visitor removed the hat, revealing thin strands of white-gray hair.

“Salvation Becker, I presume?”

Con bristled. “Conrad. My name is Conrad Becker. Or Con, that's fine too.” Although he'd been going by his middle name since he reached adulthood, the first name his parents had saddled him with still showed up now and then.

“My apologies, son.” Despite his words, the man didn't look apologetic. On the other hand, he wasn't visibly repulsed by the bandages and scars, which was something. Con still couldn't stand to look at his own reflection.

He waited for the man to explain himself, but instead the guy took a metal flask from his inner jacket pocket, unscrewed the cap, and had a long swallow of the contents. God, was he a doctor, and was he going to start poking at Con while drunk? Con tried to shrink away, but he couldn't really go anywhere. He reached for the call button, his finger hovering over it, just in case.

Perhaps a drunk doctor was his punishment for refusing to go to PT, in which case Con was in trouble.

“My name's Herbert Townsend, son.”

In the pause while Townsend tucked away his flask, Con remembered where he'd heard of him before. “The Bureau's West Coast chief?”

Townsend beamed. “That's right, that's right. I'm pleased to learn that you know of me here.”

He might not be so pleased if he knew what people said. It was rumored that Chief Townsend was terrifying and possibly insane. That he'd been in charge of his region since the thirties, which would mean he must be pushing a hundred by now. That he possibly wasn't human. And also that his agents managed to keep things pretty much under control even though the West Coast was a wild place for monsters.

Con cleared his throat and shifted his legs, which hurt. "Is there something you need, Chief Townsend? I don't—"

"Just a little chat. Tell me, how are they treating you?"

"I'm.... The medical care here is really good. I was almost dead when I arrived, and now...."

"Now you're most definitely alive, which is preferable. Yes."

Preferable. That was one way to put it. "Sir, I'm not—"

"Tell me, son. Why did you join the Bureau?"

"I was recruited."

Townsend snorted softly. "Yes, I've read your file. You were working on a road crew when there was a collision between a tractor-trailer and a bus. You ran onto the bus and helped the passengers evacuate. You continued to reboard the bus and carry out the injured even when the vehicles were engulfed in flames. And you also instructed the rest of your work colleagues in how to provide assistance. Very heroic."

When Con shrugged, it wasn't with false modesty. He'd never felt as if his actions had been that extraordinary. "I was just there at the right time. And I'm pretty strong—I *was* pretty strong—so it wasn't that hard to help people out." In fact, his memories of the entire event were cloudy. He didn't remember actively deciding to help, and at the time he hadn't been scared. It was just instinct and adrenaline.

"You saved over two dozen lives that day. And when Chief Bettaglia heard about it, he determined you were a good candidate and offered you a position with the Bureau."

“Sir, with all due respect. If you know all of this already, why are you asking me?”

Townsend widened his grin. “I know why you were recruited, but that’s not what I asked. What I want to know is why you agreed to join.”

Oh. Con considered saying it was because he had been twenty-three with a GED and few marketable skills, because road work was always too hot or too cold, because the Bureau paid much better. But those reasons, while accurate, weren’t the whole truth, and he had the feeling that Townsend would know it. “I felt like maybe I could... make a difference. Do some good in the world.” Oh man, that sounded stupid.

But Townsend nodded. “Indeed. You may no longer use the name your parents gave you, but that doesn’t mean your original name isn’t apt.”

Suddenly Con was incredibly tired, and his body ached. The doctors had weaned him off pain meds to prevent him from becoming dependent, but the hurt remained. Probably always would to some extent, according to the frank discussion he’d had with one of the docs.

“I’m not going to save anyone anymore,” he informed Townsend wearily.

“You believe you must have physical strength to be of use?”

“I’m sure there are plenty of people who can accomplish all sorts of things with their brains. I’m not one of them.”

Townsend laughed. “Really? You’re ready to dismiss your potential so easily? I’d say that a person who was raised with strict religious dogma while isolated from nearly everything else and who still managed to build a life for himself—*by* himself—at a very young age is someone who’s capable of accomplishing a great deal.”

“Look, sir. Did you come all the way from California to give me a pep talk so I don’t sue the Bureau or something?” That seemed unlikely, but Con couldn’t come up with another explanation for this visit.

“No.”

“Well, good. I built a life for myself because I was strong enough to do heavy work on the road crew. And when I got a big break, a chance for something more, look what I did. I screwed it up.”

Seemingly unperturbed, Townsend took out the flask again and repeated his little ritual. Con wondered what it would be like to get drunk. He could have had unlimited booze once he escaped his family, but every time he'd seriously considered trying it, he'd heard his father's voice. *Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.* Maybe when Con got out of the hospital he'd take up drinking. He might as well at this point.

There was a chair in the corner of the room, possibly intended for guests. Now, grunting softly, Townsend lifted the chair and carried it to the bedside. Once he sat down, he somehow made it seem more like a throne.

“You made a mistake, son, one with grave consequences to you. But people much older than you, with considerably more life experience and who certainly knew better—they've made worse mistakes. Their errors have harmed others. Even killed them. And *some* of those people have learned from what they did and have gone on to do great good.”

That was a pretty story, but Con wasn't fooled. “Did they do great good even though their body was all messed up and their face looked like something out of a horror movie?” It came out sounding bitter, but then, Con *felt* bitter.

“Those people are deeply damaged. Their scars aren't necessarily as visible as yours, but they may be even more debilitating.”

Con wasn't in the mood to play a round of Who's Got It Worse. He was positive that plenty of people were, in fact, worse off than he was, and in most of those cases it wasn't even their fault. But he'd been eaten alive, his life was ruined, and he figured he was entitled to a good dose of self-pity. He didn't want an inspirational speech.

“Chief Townsend, I’m sorry for being rude, but why are you here?”

Townsend chuckled. “My apologies. I have a habit of speechifying. My agents endure it because they must, but they don’t find it appealing. I’m here because I have a gift for seeing potential in others. I find diamonds in the rough. And you, my boy, are exactly that sort of jewel—with some polishing, you’ll shine. So I’ve come to persuade you to move west and work for me.”

That was not something Con had even remotely expected to hear. He would have blamed his meds if he were still on them. Instead, he gaped. “Work for you?”

“Yes. At West Coast HQ. We have a nice facility in Los Angeles. Frankly, it’s better than this one.” He waved his hands, seeming to indicate the building as a whole.

“Sir, look at me. I can’t even walk.”

“Your doctors tell me you’ll be ambulatory after some physical therapy. But even if they’re wrong and you need to use a wheelchair, that’s fine. We’re ADA compliant.” Townsend looked smug about that.

“You can’t have an agent in a wheelchair!” Con tried to imagine chasing after goblins while navigating uneven ground. He’d be dead within minutes.

“Of course I can. The Bureau is supported by a wide variety of positions, not all of which require physical agility. I think you’re an excellent candidate for some of those, and I’m almost never wrong. So what do you say, son? How about a move?”

Townsend folded his hands across his ample belly and waited. His expression was placid, as if he fully expected Con to accept his offer.

Which of course Con would not. It was ridiculous. He had no idea what tasks Townsend was talking about or why the guy was under the impression that Con would be any good at them. Townsend was... weird. The whole situation was weird.

But all of a sudden Con had a hauntingly clear image of himself sitting in a chair in a filthy, decrepit room, staring out a dirty window at a world he would never be a part of. Drinking himself to death or maybe just stewing in his own despair.

He took a deep breath and looked Chief Townsend in the eyes. "Okay. I'll do it."

What did he have to lose?

CHAPTER 3



BUREAU WEST COAST HEADQUARTERS

Los Angeles

Ten years later — June 2004

Con groaned as he stood up from his chair. He'd been sitting for hours and his joints and muscles had locked up. From experience he knew that he needed to grab his cane before hobbling the long length of the room to the storage cabinets. A few times he'd decided that juggling the cane and the evidence samples was too much hassle, and he'd attempted to make it on his own. Each try had resulted in a graceless fall. Fortunately nobody had been there to see, and he'd been able to get back on his feet by himself, but those hadn't been fun experiences. So, grumbling softly, Con grasped his cane in his right hand and the bag of fangs in his left.

“Be grateful you can walk at all, buddy,” he reminded himself. After all, he'd worked hard to regain the ability, and even now, a decade later, he still had to do daily exercises to keep himself operational.

The lab was cold—better for preserving evidence, much of which tended to be organic. The chill, added to the glaring lights and gleaming white surfaces, caused most Bureau employees to refer to Con's workspace as the Antarctic. He didn't mind, just as he didn't care when someone referred to him as the Phantom, as in *Phantom of the Opera*. He was disfigured, and he did tend to lurk in his underground lair.

He couldn't carry a tune, though, which is why he kept a radio on, tuned to a station that played classical music. Not that he was a huge fan of Beethoven and Brahms, but anything with lyrics still made him feel guilty—feel *sinful*—so he stuck to instrumentals. Boy, his parents had sure done a number on him. The chief had been right, that day in the hospital when they first met: invisible scars could be tremendously incapacitating.

Con reached the cabinet, unlocked it, and put the baggie into its assigned cubby. Eventually, when the case was closed, he'd dispose of the evidence bag. But first somebody who wasn't him would have to figure out who was going around breaking fangs out of vampires' mouths and why. At this point, nobody even knew whether the vampires were surviving these attacks. None of them had filed a report, but then, very few vampires would feel comfortable about revealing themselves to the Bureau, even when victimized.

"None of that is my problem," Con reminded himself as he slowly made his way to the computer desk. He sank into his chair with a muffled groan and peered at the form on the screen. Unlike most other Bureau employees, he didn't mind the paperwork aspect of his job. In fact, he rather enjoyed it. There was something intrinsically satisfying about filling in the blanks and sending documents off for the next level of review, knowing that he'd communicated the appropriate details clearly and concisely.

"Your reports have solved cases for us," Chief Townsend had told him a few years ago. "They've saved lives." And that was pretty gratifying to know. It made enduring the Antarctic cold worthwhile. Heck, it made *living* worthwhile.

The report on the fangs was nearly complete, so it wasn't long before Con hit Save and then Send. One copy would go to the Bureau's fancier lab in Northern California. Had the evidence been complicated, Art Gundersen would have taken over at that point, possibly requesting that the samples be sent to him for more intensive analysis. In this case, however, that was unlikely. Con had been able to definitively identify them

as vampiric and had documented the likely method of their removal. A sharp metal blade. Wire cutters, he guessed.

Agent Guerrero would also get a copy of the report. It was her job to assign people to investigative teams, except when Townsend decided to stir things up. The chief would receive a copy too, although what he did with them was anybody's guess. Similar to what Churchill had famously said of Russia, Townsend was a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

There was more work to be done on other cases, including unidentified bloodstains on a victim's clothing, some footprint castings that might have been from a harpy, and a small cloth bag containing what could be elements of a hex—or soup ingredients. Con's bet was on the latter.

But when he glanced at his watch, he saw that it was nearly 2 p.m. Time to head upstairs for the training session.



The classroom was a large space on the main floor, down the hall from the gym and the locker rooms. It didn't have any windows, probably to minimize distractions, and it contained neat rows of chair-desk combinations, all facing a long table at the front. There were several chalkboards, various screens that could be unfurled at the push of the button, and a cluster of audiovisual equipment. Con had been saved the effort of dragging a laptop to the session due to the presence of a desktop computer.

It took him several minutes to boot up, log in, and make sure the projector was working properly. In the meantime, agents trickled into the room, some with bagged lunches, some with notepads, all of them looking glum.

Con perched on the tall chair behind the computer. He would have preferred to walk around as he taught, but he wasn't up to having all of those pairs of eyes watch him limp and hobble. Besides, the computer blocked most of the view of his face from the audience.

“There’s no point complaining about it,” he informed the group when everyone was seated. “You have to learn this software, and it’s not that hard.”

“I didn’t join the Bureau to peck away at a keyboard.” That was Agent Isaac Molina, the bane of Con’s existence. Molina’s field notes were illegible, disorganized scrawls that generally arrived in Con’s hands only after repeated requests. His presence at trainings was surly at best and heckling at worst. And he was handsome, with a tall, tightly muscled frame that confidently stalked the hallways or sprawled carelessly in the classroom seats.

Con took a steadying breath. “It won’t take up much of your time. It’s more efficient than scribbling things in notebooks.”

“Didn’t join to scribble either. I’m not a goddamn *clerk*.”

“Shut it, Molina.” That was Agent Vaughn Brown, who had the physique and stolid temperament of an ox. His reports weren’t great either, but at least he tried. And he didn’t give Con a hard time.

Molina clicked his tongue. “What? You gonna tell me you like being a desk jockey?”

“I’m not a desk jockey, and neither are you. And there’s nothing wrong with people who are,” Brown said. “Using the software is part of our job. It’s the rules. So quit whining and let the Phan—uh, Con do his thing so we can all get on with our day.”

Con should have been grateful for the backup, but he wasn’t happy that he needed it. Molina should show him some respect, and if he didn’t, Con should be able to stand up for himself.

Well, whatever. The day wasn’t getting any younger, and at least Molina was now contenting himself by staring at the ceiling as if waiting to expire from boredom.

With a nod in Brown’s direction, Con opened the software and began his demonstration on how to convert rough field notes into something more standardized. Most of the audience

took notes; Brown stuck his tongue out as he wrote his. A couple of the agents doodled, but at least they might have been listening. Molina, however, closed his eyes and pretended to take a nap. Con could tell from his breathing patterns and tiny facial expressions that he was faking.

Everybody, including Con, was relieved when the training session drew to a close. The other agents picked up their things and fled as soon as they could, although a few thanked Con on the way out. Brown gave him a friendly wave. Molina took his time unfolding himself from the desk and straightening his suit, then shot Con a smirk and sauntered out of the room.

“Jerk,” Con muttered under his breath as he logged out. He would have liked to use stronger language, but it always felt awkward on his tongue, even after a decade working with people who swore like sailors. Another unwelcome legacy from his parents.

“How was the training, son?”

Con startled so badly that he nearly fell off the chair, and he had to swallow a yelp of pain as he jostled his legs. Chief Townsend had snuck into the room—despite his girth, the man could creep up as quiet as a cat—and now stood among the empty desks, smiling.

“It was okay, sir. Nobody’s very enthusiastic.”

“Can’t say I entirely blame them. I find those infernal modern machines frustrating at best.” Townsend gestured at the computer. “But we must bow to progress.”

“The software improves the process. I mean, it’s not perfect, but...”

“But it’s better than what we had before. Yes. Weren’t you studying computer programming?”

“A little, yes.” Con had been reading books mostly, spurred by a desire to make the software fit the Bureau’s needs more closely. He wasn’t an expert by any means, but he enjoyed playing with lines of code. Coding was orderly and

methodical, and it was almost like magic to see the results of altering just a few lines.

“Hmm. We’ll have to discuss that in more detail soon. We’ve hired computer consultants now and then, you see, but I’d prefer to have one of my own men do the work. You understand our needs better than any outsiders could.”

While Con tried not to puff up at the praise—or get too excited about the prospect of acquiring more computer skills—Townsend took out a cigarette and gold lighter and lit up. Smoking was forbidden inside the building, except for the chief. He took a few drags, staring at Con the entire time. It was disconcerting. He clearly had something on his mind, but Con had long ago learned that you couldn’t hurry the chief, who did everything according to his own schedule.

“Interesting times,” Townsend said out of the blue.

“Sir?”

“We live in interesting times. I suppose people have always thought something similar, but the rate of change these past decades is... well, humans simply can’t evolve fast enough to keep up. They zip around in space ships, they type at computers, they have information jammed down their throat so quickly that they can’t stop to chew. But their brains are still sitting in caves and carving figures out of mammoth bones.”

Con couldn’t help noticing the pronouns the chief was using: *they* instead of *we*. Nobody at the Bureau seemed to know exactly what Townsend was, but there was a general conviction that he wasn’t entirely human.

As Con pondered this, the chief seemed to realize that he didn’t have an ashtray. He chuckled, dropped the cigarette butt onto the floor, and ground it out with his heel. “I’ll have to remember to pay the cleaning crew extra this week.”

Silence fell. Con shuffled papers awkwardly before clearing his throat. “Well, I have several things waiting for me in the Antarctic.”

“I suppose you do. You usually arrive by 7:30, yes?”

Con nodded uneasily. Unlike the field agents, he had an eight-to-five Monday-through-Friday gig. If there was something really pressing, he might get called in on a weekend, but that didn't happen often. However, he was typically at HQ well before eight and stayed well past five. Partly to avoid traffic and partly—if he was honest with himself—because he didn't have anywhere else to be.

“When you get here tomorrow morning, son, come straight up to my office. There's something I want to discuss with you.”

Now Con's insides felt like the Antarctic. “Did I do something wrong, Chief?” He frantically scanned his memory for screw-ups but couldn't find any. Not since the big one ten years ago.

Townsend calmed him with a smile and a shake of his head. “No, it's nothing like that. You've been exemplary. You've earned commendations, even.”

Con felt a little sheepish about those. It was nice to have his work recognized, but he just looked at evidence and ran a few training sessions. He wasn't out there risking his life and protecting the innocent.

“Then can you maybe give me a hint, sir?”

“No. I need to move a few things into place first. I'll see you in the morning.” Townsend spun on his heel and disappeared out the door.



Con spent the remainder of the afternoon in the lab, looking at things under the microscope and taking careful notes. The routine helped calm him a little, but his thoughts kept wandering to tomorrow's mysterious meeting. It could be something entirely benign, such as a discussion over new equipment or the computer classes that Townsend had mentioned. But Con couldn't shed the uneasy certainty that it was bad news. He just didn't know what kind of bad news.

A little after six, when the worst of the evening commute would be past, he shut down his computer, locked up the cabinets, and gave the counters a final wipe-down. Then, cane in hand, he made his slow way to the parking garage where his Civic waited amid his colleagues' cars, most of which were bigger and flashier.

It was only about twelve miles from HQ in Sherman Oaks to his little house in San Fernando, but there'd been a wreck on the 405, so the drive took almost forty-five minutes. He listened to public radio along the way, at least until the announcers began talking about American soldiers abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib. That made him shudder, so he turned to the station that played Spanish hits. Since he didn't understand more than a few words of Spanish and so had no idea what the songs were about, he didn't experience his usual guilt about listening to people sing. No doubt his parents would still have disapproved.

He smiled when he finally reached his driveway.

His house was not remotely fancy, just a little two-bedroom bungalow in a modest neighborhood of similar houses, all of which had been constructed shortly after World War II. But it was plenty big enough for him, and it had two advantages. One was that it was all on one level so he didn't have to negotiate stairs. The other was that almost the entire backyard was occupied by an in-ground swimming pool. A decade earlier, his physical therapist had urged him to take up swimming as the best way to get exercise without straining himself, and Con had found himself enjoying the relative freedom he felt while in the water. There was a lap pool at HQ, but he preferred swimming in private.

It was too late for swimming now, though. Besides, he was hungry and tired.

The interior of his house was... a little cluttered. He kept everything very clean, and there was a definite order to where things were placed, but there were quite a lot of things. One of his few pastimes was acquiring unique items from thrift shops and antique stores. Like the pair of midcentury-modern lamps in peacock hues of teal and green. Or the large ornately-

framed painting of a Victorian woman in a garden. Or the scuffed leather recliner that cradled his aching body like a cloud; sometimes he even slept in it. Anyone with an aptitude for interior design would probably be aghast at Con's décor, but he liked it. And anyway, nobody saw it but him.

He made himself a stir-fry. By the time he ate it and washed up, night had fallen in earnest. He showered, put on pajamas, and curled up in the recliner with a biography of Benjamin Franklin. The book had come from a thrift store too.

But tonight he couldn't concentrate, thanks to Townsend. Con kept speculating about the upcoming meeting, even though he knew that doing so was pointless. Finally, annoyed with the chief and with himself, he went to bed.

Where he couldn't sleep.

Alone in his bed in the dark, he allowed his hand to wander beneath the waistband of his pajama pants. His dick got hard almost at once, as if it had been waiting for his touch.

When Con was a boy, his parents had removed the doors from their children's bedrooms. They would also time the children when they used the bathroom to make sure nothing was going on in there except excreting and cleaning. There were frequent lectures about the evils of what his parents called self-abuse. Warnings that masturbation was sinful because it weakened morals and inhibitions. Harangues about how the practice corrupted people and led them into worse actions.

And although Con knew better now, the emotional baggage remained. He felt guilty about a little harmless play, and even more so because his thoughts turned to men rather than women. But here he was anyway, stroking himself and imagining that he was being touched by someone else—someone who didn't mind that Con was scarred and generally messed up.

He climaxed silently, cleaned himself up, and lay alone in his bed, hoping tonight would spare him the nightmares.

CHAPTER 4



HQ WAS RARELY A BUSTLING PLACE, AT LEAST NOT VISIBLY SO. But now in the early morning it felt almost completely abandoned except for the bored-looking man behind the lobby desk.

Con did a double-take and said in some surprise, “Des!” Desmond Hughes was in charge of the Bureau’s library; reception duty was not usually one of his tasks.

“Mornin’, Con.” Des’s voice retained a hint of his Belfast childhood. He cradled a mug in one hand, and there was a scattering of crumbs on the desktop in front of him. His smile was bright.

“What are you doing here?”

Des shrugged. “Kurt’s in Seattle on assignment, and the chief decided I needed to be occupied, so he dragged me here. I don’t mind. Change of pace.”

Kurt and Des had been a couple for years. Con tried not to envy them.

“I have a meeting with the chief,” Con said. “Is he here?”

“I expect he’s nearly always here.”

That was a valid point. It was rumored that Townsend lived in the building, and honestly, Con couldn’t picture him anywhere else. He tried, though, as he walked to the elevator and rode all the way up, imagining the chief in an apartment or condo, or a bungalow like Con’s, or a mansion in Beverly Hills. Nope. None of those fit.

After a few steadying breaths, Con opened the double doors to the chief's office suite and entered the reception area. Agent Victor Holmes sat behind the desk in his wheelchair, glaring at a stack of papers. Long ago he'd been injured on the job even worse than Con—an encounter with ogres, reportedly—but he didn't seem to have any feelings of kinship with Con. In fact, as far as Con could tell, Holmes detested everyone except the chief. And everyone except the chief was terrified of Holmes, although nobody could express exactly why. Something about the glint in his eyes, perhaps.

“The chief wanted to see me,” said Con after an awkward silence. He leaned his weight onto his cane.

Although Holmes didn't glance up, he lifted his phone and barked into it. “He's here.” Then he slammed down the receiver. “Go in.”

Well, at least Con wouldn't be kept waiting.

Townsend's office was large, but other than the windows that offered sweeping views of the Santa Susana Mountains, there was nothing particularly luxurious about the space. The furniture looked as if it had been imported directly from a 1950s police station, the space smelled of cigarettes and whiskey, and the desk and table were piled with papers and books. Townsend himself sat behind the oversized desk in his throne-like chair, digging into an enormous platter of food.

“Good morning, son. Have you eaten breakfast?”

“Yes, sir,” Con lied. He'd been too nervous.

Townsend gestured at one of the low chairs in front of his desk. “Well, have a seat.”

Con complied, leaning his cane against the armrest. He watched while the chief ate, drank amber liquid from a glass tumbler, and smoked. Con tried to distract himself by gazing at the yellowed newspaper articles hanging on the wall, but they were too far away to discern anything but the headlines. And anyway, he'd read them before.

Eventually Con couldn't stand it any longer. “Sir, you wanted to speak with me?”

“Indeed I do.” Townsend wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. “But I’m waiting for someone else, and he’s predictably late.”

“Who?” Con shifted uneasily.

Instead of answering, Townsend pushed back from the desk and stood. He walked to the windows and spent a good ten minutes chain-smoking and looking out at the view, his back to Con. It was excruciating.

Several eternities later, the phone buzzed, startling Con. Townsend sailed over to the desk and picked up; he listened but didn’t say anything before hanging up and looking expectantly at the door.

It opened a moment later, and Agent Molina sauntered in.

Con’s stomach sank. Was this meeting about Molina’s mild heckling during the training sessions? Did Townsend think that Con wasn’t handling it appropriately? Or—good heavens—was this some attempt to get the two of them to shake hands and make nice?

Molina looked... ruffled. He often walked around HQ with his suit coat off and his tie loosened or missing entirely, but this morning his white shirt was wrinkled and his thick dark hair mussed. He clearly hadn’t shaved either. He looked surprised and not especially pleased to see Con.

“Good morning,” said the chief pleasantly. He waved at the empty chair. “Please join us.”

Molina collapsed into the chair gracelessly, mumbling something about traffic on the 101. Townsend remained silent for a while after that, and Con found it satisfying to watch Molina fidget like a boy called into the principal’s office. Con himself sat as straight and still as he could manage, even if it made his legs ache.

“Look,” Molina said finally, not meeting their eyes. “I’m sorry I was an asshole during yesterday’s training, okay? Although it wasn’t a big deal. The Phantom didn’t have to be a douche and rat me out.”

“I didn’t—”

“Stop.” Townsend interrupted Con’s indignant self-defense. “Agent Becker didn’t complain about your behavior. And although your behavior was hardly exemplary, it wasn’t egregious enough to deserve a dressing down.”

“Oh.” Molina shrank back in his seat.

Con relaxed a little too. “Then why are we here?”

“Because I have a mission for the two of you.”

Momentarily united in bafflement, Con and Molina exchanged a look. Clearly neither of them could picture Molina being of much help in the Antarctic, and Con wasn’t going to be much help anywhere else.

“Sir?” Con prompted.

“It’s like this, boys. For reasons not currently apparent to all, I find it necessary to forge alliances with... well, with whomever I can. Including sentients that may have a history of troubled relationships with humans. Which, frankly, is most of them.” He sighed heavily.

Molina looked as skeptical as Con felt. “Alliances?”

“Nothing formal.” Townsend leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. “Eighty years ago there was a bloody struggle in Kentucky—coal miners and union organizers on one side, coal companies and police on the other. One woman watched the sheriff’s men tear her house apart, searching for her husband who was a union organizer. And that night she wrote a song—‘Which Side Are You On?’ That’s what I need to know about sentient communities: which side are they on? Or to paraphrase our president, are they with us or are they against us?”

This explanation, such as it was, made Con uncomfortable. But it was Molina who spoke. “Who are we at war with, Chief?”

“Nobody. Yet. And honestly, I’ve oversimplified matters. Suffice it to say that in the future, I believe we will be in a position in which allies are critical. Right now, I want to do what I can to assess which partnership efforts are likely to bear fruit. The pair of you will help.”

Con and Molina both tried to speak at the same time, but Townsend held up his hands to shut them up. He pulled a bottle out of a desk drawer, refilled his whiskey glass, and downed it in one long draught. Con had tried liquor once, a few years earlier and more out of curiosity than anything else. His one small sip had burned all the way down, making him choke and gasp. He couldn't imagine swallowing it like water.

“Here are the details, boys. Tomorrow morning the two of you will choose a company car and drive east to a small town in Arizona. You could probably make it in one day, but no need to hurry, and you might as well arrive refreshed. So feel free to stop for the night along the way. When you arrive, you'll make contact with a group of local sentients. You'll—well, negotiate isn't quite the correct word—you'll parley with them. Find out if they're inclined to be sympathetic to our cause, and also what actions we might take to foster that sympathy. Then you'll return here for a debriefing.”

Townsend looked smug, Con thought. Or at least self-satisfied.

Molina, on the other hand, appeared dismayed. At least he had the grace to not express his misgivings out loud, which was a surprise. Con spared him the effort. “Sir, I'm not a field agent. I can't—”

“I've chosen the two of you quite deliberately. I need someone who can listen carefully and take accurate notes from the proceedings. Your forte, Agent Becker. Your physical capabilities aren't important. And I also need someone who, well, possesses a certain panache. That would be you, Agent Molina. But you tend toward the careless, son, and your partner will help balance that out.”

Con was still trying to process this when Molina grunted. “Fine. Who're the creatures we're going to woo?”

“When you arrive tomorrow, I'll have a packet waiting with all the information you need.”

As if on cue, the door opened and Holmes wheeled in, a stack of folders in his lap. “Meeting,” he said simply.

Townsend nodded and stood. “Yes, yes. Boys, feel free to take the day off to prepare for your journey. Now, if you’ll excuse me....”

That was a hint that couldn’t be refused. Molina unfolded himself from the chair while Con tried to hide a wince as he stood. With Molina in the lead, they left the suite. The elevator seemed especially slow to arrive.

“Sorry you’re stuck with me,” Con said just before the doors slid open.

“I usually work alone. But the chief’s right—I suck at paperwork. I don’t mind handing that job over to someone else.”

Huh. That was far less hostility than Con had expected. But they were still awkward together, remaining silent as they rode the elevator to the ground floor.

“You ever been to Arizona?” Molina asked as they disembarked.

“No.”

“Weird-ass place. Okay, see you in the morning.” He took off across the lobby at a pace that Con couldn’t possibly match.

Des, now with a paperback in one hand, still sat at the reception desk. He smiled at Con. “So, what was that the meeting about?”

“The chief wants to send me on a mission. With him.” Con pointed at Molina, who was just disappearing through the door to the parking garage. “It’s strange.”

“The chief works in mysterious ways. But tell me, have you ever known him to be wrong? About anything?”

Con shook his head.

Des leaned forward a little. He was a handsome man, his frame still powerful even in his fifties. “The chief sees things that the rest of us don’t. He can find potential in a fellow even after he’s fucked up. He found it in Kurt. And in me—and

Jesus, what a mess I'd made of things. So if he sees it in you, I say you should believe it."

"When I was a kid, I knew exactly what I was supposed to believe. But it was all nonsense."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. But that doesn't mean *nothing* is true." Des hoisted his book slightly. "Stephen King awaits me."

Although Con couldn't fathom why anyone who worked for the Bureau would want to read horror, he smiled. "Enjoy your monsters."

And then he headed home to pack.



Molina, perhaps unsurprisingly, was late the following morning. Con leaned against a wall in the lobby and waited, cane in one hand and suitcase on the floor at his other side. The suitcase was brand-new, purchased the previous afternoon. It made him self-conscious, a stark reminder to others that he never went out in the field.

A few other agents passed through the lobby while he waited. They glanced at him curiously and nodded, but none stopped to chat. He wasn't on a small-talk basis with many people at the Bureau, even though everyone interacted with him at least occasionally. Desmond was different. Because he was the librarian, Con consulted him often, and Con had become friendly with Kurt by extension. But being a couple of decades older than him, they felt more like uncles than pals.

Molina finally strolled in, wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt instead of the suit that was Bureau standard. He still hadn't shaved, and it looked as if he'd been in a hurry when he combed his hair. But he was one of those men who somehow made sloppy look handsome.

"Ready, dude?"

"We need the info packet from the chief." Con had considered fetching it himself, but he wasn't sure whether he

was supposed to do so before his partner arrived.

Huh. Partner. That was weird.

“Right.” Molina looked over at the agent behind the reception desk. He spoke at top volume. “Hey, Park! Tell the boss to send down our paperwork.”

Park glared but picked up the phone, and a few minutes later a very junior agent—Con couldn’t remember her name—emerged from the elevator with a manila envelope. She had that sort of eager expression all newbies brought to everything, until their experiences jaded them and toughened them up. She trotted over and handed the envelope to Molina and, after what may have been an aborted salute, hurried off again.

“Man, they’re recruiting babies nowadays,” said Molina as if he were ancient. He, like Con, was probably in his midthirties. “Okay, let’s go find some wheels.”

“Shouldn’t we read the packet first?”

“I’ll take the first shift driving, and you can read as we go.”

That displeased Con, but Molina was already marching away, envelope in hand.

Since different missions had different vehicle requirements, the Bureau’s garage housed a varied fleet. Con had never paid much attention to any of them, but when he caught up, Molina was looking them over and rubbing his hands eagerly. “God, I’d love to get behind the wheel of that Porsche. Probably not real practical, though.” He sighed and looked at Con. “Which one do *you* want?”

“I, uh... I dunno.” Cars were not really Con’s thing, other than making sure that his was maintained as needed.

“Hmm. We don’t need space for gear, but I don’t know what kind of roads we’ll be on, so maybe four-wheel drive is a good idea.”

Con refrained from pointing out that if they’d read the packet, they likely *would* know what terrain to expect.

But then Molina gave him a considering look. “Is an SUV gonna be a pain in the ass for you to climb in and out of? Or maybe it’s easier than a sedan.”

Well, that was a surprise. Con hadn’t expected Molina to even think about his mobility issues in this way, let alone care. “I’m fine with anything as long as it’s not super low-slung.”

“Cool. 4-Runner it is.”

Molina dashed off into the depths of the garage, returning moments later with a duffel slung over his shoulder. He moved so easily, so gracefully, as if he and the world were perfectly suited to one another. Con hadn’t been that nimble even before the orcs.

They ended up in a black SUV with an interior that smelled strongly of leather upholstery. The passenger seat was comfortable, but Con was acutely aware of being confined in a small space only inches from another man. A very handsome man who wore a cologne with cedar and citrus notes, whose big hand cradled the gear shift in a way that made Con blush and look away.

Clearing his throat, Con started to open the envelope.

“Hang on a sec,” Molina said. “We have a decision to make. Which route do we take?”

“I MapQuested it out last night, but since I didn’t know where in Arizona we’d be going—”

“I know the basics. Depending where we’re headed, the 10’s probably a little shorter, but not much, and I’ve never been out on the 40. Wouldn’t mind a change of scenery since we’ve got plenty of time.”

They should probably take the quickest way. But Molina was grinning like a mischievous schoolboy, and Con had never taken a true road trip. “I guess the 40’s fine.”

Molina whooped and gunned the accelerator.

By the time Con had carefully made his way through all the paperwork, they were heading north over the mountains on I-15. Molina had turned the radio on and was singing along,

out of tune, with the loud music. He laughed when Con turned it down. “Not a Dead fan?”

“Huh?”

“Grateful Dead? My parents were big Deadheads, back in the day. I guess some of that rubbed off on me.”

Con had heard of the Grateful Dead—he hadn’t lived that far under a rock—and he knew that even the name of the band would have horrified his parents. “I’m not very familiar with them.”

“Well, it’s old-school for sure. When it’s your turn to drive, you can pick the tunes.”

“I should debrief you on the contents of the packet.”

That made Molina snort. “You talk like a training manual.” Before Con could protest, Molina raised a hand. “Tell you what. Wait until we have dinner, okay? Then you can give me all the details you want.”

How could the man not even be curious about the assignment? Maybe that was what happened after years in the field: the whole thing became as routine as clocking in for an assembly-line job. Anyway, Con wasn’t in the mood to argue. He turned his head to look out at the desert and, unable to do much else, listened to the music.

It wasn’t nearly as horrible as he’d assumed it would be. In fact, the melodies and harmonies were really pretty, and the lyrics weren’t remotely evil. Sure, some were about drugs and various other crimes, and sex was at least a subtext for others. But they weren’t filthy. There were far more explicit passages in the Bible.

Molina seemed content to tap his fingers on the steering wheel and sing a few words here and there, and he and Con didn’t speak until they pulled off the freeway and into the Barstow McDonald’s parking lot. Molina parked the SUV and unbuckled. “Man, I need to piss so bad. Too much coffee this morning.” Then he hopped out, leaving Con with a slight blush that he hoped Molina hadn’t seen.

Con went inside too, reaching the bathroom just as Molina headed to the counter. “Whattaya want?” Molina bellowed.

It felt as if every person in the building turned to stare at Con, who desperately wanted to shrivel into nothingness. But Molina was waiting, so Con said something about a Big Mac and hurried into the privacy of the bathroom. Washing his hands a few moments later, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and sighed. Yeah, if he’d been one of those customers, he would have been tempted to stare too.

They ate in the car. Con tried to remember the last time he’d had a meal with anyone else and came up blank. He had breakfast and dinner alone at home, lunch alone in the Antarctic. He startled a little when Molina reached over and grabbed a couple of his fries. “Hey!”

Molina laughed. “Fry tax. You gotta pay it when you eat too slow. So do you wanna drive now? ’Cause I don’t mind staying behind the wheel. I like driving. When I was a kid, my family had a VW bus, of course, and we’d go on these long... wanders, my mom called them. Just going wherever we felt like. No destination, no itinerary. We’d stop at every national park and weird roadside attraction, or we’d visit some thousand-year-old guy who was painting paintings or throwing pots or whatever. It was great.” His voice had taken on a soft quality, and a slight smile played at the corners of his mouth. “How about you? Did your family do road trips?”

Con almost laughed. “No.” They hadn’t vacationed at all. He wasn’t sure whether that was due to lack of money or because his parents were afraid to expose their children to the wider world. Maybe both.

“Bummer. So, you want to drive?”

“You can.”

That brought a grin. “Thanks, dude.”

They didn’t converse as they rode through the desert. The scenery was interesting enough to almost distract Con from the ache in his joints; sitting for long periods was as hard on him as walking. Molina played more music from his childhood—

Santana, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the like—probably recreating the soundtrack from his family journeys. Con sometimes found himself tapping his foot or swaying a little.

They arrived in Kingman in the late afternoon, when the sun beat down unmercifully and the Arizona landscape seemed flat and nearly bleached out. Molina drove slowly down a street proclaiming to be part of the old Route 66. Without consulting Con, who had no opinion on the matter anyway, he pulled into the parking lot of a Best Western motel. “I wish we could stay somewhere fancier since we’re on the Bureau’s dime. But I think this is as upscale as Kingman gets. Probably comfier than an air mattress in the back of a VW, anyway. Least here we’ll have a bathroom.”

The last time Con had stayed in a hotel was three—no, four—years ago, when he went to visit the lab in Northern California. It was a strange location for a government lab, tucked away in a tiny mountain town among the pine and fir trees, but Art Gundersen had insisted on working there and Townsend had agreed. Not that Con could blame Art; the area was gorgeous. Art and his partner, Jerry, lived in a fire-lookout tower and had invited Con over for dinner. Unfortunately, Con couldn’t handle the steep steps to the top of the tower, but they’d had a nice meal outdoors instead. Con had spent a couple of nights in a little motel that hadn’t changed much since the 1950s.

Kingman’s Best Western was more modern than that, with a bright lobby that smelled of coffee and cleanser. Con got distracted by the rack of brochures advertising tours of the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, and a giant meteor crater, and by the time he collected himself, Molina had already checked them in. He held up the keys for Con to see. “No elevator, so I got us a room on the first floor. Breakfast is included, but we can always eat somewhere else if you want.”

A room. As in one room? Con was fairly certain that the Bureau would have paid for two, but if he complained he’d look like a whiny diva. *It’s fine*, he told himself. It would be like sharing an office—until bedtime, at which point they’d turn off the lights and go to sleep. No big deal.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the room had two beds. Molina plopped his duffel on the one closer to the door and, while Con sat on the other bed, did a quick scout of the space. There wasn't much to see, just standard hotel furniture plus a painting of cactuses on one wall. The air-conditioning wheezed but managed to keep the room comfortable.

"I'm gonna go explore," Molina announced, bouncing on his toes. "Wanna come with?"

"Explore what?"

"If I knew, it wouldn't really be exploring now, would it?"

Con found himself grinning back—and also feeling tempted to join in, which was unexpected since Con wasn't the wandering type. It might be fun to see what this little town had in store.

But then Con saw his cane leaning against the wall and remembered... well, his limitations. "I'll stay here. I have some work to do."

Molina shrugged. "Whatever. I'll circle back in a couple of hours and pick you up for dinner."

Con nodded and watched him saunter out the door.

CHAPTER 5



CON DIDN'T REALLY HAVE WORK TO DO. THE MISSION BRIEF had given him all the information he needed. But he dutifully pulled out his laptop and sat at the desk, looking things up. Somehow, however, instead of researching the things pertinent to the mission, he found himself reading about the Grateful Dead and Volkswagen vans and a bunch of other things that had no relationship to his job.

This research turned out to be far more interesting than he'd expected, so that when Molina came bursting into the room, Con startled and then was surprised to see how late it was.

"I found the perfect place for dinner," Molina announced. "You hungry?"

Con was. While Molina waited by the door, Con shut down the laptop and stowed it away, then slipped his shoes on. They were ugly orthopedic things that he hated with a passion, but they didn't hurt and they allowed him to walk. Anyway, whenever he went out in public, it wasn't his feet that people stared at.

It turned out that Molina's discovery was only a couple of blocks away, so they walked. Night had fallen, lowering the temperatures enough to make them bearable, and the shadows cast by the streetlights camouflaged the run-down condition of some of the buildings. Crickets chirped. The air smelled of asphalt and pungent herbs.

“Did you discover anything during your explorations?” Con asked politely. He was hoping to hide his embarrassment at the way Molina had to slow his stride for Con’s sake.

“Old buildings. Old train. Museum. Had coffee and a conche at a Mexican bakery. Saw some good murals.” Molina seemed content but also contemplative, as if thoughts and memories were kicking around in his head. Con decided it would be far too personal to ask about them.

The restaurant was Yeng’s Chinese and American Food, the huge vintage neon sign pointing at a low, blocky building with a faux pagoda entrance. “Totally old-school, right?” said Molina. “It’s like a time warp.”

Con wasn’t convinced that time-warp cuisine was such a great idea, but he followed Molina inside. The interior proved to be as vintage as the sign. Framed paintings of Chinese landscapes hung on the red-painted walls, and red lanterns with gold fringe were suspended from the ceiling. Only a handful of tables were occupied, mostly by families that looked as if they were on vacation. A smiling older man led Con and Molina to a booth near the back, for which Con was grateful; he wouldn’t be easily visible to the other patrons. Maybe that had occurred to the host too.

The usual restaurant ritual followed: the distribution of menus, the pouring of water and jasmine tea, the careful writing of items on the order pad. It all felt foreign to Con, who very rarely ate out. On those occasions when he grew tired of his own cooking, he got orders to go.

“Isn’t this place great?” Molina looked pleased with himself. “I dunno if the food’s any good, but that doesn’t matter. This place has ambience. It’s unique.”

Huh. Other people might have called it old-fashioned or kitschy.

Molina slurped happily at his tea. “Someone told me there’s a giant tiki head a few miles east of town.”

“A what?”

“Giant tiki head. We’d have to take a slight detour along the original Route 66, but that runs pretty much parallel to I-40, so it won’t slow us down much.”

“Why do we need to see a giant tiki head?”

“Cause we never have before.” Molina tilted his head and peered at Con. “Least, *I* never have. You?”

Con sighed. “I think we should discuss the mission.”

That bored expression came over Molina again, the same one he wore during trainings, but he nodded. “Can you maybe give me the Cliff’s Notes version? The boss always gives a whole book when really just a page or two would do just fine.”

“It’s important to be prepared.”

Molina shrugged. “Doesn’t matter in our line of work. You can be hella prepared, you can follow every goddamned rule, and still”—he clapped his hands loudly—“the bad guys get you.”

Con ducked his head self-consciously. “They’re less likely to get you if you do what you’re supposed to.”

It looked as if Molina was going to argue, but just then the waiter arrived with their food, served family style. They both filled their plates and had a few bites. “See?” said Molina, grinning. “It’s absolutely mediocre. Perfect.”

Con ate a little more before soldiering onward regarding the mission. “The subjects live in the mountains west of the Verde Valley and Sedona.”

“Oh, hey, not far from Gerard. Some of my parents’ artsy friends used to live there.”

“We’re not visiting artists. We’re visiting coyote shifters.”

Con waited for a response and was pleased when Molina frowned. “Coyotes? Why the hell are we talking to coyotes?” He seemed as bewildered as Con had been over the tiki head.

“The chief explained that yesterday. We’re... ambassadors, I guess. We’re supposed to form a mutual defense agreement with them.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Molina waved his hand dismissively. “I know *that*. But why send us five hundred miles to talk to coyote shifters? For one thing, there are plenty of ’em way closer to home. Hell, I know of three packs within LA County. For another, their packs are small—like, usually just an extended family—and I don’t see how much help only a few coyotes would be. And for another thing, they’re generally more or less friendly to humans anyway, as long as nobody hassles them.”

All of these points were absolutely accurate, and Con had ruminated over them himself as he read the briefing, but it was good to know that Molina was aware of them too. He might be impatient, but he wasn’t ignorant.

Con chased a bit of rice around his plate with his fork. “The paperwork doesn’t explain why we’re doing this. It just describes the scope of the agreement we’re supposed to forge. And it goes into extensive detail about coyote-shifter culture.”

Molina made an impatient *pfft*. “Culture. They’re pretty much like regular guys. They like to party. They go out hunting on weekends. The families stick together real tight. The ones in LA, they hold regular jobs. My buddy Abby is a gymnastics coach in Glendale. She and I go running together sometimes, and man, she is *fast*.” Suddenly, Molina frowned. “Oh, shit.”

Still processing the fact that Molina had a coyote-shifter jogging partner, Con took a moment to respond. “What’s wrong?”

“Gifts. That is one important coyote thing. When you meet with them, you’re supposed to exchange presents. I usually bring Abby a carob cake from the vegan bakery near me ’cause she can’t eat chocolate, and she usually buys me a burger after our run. So we’re gonna have to stop along the way and pick up something for the pack we’re visiting.”

There had been something about that in the briefing paperwork. “The chief suggested some good steaks and maybe a couple of frozen turkeys, if we can find them.”

“Okay.” Molina relaxed. “But I still don’t get why we’re going.”

Con remembered what Des had said to him yesterday. “Chief Townsend usually knows what he’s doing.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

They spoke some more about the mission and about coyote shifters—and shifters in general. Molina knew quite a lot about the subject, which probably explained why he’d been chosen for this job. Con had only ever met a single dog shifter, a Bureau agent named Edge who stuck close to his human partner when they were around HQ and tended not to talk very much.

Molina, on the other hand, was a voluble and animated speaker with a lot of interesting stories. He used his hands a lot as he spoke, sometimes putting his water glass in peril but never quite knocking it over. Slightly enraptured, Con listened and ate too much and drank a gallon of tea and even laughed sometimes.

It was the most fun he’d had in... a long time.

Only as they were paying for the meal did Con remember that he was working. He wasn’t supposed to be having fun.

Except maybe the two weren’t mutually exclusive?

It was strange. While Con and Isaac—the transformation from Molina to Isaac had happened over dinner—walked slowly back to the hotel, Con felt something cracking inside him. It was like a geological fault opening up and moving, and that should have been a bad thing because faults caused earthquakes. But the change felt... welcome. As if he’d been wearing a corset that had suddenly loosened a little.

And good heavens, what was his *problem*? Drag him out of the Antarctic for one single day and all of a sudden he was pretending to be a whole different person.

“You all right, dude?”

They were crossing the hotel parking lot and Con looked at Isaac in surprise. “Huh?”

“You were scowling. I thought maybe your leg was hurting.”

Con sighed noisily. Of course his leg was hurting—it always did. But it wasn’t any achier than usual right now, and it wasn’t why he’d worn that expression. “I’m fine.”

Isaac stopped in his tracks and caught Con’s arm. “Look. I’m gonna stop asking you whether you’re okay and whether shit’s hurting you. I’m not your mommy, and I bet the questions get old really fast. But we’re partners, right? We rely on each other, which means we can’t keep any secrets that might endanger anyone. So do me a favor. If you don’t feel up to something, if something’s causing you pain, let me know. Just like I’ll tell you if something’s not working for me.”

It was an entirely reasonable request and thoughtful too, so Con nodded. “I’m sorry you got stuck with me.”

“Dude.” Isaac rolled his eyes theatrically. “I’ve worked with all kinds of people in the Bureau, and some of them were... different. Like, have you ever met Charles Grimes and Tenrael?”

Con shuddered slightly. Grimes and Tenrael weren’t agents, but they did occasional contract work for the Bureau. Which was fine, except Grimes was an extremely creepy half-angel, and Tenrael was a genuine demon—horns and all—who preferred to walk around naked, his huge black wings furled against his back. They were good guys, as far as Con could tell, but they also scared him to death.

Isaac chuckled. “Yeah. They’re different all right. Anyway, my point is that we gotta work with the partner we have. You don’t get around so great. I fuck up the paperwork—when I manage to do it at all. It’s fine. We’ll adjust.”

Oh no. That fault line widened and shifted again—*crack*. Isaac Molina wasn’t anything like what Con had expected.

Back inside their room, Con recorded the day’s expenses and reread the briefing paper while Isaac sprawled on his bed watching a cop show on TV. Isaac kept up a running commentary, mostly of details about law enforcement that the

program got wrong. Con should have been irritated, but he found himself smiling.

Craaaaack.

At a relatively early hour, Con stood up from the desk, stretched a little, and announced he was going to get ready for bed. After Isaac nodded absently, Con gathered a few things from his suitcase and went into the bathroom. He did all the usual nighttime things and put on his pajamas. Then he spent far too long dithering behind the closed door—for no reason he could name. Finally, disgusted with himself, he flung the door open, shuffled to his bed, and dove under the blankets.

Isaac clicked off the TV, shot Con a grin, and sauntered into the bathroom. He was in there a while. When the shower started to run, Con seriously thought about turning the TV back on to drown out the noise. But that probably wouldn't help. He'd still picture Isaac naked and wet, the water glistening on his olive skin, his dark curls shining, his....

Stop it!

Con thought he had himself back under control until Isaac emerged wearing nothing but a pair of red bikini underwear. Jockey brand. Con knew that detail because it said so right on the waistband, and good Lord, that meant he was staring, and he tried to tear his gaze away. But all his eyes were willing to do was take in Isaac's long body: lean around the waist, tightly muscled at arms, chest, and thighs. Dark hair across his pecs, down his abs, leading to—

This was incredibly unprofessional and also completely humiliating.

But Isaac grinned and struck a pose, one hand on a cocked hip.

“Do you want to fuck?” he asked cheerily.

Con felt his face go fiery red. He may have made a loud gulping sound.

Isaac came a step closer. “I'm not teasing. I mean it. It's not that late and we don't have to leave super early and, well, why not go for it?” It was very nearly the same tone he'd used

when he suggested ordering four main dishes at dinner instead of two. Con had given in then, but he couldn't now.

“We can't!”

“Why not?” Isaac seemed genuinely puzzled. “I kinda thought you were into me, and I like you too.”

“We're partners on a mission. We barely know each other. We're both men. And I'm... messed up.”

The smile hadn't left Isaac's face. “Do you have a spreadsheet about this somewhere?”

“I—”

“If you don't want to, fine. But if you *do* want to, and you're coming up with a bunch of fake excuses for some reason, let me point things out.” He began ticking items off on his fingers. “One, the boss doesn't care if his agents fraternize. It happens all the time. Hell, some partners are even long-term romantic partners. Two, it's just sex, not a marriage proposal. We don't have to know each other. Besides, what I *do* know about you, I like. Three, I'm a four on the Kinsey scale. I like women. I like men even more. And four, I'm not a shallow asshole who's gonna throw a diva fit because someone doesn't have a perfect face.”

Isaac put both hands on his hips and waited.

Con realized that he was clutching the blankets to his neck like a scandalized Victorian maiden. With effort, he loosened his fists. Then, jaw squared, he hauled himself out of bed and stood a few feet away from Isaac.

“It's not just my face, which I'm fully aware looks like something out of a horror movie.” Con pulled the pajama shirt over his head and tossed it onto the bed. And then, before he could lose courage, he stepped out of the pants too. Now, like Isaac, he wore nothing but underwear, although Con's were pale blue and provided more coverage.

“Look,” he commanded.

And Isaac obeyed. He stared at the map of Con's destruction: the ugly gouges and ridges, the discolored skin,

the muscles that weren't shaped as they ought to be. A frame that had once been muscular but was now thin because weight strained Con's legs.

But no matter how carefully Con watched Isaac's face, he didn't see pity or revulsion. Frank curiosity, yes, and something else. Isaac seemed... impressed?

"Orcs, right?"

"Yes."

"Nasty bastards. You are one strong man to have survived all of that. I bet you had to work like hell to get yourself in such good shape."

The fault line widened again, and Con's world shook. "You're not—"

"I'm not turned off. Let me be honest—I know I'm pretty. Good genes, and I like to work out. But we live in LA, man. *Pretty* is a dime a dozen. It's not what I look for in the people I sleep with."

"What do you look for?" Con asked, genuinely perplexed.

Isaac shrugged. "Someone who's interesting. Who's not an airhead or a fake." He chuckled. "Someone who doesn't bitch when I play dinosaur rock in the car and pick mediocre Chinese for dinner."

In Con's estimation, those were fairly low standards. And now he felt incredibly self-conscious, standing here as if he were engaged in some type of near-nudity standoff.

"When I said I'm messed up, I didn't mean just physically. I...." Hoo-boy. He'd discussed this with a therapist, but not with someone who wanted to have sex with him. This was hard. "My family is religious. Like, beyond fundamentalist. They barely tolerate sex between a married man and woman, so as far as they are concerned, homosexuality is a one-way ticket to eternal damnation."

"Do you believe that too?"

"No. But those thoughts stuck to me anyway, like really stubborn burrs you can't get rid of. I see the world through my

parents' eyes, and then I struggle to remind myself that those eyes lie." He let his shoulders slump.

"I get it. My parents are vegetarians. I used to feel guilty as hell every time I bit into a hamburger. The Grateful Dead—that's their gig, not mine. But it gets into your DNA. Now, my parents are mostly benign. But it sounds like yours gave you some nasty DNA."

It sounded so simple, put like that. And in a way it *was* that simple, and Con was enormously grateful that Isaac understood. That he wasn't cursing Con for being a freak or judging him for internalizing unwanted values.

"I've tried to work through it," Con said. "But it's hard."

"Sure. Just like working through your physical injuries. Like I said, you're one strong man."

The fault line became more, and something inside of Con just *broke*. Maybe that something had been a chain.

Con closed the space between them, put his hands on the smooth skin of Isaac's shoulders, and leaned in for a kiss. As he did, he was astounded at his own... whatever it was. Audacity? Recklessness? Bravery?

It didn't matter, because Isaac kissed him back.

Although Isaac was tall, Con was a couple of inches taller, which he hadn't realized until now. Maybe it was because, as he walked, he tended to slightly hunch over his cane, cradling the pain in his core. Now his back was straight.

After what felt like a long time, Con leaned back slightly. "I'm probably not very good at that." He'd never made out with anyone before.

"I'm not complaining." Isaac's voice had settled into a rumbling purr that heated Con's skin.

"I can't...." *Say it, coward!* "I can't have sex with you. But I wish I could."

Isaac cupped Con's cheek, seemingly not caring about the damaged flesh against his palm. "It's just like I was talking

about in the parking lot tonight. I won't push, but if you decide you're ready, let me know."

Somewhere in the depths of his brain, Con realized that it was a possibility. He *could* be ready. Not now, but someday.

Suddenly the world seemed a lot less grim.

Each of them went to his own bed and lay down under the covers. Con turned off the bedside lamp, leaving the room lit by only the tiny flashing light of the smoke detector. He touched his face in exactly the spot where Isaac had.

"Good night," he said.

Isaac shifted on his mattress. "Night, Con. Oh, and that *Phantom* shit? I'm sorry. Didn't mean anything cruel by it. It's only—some of the guys call me Agent Flower Power, and they're just shooting the shit, you know? But I won't do it again."

"I don't really mind." And Con meant that. Honestly, the nickname made him feel as if he kind of belonged.

"Cool. Tomorrow we hang with coyote shifters."

Con had no bad dreams that night.

CHAPTER 6



CON WOKE UP FIRST. BY THE TIME HE HAD SHOWERED, shaved, and dressed, Isaac was just slowly rolling out of bed. His hair was a mess and he had pillow creases on his cheek. Con had seen zombies that looked more alert. But Isaac gave Con a sleepy smile before shambling off to the bathroom, and when he emerged, there was no awkwardness between them.

Breakfast at the hotel consisted of pastries, weak coffee, Cheerios, a hardboiled egg, and something falsely claiming to be orange juice.

After they hit the road—Isaac driving again, which was fine with Con—they drove to the giant tiki head, a ridiculous construction that made Isaac laugh.

“I don’t understand why someone put so much effort into... that,” Con said when they climbed back into the SUV.

“Tourist money, probably.”

He had a point. They’d bought drinks and snacks at the gift shop. Still. “They could attract tourists a different way. I mean, why a giant tiki head in the middle of the desert? What’s the logic there?”

“It’s art. Doesn’t need logic.”

“That’s art?”

A negligent shrug. “My mom teaches art classes at a community college, and she’s a painter herself, so I guess she’s more or less an expert on the subject. She says art is

supposed to make you react emotionally. Amusement's an emotion."

They argued about this for several miles, although without any heat. When they got tired of that subject, they traded Bureau tales and gossiped about fellow agents, then had another mild squabble because Isaac wanted to visit the Grand Canyon, which was more than an hour north of where they were supposed to go. "We're not here to be tourists," Con reminded him. "We're on a mission."

"Yeah, yeah. But it doesn't sound like an especially urgent mission."

"The coyotes are waiting for us." This was true. That morning while Isaac was in the bathroom, Con had called their contact, a woman named Trish. She'd given him directions to their home and had agreed to meet them at four.

"Maybe on the way back then."

Con decided it wasn't worth an argument right now.

They reached Prescott Valley around lunchtime, and one thing they agreed on was avoiding fast food. They found a café instead, and that would have been fine except the inside was brightly lit and there were tables instead of booths. It felt as if everyone was staring. As soon as they were seated, Con hid his face behind the menu, but that evasion lasted only until they ordered. Isaac seemed oblivious to Con's discomfort, flirting a little with the waitress and expounding at considerable length about why Thousand Island dressing should never, under any circumstances, be put on a hamburger and why American cheese was an abomination.

Afterward they stopped at Safeway, where they bought a disposable cooler, a quantity of ice, and four hundred dollars' worth of ribs, steaks, and turkeys. The grocery store was even more brightly lit than the café, but at least Con could turn and face the shelves when anyone passed by.

"We still have time before our meeting," Isaac pointed out after they'd loaded up the SUV.

“Maybe we should check into a hotel. Freshen up a little.” Con was nervous. He’d never tried to play ambassador before and had never met with anyone outside the Bureau. He’d feel better after a shower and change of clothes.

Isaac seemed agreeable, but then they disagreed over where to stay. According to the briefing document, Cottonwood was less than thirty minutes away from the coyotes and had a selection of hotels.

“I know somewhere way more interesting than that,” Isaac insisted. “It’s in Gerard. Which is even closer.”

“But the chief said—”

“The chief isn’t here. Look, if he bitches when we get back, I’ll take the heat, okay? But he won’t because there’s no reason he should. Especially after we’ve returned in triumph with new allies.”

“I don’t care about who gets blamed. That’s not the point. He told us to stay in Cottonwood and maybe he had a reason for that. It’s not a good idea to violate the rules.”

“It’s not a good idea to obsessively stick to them when they’re pointless.”

They went back and forth like that as they drove up a mountainside that was surprisingly forested for Arizona. Con hadn’t expected to see so many tall pines, and after a while he abandoned the argument in favor of sightseeing. Sometimes there were switchbacks that required slow going, and those spots often came with expansive views.

After cresting the mountain they arrived in Gerard, and somehow the issue seemed to have been decided. Isaac took them down a couple of steep zig-zags before turning off the main road and onto a very narrow street atop a ridge. He finally came to a stop in front of a sprawling yellow building with red awnings and roof.

“That seems kind of big for a town this size,” said Con. It looked as if it had been there a long while.

“Used to be the hospital. This was a mining town, which meant there were a lot of injuries. It was state-of-the-art for the

1920s.”

Well, that was more interesting than a Best Western.

The interior looked suitably antique, including what the clerk proudly told them was the original elevator. It was roomy—all the better for transporting medical equipment—but its antiquity made Con nervous. Still, he was stiff from the drive and didn’t want to climb the two flights of stairs to their room. Of course, Isaac loved the elevator. He admired the metalwork door and wondered aloud how many people had been carried up and down over the decades.

Their room was barely big enough for two twin beds, an antique dresser, a single nightstand, and an upholstered chair. But, as Isaac pointed out, it had a lot of character, as well as a view of the valley below. There was also a closet-sized shower and, in a separate space, a toilet and sink.

“Dibs on the shower!” Isaac announced almost as soon as he’d set down his bag.

“Help yourself.”

Again, when the water began to run, Con’s mind traveled to all the places it shouldn’t, although at least now he knew that Isaac wouldn’t be offended. Heck, he’d probably be really pleased about it. Con allowed his memories to linger on his first view of Isaac’s naked chest, but it turned out that imagination wasn’t much required. Isaac soon emerged wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his hips.

“Water pressure’s surprisingly good. Soap’s not very sudsy, though. I bet the water here is hella hard.”

Con tried to gather a towel and fresh clothes with as much dignity as he could muster, but he knew Isaac was grinning at him. When Con glanced over his shoulder just before entering the shower room, Isaac had dropped the towel and was watching him with a smirk.

Con ducked inside and slammed the door harder than he’d intended.

By three thirty they were freshly groomed and tucked into conservative black suits. Isaac’s tie wasn’t quite straight and a

few of his curls had already escaped from whatever he'd used to stick them down. Considering that bit of disarray, Con wondered how Isaac had managed to keep his suit so unwrinkled in his duffel.

Trish had been specific about the route they should take, and in fact, finding their way was easy. Once Isaac had piloted them down a couple of steep switchbacks on the main road, he turned onto a side road that, despite being paved, didn't look promising. It was barely wide enough for a single vehicle, and it twisted, rose, and fell as wildly as a roller coaster. They passed low scrub vegetation, rocks, and yellow soil. At one point Con caught a glimpse of an old open mine dropping precipitously on their left, and then the road turned again and the mine disappeared.

"This would be fun on a motorcycle," Isaac said.

"But if you fell, you'd go halfway down the mountain. There'd be nothing left of you but little pieces."

"Well, it would be fun until then."

About another mile later, the pavement was replaced by gravel. They kicked up a heavy cloud of dust, causing Isaac to slow down even more. He didn't look tense behind the wheel, however, and Con had the solace of knowing that his own anxiety about the road was almost making him forget his anxiety about the upcoming meeting.

Until, of course, they came to a road—if you wanted to call it that—that was even less impressive than the current one. They followed it for a few minutes, first down into a valley, then around a hill, and then down into a bowl-shaped indentation that housed the coyote shifters.

It was far too small to be called a town or even a village. *Compound* was probably the most accurate term. It consisted of three somewhat ramshackle small houses, two mobile homes, three camping trailers, and an assortment of vehicles in varying stages of deterioration. A mob of children came running up to greet the SUV, all of them naked and dusty and looking thrilled to have visitors. Approximately twenty adults emerged too, most of them dressed scantily if at all. Although

Con knew that shifters of most species avoided clothing when they could—it didn't feel natural to them and interfered when they wanted to change shape—it was still more than a little disconcerting.

But as soon as Isaac parked, Con got out of the SUV and did his best to look polite and professional. Isaac came to stand at his side and was, naturally, cool as a cucumber.

The coyote shifters were small people, short and wiry, with deeply tanned skin and long, bushy hair—tawny, blond, or gray. They had intelligent eyes and, in the adults' case, expressions that somehow mixed wariness and humor. In general, according to the briefing papers, coyotes weren't malicious, but they did enjoy mischief and pot-stirring.

A woman with long gray hair and a deeply wrinkled face approached them, her stride confident and her bearing regal. She wore clothes—a simple sundress and a braided twine bracelet—although her feet were bare.

As soon as she drew close, she asked in a raspy voice, “Bureau?”

Isaac gave a primitive bow. “Yes, ma'am. I'm Isaac and this is Conrad.” Like certain human celebrities, coyote shifters avoided last names. They did have clan names, but etiquette didn't call for addressing them that way.

“Trish,” she replied. She turned her gaze to Con. “Talked to you on the phone.”

“We're grateful you've allowed us to visit and meet with you.”

As Con had hoped, she appeared pleased with his acknowledgment of the coyotes' sovereignty. As agents learned during training, Non-Human Species had varying views of the Bureau, and he wanted to make a good impression now. It wouldn't help anyone if the Bureau tried to bully or frighten.

“I'm going to let the clan meet you,” said Trish.

“We'd be honored.”

She gestured, and all of the other coyotes surged forward. Had they been entirely human, Con still would have been uncomfortable at having them crowded around, almost close enough to touch. But they *weren't* human. They were beings capable of quickly sprouting fangs that could tear him apart in minutes. At least there was no physical contact right now, although there was a lot of sniffing.

Con stood his ground, straight-backed, while Isaac looked about as worried as an adult getting carded at a bar.

Finally the coyotes fell back a few paces and Trish stepped in, peering up at Con's face. "What got ya?"

"Orcs."

"You tangled with orcs and survived?"

"Yes."

Apparently this impressed her and her clan. They gazed at Con the way people might look at someone who'd scored the winning touchdown at the Super Bowl. Or who'd saved a busload of people.

"We want to hear about it," said Trish. "But come sit down, have a snack and a drink." She jerked her head toward a circle of picnic benches.

"We'd love to." Con was nearly a hundred percent honest about this. It was an excellent sign that Trish had invited them to settle in a little. "But first we'd like to present you with a token of our appreciation."

Well, that was popular. The children ran around howling, and when Isaac brought out the cooler and lifted the lid, the adults howled too. Steaks, ribs, and turkeys were indeed an appreciated gift.

Trish had presents for Con and Isaac as well. She handed each of them a small fabric bag that proved to contain a heavy silver ring with the figure of a howling coyote etched into it. "We mined the silver," she explained.

Isaac had already slipped his onto a finger and was holding it up to admire it. "It's gorgeous."

“We earn some money crafting jewelry.”

Con had never worn jewelry before—his parents hadn’t approved of ornamentation—but he didn’t want to offend their hosts, so he put his on too. It felt a little strange but not unpleasant. He doubted the Bureau would allow them to keep the coyotes’ gifts, but that begged the question of what the chief would do with them. Sell them? Lock them away in a drawer indefinitely? Con would have to check on the policy when he returned.

After the exchange they sat at the picnic table, Con and Isaac on one side, Trish on the other. A man brought them big water glasses and a large platter piled with sliced fruit and vegetables. Trish gestured at the food. “Dig in. We can bring out some deer too, if you want, but it’s not cooked. Most humans don’t like raw meat.”

Con had a sudden sense-memory of orc teeth tearing into his flesh and had to suppress a shudder. “This is more than enough for us, thank you.”

She gave a dry chuckle as if this was funny.

The three of them made small talk for half an hour or so, chatting about the local wildlife, the coyotes’ jewelry-making business, the hazards of living in Los Angeles, and the like. Children played around them, sometimes running up to grab a bite to eat or to gawk at their visitors before Trish gently shooed them away. Although the weather was warm, it wasn’t oppressive. They were on the eastern side of the mountain, and the sun had already dipped out of sight, leaving them in shadow.

Isaac spoke more than Con did, and he often made Trish smile or laugh. He was charming without being too pushy. Thanks to his friends back home, he even knew enough about coyote shifter culture to share a few in-jokes.

Eventually Trish crossed her arms, leaned over the table, and looked at Con. “Tell me about the orcs.”

A boulder lodged in his throat, and when he glanced desperately to the side, Isaac looked distressed. Beyond a

brief, oblique mention, Con hadn't discussed the orcs in years. When he was recovering in the hospital, as soon as he was able, the East Coast Bureau had made him describe what had happened. That had been awful, although he'd been partially cushioned by the drugs in his system. After he transferred to LA, Townsend made him see the Bureau shrink for a few months, and the story had emerged again. But not since.

Trish was waiting as if this were important to her, although God alone knew why. And Con really, *really* didn't want to screw up this mission.

A few deep breaths and a long swallow of water helped his throat work properly again.

"I was barely out of training and got sent to investigate reports of something creepy in the woods. This was back East. Nobody at the Bureau really thought there was anything there, or else they'd have sent in someone less green. I was just supposed to talk to the locals. But I was an idiot and I went into the forest alone."

"Youngsters are often foolish." As if to demonstrate the fact, Trish gestured at a trio of children who appeared to be tormenting a scorpion.

"I was old enough to know better. I'd been taught better. Anyway, the orcs attacked me. I didn't even see them coming. One second, nothing but trees, the next second..." Con had to close his eyes for a moment. He almost yelped when Isaac gently touched him—just a pinky against Con's hand—but then Con was grateful for it. Trish waited patiently.

"They dragged me to a cave. I think they were speaking to me, but I didn't understand their language. I guess I tried to fight back, but I wasn't any good at it. That's how my face ended up like this. Claws. They chained me down. I wasn't the first—there was a human skeleton in there too." He didn't need to describe how the bones had been clean and dry, with gnaw-marks clearly visible in places. "They kept me there for several days. And while I was there they... ate me. Slowly. They just kept coming back for another bite."

Said out loud like that, it was almost funny, as if Con had been one of the recipes in the women's magazine his mother sometimes bought. But Con didn't laugh because if he started, he was fairly sure he wouldn't be able to stop.

"How did you escape?" Trish asked.

"It wasn't because I was brave or strong or clever. I was just... dying. And then one of the orcs unchained me and carried me to the nearest road. Dumped me on the side there. I was lucky—a car came along and the driver took me to a police station. But I don't remember that part. Just waking up in the hospital." And realizing that his face was hideous, his body was badly damaged, and his career as an agent was likely over.

Isaac's hand was still just barely touching Con's. "Why did the orc do that?"

"I don't have a clue."

This was something he and Chief Bettaglia had talked about, actually. The official Bureau conclusion on the matter was that the Bureau didn't have a clue either. They knew next to nothing about orcs, and Con's little adventure hadn't helped shine any light on their behavior and motives. If the Bureau had learned anything more about them over the past decade, nobody had informed Con, and he certainly hadn't asked.

"Here's what I think," said Trish. "We're all individuals. Doesn't matter the species—human, coyote, orc... even cougar. I bet that orc had their own reasons. And there's not many that can say they survived being somebody's dinner, so good on you. You get a story nobody else can claim."

Huh. Con had never thought about it in that particular way. He'd have to turn that over in his brain for a while. But not right now; they had business to conduct.

Trish must have been thinking along similar lines. "All right, boys. Let's talk about why you're here. What does the Bureau want?" She directed her question at Con, which was interesting.

And he was the one to answer. This part was easy as pie after thinking about orcs. “Nothing very complicated. We’re just looking for a friendly agreement.”

“The U.S. government doesn’t have a great track record when it comes to honoring friendly agreements.”

“That’s unfortunately very true. But the Bureau itself *does* have an excellent history. We’ve done our best to honor, respect, and even protect sentient species regardless of whether they’re human. And often in the face of biases by people who assume that everyone who isn’t human is dangerous and therefore ought to be slaughtered.”

She nodded slowly. “I guess that’s true. My clan has had dealings with your Bureau every now and then, and they’ve always been fair. A generation back, we had a dispute with some cougars—nasty things, cats are—and the Bureau mediated. I don’t suppose either side was completely happy with the outcome, but we were satisfied enough. And things have stayed peaceful with the kitties ever since.”

“That’s the thing,” said Isaac, expression earnest. “You don’t have to agree with someone a hundred percent or love everything about them. As long as you can coexist without harming each other, it’s all good. That’s what we’re hoping for.”

“Hmm.” Trish popped a piece of zucchini into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully, her gaze focused on the nearby children. It must be a heavy burden to be responsible for young lives, Con thought. To protect your family in a world that often feared and hated anyone who was different.

After another piece of zucchini, Trish tapped the tabletop. “What exactly are you asking for?”

Both Trish and Isaac seemed to expect Con to respond; luckily, he was prepared. “Nothing elaborate or formal. Just an agreement in principle that we’re on the same side.”

“My clan will always come first. You understand that?”

“Of course.”

More finger-drumming. “Why is your Bureau so interested in us? Look at us.” She swept an arm to indicate the entire compound. “Just a handful of stringy shifters in the middle of nowhere. How could we possibly be important?”

Con had been thinking about this ever since he read the briefing paper. The document didn’t answer this specific question, which was a little odd. He would have assumed that the strategic plan behind the mission would be revealed. Except, of course, Townsend was in charge, and that man was nothing but puzzles.

“I can’t give you a straight answer, ma’am, because I don’t have one. Our boss isn’t big on revealing his motives. But I don’t think you have to be numerous or powerful to be important.” Con frowned, trying to think of an analogy. “You know, last year a space shuttle was destroyed on reentry because a piece of foam broke off. And back in ’86 there was a different shuttle disaster because some rubber rings failed. In both cases, little parts meant the difference between life and death.”

Maybe that wasn’t the most positive example, but it got his point across. Trish smiled a little. “My clan is rubber rings, huh?”

“Could be. Our boss seems to think so, and as far as I can tell, he’s always right.”

“So what if agree to this? Does that mean you’re always on our side? What if the kitties start acting up again?”

This part was hard. “We can’t promise to favor you. For all I know, the Bureau’s making the same request to the cougars that we’re making to you. But we can promise to view you as allies rather than foes and to do our best to make sure you’re protected from unwarranted aggression.”

Maybe Trish appreciated his honesty. She nodded rather than arguing, which was possibly a good sign. “I get it. Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. You’ll give me some time to think about this and discuss it with the clan. Come back in three days—four o’clock again—and I’ll have an answer for you.”

Three days. Con hadn't expected to be here that long. He hadn't packed enough clothing, even. But trying to hurry her decision felt like a bad idea. If he were in her position, he'd want time to deliberate.

Isaac must have reached the same conclusion. "We really appreciate your consideration. And your hospitality. We'll look forward to seeing you again."

She walked them to the SUV, her clan members watching from a distance. They all looked as if they were dying to find out what was going on. Not that Con could blame them. Trish appeared to be in a jolly mood. She even held Con's cane for him as he maneuvered into the passenger seat.

"Where you boys staying?"

"Gerard," Isaac answered.

"There's a shop in town that sells our work. Tell 'em I sent you and maybe they'll give you a discount." She cackled. "You staying at the old hospital?"

"Yes."

"Good. If you get bored, you can go looking for some ghosts. There's a couple of good ones there."

Con waited to speak until they were back on the paved road. "How do you think that went?"

"Are you sure you've never done that before, dude? 'Cause you were great."

Trying not to puff up with pride, Con said, "Thanks." He realized that his nerves had disappeared almost as soon as the conversation with Trish had begun. And maybe a big part of that was how the coyotes had reacted to his scars. To them he wasn't a freak or a horror—he was a strong man who'd been through a terrible ordeal. Funny how much someone else's regard could affect your own attitude.

Isaac played with the radio dial, failed to find anything that satisfied him, and gave up. "So," he said, grinning widely. "Three whole days at our disposal. Wanna find some ghosts?"

CHAPTER 7



THEY DID NOT IMMEDIATELY GO GHOST HUNTING. INSTEAD they drove back through Gerard and continued down the mountain into the Verde Valley. As soon as Con had sufficient cell reception, he called the chief. Holmes answered, which didn't please either of them, but Con just left a message that the mission was going smoothly despite a slight delay. He promised to check in again in three days, after their second meeting with the coyotes.

Cottonwood was a cute little place, with a town center that looked like Old West transformed into Modern Tourist. But Isaac took them past that part to the much more prosaic Walmart. As always, the other customers stared at Con under the fluorescent lights, but for once he didn't care. His scars were *his* story and nobody else's.

Con and Isaac bought a few things to get them through their unexpectedly extended stay—shampoo, socks, and underwear, mostly. Then they headed for downtown, where Con bought a couple of white button-downs and a pair of khakis. Isaac, laughing, chose two souvenir T-shirts and a garish yellow-and-black cowboy shirt. “You're going to wear that while we're on a mission?” Con asked, slightly aghast.

“You bet. And I'm charging it to the Bureau's expense account. Hey, I think we should get cowboy hats.”

“Absolutely not.”

There were a couple of antique shops and a thrift store nearby, but they were all closed for the day. Con managed not

to gaze longingly through their windows. The bookstore was open, fortunately, and Con bought a few volumes on local history while Isaac opted for an art book by an Arizona photographer and a travel guide to Vietnam.

“Are you planning a trip?” Con asked.

“Not really. But you never know.”

By then it was dinnertime, and Isaac led them into an upscale barbecue place. They sat in a booth, a horned cow skull hanging on the wood-paneled wall beside them. The skull reminded Con a little too much of the human one in the orc cave, so he avoided looking at it.

Isaac didn't seem to notice. “Feel free to get buzzed if you want. We're off duty and I'm driving.”

“I, um, don't drink alcohol.”

Isaac chuckled. “Me either. But for different reasons, I bet. I had sort of a problem with it when I was a kid. Not hardcore, but it wasn't good. Townsend found me—God only knows how—and basically bribed me with a kickass job if I got my shit together. So I did.”

Although Con had experienced literally a single taste of booze, he had taken great care to not get hooked on painkillers after his hospital stay. “You're making it sound easy, but I bet it wasn't.”

“It wasn't. It was part of this whole growing-up gig I had to do. Believe it or not, what you're seeing is the very mature, responsible version of Isaac Molina.”

Con had to chuckle at that. The waitress stepped in and took their order, and after she left, Con felt inclined to stay on the subject. “You were a late bloomer, adult-wise?”

“You could say that. Look, I love my mom and dad. But they both escaped really strict religious households—hers Jewish, his Catholic—where guilt was used as a weapon. So when they had me, they parented in the exact opposite way. Very few rules. We moved around all the time, and we lived in all sorts of, um, alternative spaces. I think I would've done better with some more structure, you know? They didn't really

prepare me to be a functioning grown-up.” Isaac toyed with his water glass before looking at Con again. “Were you ever tempted to really cut loose and go wild like my parents did?”

“No. I don’t believe... what my parents believe. I don’t think everything is a sin. But every time I think about doing the stuff my parents disapprove of, I just feel uneasy. I know that’s stupid.”

Isaac shook his head. “I don’t think so. But you did escape them, yeah?”

“The week of my eighteenth birthday. Ran off, got a job—I was strong then, so it wasn’t too hard—and never looked back. Haven’t spoken to them since.” Sometimes he wondered about them, and about his many siblings. But he knew they’d hate everything about him, and that was more than he was willing to face.

“Without the Bureau, I would have kept on partying, sleeping around, doing dumb shit. Bouncing around from one minimum-wage job to another and getting fired ’cause I showed up late or not at all. What do you think would have happened to you if you hadn’t joined up?”

This wasn’t a question Con had ever considered. His life had gone down a particular path and he’d followed it without looking at alternatives.

“Well, I wouldn’t have orc bites.” He paused. “But you know, I might have messed up my back working the road crew, I guess. It happened a lot.”

“Would you have been happier, you think?”

Con found himself shaking his head. “No. I know you hate the training, and nobody but me wants to hang out in the Antarctic, but I like it. I feel like I’m doing something worthwhile, I guess.” Huh. He’d never consciously realized that.

“I’m happier too,” Isaac said. “Man, my parents kinda flipped when I signed up.” His voice went falsetto. “*No, son, you’ don’t want to work for The Man! You can’t do that!*” He

laughed and then continued in his normal voice. “They came around eventually. Do you think yours would?”

“No fucking way.”

That made Isaac laugh—and Con too. Swearing felt surprisingly good.



After dinner they returned to the hotel, where Con settled in with his laptop. It wasn't all that comfortable for him to work propped up in bed, but the alternative was to find a spot somewhere else in the building, and he wasn't in the mood to wander. After two days of travel, it felt better to remain in their cozy little room, where he could occasionally look out the window at the lights in the valley below.

“You know, you could borrow my laptop and write up today's notes,” he said.

Isaac, who was flipping through his art book, laughed. “I'll leave that exciting task to you.”

“Maybe if you practice you'll get better at it.”

“I'm absolutely willing to remain inept.”

Con sighed. “Good note-taking is essential. It helps build cases and maintain clear records of—”

“Yada yada. I *know*. Not my gig. Hey, what do you want to do tomorrow?”

Deciding not to point out the obvious subject change, Con replied, “I have no idea.”

“Think of it like a mini vacation, dude, only it's on the Bureau's dime. The weather's not blazing hot yet, so we could do some outdoor stuff. There are several pueblo ruins in the area. Or we can go hiking. I bet there's some great trails around here.”

Con pictured himself stumbling along a steep, rocky slope. He wouldn't last long, and he'd be in pain. “Can't,” he said,

gesturing at his legs. “But I don’t want to spoil your fun. Go ahead without me.”

Isaac looked chagrined. “Wouldn’t be fun by myself. What do you do during your time off? Please tell me it’s not rearranging spreadsheets.”

“What if I enjoy rearranging spreadsheets?” Con relented a bit. “I don’t really do much. I swim. I read. Sometimes I go to the movies or a performance of some kind.” That was always good because it meant sitting in the dark, other audience members focused on the stage or screen, his scars unnoticed. He didn’t mention how he liked to haunt secondhand shops. That felt a little too personal.

“There’s probably a movie theater in Prescott or Sedona. We could see what’s playing. Or.... I know! There’s gotta be a place where we could go swimming. There’s a river down in the valley. I’ll ask at the reception desk.”

Although it was flattering that Isaac was going to so much effort to please him, Con shook his head. “No bathing suits.”

“Walmart.”

“I don’t....” Darn, this was hard. “I don’t really like other people seeing... me. At home I have my own pool.”

Isaac closed the book and shifted on his mattress to gaze more directly at Con. His brow was furrowed, but not in anger. He seemed to be trying to understand. “It really bugs you that much?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

The answer seemed obvious. “It’s ugly. I showed you.”

“Yeah, you did, and I told you I don’t think you’re ugly. Anyway, even if you were, who gives a fuck? You’re not here on this planet to be decorative for other people’s sake.”

Now somewhat annoyed, Con saved his document-in-progress and shut the laptop. “That’s easy for *you* to say. You’re gorgeous. You could be a model.”

“But I’m not responsible for my looks. I work out, yeah, but that’s because I enjoy it and because being in good shape is an asset with this job. I’m not trying to be pretty.”

That was probably true. He tended to be disheveled in his attire, and not in a hip, rakish way. His hair was generally a barely-tamed mop, and Con was fairly certain he didn’t get it cut at an expensive LA salon. When he wore a handsome scruff, it seemed to be more out of disinclination to shave than anything else. He didn’t preen in front of mirrors. He hadn’t packed a zillion bottles of skincare cremes or hair goos. But he was beautiful nonetheless.

“You can’t understand what it’s like to feel like a freak.”

“My God, Con, let your freak flag fly! Literally unbutton yourself. Stop giving a shit about whether God or other people will judge you, because if they do, that’s their problem not yours. Do what makes you *happy*.”

“Isn’t that what was getting you in trouble before you joined the Bureau? Self-indulgence and ignoring consequences?”

Isaac made a loud grunt of frustration and shook his head. He looked as if he might say more, but instead he swung his feet onto the floor and pulled on a pair of sneakers. “Trish said there were ghosts. I’m going to look for ’em. Join me if you want.”

He stomped out of the room and slammed the door before Con had a chance to ask him whether that was wise.



Hours passed.

Con finished the day’s notes, triple-checked them for accuracy, and shut down his computer. He took another shower because he felt a little dusty. He tried to read a book about the Sinagua people, builders of those now-ruined pueblos that Isaac had mentioned, but the words didn’t

register. He stared out the window. And around midnight, he started to worry.

He tried to imagine what Isaac was up to. Maybe Con's unintentionally harsh barb about Isaac's past had made him so angry that he'd rented a separate room. But then, wouldn't he have come back to fetch his belongings? He could be outside walking around, but the area was poorly lit, the footing treacherous in the dark. Even Isaac surely had enough sense to avoid that. Maybe he'd found a bar, here at the hotel or elsewhere in Gerard, and had fallen off the wagon. Maybe he'd found a woman or man—or heck, why not both?—and was currently engaged in a low-scale orgy somewhere. If so, that was his own business, and that thing Con felt was absolutely not jealousy.

It was bad form to abandon your partner like this. An agent needed to know where his partner was so that they could back each other up if needed. They'd been taught this repeatedly during training.

It was bad *manners* to disappear for hours without a word of explanation, most likely returning at some ungodly time, then turning on the lights and making all sorts of noise so that the person sharing your room was awakened.

By all rights, Con should record Isaac's absence in his daily notes.

He didn't.

But he did pace the room, which was too small for pacing, and finally stopped when the frequent pivots began to hurt. He stared out the window some more.

And then, inevitably, he recalled what Isaac had said right before leaving. Ghosts. He said he was hunting for ghosts.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 8



DESPITE THE LATE HOUR, THE RECEPTION DESK WAS STAFFED. The frowzy-looking young man looked up from his game of solitaire, blinked quickly, and pasted on a professional smile. “Need something? Restaurant’s closed, but there’s drinks in that cooler and snacks on the rack.” He waved toward one corner of the lobby.

“No thanks. I’m, um, looking for someone. For my partner. My work partner, that is.” Well, that sounded inane. Con tried again. “We’re here on business. My coworker left the room several hours ago and he hasn’t returned yet. I was wondering if you knew where he went.”

The young man shrugged noncommittally. “Maybe. I’ve been on duty since eight, so if he left the building, I probably saw him.”

“He’s in his thirties. Dark hair. He was wearing black suit pants and a white shirt.” Which was mostly unbuttoned when Isaac had stormed off, but Con didn’t mention that.

The clerk’s posture relaxed a bit. “Oh yeah, sure. Isaac, right?”

Of *course* they were on a first-name basis. “Yes.”

“Man, I’ve never met an agent from the Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs before. It’s so cool! Do you guys really, like, stake vampires and hang out with sasquatches?”

“On occasion. But Isaac...?”

“Yeah, well, he was asking me about ghosts. We got a lot of ’em. It’s an old hospital, right? And I figure most of the people that croaked were injured miners and weren’t really ready to go gentle into that good night. But I told him that we don’t mind the ghosts. One of ’em gets pissed if you move the furniture around too much in room 210, but even then, she just moans. The ghosts have been here longer than the hotel, so we figure live-and-let-, um, haunt.”

Con was trying his best to remain calm and patient. “That’s great. But where did Isaac go?”

“I told him if he really wanted to deal with something nasty, he should check out the old cemetery. That place is creepy as hell.”

“Is that where he went, then?”

“Guess so. He walked out that door and I haven’t seen him come back. I didn’t notice how long he’d been gone. I was in the john for about ten minutes and figured he might’ve returned then.”

Con’s breathing was starting to quicken. This didn’t feel right at all. “Where’s the cemetery?”

“Little over a mile from here. Just follow the highway through town and you’ll see a sign for it on your left. Can’t miss it. Um... do you want me to call the sheriff or anything?”

For a moment Con considered that, but then he dismissed the idea. Local law enforcement usually hated to get involved in the Bureau’s business—and the Bureau was rarely eager to bring them in. It would be embarrassing if nothing was wrong and Isaac had just decided to go for a stroll. And besides, the briefing papers said it was best if nobody but the coyote shifters knew why Isaac and Con were there. If Con called the cops, he’d have to explain.

He tried to remember if the Bureau had any rules governing this precise situation, but he couldn’t think of any. Technically speaking, Isaac wasn’t even operating on Bureau business—their mission was coyote shifters, not ghosts. Con could call the chief, but he didn’t want to risk getting Isaac in

trouble. Especially since the argument that precipitated the whole thing had been at least partly Con's fault.

Another option was for Con to go back to the room and go to bed. Isaac was a grown man. An experienced Bureau agent. He didn't need help from a guy who spent all his time with microscopes and spreadsheets.

Con wished vehemently that he could simply call Isaac. But Isaac had left his cell phone charging in their room, and anyway, coverage was nearly nonexistent in Gerard.

Dithering in the lobby wasn't going to help. Con walked outside, where the air was surprisingly cool, and saw that the Bureau's Toyota was still parked in front of the building as if it, too, were enjoying the view. That was good news; it meant Isaac couldn't have gone far. And assuming the keys were upstairs, it also meant that Con wouldn't have to walk. He didn't much relish the idea of limping down a mountainside in the middle of the night.

"I'll be right back," Con said to the clerk, who'd been patiently waiting. Then he took the elevator back up.

He heaved a sigh of relief when he spied the car keys near Isaac's phone. After a brief hesitation, he went to his suitcase and pulled out a locked black bag. Per regulations, he checked it at least monthly to make sure it was fully stocked and that the items were in good order. But he'd never actually used any of the contents except for his mandated quarterly time at the Bureau's firing range. The bag contained his Bureau-issued Glock and holster, which—feeling self-conscious even though he was alone—he strapped around his waist. The bullets were specially made and would take down not just humans but also an array of creatures resistant to ordinary ammunition. There were various other weapons, ranging from a long-bladed knife in a sheath to a sachet of herbs that repelled harpies and their kin.

There was nothing in the bag for fighting ghosts. One reason was that the Bureau almost never dealt with them. Like the resident specters in this hotel, the vast majority of ghosts were annoying at worst. On the rare occasions when their

behavior became so obnoxious that it needed addressing, no physical armament would work. Ghosts were nonphysical entities, and anything you threw in their direction simply passed through them. Smudging sometimes helped, but inconsistently. What worked best was to call one of the several agents who had a special affinity for the spirits of the deceased—the ghost whisperers—who'd persuade the ghost to move on.

Con was not a ghost whisperer. Neither was Isaac.

Feeling ridiculous with weapons strapped to his body and tucked into pockets, Con grabbed the keys and headed back downstairs.

The clerk looked much more alert than he had earlier. Con paused and gave him a stern look. "If Isaac turns up before I do, tell him I've gone searching for him, and that he should park himself here and not move until I get back."

"Yes, sir!" The young man seemed enthusiastic, as if, like in an old Western, he'd been newly deputized.

Maneuvering the SUV out of the parking lot and navigating the road that descended through town wasn't easy. Con rarely drove anything bigger than his little Civic, and the roadway was narrow with very tight turns. Maybe during the heyday of the mines, downtown Gerard had been a hopping place late at night, but now all the businesses were closed up tight and he didn't see a single sign of life. He drove very slowly, peering up and down the side streets and stairways that traversed the slope, but if Isaac was there, he was hidden by the shadows.

As the clerk had promised, there was a sign for the cemetery just before one of the hairpin turns. Con traveled down the gravel road, past a few small houses—all of them darkened—that clung to the hillside, and then down through a couple hundred meters of what he thought was mostly scrub. There wasn't enough light to know for sure.

He almost went right past the cemetery. There was no sign that he could see, just a low chainlink fence. He parked next to the gate and, after pausing to fish a flashlight from the glove

box, got out of the SUV. He took his cane, which meant he didn't have a free hand. That was awkward, but not as bad as losing his footing on the uneven ground and splitting his head open on a rock. Or impaling himself on a cactus.

For a few moments, Con stood on the gravel and allowed his eyes to adjust. There was only a sliver of moon tonight and the stars offered little illumination. The air had a slightly bitter, herbal tang that wasn't unpleasant. He'd been living in LA for a long time, but he'd grown up in a rural area—a small acreage about twenty miles outside Chillicothe, Ohio—so he knew the countryside wasn't silent at night. It was just a different type of noise from the city. Here, insects chirped and small creatures rustled through leaves. Far away a coyote howled. He wondered if it was an actual coyote or someone from Trish's clan.

Finally, feeling a little foolish and almost sacrilegious for marring the peace, Con shouted. "Isaac? Are you here?"

Nobody answered.

Which could mean Isaac wasn't here, or that he was and didn't want to respond. Or, a chilly voice inside Con's mind reminded him, *couldn't* respond.

The gate stood slightly ajar. There was no lock, so anyone could have left it like that, but it seemed somehow ominous.

Con swept the flashlight beam ahead of him. The cemetery sprawled across several rises, interspersed with narrow valleys. A gravel trail edged the area, and although it looked well maintained, the grounds themselves were overgrown. Grasses, aloes, cactuses, and other low plants grew between widely spaced graves enclosed by low, decorative iron fences. There were a few scattered shrubby things not tall enough to qualify as trees. He saw a lot of rocks that would be easy to trip over. Grave markers leaned drunkenly, when they were present at all.

The nearest grave was of a man with an Italian name who'd died in 1909 when he was twenty years old. Close to him was a baby girl who'd survived less than one month in April 1905.

For no real reason, Con thought of the skeleton that had kept him company in the orc cave. As far as he knew, that person had never been identified. Con wondered what was worse: dead and anonymous in a cave, or dead and forgotten in a desert cemetery. It didn't matter, did it? Not to the dead, anyway.

And musing on mortality wasn't why he was here right now.

He walked slowly, swinging the flashlight beam from side to side, calling out Isaac's name. Although there was no response, he had the skin-prickling sensation that something was listening. It was the auditory equivalent of someone staring at the back of your head, and it wasn't pleasant.

Don't spook yourself, he warned sternly. *Won't do either of you any good*. And darn it, he was a well-armed, well-trained Bureau agent. Yes, somewhat the worse for wear, but he wasn't helpless.

Of course, neither was Isaac, and he was nowhere to be seen.

Something darted across the path a few feet in front of Con, and he jerked back so quickly that he almost fell. But it was only a small rodent of some kind, and now his inner voice cursed him.

Standing in the darkness, heart racing, feeling helpless, Con remembered something the Bureau shrink had told him many years ago. *If you see yourself as weak, you will be. If you see yourself as strong, you can be*. It had seemed hokey at the time, just empty advice intended to make him act like a functioning adult. But maybe there was something to it. So now Con imagined himself steady of mind, hand, and foot; brave enough to face the unknown; tough enough to fight and survive. That was how Trish seemed to view him. And really, so had Isaac, who had behaved as if Con were as capable as any other agent.

He opened his mouth to call yet again but then heard a noise that didn't come from his own mouth. It could have been

a groan. Or an animal. Or a far-away engine echoing off the hillside. He headed toward it.

That meant leaving the pathway. Prickly plants tugged at his trouser legs and stones shifted under his feet. A few times he stepped on something smooth and flat and hard, and he realized he was walking over a fallen gravestone. Other times he had to skirt a bulky bush or the low iron fences that reminded him of old-fashioned bedsteads. He wondered if that had been part of the intent: a symbolic resting place for those beloved by the grieving family.

He heard the sound again, closer, and this time it sounded human. “Isaac?” he called. “Are you here?”

And there at the waning end of the flashlight beam was Isaac himself, half-hidden by a mesquite tree, staring blankly toward Con.

Stark naked.

Con’s first thought was that this was some sort of elaborate joke. But as Isaac walked slowly toward him, his gait was... off. So maybe he had gotten drunk for the first time in years and this was the result. Or he could have taken drugs, either purposely or inadvertently.

“What are you doing? What’s wrong with you?”

Isaac didn’t answer. That was wrong too, because he rarely seemed at a loss for words. If he were in his right mind, he would surely have something to say. Instead he simply continued to move forward, apparently heedless of the thorns and sharp stones under his feet.

Con realized that he was still rooted in place. He moved ahead cautiously, keeping the light directly on Isaac’s face. Strangely, Isaac didn’t blink or shield his eyes.

“Are you sick? Do you need me to take you to a hospital? What the fuck is *wrong*?”

The only response was a raised hand as if Isaac were reaching for him.

Con almost reached back. But by then Isaac was near enough for Con to get a good look at his eyes. And Con immediately realized two things.

This was not Isaac Molina.

And the thing haunting the Gerard cemetery wasn't a harmless ghost—it was a deadly ghoul.

A brutal creature that took the form of its last devoured victim.

Oh no.

With the ghoul almost upon him, Con very nearly dropped his cane and reached for his gun. But he remembered that even the Bureau's special bullets wouldn't kill this monster.

Some people claimed that you could stop a ghoul with prayer, but Con couldn't think of a single invocation. Salvation Becker, who'd spent eighteen years being trained by his parents to entreat God, couldn't do so when he needed it most. He almost laughed at the irony.

And then the ghoul opened its mouth in a ghastly smile, revealing sharklike rows of teeth, and Con roared. "No, goddammit! No!"

The ghoul snarled back and attacked.

Con dropped the flashlight and reached for the knife at his waist. But all that was done with his left hand, his nondominant hand attached to the arm permanently weakened by the orcs. So although he stabbed and slashed at the ghoul a few times, he did little harm. The ghoul danced around him, making a grating sound that Con realized was probably laughter.

All of the fear drained from Con at once, replaced by rabid fury. "What did you do to Isaac, you fucking evil piece of shit? What did you do!" And he continued to swear as he came after the ghoul—a constant stream of foul words, none of which he'd ever said before, some of which he wasn't sure he'd even *heard* before. He scored several more strikes with the knife, none of which seemed to make any difference. The ghoul

didn't even bleed. It skipped around and laughed and showed its teeth, stained with Isaac's blood.

And then, with all the casual ease of a playful cat, it batted the knife out of Con's hand. He heard it clatter against stone, but he couldn't see its precise location in the dark. When he bent awkwardly to find it, the ghoul was on him.

It knocked him down and fell on top of him in a profane caricature of sex, humping its body against his and dripping saliva onto his face. When Con tried to claw at it, it caught his wrists. When he tried to roll away or buck it off, it remained in place with little effort. Maybe in his prime Con could have fought it off, but not now.

He could no longer see it well. It was just a shadowed weight above him. That made things a little easier: at least he was no longer looking at a parody of Isaac's face.

Isaac. God, what if he was still alive but wounded? If Con gave up, Isaac would die too, and that wasn't fair. He was far too full of life.

The ghoul bent low, its breath foul against Con's neck. It *licked* him.

"You're worse than the fucking orcs," Con gasped. He jerked his right hand desperately and managed to free it from the ghoul's grip. He now knew that punching and scratching would do him no good, so he scabbled for anything he could use as a weapon—even a goddamn cactus would do.

His fingers brushed against the familiar metal handle of his cane, and he grasped it.

The angle wasn't good, but Con bashed his fist—handle and all—into the side of the ghoul's face. It made a surprised yelp and rolled away, and Con shocked himself by quickly scrambling to his feet. When the ghoul came at him, snarling now instead of laughing, Con swung the cane into its skull. There was a satisfying crack, another yelp, and the ghoul fell back a few feet.

It wasn't seriously injured, and Con was pretty sure that he couldn't exert enough force with the lightweight cane to bring

the monster down.

The training manual. The holy shit-fucking Bureau training manual. What did it say about ghouls?

Prayer. Flames. Or... a sword.

Con didn't have a sword and the knife was lost in the night. No fire handy either. But he flipped the cane around and tore the rubber tip off the bottom. He hurled the tip at the ghoul; it bounced off the creature without any effect. The end of the cane was now a ring of slightly sharp aluminum. Not a sword, but the closest he had.

Con waited for the ghoul to lunge at him again. When it did, instead of falling back he stepped into the attack with his cane raised, driving the end into the beast with all his might.

The metal sank into the ghoul's body with a horrifying yet satisfying *crunch*.

It shrieked and struggled to extricate itself, but the cane had gone all the way through, and Con still held the handle. After a few frenzied shudders and a gurgling gasp, the ghoul collapsed.

Unsure whether his foe was truly dead, Con yanked out the cane, retrieved the fallen flashlight, and returned with cane raised, ready to strike again. But before his eyes the ghoul shriveled, as if rapidly dehydrating, until it resembled one of those naturally mummified bodies sometimes found in the desert. It gave one final croak, sounding almost reproachful, and then it crumbled to dust.

"Isaac!" Con wanted to collapse onto his knees and have a breakdown. Instead, supporting himself with the cane as well as he could, he hurried to the mesquite where the ghoul had been hiding.

And behind it was Isaac—the real one—sprawled face-up on the ground, unmoving, blood staining his white shirt.

CHAPTER 9



CON FELL TO HIS KNEES BESIDE ISAAC AND DIDN'T REGISTER any pain with the impact. When a quick check found a strong pulse in Isaac's neck, Con gave an incoherent cry of relief. Isaac was breathing well, and although the blood came from what seemed to be a bite on his shoulder, the wound appeared shallow.

But Isaac remained unconscious, and after a moment Con discovered why: Isaac's head lay on top of a fallen gravestone. There didn't appear to be any open wounds on his scalp, but the stone surface would have been more than sufficient to give him a concussion.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity FUCK."

Swearing felt good but, unfortunately, it didn't solve anything.

Con checked his cell phone, but as he'd expected, he had no reception. There were no houses within shouting distance. He could drive for help, but he didn't want to leave Isaac alone. What if the ghoul had friends? According to Bureau materials, they usually operated solo—but not always.

"Isaac? Can you wake up?" When that didn't work, Con poked him hard in the uninjured shoulder, at the same time leaning in close to his face and shouting, "Wake up!"

When Isaac's lids fluttered open, Con almost cried in relief. The relief was somewhat lessened, however, when Isaac made a gagging noise, rolled onto his side, and vomited.

Luckily he rolled away from Con, but still Con fell backward onto his ass when he reflexively jerked away.

It took a minute or two, but eventually Isaac was sitting up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and squinting at his shoulder in confusion. “What.... Where.... Did you *bite* me?”

Con gave a hysterical little cackle. “Not me. Ghoul.”

“Ghou— What?”

“We need to get you to the hospital. Can you walk?” Because there was no way that Con could carry him.

Isaac had bits of debris in his hair and looked thoroughly bewildered. “What?”

With a sigh, Con managed to get to his own feet—causing his hips and knees to chime in loudly, thanks very much. With his help, Isaac stood too, but he was swaying and unsteady.

“Here. Hold this.” Con gave him the flashlight, which Isaac took obediently enough, although he didn’t do a very good job at pointing it anywhere useful. For a moment Con considered applying pressure to Isaac’s wound, but the bleeding didn’t seem too heavy and getting him promptly to a hospital was a bigger priority.

Con grasped his cane, now somewhat battered, in his right hand and encouraged Isaac to lean on him. It was a damned awkward way to move, but they managed to get through the cemetery and back to the SUV without further mishap. After Con got Isaac settled in the passenger seat, he handed him a bottle of water so he could rinse out his mouth and have a few sips. Then Con fetched the first aid kit he’d packed in the back, and he did a quick disinfecting of the bite before slapping on a bandage. The bleeding had mostly stopped, but infection was a worry—God only knew what pathogens ghouls carried in their creepy mouths.

“You’re a real Boy Scout,” Isaac said as Con buckled in and started the engine. “Prepared for anything.”

“I wasn’t allowed to join the Scouts. Too worldly.”

“Me either. Too militaristic.”

They both chuckled.

Con pulled onto the main road, heading for Cottonwood. He drove faster than he should have, but since there were no other cars on the road this late, he just needed to make sure he didn't send them over a cliff.

“What's going on?” Isaac asked after a minute or two. He didn't slur, which was probably a good sign.

“What do you remember?”

“I... I was talking to the guy in the lobby. Did *he* do this? And how did I get... where was I?”

“The clerk is fine, and he didn't bite you. You went to the cemetery in search of ghosts. You found a ghoul instead.”

Isaac gave a low curse. “And the ghoul bit— What's wrong with my head? It hurts.” He started to rub the back of it, winced, and let his hand drop.

“You fell. Or it pushed you—I don't know which. Got a concussion. Which is why we're on the way to the hospital.”

“I hate hospitals.” Isaac sighed.

“Not my favorite places either.”

“Yeah.”

By now they'd reached the last of the switchbacks, and Con floored it. In the unlikely event he got pulled over, he could flash his Bureau badge. He knew a lot of agents took advantage of this even when they weren't in an emergency situation, but he never had. Too bad he was too busy worrying right now to enjoy it.

“Con? What were *you* doing in the cemetery?”

“Looking for you, of course.”

“And the ghoul...?”

Con shuddered. “I think I interrupted just as it was about to eat you for dinner. It's dust now.”

Isaac was silent for a moment, and Con was driving too fast to risk a glance. Finally, in a quiet voice, Isaac said, “Ghouls are tough.”

“And nasty. This one reeked.” Which meant that Con also probably smelled like a recent grave, but he’d have to deal with that later.

“You killed it, though.”

“Inexpertly, but yes. Training materials say that a sword works. I didn’t have one so I used my cane.”

Isaac barked a laugh. “You killed a ghoul with your fucking *cane*?”

Put like that, it did sound unlikely. And ridiculous. Con shrugged. “It was all I had. I dropped my knife.” Which was still in the cemetery somewhere. He didn’t feel eager to retrieve it. The Bureau could issue him a new one.

The lights of Cottonwood shone up ahead. Con remembered passing the hospital on the way to Walmart; it was right off the main road. He slowed down a little in case there was cross traffic along the way.

A near whisper came from the passenger seat. “You rescued me. You came searching for me and you saved me from a goddamn ghoul.”

“I...” Con swallowed. “You’re my partner. I’m supposed to look out for you.”

Isaac lifted Con’s filthy right hand off the gearshift knob, brought it to his lips, and kissed the back of it.

They were silent for the rest of the drive.



Once they were inside the hospital, they got into another argument.

Not right away. First some of the medical staff whisked Isaac away, and then the remaining ones—who had nothing

else to do in the deserted ER—insisted on examining Con too. He was fine, other than scrapes and bruises. His legs hurt, but that was normal. He had a chance to wash up a little, which was nice, although his suit was probably a goner. When one of the nurses noticed the state of his cane, she found him a new one. He kept the old one, however, feeling he owed it a place of honor.

Next he had to explain to the doctors and nurses what had happened. He'd briefly considered making up a story: Isaac had gone for a midnight walk and fallen, maybe, and Con had taken a tumble too. Except that didn't explain the very obvious bite on Isaac's shoulder. So Con told the truth, which turned out to make a huge impression on the medical staff. In fact, he ended up telling them about the orcs too, mostly to distract himself from worrying about Isaac. They were fascinated.

Finally a nurse brought Con to the exam room where Isaac waited. One shoulder of Isaac's hospital johnny had been lowered, exposing his professionally rebandaged bite. Other than that he looked pretty good, Con thought, apart from his messy hair. Oh hell, he looked beautiful. The guy couldn't manage to be plain even after nearly dying.

Isaac's smile was broad and bright. "Luckily, it's only my brain. Which is not one of my more important parts."

Con didn't know whether to panic or laugh. "I think your brain's pretty important, actually."

"Well, it'll be fine, according to the doc. No harm done."

Skeptical, Con looked at the doctor, who was scribbling something on her clipboard. "No harm?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Probably not. He's not showing much in the way of symptoms now, aside from a headache. We don't have the equipment here to do a brain scan, and your partner doesn't want to go to Flagstaff and get one. And frankly, I don't think it's necessary. I'm going to release him, if you're willing to keep an eye on him for the next day or so."

"Of course. But are you sure?"

As Isaac rolled his eyes, the doctor gave Con a reassuring smile. “Observation for twenty-four hours. Bring him back if he shows new symptoms. Otherwise, he needs to rest for at least a couple of days. Nothing that requires physical or mental effort. And nothing that makes him feel worse.”

“That means,” Isaac said, “I get to sit on my ass and watch TV.”

“Our room doesn’t have a TV.”

“Shit, that’s right. Well, then sit on my ass and contemplate the error of my ways.” He sounded unexpectedly cheerful at the prospect, then sobered a little. “You don’t mind babysitting?”

“No.” Con turned to the doctor. “Is it okay if he sleeps?”

“Yeah. People used to believe that if a concussed patient fell asleep, they might end up in a coma. But it turns out that’s an old saw. Sleep is fine—probably for the best, in fact—as long as everything seems okay. You might wake him every couple of hours just to make sure.”

While Isaac grumbled about that part, Con nodded. “Got it.”

After that there were more instructions for Isaac, thankfully in printed form, and discharge paperwork for both of them. Con took care of it all, which made Isaac happy.

It was when the nurse handed Isaac his ruined clothing in a plastic bag that Con and Isaac had the argument. A quiet one.

“I’m going to call the chief,” Con said, taking out his phone. He was getting decent cell service here.

“Don’t. He doesn’t have to know about this.”

“Of course he does!”

“Why? It wasn’t part of our mission. The ghoul’s gone, thanks to you. I’ll be fine. Nobody else was involved.”

“The rules say....” Con stopped himself and took a few breaths. “We’re Bureau agents. You were very nearly killed by a ghoul. He should know about this.”

They went back and forth for a few minutes, Con doing his best to mask his frustration. Finally, though, he crossed his arms. “He’s going to find out anyway from the insurance claim. Would you rather he hear about it from us directly or from Holmes?”

Isaac’s shoulders slumped. “God, not Holmes. Fine. Call him.”

So Con did, and even though it was very late, Chief Townsend picked up on the first ring. “What’s up, son?”

Con gave him an abbreviated version of the night’s events. Agent Molina had heard about possible ghosts in the cemetery and, given that they had some downtime anyway, decided to investigate. Con stayed behind due to the potentially rough terrain but became concerned when Isaac didn’t return. Upon investigation, he found Isaac fighting a ghoul, and Con finished off the creature before they sought medical attention. He skipped the hotel-room fight that had caused Isaac to stomp out into the night.

“That’s a lot of unexpected excitement.” Townsend didn’t sound upset. “Good teamwork, though. I’m glad I paired you two up. Will you both be healthy enough to complete your assignment?”

“Yes, sir. Um, Isa— Agent Molina just needs some rest.”

“Very good. You can write this up in your final report. Good night, son.”

After Con put away his phone, he found Isaac staring at him. “You didn’t tell him I was an idiot who failed to follow proper procedures.”

“I didn’t think that was necessary.”

“And you didn’t let on how thoroughly you saved my ass.”

Con shrugged. “Also not necessary.”

“Holy shit, Con.”

Not understanding why Isaac was looking at him that way, Con simply gathered his things. “Do you want to borrow my jacket for the walk to the SUV? The jacket’s dirty, but....”

“It’s fine. In the unlikely event anyone’s out there, they’ll get a free show.”

They said goodbye to the ER staff and, both of them moving slowly, made their way to the parking lot.



Isaac complained he was hungry, so before heading back to the hotel they stopped at a convenience market. It seemed as if Isaac was seriously ready to go inside—concussion, johnny, and all—until Con threatened to tie him to the passenger seat. That made Isaac laugh and joke about bondage. Blushing hotly, Con hurried into the store.

The clerk was an older woman who didn’t bat an eye over the scarred and smelly man in the dirty suit. She’d probably seen worse. She also didn’t comment on the fact that Con was buying a hundred bucks’ worth of snacks.

Isaac was rummaging through the bags as they backed out of the parking lot. “Twinkies!” he hooted triumphantly.

“The options were limited. I can pick up some real food in the morning.” Which was nearly here. The sky was already beginning to lighten.

“No, this is fine. It never occurred to me that I could buy this shit as a grownup. My parents never let me eat crap like this. Chemicals, refined sugar, blah blah blah.”

“Our parents would have agreed on that point. Also we couldn’t afford expensive junk food. Dad never made much money, and there were ten of us kids.”

Isaac made a choked sound. “Ten?”

“And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ Genesis is big on being fruitful, and my parents took it seriously.”

“Jesus. I’m an only. I used to wish really hard for sibs because we were always picking up and moving, leaving my friends behind. Dunno what I’d have done with so many brothers and sisters, though. Where are you, numerically?”

“Fifth.” Which meant there were always older siblings watching over him, making sure he followed the rules, and younger ones needing to be cared for. His mother had left a lot of the homeschool teaching to him once she realized he had a knack. He hadn’t minded that, but he would have preferred to go to a regular school and interact with people he wasn’t related to.

Isaac munched contentedly while Con drove—considerably slower than he had in the opposite direction—and when they reached the hotel parking lot, Con was exhausted. He didn’t let Isaac carry anything, however, reasoning that doing so would count as physical effort.

The young man behind the desk was still on duty, looking as tired as Con felt. But he perked up and gasped when he saw them. “What happened?”

Con couldn’t help glaring at him. “You were right. There was something nasty in the cemetery.”

“Oh shit! What was—”

“Not now. We need rest.”

The kid nodded vigorously. “Right. Of course. Hey—do you want an upgrade? I’ve got a mini-suite with a sitting area and a balcony.”

“Does it have a TV?” Isaac asked.

“Yeah.”

Isaac gave Con a pleading look, as if it were somehow Con’s decision to make. Con sighed. “Upgrade sounds good.”

That meant getting Isaac settled into the new room—which really was nicer and turned out to also have a mini fridge—and then Con packing up everything in their old room and schlepping it down the hall. By the time he finished, he could barely function due to his aches and exhaustion, and Isaac was fast asleep in bed.

The *only* bed, Con realized.

Shit. The clerk hadn’t mentioned that part, and Con hadn’t registered it until now.

There was a couch in the sitting area. It wasn't long enough for Con's tall frame, and it wouldn't feel good on his sore body, but at this point he could probably sleep on hot coals. He kicked off his shoes and socks, peeled off his jacket and shirt, brushed his teeth, and collapsed onto the couch. At which point he realized he lacked a pillow and was a little chilly.

Grumbling under his breath, he looked in the closet and was relieved to discover a spare blanket. No pillows, but there were plenty on the bed. He grabbed one before returning to the couch.

"What are you doing?" Isaac's voice was thick with sleep.

"Going to bed." Then worry struck, and Con sat up. "Is something wrong? Are the symptoms getting worse?"

"I'm fine. But for fuck's sake, dude, sleep in the bed. It's big enough. I won't bite." That was followed by something suspiciously close to a giggle.

"Getting bit isn't a joke."

"Fine. I'm absolutely serious. I'll keep my teeth and every other part to myself. You're a hero tonight, Con. You at least deserve a decent place to sleep."

Con was going to refuse. But he couldn't find a way to get comfortable on the couch, and at this point he was ready to sell his soul for some decent rest. Still, he had to protest. "I stink of ghoul."

"Me too. Ghoul and antibiotics. Come to bed, Con."

And Con did. He climbed beneath the covers, set an alarm so he'd wake up in a couple of hours to check on Isaac, and before he could begin to worry about the proximity of a naked man, he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 10



ISAAC WAS SLEEPY THE NEXT DAY BUT OTHERWISE OKAY. HE remained in bed to eat the breakfast Con brought up from downstairs, took a quick shower, and moved onto the balcony while the housecleaner changed the bedding. She didn't say much, but her eyes were big. Perhaps the hotel staff had heard about the previous night's exploits.

Isaac went back to bed, and Con showered before settling down with his laptop to officially report yesterday's events. This room had a little desk, which was nice, and he angled it so that he could keep an eye on Isaac, just in case. But that turned out to be distracting. Asleep, Isaac looked like a fallen angel. Of course Con was acutely aware that his partner was, in fact, entirely human—but that didn't improve matters any. It didn't reduce Con's desire to touch him.

At lunchtime, Con brought back hamburgers, which they ate at the little table on the balcony. It was pleasant to look out at the view, and although their conversation was minimal, that was fine too. It was just nice to share another meal.

Afterward it was time to change the dressing on Isaac's wound. He'd been shirtless all day, apparently comfortable in a pair of lounging pants, and Con had been trying hard not to notice all that lovely bare skin.

But now he had to touch it. While Isaac sat in bed, Con removed the dressing and inspected the bite. "It doesn't look reddened or infected. How does it feel?"

“It hurts. But probably not as bad as yours did. This is just a scrape.”

“You’ll scar.”

That didn’t seem to bother Isaac. “We can start a special Bite Club at HQ. You’re the president. I know at least three other guys who’ll qualify.”

Con snorted. “And exactly what would this club do?” He dabbed gently with a damp washcloth as he spoke, hoping the inane conversation would keep Isaac from focusing on the discomfort.

“Dunno. Lord it over all the other agents who aren’t nearly as cool as us. Pretty soon everyone will be wanting one. It’ll be like... getting a tattoo if you’re a sailor. Only studlier, because tattoo artists aren’t generally trying to kill you.”

“I never knew I was such a trendsetter,” Con said as he smeared on some antibiotic ointment before applying a fresh bandage. Since Isaac had refused stronger painkillers on account of his addictive history with alcohol, Con handed him a couple of Advil and a glass of water.

Isaac downed the pills obediently and watched as Con cleaned up. “You’re good at this—doctoring, I mean.”

“I had a lot of practice in wound care while I was recovering.”

“Once you got out of the hospital, you had to take care of yourself, huh?”

Con shrugged.

“Hey.” Isaac caught Con’s wrist. It was a soft grip and Con didn’t fight it. “I’m grateful you’re here to take care of me. I’m *really* grateful you saved my life last night. And I’m damned glad that Townsend picked you as my partner. I’d rather have you here with me than anyone else in the Bureau.” Isaac’s eyes shone, and for once his expression was entirely serious.

Gooseflesh prickled down Con’s back, which was stupid because he suddenly felt overly warm. His face was flaming,

and the few inches of skin that Isaac was touching—those few inches were on fire. And God, Con wanted to burn.

“Just doing my job,” he whispered, unable to look away.

“Doing it really fucking well.”

Isaac kissed his hand again, just like last night, and then fell back against the pillow with a little huff. “And I need a nap.”

Con helped him arrange the pillows and went to close the curtains. Afterward he sat for a long time at the little desk, a Bureau form open on the laptop in front of him, his thoughts far away. He still felt Isaac’s lips on his skin.



That day and the next, Isaac slept a lot. He tried to watch TV, but it gave him a headache. When he got bored, Con ended up reading to him. First they tried one of the history volumes Con had bought, then Isaac’s guide to Vietnam, but Isaac couldn’t concentrate well enough to follow either.

So then Con made an expedition to the lobby, where there was a small stack of paperbacks abandoned by previous guests. He chose one pretty much at random. It turned out to be about a psychic waitress who falls for her neighbor, a Civil War–veteran vampire. Isaac thought it was hilarious.

By late afternoon of the second day, Isaac was apparently feeling pretty chipper apart from the ache in his shoulder. He even put on real clothing: jeans and one of the T-shirts he’d bought in Cottonwood. He grew restless, however, especially after they finished the book.

“We could go for a walk,” Isaac suggested. “Just a short one.”

“There’s nowhere we can walk that isn’t steep, and the doctor said no exertion.”

“Then drive us to somewhere that’s flat.”

Con pictured doing so, and watching helplessly as Isaac loped off into the distance like an unleashed dog. “Even if it’s flat, it’ll still be hot. And walking around is exercise.”

“Ugh.” Isaac had wandered onto the balcony, looking as if he might be considering a leap over the edge. Con thought it wise to shadow him.

“There must be *something* we can do that won’t make my head explode.”

“I can find another book.”

Isaac shook his head. “You’ve been reading for hours and your throat’s sore. I can tell.”

That was true, but it was a very minor discomfort. “You can try the TV again.”

“Daytime TV, and all they have is basic cable. I’d rather my head explode.”

It was a little like babysitting a sulky child, which was something Con hadn’t experienced since he left home. Back when he was a kid, there were always chores to hand out to bored siblings. He didn’t have any chores for Isaac.

“We could play a game.”

Isaac tilted his head. “Cards?”

Con didn’t know any card games; his parents had forbidden them. Besides, neither he nor Isaac had a pack of cards, and even if they did, concentrating might be too much for Isaac right now. “No, but—”

“Amnesty.”

“What?”

Isaac grabbed Con’s hand and dragged him inside to the sitting area, then gently pushed him onto the couch and sat close beside him. “Amnesty. My family used to play it. I dunno whether my parents invented it or learned it from their friends.”

“How do you play?” Con asked warily.

“It’s easy. It won’t even tax my poor battered brain. When it’s your turn you say something honest—something about yourself or something you did—and the other players have to promise not to flip you any serious shit over it. Like, one time my mom admitted that she’d accidentally knocked over a really nice vase my dad had made on commission. He’d been blaming the cat. Or once my dad said that he missed watching TV. We never had one.”

“Us either.” Funny how much his parents had in common with Isaac’s, albeit out of very different motivations. “Did you use this game to get out of trouble when you were a kid?”

Isaac snorted. “All the time. I’m pretty sure that’s why my folks played it—they figured it was better for me to confess to doing stupid shit than to try to hide it.” He bounced a bit in his seat. “So you up for it? I’ll start.”

Although Con was positive this was a bad idea, he nodded. At least it would keep Isaac occupied for a while.

“Cool. Let me think.” Pensive Isaac was as beautiful as all of the other versions, his brows drawn together and his lower lip caught between his teeth. “Okay. Got it. Remember that training session you did a few years ago about using digital cameras?”

“Yeess,” Con answered carefully. He’d thought it would simplify and speed up evidence collection, which it had. But first he’d had to convince the other agents, hesitant to give up old technology, that switching from film was a good idea. He vaguely remembered that Isaac had been negative about the whole thing.

“And remember how you gave us homework? We were supposed to go take photos of certain things, then upload them to computers and send them to you? Well, I cheated.”

“How did you do that?”

“Easy. I asked Des to do it for me. He gets all gung-ho about new gadgets. Now, remember how the game works. You can’t hassle me about it.” Isaac smiled angelically.

Con chuckled. He wasn't angry. He also wasn't surprised. "I don't think that's the only time you've cheated. Like a few months ago—"

"Nope! Only one confession per turn. Now it's you."

Oh. Well, Con had never cheated on anything—not that Isaac would likely care if he had. Con had to think about this.

Although the sun wouldn't set for a few hours, this side of the mountain was already in shadow, and none of the room's lights were on. Everything inside had a sort of soft mellowness to it, the edges rounded by time and dim light. The bed was rumpled after Isaac's afternoon nap, a small collection of snack foods perched on the dresser, and Con's suit coat—dry-cleaning arranged by the hotel—hung on a hook near the door. It was a comfortable setting with mismatched furniture, much like his own home. He wondered whether the hotel owners scoured antique shops for things to put in the rooms.

And that gave him an idea of what to confess.

"You asked me once about my hobbies. I do have one I didn't mention."

Isaac leaned toward him slightly. He looked deeply interested. "Yeah?"

"It's.... You'll probably think it's dumb."

"Dude, I mistook a ghoul for a ghost. I'm in no position to call anyone else dumb."

Con squirmed a bit. "I like shopping at secondhand stores and antique shops. I've furnished my whole house that way." He braced himself for the reaction.

But there was no mocking in Isaac's smile. "Really? You should meet my dad. That guy can spend hours poking around dusty shelves. All his clothes are retro. He listens to records on a turntable. Stacks old books in corners. He says there's no point paying for new when old has way more character. Kinda drives Mom nuts because they don't have much room in their little place, but I guess she's used to it by now."

Honestly, even though Con shouldn't have needed affirmation for his personal interests, Isaac's easy acceptance felt good. "I once read an old Bureau report claiming that some objects can be sort of haunted, in a good way. Like, if they were loved, a little of their owner's spirit rubs off on them. I don't think this hypothesis has been scientifically tested, but when I'm shopping, now and then I find something that just gives off a good vibe, you know? So I bring it home."

Isaac nodded solemnly. "And it makes you feel less lonely—like you're connected to the person who once owned it."

Oh. Oh, *shit*. That was exactly right, even though Con had never consciously thought of it that way. His thrift-store finds were his way of creating his own sense of family and making him feel as if he belonged somewhere.

Con swallowed thickly. "Your turn."

"You're good at this game." For a moment, Isaac looked uncharacteristically hesitant. Then his back straightened as if in determination. "All right. I used to think you were sort of a boring square who prowled the Antarctic and tortured me with software."

Not offended, Con laughed. "I am and I do."

"Nope. Nope, nope, nope. That's not you at all. You're complicated. I heard about that bus full of people you saved."

"That was a long time ago. Before the Bureau."

"But that's still you, man. Life's thrown all this shit at you, and you've still fought like hell to be your authentic self. And Con, the real you is smart and brave and resourceful and stubborn as shit. The real you is pretty damn spectacular, in fact."

This was a bad game. Bad, bad game. Con was lost in Isaac's eyes and more terrified than when he'd fought the ghoul. He felt both floaty and wrapped tightly in his damaged body. His eyes stung.

"My turn," Con rasped. "I've never had sex. I've never even kissed anyone but you."

No judgment in Isaac's face. "Do you *want* to have sex? At all, I mean. Not necessarily right this exact second."

"God yes." That came out almost like a prayer.

"Good. So when you're ready, if you'd specifically like to have sex with *me*, I'd be delighted."

"You're not going to persuade me to do it now?" Con wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed.

Isaac tapped his own head. "Maybe not advisable. It probably counts as physical exertion. Anyway.... Look, I bet you won't be shocked to hear that my parents had a pretty liberal approach to sex. *It's perfectly natural*, yada yada. But they said it's like anything else you do with your body. You should make sure you feel comfortable about doing it, and you should make sure you don't harm anyone else."

That seemed like much better advice than anything Con's parents had to say on the matter. "And I'd harm you right now."

That made Isaac sputter a laugh. "Con, I'd happily risk my brain melting if it meant making love to you. But I think we oughta wait until you're sure it's something you're ready to do."

Dammit, this was a hell of a time for Isaac to suddenly turn all mature and responsible. But he was right. Concussion aside, Con didn't want to do anything either of them would regret later. Besides, they were supposed to be working, not... canoodling.

"Thank you," he said, simply and sincerely. Then he found himself grinning. "But maybe we could kiss again?"

Why yes. It turned out that they could. Quite nicely.

CHAPTER 11



IT WASN'T EASY TO SLEEP NEXT TO ISAAC THAT NIGHT. CON had to stop himself from tossing and turning—or reaching out. Long after Isaac was breathing slowly and deeply, Con remained awake, considering what Isaac had said during their game. Not just the sex part, although that was interesting indeed. But also the part about Con being his authentic self.

He hadn't *felt* authentic. Not ever. It was as if he'd been born playing the part of someone else. Instead of the Phantom of the Opera, he was the Uptight Nerd in the Antarctic.

But he'd never quite abandoned the core of himself. That core was what had led him to escape his repressive family, to start supporting himself when he was only eighteen, to survive an orc attack, to continue with his Bureau career despite his disabilities. And look what had happened when he'd allowed some of his real self to go public these past few days. He'd saved Isaac. He'd *kissed* Isaac.

And he didn't feel guilty or ugly or anything else negative.

In fact, he felt pretty damned good.



It occurred to them the next morning that they needed more gifts for the coyotes. "I bet we can find something here in town," Isaac said.

"I can find something. You can rest."

“I’ve slept plenty these past couple of days. I’m going nuts cooped up in here. Besides, I feel fine. No headache, no cognitive deficits, no other symptoms. Want me to recite the alphabet backward?”

Con eyed him appraisingly. “Will you promise to take a nap before our meeting?”

Isaac rolled his eyes. “Fine. Nap. You can tuck me in and read me a bedtime story.”

That was more appealing than it should have been.

It was a short downhill walk to the center of town, and for once Con was glad of his own slow pace because it meant Isaac had to take it easy too. They turned it into a pleasant stroll, stopping to admire the two-room jail that had slid down the mountain decades earlier and now lay in a crumpled but picturesque heap. At Isaac’s insistence, they also stopped for ice cream and, after it was consumed, went into the jewelry store that Trish had mentioned. Again at Isaac’s urging, they each bought a piece that the coyotes had made. Isaac chose another ring, this one silver inlaid with bits of malachite. Con picked a silver necklace with a fang-shaped pendant made of turquoise. As Trish had promised, the shopkeeper gave them a generous discount.

Next Con intended to visit a toy store in search of something for the coyote children. But Isaac grinned and towed him into an antique shop instead, then waited patiently while Con explored.

However, when Con found himself drawn to a pretty little bowl with a blue-green glaze, Isaac went pale. “Con,” he whispered, “pick up that bowl and look at the bottom.”

Bewildered, Con obeyed. “There’s just the potter’s mark. Um, it’s sort of a fancy *RM*, I think.”

“Yeah. Ruben Molina.”

Con almost dropped the bowl. He set it quickly back on the shelf before disaster struck. “Is that—”

“My dad. He’s a potter. That’s one of his favorite glazes. And that pot is *not* an antique. It’s only about twenty years

old.”

“But how—”

“I told you my parents stayed around here a while back. So I guess it’s not completely improbable. Just weird.”

After a moment’s thought, Con picked up the bowl again and cradled it against his body. “Let’s face it—given our jobs, we’re meant for weird. I’m buying it.”

Which he did. It felt right.

At the toy store they bought soccer balls, kites, and giant bubble-making kits. Those seemed like the sorts of things young, active coyote shifters would enjoy. It was a little more difficult to choose something for the adults. They finally settled on an expensive set of kitchen knives, a couple of stained-glass ornaments to hang in windows, and a few handwoven blankets by local artists. Hopefully that would do.

It was quite a lot of stuff to drag up the hill, but they weren’t in a hurry. And then, miracle of miracles, Isaac actually did take a nap—after protesting only a little bit.



This time Con drove to the coyotes’ home, with Isaac moping slightly in the passenger seat. Con was fairly certain the pout was mostly an act.

His nerves were entirely calm. Sure, it was possible that the coyotes would refuse to make an agreement with the Bureau, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world if that happened. And he was fairly confident that the coyotes would be on board. They had no real reason to refuse, and the three-day delay had likely been intended to ensure group consensus and to symbolize their position of strength. Both of these were reasonable tactics.

In any case, whatever happened, it wouldn’t be as frightening as dealing with a ghoul.

The coyote children swarmed them as soon as they arrived, and then Trish sauntered over with a smile that Con interpreted to mean good news. But jumping right into business was extremely rude, according to coyote manners, so they began with a little small talk—by coyote standards, anyway.

“You smell like medicine,” Trish said to Isaac.

“It’s better than smelling like ghoul.”

That caught everyone’s interest, at which point Con was conscripted to give a literally blow-by-blow account of the events in the cemetery. He tried not to overplay his own role, because even if pride wasn’t a sin, it could certainly be obnoxious. Despite Con’s protests, Isaac made him out to be a hero, which was both flattering and embarrassing.

“I think you both deserve to sit down with refreshments,” said Trish.

Con tried not to look too relieved. “Can we give some gifts to the kids first?” He tried to say it quietly, but of course the young ones heard—they had excellent hearing—and began to howl with excitement.

Trish seemed amused. “Of course.”

The toys turned out to be a big hit, and the pups, as Trish called them, went running off to enjoy. A couple even shifted to coyote form so they could run on all fours, bonking the soccer balls with their nose. Con had never seen shifters change shape before; it was fascinating. He hoped it wasn’t considered impolite to have watched.

“We have a few things for you too,” he said after a few minutes.

Trish got a strange look in her eyes. “Let’s wait a little for that. Refreshments first.”

She led them to the picnic tables, where the adults drank water or lemonade and ate sliced fruits and grilled meats. It was more of a light meal than a snack, and it had a definite celebratory feel, which added to Con’s optimism. He appreciated that for his and Isaac’s benefit they’d cooked the meat. But judging from the shared glances and barely

concealed grins, the coyotes were keeping a secret from their human guests. He just hoped it was a good one.

There was more small talk over the food. Trish spoke about an upcoming full moon celebration that sounded like a wild party. Like other shifters, including wolves, coyotes could change shape whenever they wanted; lunar cycles had nothing to do with it. Hunting, however, was better on bright nights.

Con spoke a little about the Antarctic, which their hosts seemed to find surprisingly interesting. A young woman in a plaid shirt with the sleeves cut off asked a lot of questions. There seemed to be something wistful about her, so Con offered her a smile. “You could visit. I’d be happy to give you a tour. Or... well, I can’t promise anything, but you could talk to folks at HQ about career possibilities.”

Her eyes got big. “For me? At the Bureau? But I’m a shifter.”

“Not an impediment,” said Isaac. “One of our fellow agents is a dog shifter. Nice guy. Plus there’s a dragon who works for us sometimes, and... well, a lot of employees who aren’t *Homo sapiens*. Our boss appreciates the skills that come from having a diverse staff.”

Con nodded in agreement. “Like for instance, I bet your sense of smell would be a real help in the lab.”

The woman beamed, and Trish and the others looked pleased as well. Con handed the young woman one of his cards and urged her to give him a call after he returned to LA. He’d never done anything resembling outreach or recruitment for the Bureau—when before this would he have had the chance?—but the rules didn’t forbid it. And if the coyotes did ally themselves with the Bureau, this kind of thing could strengthen that relationship.

Besides, he wouldn’t mind some Antarctic help. It would give him the chance to take those computer classes. Or go out on assignment now and then.

The conversation moved on, and Con began to worry a little about Isaac, who, despite his protestations, wasn’t

completely up to par. He was laughing and participating in the chat, but he also looked a little ragged around the edges, as if he needed some rest.

Maybe Trish sensed something too, because just before Con got up the nerve to say something, she stood and clapped her hands. “Gifts!” she announced.

As was customary, Con and Isaac went first, and with much success. Con silently congratulated himself on his ability to guess coyote shifter tastes. As far as he knew, the Bureau didn’t have any literature on the topic. When he got back, he’d check with Des. It could make an interesting research project for the future. Not just “what to give coyotes,” but maybe even a larger work on things that pleased various species. It would be a nice change from the usual books and pamphlets on how to kill things.

But that was for another time. Right now, Trish’s eyes were shining. “We have something really special for you boys. It took some doing to get it, but it was worth it.”

So probably not more jewelry then.

Bemused, Con and Isaac followed Trish around the back of the houses. The going was a little rough on Con due to the uneven terrain, and he kept a close eye on Isaac, but they made it okay. Most of the adult coyotes followed behind while the children continued their playing.

There were several sheds back here, along with pieces of what appeared to be rusty mining equipment. There were also some impressive piles of broken animal bones. Deer mostly, from what he could tell at a glance, but possibly others as well. All of the bones were stripped clean of meat and bleached by the sun. He wondered whether Isaac’s vegetarian parents would have been bothered by this, or whether they’d have understood that coyotes are hunters by nature. Sure, shifters could buy packaged meat at the grocery store, but without the actual hunt, they’d probably feel as if something fundamental was missing from their lives.

They’d feel as if they weren’t living as their authentic selves.

And that was the thing, wasn't it? Individuals—of any species—should be free to live according to their own needs and desires as long as nobody else was harmed. Well, maybe the deer might like something to say about that. But Con had eaten a hamburger for lunch, so he figured he was in no position to judge anyone's carnivorous appetites.

Trish led them to a shed that looked bigger and sturdier than the others, its back end built into the hillside and the three exposed walls supported by thick logs. The substantial metal door was secured with a heavy padlock. Con found that a tad concerning. He doubted that there was much risk of theft in this compound, so if the lock wasn't intended to keep people out, then it meant it was to keep... something... in.

As Trish pulled out a set of keys and reached out to unlock the door, Con and Isaac exchanged a puzzled, slightly worried glance. Isaac appeared to want to keep his right hand near his hip, where his gun was holstered, but he grunted and stuck the hand into his pocket instead. Con simply gripped his new cane more tightly and wondered whether he should get one with a concealed sword. And then mused whether he could even wield a sword effectively.

Looking pleased, Trish pushed the door open. "Here ya go, boys. We caught it for you. You get to do whatever you want with it."

It was dark inside. A familiar earthy smell wafted out, however, and Con gasped. And then, as if his legs had intentions of their own, they carried him over the threshold and stopped him just inside the shed.

Where there was an orc.

CHAPTER 12



ISAAC DREW HIS GUN AND SHOVED HIMSELF BETWEEN CON AND the orc. But then Con swore and pushed Isaac out of the way. The orc was clearly posing no danger to anyone at the moment.

It was restrained upright against a thick pillar, heavy chains trapping its arms against its body and keeping it from moving. Or, more accurately, keeping *him* from moving; the orc was naked and had what were obviously male genitalia. He also had a lot of bite wounds and what looked like a nasty contusion on one side of the head. Nearly all of one pointed ear was gone, leaving not much more than a bloody stump. There was a thick gag in the orc's mouth, but he made muffled grunting noises, and his yellow eyes were wide.

“We heard there were some of 'em near the Fort Apache Reservation.” Trish had entered the shed and stood facing the orc, her arms crossed and nose wrinkled in distaste. “Normally we wouldn't go near 'em, but after what happened to you, well, we thought you might enjoy getting your hands on one. So I sent some of the pack out that way. I hear it was a good hunt. And here you go.”

Con felt very much as if he were going to be sick. That odor that had clung to the cave where he'd been captive, that had clung to his skin, now threatened to fill his nostrils. And Jesus Christ, those eyes. He would have likened them to a demon's, except he'd *seen* a demon's eyes, and the orc's were more alien. More terrifying.

Isaac's voice was slightly ragged when he spoke. "What, um, what do you want us to do with him?"

She shrugged. "Totally up to you. He's your gift. I made sure he wasn't torn up too much in case you want to take your time with him." She switched on a couple of battery-operated lanterns, probably mostly for their benefit. Coyotes saw well in the dark.

Con knew he should say something. Do something. But he was frozen in shock, even less mobile than he'd been in that cave ten years ago. He almost burst into tears when Isaac came to his aid.

"Trish, could you, uh, give us some time?"

She nodded. "Course. Take as much time as you want. I'll be out on my porch when you need me. I like to nap right around now." When she left, she closed the door.

Isaac stared at the orc for a moment, then at Con. He didn't actually touch Con, for which Con was extremely grateful, but Isaac was visibly tense. "I, uh, think she meant well by this."

"Yeah," Con managed. From the standpoint of a coyote shifter, this was a thoughtful and generous gift. Once he pulled himself together, he was going to have to thank her appropriately. If he pulled himself together. That seemed questionable at the moment.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Isaac looked deeply concerned.

For some weird reason, the offer itself ratcheted down Con's tension a few notches. It was really good to know someone had his back—someone who wouldn't judge him. Con took a few deep breaths and felt his heart slow to a more reasonable pace. "Amnesty," he whispered.

"Lay it on me, Con."

"I don't know what to do." That was incredibly hard for him to admit out loud. He was the training guy, the spreadsheet guy, the guy with all the answers that nobody particularly wanted to hear.

“Well, I guess we could start with the regulations. What do they say about a situation like this?”

Con wasn't sure there ever had been a situation like this. Not exactly, anyway. But Isaac was right—surely the Bureau had *something* to say on the matter. Feeling sweaty, Con wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Orcs are classified as inherently dangerous.” Not many sentient species had earned that designation. It meant somebody at the Bureau had decided that there was no hope that they'd just wander off and mind their own business. Merpeople were in this category—nasty, venomous creatures that enjoyed human flesh. Ghouls definitely counted. Basilisks. Windigos. And orcs.

“So we're supposed to kill it?” Isaac asked.

The orc responded with more urgent grunting and attempts to jerk his body free. Apparently he understood at least that much English.

“He's not an imminent threat,” said Con. “So transportation to the facility in Nevada is probably the more appropriate option.”

“Ugh,” said Isaac, and Con had to agree. The place was, essentially, a supermax prison, and the incarcerated had no hope of ever being released. The only exception that Con knew of was Des, who'd spent seventeen long years in a cell there and who still shuddered when he thought about it.

Isaac was regarding Con gravely. “Rules can be bent. Look, I have no taste for torture, and I'm guessing you don't either. But if one of us shoots him now, nobody will ever know that he wasn't coming after us. Honestly, I doubt anyone at the Bureau would bother to investigate.”

“Is that what you want to do? Kill him?”

“No.” Isaac looked miserable. “I'm sorry. I can totally understand if you want to, and I'll back you up no matter what, but pulling a trigger in cold blood....”

“Is murder.”

Isaac shrugged. “Justifiable, some might say.”

“There are always people who find ways to justify murder.”

It wasn't fair that Con had to make this decision. Kill. Ask Isaac to kill on his behalf. Call the chief and arrange for the orc to be dragged away and locked up forever. None of these sat easily on his soul.

On the orc's skin, coyote bite marks had scabbed over but looked painful. He wondered whether orcs scarred.

And then, overtaken by an urge he couldn't name, he walked closer to the bound creature. Close enough to see that the orc, too, was sweating, and that he had what looked like a tiny spiral-shaped tattoo on one cheek.

Con traced his fingers down his own cheeks, feeling the familiar grooves and divots. One claw had missed his right eye by millimeters. Another had sliced open his forehead. One had caught on the muscle beside his mouth, so that his smiles and frowns were eternally lopsided.

A human had no claws. But Con had a good knife, and a blade would do just as much harm.

“I used to be not-bad-looking,” Con told the orc. “Now people stare and whisper. Your people did this to me.”

The orc's eyes widened even more and his sounds became more desperate. But Con wasn't finished. He had to... had to *show*. He dropped his suit coat onto the floor, heedless of the dust, and unbuttoned his shirt. He tossed that aside, along with his undershirt. This was the second time he'd intentionally revealed himself to another this week, only this time he kept his pants on.

“They did this too.” Gouge scars on both arms that pulled when he moved the wrong way. Ugly marks on his sternum and belly. And if he *had* undressed completely, the orc would have seen craters where muscle ought to be. Dimpled indents that were the souvenirs of individual fangs. Zipper-like slashes where surgeons had gone in to remove infected tissue and then sewn everything up. “I'll never walk properly again. Never be

able to do the things I used to. Never spend a day without my joints aching.”

Con’s voice was low, conversational, really. Now his anger felt icy-cold, as if he’d fallen through the ice of a frigid lake.

And the orc—the orc was nodding.

The knife slid easily from its sheath. This wasn’t the one he’d lost in the cemetery, of course. As Bureau policy dictated, Con had packed a spare.

When he raised the blade, the orc went silent and entirely still—except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest. Isaac made a small sound, but Con didn’t turn to look at him. Instead, he put the knife against the orc’s face... and cut the fabric that gagged him. The fabric fell to the floor, followed by what looked like a soggy athletic sock that had been stuffed in the orc’s mouth.

The orc coughed several times and licked his lips. When had he last been able to drink? Con remembered the broken-glass sensation in his own throat and the temporary relief of water being poured on his face. But right now he had no water.

Some of the orc’s teeth were broken. Con hoped they hadn’t ended up imbedded in one of the coyote shifters. Anyway, the orc had plenty of fangs remaining, more than enough to cause permanent damage.

When the orc spoke, his voice was so ragged and his accent so thick that at first Con didn’t realize he was speaking English. Not until the orc repeated himself. “*We learn.*”

“What?”

The orc made a sound remarkably like the one that Con did when he was frustrated, then tried again. He spoke haltingly, as if searching for the right words, and his mouth was clearly not well constructed for making English sounds. The broken teeth probably didn’t help either. “Here not home. We new. We want know. We learn.” He made a biting motion. “We eat, we learn.”

Utterly confounded, Con only stared.

Isaac moved in closer, however, and addressed Con. “Jesus Christ. I think— One of my biology texts, back when I was a kid? It said that if you teach a... a flatworm, I think it was, to do something, like avoid the dark side of a petri dish? And then you feed that worm to another one, the new one will know to avoid the dark side. They can learn stuff by eating guys who already know the stuff.”

“I didn’t have biology texts,” Con said inanely. His parents didn’t believe in them.

But now Isaac turned to the orc and spoke slowly. “Are you saying you learn by eating people?”

The orc nodded frantically. “Yes! Yes yes yes. We eat, we learn. We make new home here.”

“Not a great way to culturally assimilate, dude.”

Isaac’s statement was clearly incomprehensible to the orc, and Con’s brain was still catching up. He didn’t understand how any creature could learn by consuming another’s flesh. Brain matter, okay maybe. But the orcs had more or less left his head alone. And what had they hoped to learn? If “here” wasn’t their original home, what was?

Oh, fuck.

Now Con’s heart was racing again, but not with fear. He looked steadily into the orc’s eyes and pointed up. “Is your old home there?”

“Yes. Far. Old home... dead. Dead. All dead.”

Con turned to Isaac. “Orcs are aliens.”

“Orcs are fucking aliens,” Isaac agreed.

Bureau agents came into contact with a great many unusual species, most of which were known to civilians only in myths and rumors—if they were known at all. To the best of Con’s knowledge, however, all of these species originated from the same planet he did. Except, apparently, orcs.

“All dead,” repeated the orc quietly. “Want new home. Please.” He somehow had a certain dignity despite his captivity, despite his nudity and damaged ear.

Dignity. His people had captured Con—and whoever that skull had belonged to, and who knows how many others. They had *eaten* him. Very nearly killed him.

And in the end, one of them had carried him to relative safety.

It was a fact that had rubbed at the back of his mind for a decade, a piece of evidence that didn't fit in with the rest. Nobody at the Bureau had been able to come up with a plausible explanation. They could all understand creatures that harmed others, that killed helpless prisoners; after all, humans did those things as well. But nobody knew why the orc had let Con go.

“Your people put me in chains, just like you.” Con pointed to clarify what he meant, and the orc nodded. “They hurt me. Bit me. Damaged me. And then they released me. Why?”

He wasn't sure the orc understood, but then the orc nodded again. “We want know. Not want dead. No more dead.”

Two people as different as Con and Isaac could, given a few days, find empathy for each other. Was it so unrealistic to believe that two species—from different planets—could do the same?

It didn't make what had happened to Con any less horrible, and it didn't heal his injuries. It sure as hell didn't resurrect the owner of that skull. But then, neither would vengeance.

“Isaac, if we let him go we're breaking Bureau regs. And the coyotes might get offended that we've refused their gift. They might refuse to ally with the Bureau.”

“Yeah. But... amnesty?” He gave a small smile.

“Yes?”

“I trust you to make the right decision. And I'll fully support whatever you choose.”

The right decision. So many people were sure their actions were the correct ones, and yet they caused so much injury. Failing to follow the rules could get you in deep trouble. Attacked by orcs or ghouls. But following the dictates of those

in charge, of a supposed higher power, also often led to disaster. To eighteen-year-olds alone in the world, and to people growing up afraid to be their authentic selves.

In the end, maybe what a person needed to do was follow his own rules—and hope like hell he was doing the right thing.

Con's nerves and stomach were settled, his heartbeat strong and steady. His scars were a reminder of past mistakes—and past successes. And Isaac stood beside him, waiting for his decision.

“My name is Con,” he said to the orc. He patted his own chest. “Con.”

The orc seemed to relax a tiny amount. “Con. I...,” and he uttered a string of syllables that Con tried to memorize.

“Oh-a-cha-aw?” Con attempted, the only consonant being a throaty sound somewhat similar to those found in Hebrew and German.

The orc rearranged his mouth into something resembling a smile. “Yes.”

“Isaac,” Con said, pointing, and Oh-a-cha-aw repeated it. It was the weirdest round of introductions ever.

But there was still business to attend to.

“Listen,” Con said to Oh-a-cha-aw. “If we let you go, you can't bite... people. Find other ways to learn. Do you understand?”

“No more eat-know. Yes. No more dead.”

Maybe the orc was lying. But when Isaac walked over to one of the lanterns, picked up a key, and brought it back, Con took it. And then he unlocked the chains.

Oh-a-cha-aw collapsed to the floor, but Con and Isaac helped him up. Con lifted his own shirt from the floor and handed it to Oh-a-cha-aw, who put it on eagerly. It didn't fit well but was better than nothing. Flanked by Con and Isaac, the three left the shed and slowly walked around to the front of the houses.

The children saw them first and began to howl, and then the adults came running. Trish was the last to arrive, descending from her porch with a yawn. She was the only one who came anywhere close to them, and if she was afraid or angry, she didn't show it. If anything, she seemed amused. "You could do anything you wanted with him and you gave him your clothes?"

"Maybe one you has a pair of pants he could have? The Bureau will reimburse—" Con stopped, feeling awkward.

"I don't think anything we have is gonna fit him."

Good point. The coyotes were short and sinewy; Oh-a-cha-aw was as tall as Con and more muscular.

"Trish, I am very grateful for your gift. I know you chose it specially for me and your people spent time and money obtaining it. Obtaining *him*. Some of your people might have been injured."

"It ain't a good fight if nobody's bleeding."

Isaac chuckled, and Con couldn't blame him. But he wanted to make sure Trish's fur wasn't ruffled. "I really hope this doesn't offend you, because I certainly don't intend it to. And I consider your gift extremely valuable. But I'm going to free him, and I ask that your people let him and his people be. Please." He prepared himself for a backlash.

But Trish simply shrugged. "He's yours. If you wanna let him go, that's up to you. Ain't my business, anymore'n it's your business where I put those nice blankets you brought."

Although Con wasn't entirely comfortable analogizing a sentient being to bedding, he let it go. "Thank you. I hope this doesn't sour our relationship."

"Honey, if you're worried about our agreement with your Bureau, don't be. It makes good sense for us. And if you can be respectful to an orc, especially after what they did to you, I bet that means you'll be respectful to other folks too—and not just humans."

Con's sigh of relief was so loud that they probably heard it in Los Angeles.



Oh-a-cha-aw had been in a vehicle only once before, and since that was right after the coyotes captured him, he hadn't enjoyed it. Now he was intrigued, but due to his recent grueling experience, he fell asleep almost as soon as they got rolling.

After some quiet conversation, Con and Isaac decided the best option was to drive the orc back to where the coyotes had found him. They stopped first at the hotel, where Isaac grabbed a pair of sweatpants for Oh-a-cha-aw and then flatly refused to be left behind. "I can sleep while you drive, dude, but I'm not leaving you alone."

So Con drove while Isaac played with the radio, and the orc... dreamed orc dreams, maybe. It was a four-hour trip, according to the map, and darkness fell about halfway there. Con stopped at a Circle K for gas and another haul of convenience-store foods. When Oh-a-cha-aw woke up, they discovered that orcs were vegetarians, which maybe made sense. They might not want to learn anything from a ham sandwich. He was happy to drink a lot of water, however, and eat the apples and bananas Con had bought in an attempt to consume at least a little healthy food.

As the three of them sat in the SUV in a dark spot not far off the highway, munching away, Isaac twisted around to look in the back seat. "Hey. Do you need to *bite* to learn?"

"Eat-know," was the answer. Con had a sense that the orc language had a word meaning exactly that.

Isaac wasn't satisfied. "Right. So if I gave you a little bit of my blood, would you learn from that?"

"Sorry?" Oh-a-cha-aw said that whenever he didn't understand. He seemed to be genuinely trying, but the language barrier was significant.

"Like this." Isaac pulled out a small knife, startling both Con and Oh-a-cha-aw, and before Con could stop him, he'd sliced a shallow groove atop his own left forearm.

“What the hell!” Con cried.

“Tsk. Language. It’s nothing—you can doctor me up in a sec.” Isaac stuck his bleeding arm back between the seats, almost into the face of a very wide-eyed orc. “No teeth, right? Just tongue.” Isaac stuck out his own to demonstrate.

Oh-a-cha-aw mumbled something that sounded very much like a prayer—even if Con couldn’t understand a word—bent forward, and with great delicacy lapped at Isaac’s arm. He took only a few swipes before sitting back again; by then the bleeding had already stopped. Maybe there was some kind of clotting agent in his saliva. That would explain why Con hadn’t exsanguinated even after the orcs had taken big chunks out of him.

“Good,” said Oh-a-cha-aw. “Eat-know. I know Isaac.” Then his eyes went unfocused and he slumped a little.

“Um....” Con wasn’t sure how to react.

“Chill. I think he’s digesting. Processing. Doing whatever he does.”

Before they hit the road again, Con rinsed Isaac’s arm with a water bottle, slathered on antibiotic ointment, and fastened a bandage over the cut. His own wounds back in the cave had become badly infected, but they had been much deeper and had involved fang-to-flesh contact. He was more optimistic about Isaac.

“You’re going to return to LA having been eaten by several species,” Con pointed out.

“Only two. And not by the one guy I was really hoping would put me in his mouth. You’re blushing, aren’t you?”

“No,” Con lied.



Con stopped again when Oh-a-cha-aw told him to. It looked to Con as if they were in the absolute middle of nowhere, but Oh-a-cha-aw seemed confident that he knew where he was and

how to find his way home. The three of them stood beside the SUV with no witnesses but the stars.

“Old home?” Con asked, pointing at the sky.

Oh-a-cha-aw looked around for a moment before indicating a particular portion of the heavens. “Old home.” Then he lightly stomped his bare foot. “New home. Good. Soon we help you. No more dead.”

“Help us how?” Con was slightly alarmed by the last couple of sentences.

“Soon, Con. Now you, Isaac, good. Very good.”

He ducked his head in a bow, first toward Con and then toward Isaac, and took off at a swift lope. Con could see the white shirt through the gloom for a short while, but soon the darkness had swallowed that too.

“I can drive back,” Isaac said brightly.

“No way, dude.”

It was a long way back to Gerard, but Con felt as if they flew.

CHAPTER 13



THEY BOTH SLEPT IN LATE ON THEIR LAST NIGHT IN GERARD. After breakfast, Con called HQ, but Holmes picked up instead of the chief. “Tell him everything went well,” Con ordered. “We’ll debrief when we return.”

Holmes grunted something vaguely affirmative before hanging up.

“You didn’t mention the orc.” Isaac was trying to stuff his local acquisitions into his duffel bag. He hadn’t shaved that morning or done much with his hair besides wash it, and of course he looked as charmingly tousled as an actor in a rom-com.

“I can tell him when we get back. And if he gets pissed off about how I handled it, that’s on me.”

“Nope. I said I’d back you up. We’re partners, remember. Anyway, I don’t care whether the old man blows a gasket. You did the right thing.”

“Aliens.”

Isaac grinned. “Coyotes and ghouls and aliens, oh my.”

At Isaac’s urging, they took a different route back to LA, this time sharing the driving and covering the distance in one day. The previous day had taken an emotional toll on Con—who looked forward to swimming some laps and cocooning in his favorite recliner—but he enjoyed Isaac’s company during the drive. Isaac provided lessons on old rock music and talked about some of the adventures he’d shared with his parents when he was a kid.

“You love them a lot, huh?” Con hoped he didn’t sound too wistful.

“Yeah. They’re a little nuts, and I don’t know that they always did such a great job raising me, but they tried their best. Even their bad decisions were made with good intentions. I think it would be fun if you met them sometime. They own this sort of retreat place up in the Olympic Peninsula. People pay to spend a couple of nights in a geodesic dome my folks built, and they take classes in painting from Mom or in pottery with Dad, and they eat vegan food and get stoned and admire nature.”

Con, who was driving at this point, shot a quick glance at Isaac. “Meet them?”

“’Cause you’re my friend, who saved my life. ’Cause you’d find each other interesting. ’Cause... shit. Amnesty?”

“Go ahead.” Con felt anxious, but in a much more positive way than when facing ghouls and orcs.

“I like you, Con. A lot. I feel more comfortable around you than anyone I’ve met. Like, you definitely have my back when we’re out in the field, but we can also sit in a car or a hotel room or wander around antique stores, and I’ll just want to be where you are.”

Con let out a long, noisy breath. “Ditto,” he whispered. “I don’t know exactly where I’m going emotionally right now. It’s been quite a week. So I can’t tell you... well, when or if I’ll be ready for something more physical. But no matter what, I’d really like you as a friend.”

Isaac reached over to squeeze Con’s knee. “Good. It’s all good, Con.”

“Salvation.”

“Huh?”

“My parents named me Salvation. Conrad was my middle name.”

That made Isaac huff a small laugh. “My middle name is Nirvana. Given to me well before Kurt Cobain used it.”

“Who?”

“Oh, dude.”

They spent the next hundred miles listening to and discussing grunge music.

Later, when Isaac was driving and darkness had embraced the desert, Con leaned his seat back and thought about what Isaac had said about his parents. *Even their bad decisions were made with good intentions.* Couldn't the same be said about Con's mother and father? They had been rigid and judgmental, they'd cut him off from most of the world, and they'd rejected the fundamental aspects of his psyche so thoroughly that he still couldn't fully accept himself. However, they'd done these things not out of cruelty per se, but rather out of the misguided but sincere belief that this was how to ensure Con's eternal salvation.

God, if he could forgive orcs, couldn't he find it within himself to forgive his own flesh and blood?

Maybe.

Not tonight, at least not fully. But something had softened inside Con, as if maybe the process had begun.



It was nearly midnight by the time they reached HQ, and the parking garage was mostly empty. They retrieved their belongings from the back of the SUV and then stood there, surrounded by echoey concrete. “The boss is probably around if you want to check in now,” Isaac said.

“He can wait until tomorrow. I'm beat. And you need your rest too. You've been overdoing it for someone with a recent concussion.”

Isaac grinned broadly. “Are you going to keep on nannying me even now that we've completed the mission?”

“Somebody has to.”

“Do you feel comfortable letting me kiss you before we go?”

Con smiled back. “Very comfortable.”



When Con got home, he dumped everything onto the couch, changed into swimming trunks, and padded out back for a swim. Yes, he was exhausted, but the buoyancy of the water felt good, and the movement eased the travel-kinks from his muscles.

There were a few household chores to catch up on, like going through the mail and getting groceries, but they could wait. It was wonderful to climb into his own bed, beneath the quilt he’d bought at a crafts fair a few years earlier—but it was weird to have a bed to himself. He missed sleeping-Isaac’s company. And he’d wait for another time to analyze what that signified.

Although Con arrived at HQ a little after nine the next morning, Isaac—predictably—did not. Con busied himself in the Antarctic, surveying the evidence that had come in while he was in Arizona and triaging it for analysis. There was a baggie full of large scales that especially intrigued him; he looked forward to reading the report that accompanied them.

Then the door opened and Isaac strolled in.

He wore a suit, slightly rumpled, without a tie, and he still hadn’t shaved. And man, Con felt a little thrill, knowing exactly what those whiskers felt like against his own scarred cheeks.

“It’s freezing in here,” Isaac announced.

“Why did you think everyone calls it the Antarctic?”

“Because it’s full of penguins.”

Con spread his arms to indicate the entire penguin-free expanse. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“You surprise and delight me, but you’ve yet to disappoint.”

The room suddenly felt a lot warmer.

Together they took the elevator to the top floor and braved Agent Holmes’s gimlet glare. “He’s busy.”

Isaac crossed his arms. “Tell him we’re here anyway.”

A brief stare-down ensued, but it was two against one and Holmes eventually ceded by picking up his phone and barking into it. “Molina and Becker are here.” He looked even more sour at the response, slamming down the receiver and jerking his head in the direction of the inner sanctum.

Townsend, on the other hand, greeted them with a broad smile and outstretched arms. He stood near the center of the room, whiskey glass in one hand and cigarette in the other. “Welcome back, boys.”

“I haven’t written the report yet,” Con blurted.

Isaac nudged him. “Because we’ve been back, like, three seconds. We’ll get to it.”

“Of course, of course.” Townsend appeared unperturbed. “You can give me just the highlights now.”

Con exchanged a look with Isaac and inhaled deeply. “The coyote shifters are willing to ally with us. One of them seemed really interested in the Antarctic so I gave her my card. She might visit for a tour or job interview. The ghoul in the Gerard cemetery is dead. Well, *a* ghoul, anyway—we didn’t check to see whether there were more. The hotel there is haunted, but amicably, so no actions are needed by the Bureau. And the coyotes gave me an orc, and it turns out that orcs are actually creatures from outer space who want to settle on Earth and who learn things by consuming other beings, and after the orc promised not to eat anyone we let him go.”

Although Isaac pressed a palm to his mouth and hid a smile, he couldn’t hide the laughter in his eyes. Con had to suppress laughter too, and he felt vaguely like a mischievous schoolboy.

Townsend was as unflappable as ever. “You had quite an adventure.”

“Did the Bureau know that orcs are aliens?”

“No, and this news is fascinating. But tell me, considering what orcs did to you, why did you release this one? Protocol calls for taking them into custody or destroying them.”

Con lifted his chin. “In this case, following the rules wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“Because?”

How to put it into words? “Because their previous attacks were out of desperation, and I have hope they’ve learned to do better. Because condemning an entire species for the mistakes of a few is wrong. Because... maybe humans and orcs can find a way to not be dangerous to one another.”

Townsend looked thoughtful. He walked to his desk, stubbed out the cigarette, and went through the familiar ritual of refilling his glass.

Meanwhile, Isaac had sobered. “Boss, I want you to know that I supported Con’s decision about the orc. If you’re gonna nail him for not following regs, nail me too. But I don’t think you should punish either of us.”

Instead of answering right away, Townsend floated to the window and spent a long time staring outside. His manner was less confident than usual and more melancholy, which was disconcerting. But Con didn’t regret what he’d done.

“Boys,” Townsend finally said when he turned around, “the world is a stranger place than you could imagine, and more complex than your minds can grasp. Beings—of all species—are forced to find structure and meaning despite the forces of chaos; to find love despite all the things that seek to deny it, to twist and destroy it. Every moment of life is a struggle. And every moment of life is a victory.”

He seemed to expect some sort of response, but Con’s mind was a blank. Once again, Isaac rode to his rescue. “Boss, I don’t know what the hell you’re getting at.”

The chief laughed, then drained his glass. “Yes, sometimes I am a puzzle as well. Unavoidable, I’m afraid. But I can make a few things clear. Something’s brewing, boys. Big. Not now, not even soon—as you might measure it—but soon enough. I myself don’t know the shape of it. So while we do our everyday tasks here with vampires and demons and things that go bump in the night, I’m also doing my best to position us for the bigger game. You see?”

Con looked at Isaac, who shook his head. “Not really,” said Con.

“Well, no worries. I’m just an old man rambling. You can rest assured, however, that neither of you will be punished for anything you did on this mission. You’ve cemented an affiliation with that group of coyote shifters—and someday, every friend that we have will count. You’ve opened up some very intriguing possibilities concerning the orcs. And you’ve helped tip the moral balance in our favor, which I believe is the most important resource of all.

“Now, one more thing. A question for you both. Would you be willing to partner in future assignments?”

“Yes!” Con and Isaac spoke in unison, causing the chief to laugh again.

“Excellent. Well, for now you have a report to write, and Becker, I understand that a backlog of evidence has accumulated in your lab. As for you, Molina, you can assist him for a week or so until you’ve fully recovered. Perhaps you can use the time to improve your computer skills.”

And somehow, that was it. Townsend ushered them out, Holmes looked smug as they walked by, and they finally came to a stop near the elevator.

“What the *fuck* was the old man going on about?” Isaac demanded. Quietly, though, because Townsend was rumored to have preternaturally good hearing.

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“It sounded dire. Apocalyptic even.”

“Nothing we can do about it except try our best, I guess. Come on down to the Antarctic. How familiar are you with Windows XP?”

“Ugh. I’d rather be bitten by ghouls.”

But Isaac was smiling.

CHAPTER 14



EIGHT WEEKS LATER

Late August 2004

San Fernando, California

Con's kitchen table was vintage Formica in an absurdly bright yellow that didn't really match anything else but made him happy. Currently he sat staring at an envelope sitting there, addressed to Salvation C. Becker and postmarked Ohio.

Instead of opening the missive, Con lifted his phone and poked at the buttons.

Isaac picked up on the second ring. "Is something trying to eat you?"

"I'm sitting in my own kitchen. I think I'm fairly safe from attack." Physically, anyway.

"You never know. A few years ago I got a case up in Bakersfield. A baby asep was slithering up into houses via the plumbing and—"

"There are no snake monsters in my plumbing."

"Can I make the obligatory joke now?"

Con sighed fondly. "You're twelve."

"Perpetually. So what's up?"

"Um." *Spit it out, Becker.* "Are you free today?" It was a Saturday, which they usually had off when not on assignment.

“Sure. I just got back from the gym. I was thinking of heading to a beach ’cause it’s hella hot today. Wanna join me?”

“Actually... I was wondering whether you might want to come over.”

The long silence made Con squirm. When Isaac finally spoke, he sounded hesitant. “To your house?”

“Yes. I.... Shit. Remember how I sent that letter to my family a couple of weeks ago?” A letter that had taken him several days and umpteen revisions to draft. He’d probably still be revising it if Isaac hadn’t kissed him and told him to get on with it.

“Of course.”

“Today I got one back.”

“Damn. What’s it say?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Dude.” Isaac was almost certainly rolling his eyes. “Gimme your address. I’ll be right there.”

It should have taken Isaac at least half an hour to drive from his apartment in Santa Monica. Instead he came screeching into Con’s driveway twenty-five minutes later, driving one of the Bureau’s flashy sports cars instead of his own somewhat battered pickup. Since he wasn’t on assignment, he shouldn’t have been driving a company car, but Con pretended not to notice.

He watched from the front door, bemused, as Isaac struggled to remove a large, paper-wrapped item from the passenger seat. The thing was rectangular and flat, and it must have been an adventure for Isaac to jam it in there in the first place.

“If you’re going to transport bulky things, you ought to steal a truck or an SUV.”

Isaac performed an amusing dance, clutching the object, spinning around, and slamming the door shut with his hip. Then he bounced up the sidewalk and stood on Con’s tiny

brick porch, grinning. In flip-flops, a pair of striped swimming trunks, and an old T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, he looked more like a surfer or a beach bum than a federal agent.

“You gonna invite me in?” Isaac asked.

“Are you a vampire now?”

“Nope. Just polite. Although come to think of it, neither of us has added vamps to our list of things that bit us. I wonder what it’s like.”

“I don’t. And come in.”

Isaac set his parcel on the couch and immediately began prowling around the living room. He didn’t touch anything, but he took his time examining Con’s mismatched furniture and secondhand knickknacks. He made a happy little noise when he saw what was on the small table next to Con’s favorite chair. “Dad’s pot!”

“I think it looks good there.”

“It does. But hey, look what I brought for you.” He grabbed Con’s hand and dragged him over to sit on the couch.

“I’m not a coyote shifter. Gifts are not required.” Con was trying really hard not to show how pleased he was. Aside from jewelry and an orc from Trish, he hadn’t been given a present in... well, pretty much ever.

“Dude, I’ve been saving this for when you finally invited me over. Open open open.” Isaac bounced on his toes like a kid at a birthday party.

Con carefully untaped the brown paper and set it aside for recycling. The object inside was a framed painting... of himself. It was slightly abstract, but his scarred face was recognizable as he bent over one of the lab tables in the Antarctic, peering at a glass plate containing a human heart.

“It’s called ‘Con Studies Himself,’” said Isaac. “The title and theme were Mom’s idea.”

“I... How?”

“I snuck a photo of you when you weren’t paying attention. *With* a digital camera, you’ll be pleased to know. Sent it to Mom. Inspiration struck.”

“I....” It was a beautiful painting. Con knew almost nothing about art, but even he could tell the composition and execution were wonderful. And that somehow a woman he’d never met had captured him perfectly. “Wow.”

Isaac looked around the room. “Where are you gonna hang it? I think it would look great on that wall, where you have those tin mask things. Unless maybe you’re really attached to the masks.”

Con wasn’t, particularly. He’d found them on a bottom shelf in a thrift store, dusty, one of them a little dented, and he’d thought they looked lonely. Which was ridiculous maybe, but he’d bought them anyway.

“I can’t hang a painting of myself in my own living room.”

“Why not?”

“It’s... vain.”

“It’s not. It’s a Naomi Geller-Molina original, and it’s great. Besides, at least you’ve got clothes on. In my house, the paintings of me are nudes.”

“I....” Con gaped. At some level he realized that Isaac was trying to help relieve his stress over the letter, and while the attempt was transparent, Con couldn’t help being caught up and carried along. Isaac had that effect. “Nudes?”

“When I was nineteen I had sort of a thing with one of Mom’s artist friends. He was my parents’ age, and the things he could do with his hands.... Anyway, he liked to use me as a model, and I got to keep a couple of his paintings. He’s semi-famous. Naked me is hanging in a museum in, uh, Vermont, I think. Maybe New Hampshire. One of those cold places with the pretty trees.”

Con gave a helpless laugh. “Thank you for the painting. I love it. Please thank your mother too. Do you want a complete tour of the place?”

“Later. Let’s deal with that damn letter first.”

A previous owner had removed some of the interior walls and replaced them with supporting pillars, creating an open floor plan that hadn’t been popular in the late forties when the house was built. So it was simply a matter of Con and Isaac crossing the room to take a seat at the table.

“Want something to drink? I’ve got iced tea. Or I have some crackers and chee—”

“Sit down, Conny.”

The nickname was fond, not teasing, and it did something funny to Con’s spine, making him shiver even as he grew warm. To his family he had always been Salvation and nothing else. To the people he worked with, he was Agent Becker, or Con if they knew him a little better. Or the Phantom. Never Conny.

He sat across from Isaac, the letter between them. “That’s not my mom or dad’s handwriting.”

“Whose then?”

“One of my sisters, I think. Probably Humility. She’s the oldest of the girls.”

Isaac silently mouthed her name. Someday maybe Con would rattle off the entire sibling roster, including Diffidence and Redeemed. But not now.

“What’s she like?” asked Isaac.

“I don’t know now. I haven’t seen her in... God, over fifteen years. But she was... kind. She used to help me with my schoolwork when I was little. And if any of us got in trouble—punishment was paddling, prayer, and fasting—she’d sneak us something to eat.” He smiled a little at the memory of illicit peanut butter sandwiches.

“Are you ready to read it?”

Con winced. “Will you? I know I’m being chicken, but....”

Isaac grabbed the envelope and tore it open. “Happy to.” He cleared his throat.

Dear Salvation,

We're all so grateful you wrote to us. We've been praying for you every week. You know, Dad read in the newspaper when you rescued all those people on the bus. We knew that Conrad Becker had to be you. We were so proud. But then we never heard another word from you or about you. Still, I was sure you hadn't yet passed on. You have too much to give the world before you go.

Your letter told us some things about you that were hard to read. Mom and Dad and some of the others, your news made them sad and maybe angry too. Dad says you've moved away from the Lord.

But I don't believe that. You were always good, and none of those things changes that. So me and my husband and kids, and some of our brothers and sisters, we're praying that the others will understand that too. I think someday they'll see the truth and they'll know that accepting you and loving you just as you are is what we're meant to do.

Until then, I'll keep writing you with news of the family, if that's all right with you. And maybe someday soon we can see each other.

You know, I have two daughters. The older one, Emily, she's fourteen. And she hasn't said anything, but I've been wondering about her. Whether she might like girls. When I finish with this letter, I'm going to go tell her that if she does, it's all right. I still love her just as much. Because hearing from you has made me think about how alone and afraid she might feel, and how much I don't want to drive her away. So I thank you for that, Salvation.

All my love,

Humility

The kitchen was silent except for the ticking of the vintage clock mounted on one wall.

“I’m going for a swim,” Con said quietly. “Want to join me?”

“I’d like that.”

It took a couple of minutes for Con to change into swim trunks.

When he emerged from the bedroom, Isaac had stripped off his shirt and was waiting by the patio door. He looked larger than life in Con’s kitchen, and if Con had been an artist, he would have painted him just like that—skin golden, hair mussed, smile warm.

“Swim,” Con said.

And they did: laps back and forth for quite a long time with periodic pauses at an edge to catch their breath. Here in the pool together, Con could almost forget about the scars and the missing pieces of himself.

Eventually Isaac hauled himself out of the water and sat on the edge of the pool, dripping and magnificent. He shook his head like a dog, sending droplets flying. “I already worked out today, you know.”

“And this is my second swim,” countered Con.

“Have you ever skinny-dipped?”

“Never. But I bet you have.”

“Are you kidding? I spent half my childhood running around as bare as one of those coyote kids. Sometimes a prude at a beach or campground would make tsking noises, and then Mom would give them a lecture about how children should be free and all bodies are beautiful and we should be proud to share them.”

Treading water, Con chuckled. “My parents made me feel ashamed to be naked in a bathtub.”

“The only shame is that some people are too blind to see how stunning you are.”

Those words could have been glib or mocking, but they weren’t. Con looked up into Isaac’s face and saw only

sincerity.

And Con reached a decision that felt entirely right, like something finally clicking into place.

He climbed out of the pool using the stairs and came to stand a few feet from Isaac. “Come inside?”

Isaac’s eyes widened. Con could see his pupils dilate, his breath quicken a bit, the corners of his mouth turn slightly upward. “You sure?”

“Categorically so.”

“Oh, thank God.”

Isaac was uncharacteristically clumsy as he scrambled to his feet, and neither of them kept much dignity as they hurried inside. Con led Isaac directly to his bedroom. In tandem, they took off their wet trunks and let them fall onto the tile floor. Con would have done the same even if it had been a priceless Persian carpet.

They had seen each other mostly naked before, but not completely and certainly not with this degree of anticipation. With the way Isaac gazed at him, Con felt desirable and handsome and strong. Not embarrassed. Not shameful.

Isaac’s dick twitched and began to rise, which is when Con remembered he wasn’t constrained to looking. Isaac wasn’t a painting; he was a flesh-and-blood man, impetuous, sometimes careless, often impatient. And also brave and loyal and funny and accepting. Con was allowed to touch, especially now that he was opening himself to all that Isaac had offered.

They moved into a tight embrace. Areas of their skin were warm from the outside heat while others were still chilled from the water. Isaac felt solid against him, smooth in places and softly furred in others. His hands traced over Con’s body without discriminating between the parts that were damaged and the parts that were whole.

Con let his fingers wander too. He immersed himself in the novelty of feeling a body that wasn’t his own. Isaac had a very fine butt, rounded and silky to the touch. His back was broad.

Con ran his palm down Isaac's spine, counting the vertebrae as if he were collecting them.

Isaac leaned in impossibly closer and mouthed at the juncture of Con's neck and shoulder. Tongue and lips mostly, but a gentle bit of teeth as well. Knees a little weak, Con traced the fresh scar on Isaac's shoulder and enjoyed the sensation of floating.

"I think I need to lie down." Isaac may have said that for Con's benefit, but if so, Con didn't mind. It was an excellent idea. So then they were atop the colorful quilt, facing each other, exploring each other with eyes and fingertips.

"Tell me what you want," whispered Isaac.

"I'm going to disappoint you. You were fooling around with famous painters when you were still a teenager, and I—"

"Will never disappoint me. There are no rules here, Conny, except respect each other's wants and needs. And I guarantee you, *anything* you do with me is going to be right. Never perfect, although we can always try for that, but *right*."

Experimentally, Con touched Isaac's brown nipple. It hardened and Isaac gave a breathless little gasp. "Have I mentioned that I have several erogenous zones, and they are all exquisitely sensitive?"

"I'm not sure whether I have any."

"Shall we find out?"

As it turned out, Con did.

That afternoon, they didn't do anything too fancy. Just hands and mouths judiciously applied. But that was enough—more than enough—and Isaac laughed and moaned and begged, and Con shuddered and groaned, and they moved together like dancers. Con never for a moment felt weak or sinful.

"Yes, please," Isaac rasped when Con stroked him just right. Isaac was stroking him back, but it was those words that finally did it, sending Con spinning over the edge and into the star-spangled heavens.

Sticky, sweaty, sated, they cuddled together on Con's bed. "A nap is called for," Isaac announced, then yawned.

"A nap, then dinner."

"A nap, then dinner, then a second round?"

Con chuckled. "A nap, dinner, second round, and you stay the night."

"This is the best negotiation ever."

This felt so... correct. As if everything in the universe had been built to put him like this, nestled against Isaac, who smelled of chlorine and sex. The only guilt in Con's heart was that he hadn't done this sooner. He'd wasted weeks.

"Townsend says something bad's coming," Con said thoughtfully.

"Eventually. But he also said we're helping him prepare."

"I think... well, I don't know what's brewing. But I think that in the end, the good things will tally up. The allies we've made, the lives we've saved, the friendships. The...." He stumbled.

"The love." Isaac kissed Con's forehead. "Yeah. And you can probably design a spreadsheet to keep track of them all."

"You can. It'll be part of our next training session."

"I'm always up for some lessons with you."

Con nuzzled. Isaac kissed. And somehow the agreed-upon schedule was abandoned and the nap delayed.

No problem. Con could be flexible. As long as Isaac was involved, Con was willing to bend all the right rules.

THE BUREAU OF TRANS-SPECIES AFFAIRS



For many years the United States government has been aware that *Homo sapiens* is not the only sentient species inhabiting the country. Some other species were native to the continent, while others immigrated along with humans. Early on, these nonhuman species (NHS) were largely ignored when they lived peacefully within human communities. At other times they were deemed a threat and local efforts were made to eradicate them. The federal government was not involved in these early efforts.

During the Civil War, both the Union and Confederate armies recruited members of the NHS, with varying degrees of success.

By the early 20th century, some local law enforcement agencies expressed frustration with their inability to deal effectively with the special needs of NHS. Localized incidents of mass violence occurred in several locations, most notably

the Omaha Zombie Epidemic of 1908, the Manchester (New Hampshire) Melusine Drownings of 1911, and the Eugene (Oregon) Sasquatch Riots of 1915.

In response to these incidents, as well as a heightened desire for increased federal control, President Wilson created a new federal agency in 1919 called the Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs. The mission of this agency was to communicate with NHS, to control them, to investigate reported dangerous actions committed by them, and to bring them to justice or eliminate them when necessary. Since then, the Bureau has been quietly active throughout the United States. Its jurisdiction has expanded to include humans who engage in magical or paranormal activities.

Over the decades, a great many dramas have unfolded among the people who work for the Bureau. The **Bureau stories** are a collection of these tales. Each involves different protagonists and is set in a different era, yet all focus on the adventures and struggles of the Bureau's agents. These novellas can be read in any order.

*****The Bureau of Trans-Species Affairs: Strength, Intelligence, Honor*****

[More about the books in this series.](#)

- **Book One: Corruption**
- **Book Two: Clay White**
- **Book Three: Creature**
- **Volume One (Compilation of Books One through Three)**
- **Book Four: Chained**
- **Book Five: Conviction**
- **Volume Two (Compilation of Books Four and Five)**
- **Book Six: Conned**
- **Book Seven: Caroled**
- **Book Eight: Camouflaged**
- **Volume Three (Compilation of Books Seven and Eight)**
- **Book Nine: Caught**

- **Book Ten: Chambered**
- **Volume Four (Compilation of Books Nine and Ten)**
- **Book Eleven: Consumed**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Fielding is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. Winner of the BookLife Prize for Fiction, a Lambda Award finalist and three-time Foreword INDIE finalist, she has migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States and currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two daughters who fully appreciate her, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

Kim can be found on her blog: <http://kfieldingwrites.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/KFieldingWrites>

and Twitter: @KFieldingWrites

Her e-mail is kim@kfieldingwrites.com

ALSO BY KIM FIELDING

Series

The Bureau
Greynox to the Sea
Love Can't
Ennek
Bones
Stars from Peril

Novels

Crow's Fate (July 2023)
The Taste of Desert Green
Potential Energy
The Muffin Man
Teddy Spenser Isn't Looking for Love
Hallelujah (with F.E. Feeley Jr.)
Blyd and Pearce
A Full Plate
The Little Library
Ante Up
Running Blind (with Venona Keyes)
Staged
Rattlesnake
Astounding!
Motel. Pool.
The Tin Box
Venetian Masks
Brute

Novellas

Farkas
Ash Believes the Impossible
A Very Genre Christmas
Gravemound
The Solstice Kings
Dei Ex Machina
The Golem of Mala Lubovnya
Refugees
The Dance

Transformation
Summerfield's Angel
The Tale of August Hayling
Phoenix
Grown-Up
The Pillar
The Border
Housekeeping
Night Shift
Speechless
Guarded
The Downs

Short Stories and Collections

Dog Days of December
Firestones
Dreidels and Do-Overs
Get Lit
Christmas Present
Act One and Other Stories
Exit through the Gift Shop
Dear Ruth
Grateful
The Sacrifice and Other Stories
Saint Martin's Day
The Festivus Miracle
Joys R Us
Alaska
A Great Miracle Happened There
Violet's Present
Standby
Anyplace Else