



Mastering Id

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The club was called "The Factory" which seemed to Jacob a rather perfunctory title, as this was what the complex of buildings used to be anyhow. But that was more than twenty years ago and the facility was reduced to a dark labyrinth of buildings protected by an impotent chain link fence and overgrown vegetation, rotting boards protecting broken windows and rusty chains securing doors falling off their hinges.

The Jeep bounced and swayed as Jacob navigated the many craters marring the pavement. Without the glow of a nearly full moon to aid him, he was positive he would be investing in a new set of tires come Monday. Only one structure, a squat red brick building in the center of the compound, was illuminated. He pulled the

Jeep to a stop near the back of the crowded parking lot and turned to Phil. "Doesn't look like much."

Jacob met Phil Dawson at TechOne, a software development firm where they were both employed, about a year ago. Phil was short and thin and wore thick round glasses. He was in his early thirties, like Jacob, and their friendship started out of necessity; TechOne's offices were cramped and being trapped in a cube less than five feet from one's neighbor facilitated hasty acquaintances. Once the pleasantries were established, they moved on to movies, gaming, politics, and eventually embarking on a quest to help one other find "the perfect girl"...or the closest approximation thereof. So every Friday for the past eight months they had set out together, braving nightclubs, double dates, and Internet dating to accomplish this goal. Jacob met Trish five months ago; Phil was still in bachelor status.

Phil smiled. "Yeah, right? But you gotta admit the place has a lot of character."

Jacob nodded. "Well, if we strike out here there is always mail order." He switched off the engine and stepped out into the chilly February night.

"Don't think I have tried that."

The two men joined the small, but steady streams heading towards the entrance. Jacob folded his arms across tightly across his chest. "Other than a creepy atmosphere, what else does this place have going for it?"

"Oh you know. Beautiful women, expensive drinks. The usual fare."

"Sounds exclusive. You sure you are going to be able to get inside?"

"Don't worry. Money spends the same, even if it's from the non-beautiful people."

They arrived at the front of the brick building, where the constant pulse of music throbbed beneath their feet. The letters "T" and "U" were carved in a flowery script and flanked the large doors at the entrance. The second and third stories were rings of glass, all painted black. Three metal flagpoles, devoid of any colors, were on the left. A podium was on the right, staffed by two large men in overalls, black boots, and construction hats.

One of the men, whose blue sleeves were rolled up to reveal a beautiful web of tattoos, waved them forward. "IDs and twenty each."

Jacob and Phil provided the necessary papers and paid their fare and headed inside. The music slammed into their chests like an invisible wave and threatened to deposit them unceremoniously back into the parking lot. They pushed further inside, fighting the music and the small pockets of people gathered around the entrance.

All of the original walls had been removed, as had the second and third stories. The ceiling was glass sheets and offered unobstructed views of the night sky. A narrow catwalk was suspended above the room in the shape of a giant "X". Brave souls had climbed ladders in the corners and were gyrating to the music some twenty feet above the floor. The whole club was illuminated by deep blue floodlights lining the floor but every few moments a bright yellow shower of sparks would erupt from a metal ball hanging from the center of the room ceiling. A throng of people danced below the catwalks, different colors and shapes, all moving as one.

"Wow", Phil said.

"What?"

"I said, WOW".

Jacob nodded. "Want anything from the bar?"

"Yeah, ear plugs."

"Now I know we're getting old. I'll be back." Jacob spied the bar to their left, a massive structure constructed with sheet metal and rivets. Silver stools wrapped around the bar and each had one or more occupants per seat. Nearby were portable bathrooms, each with a blue or pink belt around the center; it appeared the designation was more of a suggestion than a rule.

The bartender closest to him, a pretty woman whose long blond hair was pulled tightly into a pony tail, pointed to him with an inquisitive "what'll you have expression." He held up two fingers and said "Beer". She disappeared below the bar for a split second and emerged with two ice cold bottles.

In between the masses of arms and legs, Jacob spotted the DJ near a blinking "EXIT" sign. Jacob watched as the DJ moved seamlessly between songs without breaking stride or rhythm, almost robotic in nature, before locating Phil near one of the corner ladders. As Jacob moved closer, he could see Phil was talking with someone.

"There you are, thought you got lost", Phil said. He took the bottle Jacob offered. "This is Mary."

"Nice to meet you", Jacob said.

Mary had straight dark hair, which covered most of the left side of her bronze colored face. "Hi there!", she shouted back.

"This is Mary's first time here as well", Phil said.

"So I guess that makes us all virgins", Mary said, giggling, as she took a sip from the cup in her hand.

Phil launched into his standard playbook of First Date Conversations ("Chapter 1: So, what do you do when you aren't here?") and Jacob had heard them so many times he could tag Phil out and take over at any moment. His mind went to Trish.

She came on a double blind date with a friend, Rachel or Ann or something like that, who was there to meet Phil. She was almost as tall as Jacob, with long brown hair and eyes that danced with life. Every bit of laughter, anger, surprise, sadness, all of it began and ended with her eyes. That night, their first unofficial date, she had jokingly told Jacob that when she went on blind dates but wasn't in the mood for a relationship, she wore her tallest heels and this usually had the desired effect of scaring off any potential suitors. That night, however, she was wearing flats.

Jacob wondered if Trish, somewhere across town, was growing as bored as he was. Hopefully Phil would hit it off with Mary and he could meet up with Trish later. It certainly looked encouraging at this point; Phil was already up to "Chapter 3: How long have you lived here?" and Mary was still smiling.

"I've been here about three years", Mary said. "After I graduated college, me and my roommate sort of threw a dart into a map and we landed here. Would you like to meet her?" She nudged Jacob in the arm.

"Oh? Me? Sorry, I'm spoken for. But thanks."

"No problem."

"If you two would excuse me, I think I'm going to look around"

Phil winked at Jacob with his right eye; a very good sign. Had it been the left, it would have been cause for alarm and immediate evacuation.

Jacob hugged the wall, slowly making his way through the crowds towards the back of the building and the blinking sign. In the pockets of shadows between the blue lights there were dark sofas draped with people, like living throw rugs. Human-sized speakers marked the perimeter of the dance floor. He stopped near the center of the club to watch the sparks explode from the ball. Like a swarm of angry bees they descended on the crowd below, extinguishing only seconds before they reached their victims. He drained his beer and deposited his bottle next to the collection around one of the sofas.

As Jacob was watched, the beat slid over to him and captured his feet. He was drawn closer to the mob, and with each step his body fell more under the control of the robotic master. His legs succumbed next, then his arms, his chest, and finally his head. He joined the mass on the floor and became lost in the unearthly rhythms throbbing around him.

Blast of sparks. The beat, like a heartbeat itself, forced Jacob's to beat faster, trying to keep time. He was absorbed into the crowd, becoming part of the being which swirled around the room. The master pressed them harder, faster, until in a frenzy. Blast of sparks. The being was near exhaustion before the master relented and allowed them a respite.

Jacob backed away, intending to locate a section of sofa where he could catch his breath. The master urged them on again. Shower of sparks. Then he saw her.

A goddess was pushing through the crowd towards him. Her auburn hair was bushy, wild. Her eyes flashed with intention, purpose. She had full breasts and hips and the green dress she wore strained to retain a modicum of her modesty, but was mostly failing. "Dance with me", she whispered in a throaty voice, almost a growl.

They began swaying together, slowly. It was earthy, primal, lustful. Jacob became aroused, but not embarrassed. The beat quickened. She noticed but was not offended or repulsed but rather drawn towards him. The beat quickened. He pulled her close; he could almost feel the texture of her nipples on his chest. She wrapped her arms around him and drew him even closer. The beat quickened. She pressed her lips to his and they kissed...

Shower of sparks. Jacob emptied. He would have crumpled to the floor, useless and weak, but she held him firm. The beat faded and she led him to a free spot on a nearby sofa.

"Look I...shit", Jacob stammered. "I've been thinking about--"

"My name is Iris. What's yours?"

Jacob stared at his feet. "Jacob."

"Nice to meet you Jacob. Would you like to go somewhere more...private." The last word rolled slowly off her tongue.

Yes! "Uh...I want to but, I..." Jacob paused and he knew this automatically made him guilty of something. Finally he said, "I'm sorry. I have a girlfriend...Trish."

"Is she here", Iris said, coyly glancing around the club.

Jacob looked up. She was just inches away from his face. She smelled warm, feminine. No she isn't here! She is halfway across town. How would she know? She couldn't! "I want to, I do. But...look we've been going together for a while and I...I care about her. I'm sorry."

A man stumbled and bumped into the back of the couch. "Sorry you two." He winked at Jacob and gave him a thumbs up sign. "Nice catch sport!"

Iris flashed her eyes at him; it was a cruel, expression, one meant to disembowel the intruder. The man wandered off and instantly she focused on Jacob, gently purring in his ear. "It's just you and me right now."

Jacob looked into her eyes, those playful, green eyes. His place was twenty minutes away, only fifteen tonight. Trish would never come by without calling first. Would she? No, of course not! He sighed and stood up, keeping one hand in front of his crotch. "I gotta go. I'm...uh...meeting a friend."

Iris tugged at the ends of her hair, slowly rubbing thick strands between her fingers. "I'm sure the women your friend is with will take good care of him."

Of course Mary would! Phil could be charming when he wanted to. Or hell he could just get a cab. Jacob would pay for it if he had to! "Uh, maybe? But...how did you know?"

"I've been watching you since you came in. I...I can't explain it. I just want you tonight."

You don't have to leave! Look around, no one here recognizes you. "I'm sorry. I should go."

Iris' hand shot out and caught his. "Wait. Would you...at least let me buy me a drink?" Her eyes moistened slightly; was she about to cry?

Jacob glanced around for Phil, but he was nowhere in sight. "Yeah. Yeah, OK. I at least owe you that." He smiled. "What'll you have?"

Iris stood and gently kissed his cheek. "Allow me. Don't run off."

Jacob watched her disappear into the fog of dancers around the bar. When she had completely faded, he took her place on the couch. It still housed her warmth, her scent.

Iris returned carrying two glasses, filled to the brims. She squeezed in next to him, her bare leg brushing up against his arm. "Cheers", she said, handing him a glass.

"Cheers." Jacob held it up and took a sip. It was strong, but had a nice mix of flavors. The rum and lemon were easy to spot. But there was something else in there too. "Mmmm. That's pretty good. What is it?"

"Lone Wolf. Lemon, rum, Southern Comfort...something else, I forget." Iris took a delicate sip from her glass.

Jacob finished his glass and added it to the pile on the floor. He coughed several times, shaking his head. "Guess it went down the wrong pipe." The music became annoyingly louder. "I...it was nice to meet you Iris. Thanks for the drink. Good night." He stood up, too quickly he guessed, and nearly lost his balance.

The couple next to them on the couch began laughing. Something was happening. Their laughter was...slowing down? Jacob blinked several times. The music was so loud in here now, the air was so stuffy. Too loud. Too many people. Too much movement. If he could just get outside, to the night, to the quiet. Too much...everything.

A man's arms wrapped around his shoulder, steadying him. "Are you OK sport? Would you like to lie down?"

"Yes. No. I can't. My friend...my friend...he is waiting for me. I have to go."

The man laughed. "You aren't in any shape to go anywhere sport. Need to pace yourself a bit more. Come on, you can crash in the back of my car."

"Yes. No. I..." Jacob looked at Iris. He was surely making an ass of himself after just one drink, but she wasn't smiling anymore. There was one final blast of sparks before the club went completely dark and silent.

Jacob was lying on a daybed comprised of silk sheets and thick, fluffy pillows. He was dressed in soft lines and barefoot. He rubbed his hands through his hair; it was soft and his skin was as smooth as the pillows.

A window was across from him and the warm afternoon sun shined brightly in his face. Two sheer white curtains lazily flapped back and forth in the cool breeze. A wicker nightstand was next to the bed and it matched an armoire in the corner. There was only one visible door.

This place reminded him of a posh hotel in Miami he stayed at once. TechOne had sent him to a software conference there two years ago. Sure there were many lectures and product demos to see during the day. But, like most attendees, he was there for the week away from the office, the exotic location, and the meet and greets, which was just code for open bars and late nights.

Jacob walked over to the window and peered out. A sandy white beach stretched out for miles in both directions. The dunes were covered in sea oats that were busy keeping rhythm with the curtains. The beach was deserted, but he didn't mind. He could listen to that surf for hours. He stretched his arms and legs; he must have slept funny because for some reason he was sore. He laughed out loud; perhaps he needed another nap. Something stirred, outside his room, and Jacob turned around. "Hello?"

Another sound. This time, he was sure it came from the other side of the door. "Can I help you?" He walked over to the door and peered out through the eyehole. A dense jungle, thick and dark, was on the other side. The trees were knotted and old, twisted in agony. Thick vines stretched between them like primitive power lines. There was no wind, no movement. Only stillness.

Jacob pressed his ear to the door and listened. Must have been the wind...or something. He shook his head and walked towards the bed. The sound came again, this time like scratching. Something was definitely on the other side, clawing its way in. "Hello?" he shouted. He peered out again, his eye rolling around the hole, straining to see what was there but no matter how he positioned himself it remained hidden.

Jacob knelt down and put his hand to the door. Whatever it was it had to be the size of a large dog. Maybe larger. He banged on the door with the palm of his hand. "Get out of here!"

The scratching stopped and was replaced with rapid sniffs, like the first time an animal greets you. Jacob banged on the door with his fist. "Go one, get out of there!"

The animal growled; a low rumble which vibrated the door. The clawing resumed, this time with more ferocity. The wood on the other side of the door began to splinter and the animal pulled large chunks out with its teeth.

Jacob backed away from the door, scanning the room for a weapon. He flung open the armoire but it was empty. All of the drawers and the bed were likewise devoid of anything useful. He went to the window and looked down; he had to be ten or more stories from the ground.

A large chunk of the door was suddenly ripped out. Jacob spun around and saw it, a huge black paw with nails an inch in length, pushing through the hole and groping the air before retracting again. The clawing and biting resumed.

Jacob dashed to the armoire. If he could turn it on its side and push it in front of the door, that could buy him some time until he could somehow escape to the beach below. He pushed it hard, but it wouldn't budge. Another section of the door gave way. He crashed into the armoire, throwing all his weight into it but nothing. He tried the nightstand and the bed but they were affixed to the floor with the same strength as the armoire.

The bottom half of the door was now gone and he could see the full length of the animal. It was much larger than a dog. It kept thrusting its front paws through the opening it made, swinging for something...the handle! The animal had opened a wide enough hole and its muscular arm was slowly reaching up towards its goal.

Jacob let out a shout and tried to intercept but it was too late. The handle turned and the animal removed its paw from the opening and thrust the door open with such savagery it became lodged in the wall.

The animal's head was lowered and Jacob could only see top of it. It looked too small for the body it was attached to and was covered in fine, soft hair which didn't match the thick fur covering the rest of the animal. The animal was the size of a small bear and its nails clicked on the fine ceramic floor as it drew closer. It was growling with each step, a low series of grunts yet there was a strange cadence to it.

Jacob slowly backed up with his hands outstretched in front of him. "Easy now."

The creature was only a few feet away when it began to rise up on its hind legs, growing taller with each step until it was the same height as Jacob.

"Oh my God..."

The animal let out a slow laugh, like a hyena. It was Jacob's face, somehow attached to this abomination. The beast was smiling with its mouth open wide, exposing a gallery of sharp, jagged teeth. Jacob let out a shriek as the thing lunged for his neck.

Jacob suddenly awoke, still screaming. The room was pitch black and smelled like urine and rotting food. He was lying on a hard stone floor, completely naked. His entire body was sore, but the left side in particular felt numb, he could barely move his arm. He reached over with his right hand and felt a savage wound over his shoulder. The gash was several inches long, but had been crudely sewn together with some sort of twine. The hair covering his body felt longer and thicker now.

Jacob blinked his eyes several times, hoping to adjust to the darkness but he couldn't see anything. His head ached all over with a dull thud and his throat was dry and sore and it hurt to swallow. His stomach was cramped, like he had been doing hundreds of crunches.

Jacob stretched out his right hand and began feeling around. His fingers moved over the damp floor, finding small puddles of water, tufts of hair, much like his own, and bits of something hard, like plastic, which had a terrible smell. He turned in a small circle and located a wooden object close by. It was rough with splinters, and filled with a liquid which felt like water. He leaned his head towards the object to smell it, but jammed his nose into the edge and he let out a cry of pain.

"You should drink something stranger." A man's voice was directly in front of him, maybe six feet away.

Jacob pushed himself backwards across the filth until he rammed his body into something flat and hard. His hands scurried over the surface and he realized it was a wall. "Who are you?"

"My name is Don. I am not your enemy." His voice was old and gentle, like a doctor comforting a sick patient.

"Where am I? What happened to me?"

"What is the date?" A different man, whose voice was richer and younger than Don's called out from Jacob's right, but farther away than Don. "Please man, can you tell me the date?"

"Just a moment Roger", Don said. "We will get to that." He paused for a moment. "Now, stranger, what is your name?"

"My...my name is Jacob." He pulled his knees to his chest and rubbed his body with his good arm, trying to stem the cold tide seeping into his body.

Don and Roger, joined by a new voice in the darkness, repeated his name three times in slow succession.

"Where am I", Jacob shouted into the blackness. "Who are you people? What happened to me?"

"Jacob, please address one of us by our name when you speak. I am Don and my room is adjacent to yours. Across from you is Roger. And adjacent to him is Will."

"What are you talking about? Where am I?"

"I hate the new ones Don", Will said. He voice had a slight Southern accent.

"Give it time Will", Don said. "Jacob...I... first I must say I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry for this. No matter where you came from or what your life was like before now, that part is over, forever. You must accept this before you can begin to understand what has happened to you."

"I don't understand! Where are we? What happened to me?"

"Jacob please direct your questions to one of us. My name is Don."

"The date Jacob man", Roger said. "Could you tell me what the date is? It's kinda important."

"Roger, please", Don said. "Give Jacob a few minutes."

"Yeah ok Don", Roger muttered. "But you know Will and I have a bet going."

"Christ where am I? Somebody help me, please." The insides of Jacob's stomach were churning now. "I...I think I'm going to be sick."

"There is no Christ here Jacob", Don said calmly. "Only Don, Will, and Roger. You need to drink some water Jacob. It will help. Can you find your bucket again?"

"HELP!"

"That won't do any good Jacob."

"HELP ME! ANYONE! Oh God..." Jacob's stomach emptied. "Shit..." He vomited again, this time a dry painful heave.

"Jacob, please drink some water. It will help. You have to trust me."

Jacob crawled forward, inadvertently through his own filth, trying to locate the bucket of liquid. He bumped into it with his leg as he was turning around. The contents shifted, but fortunately he didn't dump it over. He reached in with his hand and took a sip. The water was warm and tasted like the wooden container but it was refreshing and soothed his burning throat. He bent down and started scooping more and more into his mouth.

"That's better isn't it Jacob" Don said.

"Yes", Jacob said. "Yeah it is...Don." He dunked his hands into the water and splashed some on his face. The coarse hair on his face was full, like he hadn't shaved in a week.

"Good Jacob, good."

"Don what happened to me?"

"What is the last thing you remember Jacob?"

"I was in a club. There was this woman...in a green dress. She had green eyes and long brown hair."

"Bitch", Roger said. "I knew there was something wrong with her."

"Yeah Roger, we all know that now", Will said, chuckling.

"Who was she Don", Jacob said.

"The lure Jacob. She works with them, but not by choice."

"We don't know that Don", Roger said emphatically. "For all we know they are the ones in control."

"Wouldn't that be something Roger", Will said.

"No", Don said and for the first time his voice rose above the others. "They are held captive, just as we are. Do not direct any animosity towards them."

"Don she isn't...is she here, with us, in this room...now", Jacob said.

"No Jacob. They keep us separated. Part of it is to ensure the ritual is...spontaneous. The other reason is they fear some of us might try and hurt them, if given the chance."

"Them? You mean there is more than one?" No one answered. "Sorry. Don."

"Yes Jacob. We have identified at least four females." Someone slapped a wall with the palm of his hand. "We think they are kept nearby, but we don't know for sure. And there are usually four or of us."

"So Don...I've-we've been kidnapped. OK. Why?"

"Jacob we are here to amuse our masters. The moon is nearly full, right?"

"The moon? I...guess so. Yeah it was almost full. I remember it the night I was taken. So what? There was also loud music and dancing and blue lights. I was at this club with my friend...my friend Phil." Jacob wondered if Phil made it out OK. Iris said she was watching him when he entered. And she knew about Phil.

Surely he made it and was helping Trish and the police...

Trish. Jacob could see her, hair pulled up, wearing her white robe and curled up on her couch with two large pillows propping her up. She always did that when she was upset. More than anything else, he just wanted to see her again. Even the picture in his wallet would be enough. He took a deep breath then said quietly "How long have I been here Don?"

"We don't know hours or minutes Jacob. We don't even know months or years. We measure time by feedings. We are fed three times a day. You were brought here five feedings ago."

"So... yesterday?" Thank Christ. By now the police should have interviewed everyone he had contact with at the bar. The doorman. The bartender. The man who helped him...NO NO NO! "They don't work alone, do they Don."

"No Jacob. They don't. I'm sorry..."

"Jacob can you please tell me the date", Roger said. "I really need to know man. Please."

"Yesterday was February twenty-sixth Roger."

"How close were you Roger", Will said.

"Not very Will. I thought it was January still. I must have lost count..."

Will whistled. "Well that's one you owe me Roger."

Jacob slid his bucket against the wall for safekeeping. He braced himself against the wall and stood up. His legs were wobbly and his left shoulder complained but he spread his hands out and slowly worked his way to the left, sidestepping his bucket along the way. "Why does it matter about the moon Don?"

"The ritual takes place the days before and after a full moon Jacob. What are you doing over there?"

"Having a look around Don." Jacob took several more steps before the wall behind him intersected with another. He guessed he had traveled around ten feet. He transferred to the new wall and continued. After many more small steps his hand felt something smooth and metallic. There were several of them, stacked close together. Bars.

A hand suddenly wrapped around his. Jacob cried out and recoiled quickly, sliding back down the wall towards the corner. "What was that?"

"That was my hand Jacob" Don said.

"How...how did you know I was there Don?"

"The other senses compensate for our eyes Jacob. Yours will eventually. I could hear you approaching. Smell you approaching."

"Christ don't do that again!" Jacob moved back towards Don's cell. "There are bars between us Don?"

"Yes Jacob. Our rooms are separated by them."

"OK...what is this ritual you are talking about?" Jacob pictured a violent band of outcasts. Or maybe a cult,

obsessed with blood pacts. Whoever they were he decided they had to be well financed, well organized.

"Very soon, two of us will be taken to the arena to fight for a...prize. We call this the ritual. Our masters take great pleasure in watching this." Then he added softly, "You will be one of the participants."

"Fight one of you? What the hell are you talking about? Why would I fight you? What the hell do you mean?"

"Jacob please address--"

"Fuck. I'm sorry. DON. What the fuck is going on here DON."

Don sighed. "I'm sorry Jacob. Truly sorry."

"Yeah we all sorry Jacob man", Roger said.

"Jacob you will fight because you won't have any choice. You will fight because that is our nature."

"I'm not fighting anyone Don. I just want to figure out a way to get out of here." Jacob resumed his slow walk and followed the bars. "Who are these people?"

"Jacob you must promise me you will not interact with them at all. Please, for your own safety."

"Better listen to him Jacob man", Roger said. "If they take you away by yourself you don't come back."

"Jacob, please. You must not try anything."

"Can you at least tell me who they are Don?"

"We don't know that much about them Jacob. We can't understand their language and they don't understand ours. We've all tried different ways to communicate with them, bribes, threats, pleas for mercy, but they seem to regard all of it as acts of aggression."

"Are they foreign Don? Are they terrorists?" Neither Jacob nor his family had much money. Sure he was doing ok, but if they were holding him for ransom there wasn't that much to gain. Were they trafficking in slaves? Or just using him to make some sick point to the rest of the world?

"They are foreign Jacob, but we don't know where they are from." Don feigned a laugh. "I never thought of them as terrorists before, but yes I guess they are...in a way."

"Have you guys tried to escape Don?"

"Shit Will you win", Roger said. "Last guy was here thirty minutes before he asked that stupid question."

Will laughed. "That's two Roger! I told you I could smell stupid on that last guy."

"Yes Jacob", Don said calmly. If he was as annoyed with the question as the others, he hid it well. "There have been several attempted escapes. When we are captured the rest are forced to...to watch the punishment. And then share in it."

Jacob walked for a longer distance this time, maybe fifteen feet before the bars intersected with another row of bars. He followed the new set of bars towards the opposite end. "OK, well have anyone made it out of here Don?"

"There was one Jacob. His name was Mike. He told us he worked with the police and had special training. He was huge! Could barely fit through the door and ate like a horse. Anyway, one night after ritual he came back and said he saw something. A way out, he said. He tried to tell us about it but no one wanted to listen. We thought he was going to end up like the others, beaten and humiliated. Or that he would get us all in trouble. So we stopped listening. And eventually he stopped talking.

But that particular night, his last ritual as it turned out, something went wrong. We heard a commotion and then the masters were screaming, some in fear others in rage. This went on for...awhile. Finally they came down and took their rage out on all of us, screaming in their strange dialect the whole time. We never saw Mike again."

"If he did escape, he never came back for you guys", Roger said. "Just left you here to rot."

"I hope he made it Roger", Don said. "And I don't blame him for not coming back. I'm not sure I would have the courage to come back here if I made it."

"Yeah you would Don", Will said. "Yeah you would."

Jacob's hands discovered a smooth metal plate. He reached through the bars and felt a one inch slot...a keyhole. He located the two round hinges attached to the bars. He couldn't tell which way the door swung, but there was his way out. He pushed and pulled on the door, but it only gave slightly in either direction. He tried each of his fingers in the keyhole, but only his pinky would fit. He would need to find something to pick the lock. He moved past the door and continued following the bars until he found the stone wall again. The room was a rectangle he surmised, maybe ten feet by twenty feet in length. His cell was bordered by two stone walls and two metal ones.

"Feedin' should be any time now Don", Will said. "My stomach is growlin' like a son of a bitch."

"Jacob, listen to me very carefully" Don said. His voice was quicker now, agitated. "When they come to feed us don't try and talk to them or touch them or stare them down. Just move back against the wall and stay there until they leave. Anything else they will see as a sign of aggression. Do you understand?"

"Don we can try and slip past them in the darkness, right? I mean I'm sure you guys have tried this, but maybe if you can cause a distraction I can--"

"Don't try anything Jacob," Will said firmly. "We only get the light during feedings. If you mess with them they will take that away. Depending on their mood they may do worse."

"Please trust me Jacob," Don said. "Do not do or say anything. Please."

"But Don we have--"

Several fluorescent bulbs flickered and then ignited. The room was filled with a brilliant light and Jacob slammed his eyelids shut. He shielded his eyes with his hands and, though they were burning, opened them and looked around the room through the cracks in his fingers.

Jacob's cell was much smaller than he imagined, really only five by ten. He was standing near the corner where he first stood up, the remnants of yesterday's meals splashed around his feet. The stone walls were grey and dulled with age and stained with dried red patches. A pathway separated the eight cells, four on either side of the room. Just outside the cells was a narrow drain which ran the length of the room. A stall with a half door was between the two empty cells at the end, next to a large hose wound loosely around a metal valve. There was only one way out, a solid looking wooden door just outside his pen.

Don, the man next to Jacob's cell, was older with patches of grey hair and a receding hairline. His face was marred with thick wrinkles or scars; it was hard to distinguish the two. He looked fierce, but his eyes were kind. Across from Jacob, Roger was sitting with his back against the wall with his head on his knees. He was younger than Jacob and only a half dozen or so scars covered his muscular body. Next to him was Will, who looked to be Jacob's age. His thick frame was leisurely resting on the floor and it appeared he could scarcely turn around in the small space. All three men were naked and Jacob's unblemished body looked stark in comparison.

Jacob's hands moved instinctively to cover his genitals, but the others didn't bother or even notice. He examined his left shoulder. The gash was at least six inches in length. It was swollen and stained with many different shades of purple. "This wound Don. What did they do to me?"

"You mean this?" Roger stood up, leaned his left shoulder forward and patted it several times. "Don't worry Jacob man, it will heal."

Jacob looked over at Don, who bore a similar mark. "Christ...what is this place?"

"We don't have much time Jacob," Don said. "They will bang three times on the door before they enter. When you hear this go to the back of your room and sit with your back against the wall. Don't say or do anything. Do you understand?"

Jacob looked at Don, whose eyes were filled with deep concern. Roger returned to the floor with his head back on his knees. Will hadn't moved at all. Whatever experiment or torture employed here to break these men had succeeded. They could not, would not be able to help him. Jacob was alone. "I understand Don."

Don smiled and nodded his head. "Good Jacob. Good. It will be easier this way."

Three loud bangs sounded on the door. Almost in unison, Don and Will moved to the rear of their cells and slumped down.

"Jacob, hurry!" Don hissed.

Jacob moved to the wall opposite the bars and lowered himself down into a squatting position.

A lock clicked and the wooden door creaked open. A man pushing a large cart entered, followed closely by a woman. They were both pale, almost glossy, and their skin was smooth as polished stone. Their hair was dull and faded, the woman's short and blonde the man's black and slimy. Their eyebrows were slim and they bore no other visible hair. They were talking in a language unfamiliar to Jacob, but their body movements and facial expressions indicated a casual chat between friends.

The top shelf of the cart was covered in a pile of what appeared to be uncooked ground beef. A large wooden bucket was on the bottom one. The man fished around his jeans for something and pulled out a large old key. He spoke and pointed into Jacob's cell.

The women peered in and nodded. She smiled at Jacob; her teeth were unusually white and large. She said something back and the man agreed with a nod of his head. The man opened Jacob's door and flung a handful of the meat inside. It landed with a splat just in front of Jacob. The man entered the cell and bent down to pick up Jacob's bucket.

Jacob sprang from his position and grabbed the man's arm. The man offered little resistance and Jacob turned him around to face the woman, pinning the man's arm behind his back. He expected the woman to start screaming or run for help but she just stood there, smiling. The man and the woman exchanged more words.

"SHUP UP", Jacob shouted.

"What have you done Jacob", Don yelled. "Release him, immediately! For God's sake!"

"Shut up Don. I'm not going to stay here and eat raw meat and participate in some ritual for these sick assholes. I'm getting out of here, now!"

"No you ain't", Will said. "You ain't going anywhere friend. You'll be lucky if they let you live."

The man said something and the women cocked her head to the side, as if she were deciding something.

"I said SHUT UP". Jacob tightened his grip but the man didn't flinch.

The women smiled and nodded her head. Suddenly the man wrestled his arm free and pulled Jacob around to face him, dangling him like a rag doll. He looked into Jacob's eyes a moment before placing both hands on Jacob's chest and shoving him across the room.

Jacob crashed into the stone wall and crumpled to the floor. He landed on his left shoulder and stings of pain erupted along his body.

"I told you Jacob", Don said, shaking his head. "I warned you."

"Let's hope they don't turn on the rest of us Don", Roger muttered.

Jacob grasped his shoulder. Several of the stitches had torn and blood was seeping onto the floor.

The man snatched the bucket from the ground and drenched Jacob with the remaining contents. The man tossed the empty bucket into the corner and then collected the meat he left for Jacob and returned it to the cart. The man directed a stream of what sounded like curses at Jacob and then locked his cell door.

The pair went to the remaining cells and deposited a hunk of meat inside each and refilled the wooden buckets from the one on the cart. After Will was fed and watered the pair left, continuing their idle conversation.

Don scurried over to the bars. "Jason, are you alright? Let me see your shoulder."

Jacob rolled onto his back, clutching his shoulder with his right arm. He was dripping water and blood.

"Jacob can you hear me?"

"Yes Don", Jacob said, gritting his teeth. "I can hear you fine."

"How is your shoulder Jacob."

"It hurts Don. It looks like one of these stitches tore open. He didn't look that strong."

"You're lucky to be breathing", Will said. "Monica must like you."

"How do you know her name Will", Jacob said. "Can you understand their language?" He pulled himself into a seating position with his back against the wall for support. "What are they saying?"

"No Jacob man", Roger said with a smile. "Will here names all the females after his ex wives and girlfriends. Which one was Monica, Will? Was that the dancer or the flight attendant?"

"Neither", Will said with a chuckle. "Monica was my cousin's girlfriend and we sorta had a fling there for a while." He stretched out and scooped out some of the reddish colored meat from the floor. He took a large bite and said "Nothing serious" in between chews.

"Yeah well whatever her name was Jacob man, you are lucky", Roger said. He pulled two chunks of meat from his pile, formed them into a ball, and tossed it to Will, who happily gobbled it with the rest.

Don took a handful from his pile and brought it to Jacob's cell. He stuck his hand between the bars. "Here Jacob, you need to eat."

Jacob was hungry and he found the contents strangely appealing. "Don, I can't eat that. It's...raw meat." It smelled delicious and he was fighting the urge to tear it out of Don's hand and devour it whole.

Don smiled. "Don't fight it Jacob. Your body needs energy to heal. Come, eat some."

Jacob crawled to Don and took the meat out of his hand. It was bloody and cold, but very fresh. He retreated to the corner opposite Don's cell and took a small bite. He had never tasted food like this before! Somehow it moved through his body, easing the fatigue and tension and anxiousness he felt. He gobbled the rest down in two large gulps.

Don started on his half. "You see Jacob, much better. Let me finish mine and we can share some water."

"Thank you Don."

Will and Roger finished their portions and were arm wrestling through the bars.

Don lapped some water out of his bucket and then slid it over to Jacob's cell. "Hurry. They don't like us sharing."

"Thanks." Don didn't acknowledge him. "I'm sorry. Thanks Don."

"You're welcome Jacob."

"Don why do you guys insist on always using a name? It seems well...unnecessary."

"Because Jacob. It reminds us who we were. Who we are I mean. We never want to forget. We never want to lose ourselves here."

Three more bangs. Don pulled his bucket away from Jacob and Will and Roger snapped into their subservient positions moments before the door opened again. The black haired attendant entered alone, this time carrying a metal pole with two leather loops at either ends, one much larger than the other.

"Just cooperate Jacob", Don whispered. "He is going to take you to the stall and clean out your cell. Don't do anything to provoke him. Please."

The attendant opened Jacob's cell door and moved towards him, the pole thrust towards him. His words were calming, soothing. Then with a quick motion, he slid the large loop over Jacob's head and down around his neck. He pulled down on the smaller strap and the loop quickly tightened.

Jacob wrapped both hands around the strap and tried to loosen it, but it held firm. The more he struggled, the tighter the attendant pulled. His vision became blurred and his breath shallow. His grip on the straps began to fade and he collapsed to the floor.

"Stop struggling Jacob", Don yelled.

"Better listen to him Jacob man" Roger said. "He doesn't care about strangling you."

"Come on Jacob! Let go", Will said.

There was a loud pounding in Jacob's ears now. Despite his instincts urging him to continue the fight, he dropped his arms to his sides. The attendant nodded and smiled in approval and loosened the strap a little. Jacob took a big gulp of air and chased away the blackness threatening to blanket at his mind.

The attendant pulled Jacob out of his cell. He rotated the strap so he was behind Jacob and pushed him into the stall. Inside was a single toilet, the bowl covered with hard water stains, which smelled like rotten eggs. The attendant removed the loop from Jacob's neck and prodded him into the stall by jamming the pole into his back several times. Once Jacob was inside the attendant closed the door and locked it from the outside.

There wasn't a sink or mirror in the stall and the walls were covered with rust. Jacob heard the hose unwind, the squeaky valve turn, then jets of water blasting at the stone floor. He peered under the door and saw the attendant spraying the inside of his cell. The rod with the straps was leaning up against the exit door.

After several sweeps the attendant man turned off the water and flung the hose on the ground. He retrieved the rod and turned around and caught Jacob watching him. He smiled and Jacob ducked his head back into the stall. The attendant unlocked the stall door and stood there with the rod pointing at Jacob's head, his left arm outstretched, as if asking for a decision.

Jacob lowered his head and this seemed to please the attendant. He put the strap around Jacob's neck, snug but not too tight, and led him back to his cell. He pointed and Jacob entered. The man removed the strap and locked the door, smiling and nodding.

The attendant performed this chore for the other prisoners, who moved with clockwork precision to the smallest gestures he made with his hands. They made use of their time in the stall but Jacob noticed only Don rinsing his hands with water from his bucket afterwards. When the attendant finished, he returned the hose to the wall and left. Within seconds the room became engulfed in darkness once again.

Jacob dropped to his hands and knees and crawled across the damp floor with his right arm outstretched until he found the back of his room. He sat with his back against the wall and his knees to his chest. He heard the other men rustling in their cells, presumably finding a comfortable spot to rest. He was exhausted and wanted to join them in sleep, but his mind refused to yield. How could he overpower the attendant? Would he be able to use that rod against him? He could easily crawl under the door of the stall, but what then? Could he feign an injury? Pretend to be ill? Maybe he could get the keys from the man's pocket and toss it to one of the others. Would they even help him? Jacob curled up onto the floor, resting his head on his arms, and closed his eyes. He laughed to himself; he wouldn't have to close his eyes to fall asleep anymore.

The banging on the door yanked Jacob back to consciousness. The overhead lights were on and burned his eyes before they adjusted. His body was stiff from lying on the stone floor, but otherwise rested. His shoulder had stopped bleeding and a scab had already formed over part of it.

The attendant had returned with his cart restocked. He waited outside Jacob's cell; it sounded like he was asking a question. Jacob lowered his head and moved back against the wall like the others. The man opened Jacob's cell and tossed some of the meat inside. He strode into the room and retrieved the empty bucket. He paused for a moment and Jacob could feel his eyes on him. Jacob didn't budge. The man filled the bucket with water from the cart and returned it to the center of the room. He praised Jacob with foreign words and then proceeded to take care of the others.

When he had finished the attendant pulled two pieces of white rope from one of his pants pockets. He tied one to a bar outside of Will's cell and the other Jacob's. He wheeled the cart out and locked the door behind him.

Jacob tore into his food immediately but none of the others had much interest in their portions and were instead fixated on the pieces of rope. "What does that mean Don?"

"The participants for tonight's ritual have been chosen Jacob."

"The ritual? Is this the fight you were talking about Don?"

"Yes Jacob."

Looks like it's you and me Jacob", Will said.

"I'm not going to fight you Will. I'm not going to. I don't care what happens."

"We have to fight Jacob." Will tore a small piece of meat from his pile. "We don't have a choice."

"What the hell are you talking about Will? Of course we have a choice!"

"You won't understand until later Jacob man", Roger said. "Then you will know everything about this place."

The attendant banged on the door and returned with the rod. He entered Jacob's cell and pointed the rod at him. Jacob bent his head low and the man slid the strap over his neck. Jacob feigned a smile and put his arms up halfway in a sign of subordination. The attendant nodded, said something pleasing, and led Jacob to the stall.

Once he heard the hose undock, Jacob peered under the door and watched the routine again. The attendant was humming a familiar tune, something Jacob knew but couldn't quite identify, as he washed the bits of meat and small pools of blood into the drain. The rod was in the same spot, but useless; Jacob could never get to it in time. The attendant switched off the hose and Jacob quickly hid behind the door.

The stall door unlocked and Jacob lowered his head once again. The attendant smiled and led Jacob back to his cell. As he shut the door, the man pulled a small piece of additional meat from the table and threw it inside. Jacob happily ate the treat and this seemed to please the man. Once the others were taken care of, the attendant left and the darkness resumed.

Jacob waited for what seemed like long enough to ensure the man had gone. "How long do we have until this ritual Don?"

"We never know for sure Jacob. Sometimes it's a feeding or two before they collect us. Other times it seems like its right afterwards. We think they do it like that on purpose...to keep the adrenaline going."

"What do they do if you don't fight Don?" Jacob wondered what they would do to him when he didn't participate in their barbaric ritual. Would Will just beat him to a pulp as he laid on the ground, shielding his head with his arms? Would they torture him? Threaten to kill him? They had his wallet and his license now; would they track his family down and use them to make him fight? Did they know about Trish? She had a key to his condo after all. Jacob hoped she had gone to stay with her sister while the police looked for him.

"They don't do anything Jacob. All they do is watch."

"This is bullshit Don. You need to tell me what is going on here. Now. Don't give me any more crap. I want

answers God damnit!" Jacob smacked his palm against the stone floor. "Please. I just want to know what is happening here."

"Jacob, I'm sorry", Don said. "We don't have the answers to your questions. The only difference between us and you is the amount of time we have been here."

"No", Jacob said. "There is another difference. I've never been in a fight before. Ever. Not even as a kid."

"Don't worry about Jacob", Will said. "It hurts like a son of a bitch. But it's over quick and you don't have to fight again for a while."

"Has anyone ever been killed in one of these rituals Will?" The pause gave Jacob the answer faster than Will could. "People have died in this ritual, haven't they?"

"Yes Jacob", Will blurted out. "It's rare and we never mean to do it. I mean, shit, we are all we have in this place. We are family now, you know what I'm saying? And they don't like it either because that means they have to go get a replacement."

"So that's why I am here? Isn't it? Don? I'm here because one of you died, right? I'm the replacement."

"I'm sorry Jacob--"

"I know Don. You're sorry. Can you tell me what happened?"

"It's just like Will said", Roger bellowed. "I didn't mean to kill him! You think I planned it that way? I don't know what happened!"

"Roger I didn't know--"

"What the fuck do you want from us Jacob man! We don't know why you are here. We don't know why we are here! All we know is we are in Hell now and death is the only way out. You feel better now?"

So that was it. Jacob would either end up murdered or a murderer. He crawled to the corner and tucked himself into a ball. He became hyper sensitive to the slightest noises around him, convinced they would be the harbinger that would lead him to his execution. His heart was racing and would not slow; he was going to die soon. Jacob started counting seconds, but he could never make it past thirty.

After his tenth or hundredth iteration, the lights overhead switched on, their humming matching the one in his ears. The wooden door opened and the attendant entered, followed by two thin men carrying thick metal chains attached to leather collars. There was no cart. It was time.

Jacob stood up slowly and pressed his back against the wall. He wasn't going anywhere with these men, not if he could help it. His knees were slightly bent and his arms were tucked close to his body.

The three strangers were pointing at Jacob and talking between themselves. The attendant stood there, shaking his head, while one of the thin men lazily swung the chain in a circle. Finally, the attendant opened Jacob's cell and the man swinging the chain entered. He held up the collar and pointed to Jacob's neck. Jacob shook his head back and forth quickly. The man sighed and advanced towards him.

Jacob threw a punch at the man's head, which he easily dodged. He grabbed Jacob by the arm and twisted it until it felt like it was going to splinter in two. Jacob cried out and the man forced him to the ground, twisting his arm even further as he did. The attendant and the other prisoners began frantically begging for mercy, but

the man waved them off with a flick of his hand. Jacob wailed louder while the man calmly secured the collar around his neck. He pulled both Jacob's arms behind him and slid a plastic band around his wrists, tightening it with a quick motion.

The man let go and Jacob fell to his knees. His arm was throbbing and the plastic bands were burning his wrists. The cold chain was loosely draped over his shoulders, like a scarf, but the man held the other end with a firm grip. Will had his collar attached without incident. The attendant pointed at Jacob and then the door, but Jacob didn't move. The man holding his leash jerked it hard and pulled Jacob towards the exit.

Jacob lost his footing and crashed into the bars next to his cell door. The two handlers burst into laughter but the attendant dashed into the cell and helped Jacob to his feet. The man yanked on the chain again and pulled Jacob behind him. Beyond the great wooden door was a flight of wooden stairs. With only the glow from the room behind to guide him, Jacob crashed into the back of the man several times. This seemed to annoy him and the man uttered strange curses at Jacob. Will and his handler followed closely behind.

At the top of the stairs they entered a large cellar, cold and damp. A single lamp, sitting atop an old desk in the far corner of the room among piles of yellow pages, struggled against the darkness. Wooden barrels, which were stacked two or more high against the stone walls, crowded the room. They were wrapped with metal straps and some had filthy mugs and glasses scattered on the top.

Jacob used some of the barrels to steady his balance as they forged ahead. When he bumped into them, Jacob could hear the liquid contents inside slosh back and forth. They came to a door, barely visible in the dim light, where one of the handlers knocked three times in rapid succession. A muffled man's voice answered, but the door did not open.

Jacob turned and saw Will, in front of his handler, standing directly behind him. "Will...what's going on?"

"They ain't ready for us yet Jacob", Will said.

"Will I...I'm scared."

"So am I Jacob." Will's handler tugged on his chain and he lowered his head. "No more talking now."

The four of them stood there, waiting in the near darkness, with only the occasional rattling of the chains to keep them company. After ten or fifteen minutes, Jacob began to hear murmurs and many footsteps from the other side of the door. There was laughter and excitement and energy building in the room. A chant started, accompanied by the rhythmic banging of many feet on the ground. Suddenly, cheers and applause. A man's voice, loud and clear, arose over the commotion and silenced it.

The man was speaking in the same foreign tongue, but there was something hypnotic about the pitch or cadence. Jacob became fixated on it, struggling to understand what the magical voice was saying. The man finished his monologue and the crowd erupted again. The thick door flung open and Jacob was swept inside.

Jacob was standing in a large circular room, thirty feet in diameter and height. The room was two stories and open from floor to ceiling. The walls were adorned with a dozen lit torches; the floor with many metal drains stained a dull reddish-brown color. A closed door, a mirror of the one which they entered through, was on the opposite side of the chamber. To Jacob's left was a small antechamber, its contents hidden behind a large black curtain. A rope was strung from the top of the curtain to a metal hook on the second floor.

A giant coat of arms was set into the wall on Jacob's right. It consisted of a pair of dueling ravens fighting over the carcass of some dead animal. Above the crest on the second floor was a podium, where an aged, elegant man stood, welcoming Jacob to the chamber with a confident smile. Crowded around ornate columns

and overlooking the bottom floor were dozens of thin and pale men and women of every race. Jacob couldn't see their eyes, but he could feel them all over his body.

Will was led to the opposite end of the room where his collar was removed and the man holding his leash disappeared through the door. Jacob was forced to his knees. His collar was removed and the plastic bands were cut with a quick motion of the man's hand. He returned to the cellar and closed the door. A bolt slid into place with a loud click.

Jacob got to his feet and rubbed the feeling back into his wrists. Will was across the room, pacing back and forth, his head down. Jacob pushed and pulled on the door, which drew jeers from the crowd above him, but it was securely in place. He traced his finger through one of the deep scratches along the surface; something large and powerful made these marks. Something Jacob didn't want to face.

The aged man at the podium spoke a command, the echo of his words traveled around the chamber several times. Jacob looked up and saw a man reach down and pull on the rope above the antechamber. The curtain lifted and there, chained naked to the wall, was Iris. She was beautiful and terrifying, her body warm and inviting, her face twisted with rage.

Jacob became aroused; he couldn't help it. He placed his hands in front of his groin, but there was no way to hide this from the gleeful audience, who leaned in closer trying to share in his excitement. Will stopped pacing and turned his back to Jacob. The aged man spoke again. He was leaning down over the podium, his white face seemingly inches from Jacob's. Somewhere above Jacob a switch clicked, which was immediately followed by the hum of an electric motor.

Jacob looked up and saw the ceiling moving. The two enormous pieces of metal which formed the roof slid apart and revealed the night sky. The entire room was bathed in the glory of a nearly full moon, only a sliver of darkness keeping her from her full glory. A cold blast of air threatened the torches, who danced wildly, trying to stay alive. The chamber became still and Jacob could only hear the sounds of his accelerated breathing. His ears pounded in rhythm with his racing heart.

But there was something else growing inside Jacob. Something which was quickly replacing fear with purpose. His eyes locked onto Iris. The scent of her was so powerful he could almost taste her sweaty body. She was struggling against her bonds, warning the weak to keep their distance. Jacob was not weak. He thrust his arms out to the sides, proudly displaying his potency. He would have her. He would mate with his equal.

A low rumble from the other side of the room drew Jacob's attention away from his prize. A weak creature, whose body was that of a beast with a man's head, challenged Jacob's right. He slowly advanced, swinging his paws and baring his fangs. He commanded Jacob to back down. The female was his. Jacob opened his mouth and issued a fierce warning: he would not be denied. That thing would not have her. Jacob lowered his body and charged.

Jacob crashed into the beast with his full weight. The beast issued a small yelp but dug his claws firmly into Jacob's chest. A shower of red but no pain. Only the female. Jacob pulled himself closer and bit down on the beast's neck. It howled with anguish but no remorse. Only the female. The beast removed its claws from Jacob's chest and grabbed his shoulders. Jacob tightened his clamp and shook his head back and forth. The taste of flesh but no sickness. Only the female. The beast was weakening. His grip on Jacob was fading. He was pleading but no mercy. Only the female.

Iris howled with delight. Her champion had earned his place beside her. Jacob released the beast and he slid to the floor. The only sounds in the arena were the pools of red trickling into the drains beneath Jacob's feet. He strode over to her and they embraced. She clawed at his chest and nipped at his neck, but not too hard. They drew together and became one. The pale figures swayed in rhythm, urging them faster and faster. Then it was

done. Their lust was sated. Jacob fell to the ground, broken.

A noise, painful to his hears, and darkness moved across the sky, extinguishing the moon. Jacob reached out his hand, to hold onto her for as long as he could. A loud thud and then she was gone. Her light left the chamber and the air became still and foul. He was cold and weak again.

Jacob squinted through the dim light. The figures were slowly filing out of the chamber above him, amongst many murmurs. Then a door, hidden in the shadows, opened behind Iris and two pale females entered. Iris cried out and attempted to run to Jacob. The women restrained her and escorted Iris down the tunnel, throwing a thick robe over her shoulders before the three of them disappeared behind the door.

Jacob wanted to stop them, to follow, but his legs were sore and...and...he was bleeding from six large puncture wounds on his chest! "Oh God! I need HELP! Somebody please!" He covered the wounds with his hands, but the red seeped through his fingers. Doors opened somewhere around him. "Hello? Anyone, PLEASE!" His body was growing cold and begged for sleep. But someone grabbed his arms and shook him from his slumber.

Jacob looked up and recognized the attendant. He was speaking softly while wrapping Jacob's chest tightly with gauze. It took several iterations around his body before Jacob could no longer see red. "Thank you", he said.

The attendant paused; could he understand Jacob? He smiled and pulled a small ball out of his pocket. Jacob took the meat and ate it. It was raw, but delicious. He looked past the attendant and noticed two others hunched over a mass of flesh on the ground. "Will!" Jacob bolted upright and pain ripped through his chest. The attendant gently, but firmly, restrained Jacob and comforted him with more foreign words. "Can you hear me? Will!" There was no answer. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I don't know what happened to me. WILL!"

The attendant rubbed his hands through Jacob's hair. He put Jacob's arm around his shoulder and gingerly lifted him off the ground. Together they moved towards the door, but Jacob's eyes were fixated on Will. He hadn't seen any movement. They passed through the cellar and down the stairs. The attendant pushed open the wooden door and laid Jacob back into his cell. He tossed another ball of meat at Jacob before locking the cell and disappearing up the stairs.

"What have I done...Don...what have I done?"

"You did what you were meant to do Jacob", Don said quietly. "What we all do."

"But why? How? I don't understand. PLEASE TELL ME." Tears flowed easily from Jacob's eyes. "For Christ's sake...just tell me what happened. Just tell me..."

"Jacob you have been inflicted with a terrible curse called Lycanthropy. When the moon is full the veil which separates the rational from the primal will be torn and your feral self will manifest itself in a beastly form."

"Lycanthropy? You are saying I'm a...a werewolf? Are you...insane? Are you all insane here?"

"Listen to him Jacob man", Roger said softly. "It's the truth."

"Think about what you remember Jacob", Don said. "The full moon. The smell of the female. The fight to have her."

"No! That had to be a dream. Or some kind of drug induced hallucination. What did they give me?"

"Jacob the night you came here you were unconscious", Don said. "I was forced to bite your shoulder and infect you. You are now part of the union of the wolf...forever."

"No...it isn't possible. These things don't exist. All this shit is made up." Surely they were poisoning his food. Jacob grabbed the ball of meat and flung it at the door. He would stop eating...and drinking...until his mind was clear.

"Look Jacob man, nobody wants to wake up and realize this was all some nightmare more than me", Roger said. "But I stopped pinching myself a while ago. You better do the same."

The wooden door flung open and the attendant entered behind two men carrying Will's body. His neck was wrapped in the same thick gauze as Jacob's chest. His chest had an unsteady rhythm but he was alive.

"Thank Christ", Jacob said. "I thought I killed him."

The attendant locked Will's cell and the three men left. The light was extinguished once again.

"Will", Don said. "Can you hear me?"

"Hey Don." Will sounded like he was gargling.

"Will, I'm sorry", Jacob said. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened."

"It's ok Jacob", Will said softly. "It's always hardest for new brothers."

"You better get some rest Will", Don said.

"Yes Don." Will's voice trailed off.

Jacob's memory of the ritual came in violent flashes. In one frame was the beckoning moon. In another was Iris, demanding he take his place with her. Another was a creature, threatening and dangerous. It was the beast he had seen in his dream. Had Jacob transformed into the same creature? His body felt normal, albeit more hairy, but normal. And he hadn't experienced any of the symptoms of the transformation from man to beast he had seen in movies: enormous pain, hair slowly growing from his entire body, bones cracking, teeth and nails springing into place.

Had Jacob imagined Will as that creature and attacked him with his bare hands? Maybe he was infected with a disease; some kind of brain disorder which only manifested itself in the full moon? Maybe it made you highly suggestible? In this state, if you believed in something so strongly, wouldn't you make the appropriate responses? If Jacob believed Will was actually a beast, believed it with every molecule of his body, would this cause Jacob to attack him and then force himself on a woman?

"Jacob, are you awake", Don said.

"Yes Don." Was the disease progressive? Over time did it become harder to distinguish the truth from the hallucinations?

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you all of this before Jacob. It's difficult to accept without experiencing it for yourself."

"If this is true, how come I don't remember becoming a beast", Jacob said. "How come I didn't transform--"

"You mean like in the movies Jacob man", Roger said.

"Yeah Roger. Like in the movies."

"It just doesn't work that way Jacob man. One minute you're normal, the next you're the beast. It's like changing your mind. It happens in an instant."

"We also think the proximity of the lure--"

"It was Iris Don," Jacob said firmly. "It was Iris. And I...I..." How could he say it out loud?

"I'm sorry Jacob", Don said. "Of course, I'm sorry. It's tough for all of us to accept who we are and what we have done. The beast is always present Jacob, waiting for just the right catalyst to emerge. To my knowledge none have been allowed to transform outside the ritual. But the creature you saw was Will. And he saw you as the same."

"No. You are delusional. All of you! None of this real! They are poisoning us or infecting us or exposing us to some sort of mental disease. It's all in our heads!"

"Jacob do you think a normal man would have survived those wounds to your chest", Don said. His tone had become slightly more irritated. "Or your shoulder? And what about Will? Surely you saw the savage wounds on his neck."

"I saw them tend my wounds Don. And Will's."

"Then do you remember stitches Jacob? Antibiotics? Or were you simply wrapped in bandages to stem the bleeding until your body could heal itself faster than any doctor could?"

"No. This is bullshit. We are ill. We need... professional help or something."

"Feel your chest Jacob," Don said.

"My chest?"

"Unwrap your bandages and feel your chest."

"Are you kidding? I'll bleed to death!" Jacob wrapped his arms around his body.

"You aren't going to die Jacob. You are much harder to kill now and that is one reason why they fear us. If you are nervous, come to the bars and I'll help you. You must trust me."

"OK." Jacob crawled over and through the bars Don squeezed his hand. Jacob released it after a moment and gingerly unwrapped the bandages. They were dry on the outside, but as he removed the layers he could feel the dampness of his own blood and sweat. He took a deep breath. "There is so much blood."

"I know Jacob", Don said. "Keep going, it's OK."

Jacob got to the final, soggy layer. He pressed his fingers to his chest but there was no fresh flow. He removed the last layer; there were no open wounds, only several swollen, tender spots. "He must not have hit me that hard. I...I must have imagined it."

"And the damp bandages Jacob? Do you still think that isn't your blood on them?"

"I...I don't know." Was it Jacob's blood on those bandages? Or Will's? Jacob's head began to pound. Was it real? Did he become a savage and attack another? It seemed so real. He could still smell Iris' femininity...and Will's blood. He needed to rest, to shut off his mind. Maybe with sleep it would be able to process these events. Maybe tomorrow he would be clear...or later today? What time was it? What day was it? "I'm tired Don. I'm going to rest for a while."

"Good Jacob, good. Rest is just what the doctor orders."

Jacob crumpled up the bandages next to him and quickly fell into a deep sleep. Sometime later, the attendant returned with more light and nourishment. Miraculously Will was leaning up against the wall for the first feeding, by the second he seemed completely recovered and at the third he completely removed his bandages. A fresh and vibrant purple scar ran down his jaw to his chest.

Jacob tried to resist eating their food and drinking their water, but he was only able to skip two feedings before he succumbed. The attendant seemed pleased with his renewed appetite and happily gave him an extra portion of meat. Jacob snapped it down; it didn't taste contaminated.

"He likes you, Jacob", Will said after the attendant left them alone.

"Who, Will?"

"Richard. Our own personal butler. You are his new favorite cub, Jacob."

"Let me guess, Will. You name the men after your...cousins?"

"Nah", Will said, with a chuckle. "Don't care about them that much. All Richards to me."

"Don, you awake", Jacob said.

"Yes, Jacob. What's on your mind?"

"The ritual where Mike escaped, was that his name?"

"Yes, Mike."

"Who was fighting against him Don? Was it one of you?"

"No Jacob. It was John."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed. After Mike escaped, they assumed John had helped him. So they beat him to death in his cell."

"They left his body in there for two feedings Jacob man", Roger said. "As a warning to the rest of us."

What had Mike seen? Or done? How had he escaped? Jacob had been thinking constantly about that night. But every time Jacob tried to compare it with his own ritual, only three images appeared: the moon, Iris, and the beast. No matter how hard he tried he could not remove those obstructions. "Is it possible to control the beast Don?"

"To a degree, yes. The beast is driven by instinct: aggression, fear, lust, hunger. You cannot reason with it but you can direct it, aim it, once you understand its nature."

"Mike saw a way to escape. And maintained enough control to aim it. Is that right Don?"

"We don't know that for sure Jacob. We don't know if he made it out alive."

Mike had to have made it out alive. For whatever reason Mike didn't come back for the others, but he was out there, reunited with his family and friends. Did Mike remember this place? Or had he blocked it out completely, a nightmare which he would never return to? It didn't matter; Jacob would join him in freedom, somehow. "Is there some trick I need to learn to control the beast Don?"

"So you have accepted who you are", Don said.

Something had happened to Jacob the night of his ritual. He had become something different. Whether he really was the creature Don described or just a very sick mental patient, he couldn't be sure. But if the only way he could escape this place was to believe he could transform into a beast then he was ready to make that leap of faith. "Yeah Don. I am."

"Then you are already in control Jacob."

"Wait...what? But I haven't learned anything! Don't you have any...techniques or something? How do I focus?"

"I'm sorry Jacob", Don said. "I don't have anything special to teach you. God knows I wish I did. It will always be a struggle, especially in the presence of the females. But all of us have learned to tame it, to a degree. It is why all of us fear fights with new brothers."

"Why didn't you tell me this before Don?"

"Up until a few minutes ago you didn't believe us Jacob, even after you experienced the ritual for yourself. What chance would we have had convincing you before?"

"Welcome to the brotherhood Jacob", Will said.

"Thanks Will", Jacob said weakly.

"Next time Jacob, go easy on me, will ya?"

"Don you said we are harder to kill, right? And they fear us because of this? So what else can we do?"

"You are quicker and more agile than any of them. And wounds you inflict to one who isn't your brethren will not heal. Ever."

"Wait...so if I just...scratch someone's arm--"

"The wound will never close Jacob. All they can do is stitch it to hold the flesh together and bandage it to slow the bleeding. But it will never be whole again."

"If you hit one of them hard enough Jacob there won't be enough bandages to keep any blood in 'em", Will said. "We think Mike got a few that night, lucky bastard."

"They are in charge while the beast rests Jacob man", Roger said. "But they wouldn't be walking away if you got hold of them during ritual."

"OK. OK. So...when do I fight again?"

"Damn Jacob man. Most of us aren't so eager."

"Sounds like Mike all over again", Will muttered.

"They usually alternate pairs", Don said. "There are three rituals per cycle and we each fight twice, with the winners from the first two rituals fighting in the final match. Fighting in all three is rare, but not unheard of."

"Did Mike fight more than once in a row? How did he do it?"

"You understand what you asking of us Jacob man", Roger said. "If you escape they will kill the other, just like they did with John. If you don't' escape, they might kill the both of you anyways. Or all of us just for the hell of it."

"I don't want that", Jacob said quietly. "Is there any other way Don?"

"Sometimes they will come and take just one of. Its punishment Jacob--"

"What, like a different ritual Don?"

"We don't know. We never see the man alive again. They could hunt the beast for sport or pit him against other animals or simply tie him to the ground and shoot him for fun. Please don't consider this an option Jacob."

"How do you get selected for this Don?"

"Jacob, please don't."

"How do I get selected Don? Do I need to attack Richard again?"

"Jacob, please--"

"Tell me Don. Tell me what I need to do."

"No", Don said firmly. "This is not an option. I'll fight you during next ritual Jacob. You can try your escape then."

"No Don, don't", Will shouted. "If Jacob wants to get himself killed fine, but don't do this!"

"He's right Don", Roger said. "Let him go."

"Don I don't want to put the rest of you in any danger. I'll keep attacking Richard until they take just me."

"Jacob if you try to escape and you fail I'm positive they will take you", Don said. "If you survive. So either you will escape or you will be taken. You will get your wish."

"But won't they...kill you if they think we worked together?"

"Yeah they will Jacob man", Roger said. "They will beat Don to death in his cell and we will be forced to watch it. Is that what you want?"

"No Roger, of course not! I just have to try. I'm sorry."

"Always one ain't there Roger", Will said.

"Yeah Will", Roger said. "Always one."

Jacob crawled over to the bars separating his cell from Don's. "Are you close Don", he whispered.

"Your senses are getting better", Don said. "I'm just on the other side."

"Look, I don't want to put you all in danger."

"I should have listened when Mike was talking. Who knows what would have happened if we had tried to help him? This can't go on forever. I can either die trying to help one of us escape or die in the arena. I'd at least like to think it would be worth something. What do you need me to?"

"There was this door...behind Iris. I remember after we...I...finished. Two of them came out and took her away through there. Any idea where it leads?"

"No, I'm afraid not. And once you...finish...you will be as weak as a baby."

"Well, what if I only pretended. What if I never actually...well, you know. Would I retain any of my strength?"

"I don't know that either. I'm not sure any of us have ever had that kind of willpower."

"Why...why do they watch us Don?"

"I think it's because they can't do it themselves. They are emotional, but seem to be devoid of any sexuality at all. I have never observed any warmth or depth of feeling between the sexes. But the exact reason is still mystery to me."

"What did you do before you came here?"

"I was a doctor. General practitioner. I had an office just south of town."

"How did they lure you here?"

"Probably much the same way they got you."

"You were dancing at a club?"

Don laughed. "Ok, fair enough. No it was a bar near my office. I just finished up a long day and wanted a drink or two before I headed home. Her name was Lily. God she was gorgeous. Long dark hair and the deepest brown eyes you ever saw. And that body...wow. Anyway we got to talking and well...I think you know the rest."

"Yeah. I know the rest." Jacob wondered what Trish was doing at that exact moment, wondered where she was. He wasn't sure exactly how many days had passed; it couldn't have been more than five days? Maybe a week? Were they still searching for him? Of course they were. "Do you have a wife or girlfriend?"

"Divorced. She was a doctor too. Not a good combination. After we split she moved back home with her

family. I think she never really wanted to leave in the first place." Don paused and then said "Jacob what do you need me to do?" "ed?" "ner. I had an office just south of town."

"I need you to win Don. All you have to do is win." Jacob quickly added "But don't beat me too bad."

"I think I understand. They will be distracted by me and my mate."

"And hopefully that will give me some time. I can't imagine what the women go through. Do you ever get a chance to talk to them? To...I don't know. Apologize?"

"No. They keep us segregated. Sometimes you can talk to them...afterwards. It's just briefly, but it's special. Almost...magical. You will never be able to get close to anyone else like that ever again. So you cherish those few seconds when you connect with them." Don's voice stiffened. "We all feel the same Jacob. It is terrible what we do...what we have become."

"If I make it out Don I will come back for you...all of you."

"I know you will Jacob. I know you will."

The lights jolted Jacob awake. He had been dozing, his head leaning against the stone wall, and his neck was stiff. The attendant entered with two pieces of rope in his hand. Jacob sprang from his position and raced over to the bars. He kept his head low and as his body as non-threatening as he could. The attendant watched him with a puzzled expression. Slowly Jacob slid his right arm through the bars and pointed to the strands of rope.

The attendant smiled and held them up in front of Jacob, just out of arm's reach. Jacob stretched and strained, smiling the whole time, trying to reach one of them. The attendant nodded and waved Jacob back with his hand. Jacob complied, bowing his head and moving to the rear of his cell. It had worked; the attendant tied one piece to the bars outside Jacob's cell.

Don stood up in his cell and pointed to the other piece and then his chest. "Come on you bastard. That other piece is mine", he said with a smile.

Will and Roger remained seated with their heads low. The attendant laughed at a joke he told that only he understood. He tied the other piece of rope to Don's cell and left the prisoners in darkness.

"Hope you two know what you are doing", Will muttered.

"They won't go after you guys Will", Don said. "They can't afford to replace all of us at once." He moved next to Jacob's cell and whispered, "I'll swipe you across your chest and back. It will sting a bit but it will look much worse than it really is. How will you get out?"

"Once you get to the woman I'm going to make for the wall and try and scale it. If that doesn't work I'll try the door behind her."

"Do you think you will be able to control the beast enough to do that?"

"Yeah, I have an idea about that. Something you said earlier about understanding its nature. I...I really appreciate this Don. I know what this means for you. If I get out I'll bring help as quickly as I can. Hopefully in time--"

The lights switched on again. The attendant briskly entered followed by the elderly man Jacob had seen addressing the crowd from the podium before the ritual. He was dressed in a white collared shirt, buttoned

tightly around his pale neck. His pants were brown and faded and smelled as if they had been locked in an attic for years. He whispered something to the attendant, who quickly unlocked Jacob's cell, and then he entered.

Jacob slowly rose to his feet. He kept his head bowed, but his eyes were focused on the man.

The old man examined Jacob's arms and legs, running his cold hands over them. He turned Jacob around and checked his back and then his chest. He stared vacantly into Jacob's eyes for a moment and then he smiled, showing his large white teeth. He nodded to the attendant and disappeared out of the cell and up the stairs. The attendant tossed Jacob a bit of meat from his pocket and followed.

"What was that about Don?"

"They were deciding whether to let you fight again so soon Jacob", Don said. "Looks like you passed."

The attendant soon returned with two others and they fitted Don and Jacob with their collars.

"Good luck Jacob man", Roger said. "Hope you don't get all us killed."

Don and Jacob were led them up the stairs and to the arena doors. They paused as the old man addressed the assembly. Then the door opened and they were moved into place.

"Let me get one or two swipes on you Jacob", Don said from across the room. "They have to believe it."

The old man gave the order and the female was revealed.

Jacob focused his gaze to the floor before his body could react to her presence. You are trapped. You are trapped. You must be free. You are trapped. You must escape.

The old man spoke again and Jacob heard the roof slide apart. A glow filled the room with light.

You are trapped. You must escape. You are trapped. A panic swelled with in him. I MUST BE FREE. His eyes darted around the room. No place to hide. No place to go. He started running around the room. I am trapped. I must be free!

Something was chasing him. I am trapped. I am trapped! Jacob looked over his shoulder and spotted his pursuer. The beast lunged at him and raked its claws across his back. Pain! A cheer erupted. I must escape. I must be free!

Jacob neared the female, who was growling and writhing with fury and passion. He caught her scent and stopped. His chest was heaving and his back was bloody, through the flow was just a trickle now as his body repaired the damage. I must be free! I must be free!

The footsteps were close. Jacob spun around. Pain! The beast struck again and several canyons of flesh opened across Jacob's chest. He howled in pain, clutching his wounds before collapsing to his knees. Not your enemy. I am trapped. Not your enemy. I must be free!

The creature left Jacob and scampered to the female. The eyes in the room followed. Jacob tried digging his claws into the stone but it was too hard. Furiously he scratched but he could not make a dent in the smooth surface. He spied the wooden crest to his right. He galloped over to it and sprang into the air. His claws dug into the soft wood and he heaved himself up, kicking and scraping with his legs. One more jump and he would be free!

The old man at the podium tore his gaze from the beast and female. He pointed at Jacob and opened his mouth wide, emitting a horrible cry of fear and rage.

Jacob tensed all his muscles and with a final effort, hurled himself upward towards the podium. His claws found their mark and he pulled himself over the edge. The arena erupted with screams. The old man was pointing and shouting to the others. Almost free! Almost free!

A stream of people pushed through a set of double doors but like a funnel it was already backed up. Jacob heard a loud squeal and he covered his ears with his hands. He looked up and saw the moon, his life, being extinguished by dark metal. His growl was fierce and loud. He stormed through the sea of panic in front of him, slashing with his claws and snapping with his jaws; jets of red splashed all around him. Almost free! Almost free!

Jacob reached a set of columns reaching up to the sky. He scampered up the one closest to him, its ornate designs acting as footholds. The opening to the sky was shrinking rapidly. With a final heave he squeezed through as the metal doors snapped shut.

Jacob took several large gulps of fresh, cool air. The night was alive with sounds and smells he had been denied. He looked up at the moon and howled. The night became silent out of respect and fear. Almost free. Almost free! Jacob ran to the edge of the roof and several large trees came into view. He jumped on the one closest to him and swung down to the ground with ease. His nose caught a new scent; it wasn't benign. His ears prickled with the sounds of doors opening and the low rumbles of approaching footsteps.

Jacob got down on all fours and starting running, darting left and right between the trees and shrubs occupying the landscape. His eyes adjusted quickly and with the moon's help, he had perfect vision. He kept his head low, raising it only occasionally to catch the scent of those pursuing him. They were falling behind. Almost free!

Ahead, tall shrubs concealed a metal fence, the last barrier to his freedom. He skidded to a stop just in front of it. He turned his senses back towards the house; they were coming. He reached through the shrubs and grabbed the fence...pain! He let out a loud yelp and retracted his paw. He touched again, this time with just the tip of his claw. Pain!

The pursuers were closing in on him now, from two directions. They had traveled close to hide their scent but were spread out now and pinning him in. Jacob dropped and galloped parallel to the shrubs. Almost free! There were shouts and the pursuers adjusted their positions. Jacob hugged the shrubs lining the fence, only deviating when a tree intercepted him.

Jacob's breaths were labored now and his muscles burned. Almost free. The pursuers didn't tire and they were gaining. He came to a corner, turned left, and continued. He ran a hundred more yards and saw a break in the fence. Almost free.

There was a small shack next to a large gate. Someone stirred inside. The door opened and Jacob lunged at the man's throat. The man was too startled to react and Jacob buried his teeth into the man's jugular. There was a moment of struggle before the body went limp. More shouting behind him.

The road smelled foul and dirty, not like the lush green he had emerged from. Jacob nudged the man's body into the fence; it didn't flinch or smoke. Almost...free. Something buzzed past his ear and shattered the window of the shack. Jacob crouched next to the man's body. The pursuers were still fifty yards away, but pointing something metallic at him.

Jacob jumped onto the gate and scurried over the top. He landed nimbly on the ground. Almost...free. A

densely wooded area was on the other side of the road. It smelled like home, pure and clean. He tore into the wilderness, darting left and right to throw off his pursuers. Thorns and branches cut into his flesh, but he never felt threatened. Overheard birds warned of his approach and small animals darted into the bushes as he sped past.

Jacob emerged near a small pond. The water was black and glossy. The orchestra of crickets and frogs ceased as he nosily waded into the water and crossed to the other side. He collapsed into the soft, tall grass and forced himself still. The water settled back into its slumber and, satisfied the threat had passed, the chorus resumed. Only a light breeze whistled in his ears. He sniffed the air; there were no foreigners present. He was free!

Jacob curled up into a ball under a nearby tree. The bushes were thick here and provided ample coverage and warmth. He sniffed the air again and detected life but no enemies. He waited for some time, still tense, until finally he laid his head down on his arms and slept.

Jacob was shivering so violently he shook himself awake, scattering the moist leaves and branches which had served as his tent for the night. The sun was peaking over the horizon, chasing away the darkness with bright shades of orange. He rubbed his arms over his chest and shoulders, trying to coax some warmth out of it.

Jacob stood up, holding onto the tree for balance. There were small cuts and bruises all over his body, but no open wounds, not even the on the bottoms of his numb feet. He turned in a small circle, trying to remember which direction he came from but the familiarity ended with the pond. The air smelled familiar, however, and he knew he was still in the same city. And even though he was naked, cold, hungry, and lost, he was free. He suppressed the urge to cry out in joy and anguish and pain. He had to find his way out of here and bring help to the others.

Jacob bent down and scooped out several large handfuls of water from the pond. It was cold, but refreshing. He turned towards the rising sun and began walking, bushing and peeling off the wet leaves clinging to his body. He sounded like an elephant crashing through a jungle! Every few moments he would duck behind a tree or crouch down beside a patch of foliage to see if anyone had heard. The woods were quiet, save an occasional rustling in the bushes or the squawk of a bird overheard. He increased his pace to a light jog.

The woods began to recede slightly: large trees gave way to thin ones, thick foliage which clung to everything to occasional clusters. Through the clearings Jacob saw a house a hundred yards ahead. It was a squat one story building, painted brown to almost match its surroundings. Jacob crouched low, zigzagging between the available brush for camouflage. About fifty yards away, he dropped to the ground and crawled forward.

Thin, wispy smoke poured steadily from the chimney on the far side of the house. An old blue pickup truck was parked under an awning on the right. A sliding glass door was near the center of the house. Two windows were on the right of the door and a third was on the left, off by itself. Low, manicured bushes formed a trim around the backside of the house.

Jacob reached the last patch of brush he could use for cover. If he was going to get any closer he would have to make a run for it. He was still twenty yards away. He waited there, still and flat on the ground, straining to detect any signs of movement. You can do this. He started counting...one...two...three! He bolted up from his position and ran straight for the house. The driveway was composed of rocks, which crunched nosily as he approached his destination. They cut into his feet but he didn't slow. He skidded to a stop and dove into the space between the hedges and the house. He swiveled his head left and right, but no one came charging around the corner.

Jacob crouched down between the windows and pulled tiny bits of rock out of his bloody feet. The window on his left was covered with thick green curtains; the other one, closest to the sliding glass door, had blinds which were drawn open. Jacob slowly raised his head and peered inside. The lights were off but the sun provided

enough illumination. He was looking in at a kitchen. There was a wooden table with four chairs just inside the window with a bowl of apples on top. A clock in the shape of a rooster hung across from the window but he couldn't make out the numbers the wings pointed to from here. There were no sign of the occupants.

Jacob dropped to the ground and crawled around the house to the truck. The bed was peppered with leaves but otherwise empty. He tried the driver's door and it swung open. He searched the seat and the floor and the visors but there were no keys. He gently snapped the door shut and moved back around the house. A light was on in the kitchen now.

Jacob raised his head just enough so his eyes could see inside. A woman was at the refrigerator, pulling out eggs and milk and setting them on the counter. She looked to be in her early forties and was wearing a cushy, but faded, white robe drawn at the waist with matching slippers. Her hair was twisted into a loose pony tail. She swung the door shut with her hips and moved to the stove. She was joined by a boy, who looked about ten. She tossed his hair and starting talking...it was the same foreign dialect as his captor's.

Jacob slunk to the ground. Any hope of finding sanctuary here evaporated as they happily chattered away inside. Jacob closed off his mind to guilt; if they were involved somehow then they would share the same fate as the others. He would lure one of them outside, preferably the boy, and use his hostage to gain entrance to the house. He would dress and eat and find the keys to the truck and make his way to the city...to Trish's. Together, they would return to this place with the authorities and free the others.

Jacob waited for ten more minutes, but no one else joined the woman and the boy. She was serving breakfast now, eggs and toast. Even through the window it smelled delicious. He wondered how they were connected to the others; they seemed so normal. Was she one of the people watching the rituals? She didn't look as pale or thin but there were so many faces he couldn't be sure. Or was she simply a sympathizer? Jacob told himself it didn't matter. Either they were involved directly or knew what was happening here.

Jacob retrieved a small tree limb from the driveway. He waited until the boy had finished and the woman was cleaning up before moving towards the side of the house where the truck was. The boy took off out of sight, but Jacob surmised the room with the curtains next to the kitchen had to be his. He would have to take that chance. Jacob lay on the ground underneath the window and gently scratched it with the limb.

Almost immediately, the curtains flew open. Jacob moved the limb up and down and back and forth in front of the window. The window opened and a small hand pressed against the screen. Jacob retracted the limb into the hedges and made a soft rustling noise with his hand. After a moment, he slowly raised the limb again and moved it back and forth. The boy giggled and Jacob heard his tiny footsteps quickly leave the room.

Jacob backed around the side of the house and waited. Hopefully the boy would come out of the sliding door. Almost immediately, the door swung open and the boy came running out, his mother yelling some kind of warning after him. The boy was giggling as he rounded the bushes. Jacob sprang from his position and grabbed him, muffling the terrified gasp with his hand. The boy began to cry and struggle but Jacob held firm. He kept the boy in front of him and moved to the open door. The woman was wiping off the counter, still chatting to the boy. Then she stopped in mid sentence and let out a terrible shriek. She covered her mouth with her hands and starting pleading with Jacob in their accursed dialect.

"SHUT UP", Jacob yelled over her. "Shut your mouth!" The woman continued to wail and reach her arms out to the boy. Jacob pointed to her robe and motioned it with his hand. The woman shook her head back and forth. "Give me your robe!" He pointed at her robe and then to his chest.

The woman slid out of her robe and tossed it to him, wrapping her arms around the t-shirt covering her breasts. Jacob reached down and slung it over his shoulder. He scanned the room and saw the woman's purse on a small table by the front door. He pointed over her shoulder to the purse. "Bring it to me." She glanced

back and shook her head. "Bring me your purse!" He pointed again.

The woman retrieved the purse, never once taking her eyes off her son. It landed at Jacob's feet and he spilled the contents onto the floor. He retrieved a brown wallet and the small ring of keys and put them into one of the robe's pockets. He dropped an apple into the robe and backed to the sliding door.

"Thanks", Jacob said. He pushed the boy to the floor and bolted outside. He sprinted to the truck, fishing the keys out as he ran. He reached the truck, put the keys in his mouth and slipped on the robe. He climbed inside and jammed what looked like the correct key into the lock. The truck cranked, Jacob depressed the gas, and it roared to life. He slammed the transmission into gear and took off down the driveway. He glanced into the mirrors but there was no one giving chase.

Jacob turned left onto a dirt road. He whizzed past a few houses and came to an intersection with a paved road. He blew past the stop sign and turned left again, unsure where he was. He only knew he was headed to Trish's and had about half a tank of gas to get there. He passed another truck, barely catching the angry look from the elderly driver. He reached another intersection and stopped. He recognized the blue sign pointing towards the freeway. Jacob gunned the truck and followed the sign, passing several gas stations and fast food restaurants before merging into the heavy traffic speeding towards the city.

Jacob's heart finally slowed and his hunger returned. He took several large bites from the apple, but it was bland and so he tossed the remnant to the floor. He reduced his speed and tried to blend in the flow of traffic. The woman had surely dialed 911 by now and the police would never believe the ravings of a man dressed in a woman's bathrobe driving a stolen car. He had to make it to Trish's. She would be able to tell them he had gone missing. She would be able to convince them to free the others. She would understand. She would believe him.

Jacob exited the freeway and entered the mass of stop and go traffic. He had been this way so often, the truck was practically driving itself. People around him were staring; he could feel their eyes over him, just like in the arena. He combed his hand through his hair, but it was a wild mess. He changed lanes but neither was moving particularly well. He had to get out of here! Why won't this light turn green? Was that a police car behind him? Finally! Jacob accelerated then braked hard to avoid smashing into the car in front of him. Go! Why aren't you people moving? Large beads of sweat splashed into his lap. At last he made it through the light. He ducked down a side street and pulled to the side of the road, leaning over and pretending to fish something out of the glove box. A white car slowly drove past; it wasn't the police.

Jacob put both hands on the wheel and took several deep breaths. He had to relax, to focus. He turned the truck around and continued on. As Jacob steadily moved through the web of lights, the traffic began to thin as the morning commuters arrived at their destinations. Trish would be at work now...but he couldn't go there, not like this. He would wait for her; sometimes she went home for lunch.

Trish's apartment complex was deserted. There were maybe half a dozen cars parked around the lot, but it was quiet. Jacob parked in front of Trish's building and turned off the ignition. He had been to this spot many times. The two of them sat here often, after a day or night out, talking, not wanting it to end. Finally, reluctantly, she would give him one final kiss, whisper a goodbye, and walk up the stairs to her apartment. She would give him one last look back, one last smile, and then disappear inside. He swallowed hard; in just a few short hours, he would see her again.

Jacob glanced around the parking lot and then exited the truck. He clutched the robe around him and dashed up the stairs to the second floor, Trish's floor. She was in the last apartment on the left. He couldn't remember the number, but he could find his way here blind. He went to her door and rang the bell; maybe she was home sick today? He pressed his ear to the door but nothing stirred inside. He sniffed the air around the cracks of the door and confirmed she wasn't there. He would have to wait. He tried the door, but it was locked. He smiled;

Trish always locked her door, even when they were both inside.

Jacob had a key to her apartment, but he hadn't seen it since the night he was taken. It may not have worked anyway; the lock looked different now, shinier than he remembered. He thought about trying to fool one of the managers into letting him inside, but surely they knew about Jacob's disappearance. There would be too many questions and Jacob wasn't giving answers to anyone but Trish.

Jacob put his hand on the knob. He had to get inside. He kept a change of clothes at Trish's and he could shower, make himself more presentable. He lowered his shoulder and banged into the door. It gave way a little. He had to get inside! He banged again and again. A small dog two doors down warned of the intruder but no one came. The door moaned under his repeated assaults before the door frame separated and he crashed into the room.

Jacob took a deep breath. Trish had been here recently, maybe just an hour ago, two at the most. He could smell the lavender lotion she was so fond of; she shied away from heavy perfumes. And she had washed her hair today. It was wonderful to be with her again. He was drawn to her bedroom, where her scent was the most potent. He followed her around the room, as she got up from bed and went to the bathroom, where she showered and got dressed. She moved to the living room and then the kitchen. She made some tea, green was her favorite, then back to the bathroom before she left.

Jacob stood in her living room, watching the ghost of her disappear down the hall towards the parking lot. His attention snapped back to the open door with its frame splintered and mangled. He pushed the frame back into place, but it was badly damaged. He held the frame into place and closed the door. It was slightly ajar, hopefully no one would notice. But Trish would. He would have to leave her a sign that it was safe to enter. He went to the kitchen where she always kept a running grocery list next to a pen. He scrawled on the paper, but his hands were shaking badly. He ripped off the first page and balled it up. How could he possibly write everything he was feeling? He jotted a few frazzled words but Trish would understand. He retrieved some tape from the drawer under the pad and attached it to the outside, using it to cover up some of the damage to the frame.

Jacob slid out of the robe and went to her bathroom. He flicked on the light. His body was covered with bruises and scars and hair. The hair on his head was down to his shoulders. A thick beard covered his face. His nails were yellow and long. He couldn't let Trish see him like this! He tore through the cabinets until he found a package of razors. He ripped it open, splashed some water on his face, and began to shave. He opened up several wounds on his face, but they clotted quickly. He cut his nails with a pair of kitchen shears since the clippers he found weren't nearly strong enough. Finally he stepped into the shower. The water was soft and warm...like Trish. He stood there for several minutes, letting the hot water rinse off the filth and blood and horrors. The water began to run cold, he had almost exhausted the tank's supply. He stepped out into the mist and dried off with Trish's towel, still damp from earlier use.

Jacob pulled a brush from a drawer and ran it through his wet hair. At last, he looked somewhat like himself again. He went to her bedroom closet and found a pair of jeans and t-shirt he had stashed there. He dressed and put the truck keys into his pocket. He glanced at the clock on Trish's nightstand, but something was wrong with the display. It didn't matter; he would wait for days just to see her again. He rummaged through the refrigerator and feasted on some sliced deli ham and milk. Trish always kept a hidden stash of candy around the house. She had always joked that she had to hide it from her girlfriends or there would never be any for her. Jacob sniffed around and located it easily, tucked behind a bag of potato chips in the pantry. He helped himself to two bars and returned the rest to their hiding place. He went to the living room and stretched out on the couch. Even after all this time, he could still detect the lingering odor of his cologne from his last visit here before he was taken. He curled up into a ball and closed his eyes.

The jingling of keys roused Jacob from his slumber. Immediately he caught Trish's scent. She was here! He

stood up and faced the door, running his fingers through his hair. Tentatively, the door swung open and revealed her, the most beautiful thing he had even seen. Her eyes were welling with tears and Jacob did not fight to control his. She dropped what she was carrying and flew to his arms. They caressed one another, speaking unintelligible, but comforting, words and phrases through the sobs. Jacob squeezed her tight, afraid that he might crack one of her ribs but he couldn't let her go again. She didn't flinch or push him away. They fell to their knees, still embracing, still sobbing. He ran his fingers through her hair, feeling every strand. He grasped her face with his hands and slowly he kissed her.

When he let her lips go, he put his head against her chest. Her heartbeat was as loud as a drum line. She was sniffing, rubbing her hands over his arms and body. She paused over every wound, every bruise, and kissed it before moving on to the next. When she had finished, she got up and retrieved her purse and keys from the hallway. She pushed the door shut with her leg, laughing and pointing at the smashed wood. She pulled out a small white pouch of tissues from her purse and gently wiped their eyes.

Trish was speaking to Jacob softly now, rubbing her hand over his, her inquisitive eyes locked with hers. But something was wrong. Jacob couldn't understand her. Her lips were moving but it was foreign...like the strangers who imprisoned him. Like the woman and child whose home he invaded.

Oh God...No. "Trish...what happened? I...I can't understand what you are saying!"

She said something else, more words he couldn't understand. She started crying again, but there was a deep sadness behind them.

"Oh God! Please No!" Trish was wailing too. And slowly backing away from him. "Don't be afraid. Please don't be afraid." Jacob reached his hands out to her. "Let me write you something. Stay here. Please." Jacob went to the kitchen and began writing on the pad. He wrote: "I love you. Can you understand this?" He held it up for her but she just shook her head. "I'll fix this Trish. And then I'll come back." Jacob put his arms around her. "Don't worry. I'll fix this." He kissed her forehead and dashed from the apartment.

Jacob turned onto a dirt road and switched off the headlights. Just down this road was the compound he had fled just hours earlier. He followed a scent, his scent, back to his prison. It was dusk now and the air was rapidly chilling as the sun disappeared into the blackness; there was no moon tonight. He piloted the truck slowly down the road, following the same fence line. After a hundred yards, he spotted the guard house. It wasn't lit and looked empty. Jacob eased forward, ready to gun the engine at the first signs of life. But he passed by without incident. The broken glass still lay by the gate, but there were no signs of the struggle he had with the guard. He continued down the road another twenty yards before pulling off to the side.

Jacob left the transmission engaged and the engine idling for several more minutes. It was completely dark now, but he didn't need his eyes to tell him he was alone. He put the truck in park and turned off the ignition. He got out and walked back to the gate. He found another branch and tested the fence; it was harmless. After a final sniff, he hopped over the gate and sprang towards the house. He covered the distance quickly, weaving between the trees and bushes for cover. The house was unlit. He detected a few familiar scents now, Will and Roger, Iris and the other female prisoners. He hugged the outside wall and moved around to the back. He came to a cluster of windows next to a locked door. He peered through the glass and at first glance thought the strangers were there, sitting motionless on the furniture. But they were only white sheets.

Jacob kicked the door in and it smashed against the wall with a loud bang. He stepped inside and took another deep breath; more familiar smells, but none recent. He followed the trail through the deserted house until he came to a familiar door. He swung it open and stepped inside. He was back inside the arena. He groped the wall for a switch and flicked it on. Several lights snapped on around the room. He looked down into the pit, which seemed much smaller from this vantage point. The blood had been washed from the floors and walls but the stench remained as strong as ever. He found the wooden pillar and traced the fresh claw marks he

made last night. The crest under the podium was gone and only the unblemished stone behind it served as an indicator something had been there.

Near the podium was a trap door concealing a flight of stairs heading down. Jacob followed them to a narrow tunnel which led to the arena floor. He crossed to the other side, where a familiar and fresh scent awaited him. He opened the door to the cells and made his way down the stairs, flicking on the lights as he entered. A naked man slowly raised his head. It was Don. His body was covered with many fresh wounds and bruises. His face had been severely bludgeoned but he smiled when he saw Jacob.

"I told them you would come back", Don said. He started to cough. His cell door was open, but he was chained to the bars at the rear of his cell.

"Don!" Jacob crossed to him.

"You made it didn't you Jacob. I knew it. You actually made it. Thank God."

"Yeah Don, I made it. What happened?"

"You did quite a bit of damage. From where I was it looked like you took out several of them on your way out." Jacob tugged at the chains. "Don't bother", Don said. "Apparently they thought it would be funny to leave me here with the doors open so I would have to chew off my own arms to get out. Sick bastards."

"We have to get you out of here Don. I've got a truck outside."

"No hurries Jacob. They are gone. After you escaped, they cleaned up the mess and disappeared. They took everyone else with them. I guess they figured out who was working with you." Don smiled again.

"Don, do you have any idea where the keys might be?"

"No Jacob. I was pretty messed up at the end. I think I blacked out before they left. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it Don. We'll get you out of here. And then we'll find them. Together. We'll track them down and end this."

Don nodded. "Ok Jacob." Then, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yeah Don. I found her."

"I'm sorry Jacob."

"I know Don. I know."

Detective Bill Brown sat next to the trembling young lady. She was pale and had been crying...a lot. A box of tissues was in her lap and several were already balled up around her. He had hoped the female officer he requested would have been here by now; he hated questioning women in this state. The rest of his team was examining the door and taking fingerprints, but someone had to get a statement. He faked a cough. "Ms?" She raised her head. "I'm sorry, I know how difficult this is for you but I need to ask you a few questions."

Trish nodded. "I understand."

"So you came home and saw your door had been tampered with. Why didn't you call us immediately?"

"I saw a note taped to the door. I thought...I thought it was from Jacob."

Bill held up the paper. It was nothing but crude lines scribbled across the page, like someone using their feet to write with. "This note?"

"I know how it looks. But that's his writing."

"OK. So you pushed open the door and there he was?"

"Yes, but he looked different. His hair was longer and...different, coarser. And he was covered in bruises and scars."

"Did he say anything?"

"I...I couldn't understand him. It was like he was...growling or barking at me or something."

"Barking. I see." Bill wrote barking mad in his journal. "Did he say where he had been?"

"No."

"Did he ask for money?"

"No."

"Any history of mental illness?"

"No!" The woman flashed Bill an angry look.

"Sorry, I have to ask these things. Did he say anything about the woman or her son he attacked earlier in the day?"

"Jacob wouldn't do that", Trish spat at him.

Of course not. No one's boyfriend ever commits a crime. "The woman has already identified him", Bill said calmly. "She was pretty shook up. I've got her statement...here." He slid the document onto the glass table in front of them.

"I don't need to see her statement", Trish fired back.

Nothing more out of this one tonight. "OK. Do you have somewhere else you can stay tonight?" Trish nodded. "Good. I'll have one of the officers give you a ride there. Now, the best thing you can do for him is help us bring him in safely. It sounds like..." He has gone nuts. "...he may have hit his head or something. We've gotten word to the area hospitals but if he contacts you, call me at this number." He handed her one of his cards. "OK?"

"I understand."

"OK. OK. Try and get some rest. I'll call you in the morning."

"Fine."

Bill stood up and said, "One other thing. Did either of you have any pets?"

"No. Why."

"Probably nothing. But the shower drain was almost completely stopped up with some kind of fur. Must have been from another apartment or something. We'll be in touch."

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