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# VICTORIOUS



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I



THE DOCTOR IS IN

## I

[REDACTED]. THEN.

3 YEARS AGO

A HOTEL BAR

VICTOR sipped a whisky—neat—and counted.

He counted the number of states he'd crossed—six—and the number of finished drinks in front of him—two—and the number of empty seats to his left—four.

He counted the number of hours since his last dose—seven—and the number until his next one—five.

He lifted the glass to his mouth and counted the number of other bodies in the room—eight.

Once upon a time, he would've felt them, too, been able to trace the elaborate pattern of their nerves, the current that ran beneath their skin. Would've been able to pull on that current until they buckled, screamed.

Now, the only thing he felt was the thin glass tumbler in his hand.

And the worst part was, he'd done it to himself.

Not that he'd had many options.

Ever since Sydney had brought Victor back from the dead, his power had been glitching, his body reenacting the same electrical surge that had stopped his heart back at Lockland, fifteen years before. After each episode, it had taken longer for his heart to restart, until it became clear the next death would genuinely kill him.

A fortuitous discovery, then, that he'd found a drug capable of suppressing that death.

Unfortunately, it did so by suppressing his powers.

Rendering him *ordinary*.

Victor drew the inhaler from his coat pocket and turned it in the bar's low light, studying the vivid blue contents as he counted the number of vials currently in his possession—four and a half—and the number he'd started with—six—and the number of days—sixty-three—until he ran out of Haverty's compound. Which wouldn't be such a problem except the good doctor was dead.

He counted the number of weeks—three—that had passed since the showdown at the Merit gala. The night Victor had killed EON's director, Stell.

The night Eli had killed Marcella.

The night Sydney had killed Eli.

Victor's hand tightened imperceptibly on the glass.

He had waited fifteen years to kill his best friend.

And he was dead.

But Syd had been the one to pull the trigger.

Victor told himself that's what bothered him, the fact she'd deprived him of his closure, stolen his kill. But that was a lie. What bothered Victor most was that, for the first time in his life, he didn't know what to do next.

And he *hated* it.

More than the absence of his powers.

More than dying at Eli's hands.

More than the solitary cell in which he'd spent the first five years, after his arrest. Because then, at least, he'd been fueled by the promise of revenge.

Eli was dead, and Victor wasn't dead.

He was in purgatory. Not in the biblical sense—he didn't believe in that—but technically trapped. Tethered to a drug that kept him alive, but powerless.

He'd hoped, when he'd first stolen the serum, that it was simply a matter of finding the right dose. That the threshold, once determined, would enable Victor to keep death at bay without giving up his powers. But there seemed to be no nuance. No degrees.

The compound was all or nothing.

The only reprieve, a narrow window of time after the dose wore off and before the dying began. A brief gap during which his abilities came rushing back, heady, electric. But it was a window measured in hours, not days, and Victor had the grim suspicion that it, like the time between his episodes, was shrinking. That it would eventually close.

Until he found an alternative remedy, he was bound to the clock. Counting every hour, every day until—

Somewhere beyond the bar, a dog barked.

Victor looked up, scanning the windows, and saw a large black beast standing on the curb outside.

"Dol?"

It wasn't. Couldn't be.

And yet, the dog—Sydney's shadow, his stray—stared back at Victor, tail wagging in recognition.

He stood too fast, nearly upending what was left of his scotch, but by the time he righted the glass, the dog was gone. The curb, empty.

Victor frowned, running a hand through his hair.

He'd never slept well, his senses too keen, every body around him humming like a plucked string, but these days he was having the opposite problem. Without his power, he felt exposed. Vulnerable. Spent most nights hovering at the edge of consciousness, unwilling or unable to sink fully into sleep.

The lack of rest was clearly catching up with him.

He went to the restroom, was bent over the sink, splashing water on his face when he heard the sound of another man entering, followed by the bolt being thrown. He looked up, expecting trouble.

And saw *him*.

The mass of him filling the doorway, tattoos protruding from the edges of his shirt. First the dog, now Mitch. Victor wondered, for a moment, if he might be losing his mind. More likely, it was a side effect of the serum, a consequence of constant medication—

But then his cellmate stepped forward, and smirked, and

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he knew it was neither a hallucination nor the real Mitchell Turner.

It was *June*.

The shapeshifting mercenary who'd gotten close to Sydney after Serena's death, positioned herself as a surrogate sister. An EO almost as dangerous as Serena, and—he knew from experience—*far* harder to kill.

Sure, June had helped Victor once. During an episode. And after.

But that was before.

Before she tried to recruit him on Marcella's behalf.

Before she kidnapped Syd.

Before she intercepted him at the gala and forced him to stop Marcella instead of going after Eli. She'd cost him that fight, that life, that death, and Victor had promised her that the next time they met, he'd settle the score.

And here she was.

"Hello, June."

A smile split Mitch's hardened face. "Aww," said his mouth, in a voice that was and wasn't his, inflected with a musical note. "What gave me away?"

"Your little trick may work on strangers," said Victor, turning from the sink to face her. "But I know my cellmate better than most."

Mitchell Turner was the kind of man who hated his size, worked hard to make himself seem smaller than he was, whereas June seemed to relish taking up space.

And he never, *ever* smirked.

"You wear him like an ill-fitting suit. So why don't you change?" It was an order in the guise of a suggestion.

Mitch's mouth pursed. "But I've taken a liking to this one."

He drew the gun from his pocket. Let it hang from his fingers.

"Come now," she said. "We both know you'll run out of bullets before I run out of bodies. Besides," she added, rubbing the back of Mitch's neck, "you wouldn't want to hurt your pal."

Victor took a step forward. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Mitch's head tipped to one side. "Perhaps that's why you're all alone."

Another step, the space between them narrowing.

"Or perhaps it's 'cause you can't use your power."

Victor's jaw clenched. "And what makes you think that?"

June laughed, the sound caught somewhere between Mitch's rumble and her own strange lilt. "You think I just stumbled across you in a bar? Give a girl some credit."

Victor hit the catch on the gun, ejecting the clip, and with it, a length of steel wire that ran between the magazine and the grip.

He'd thought of June more than once in the weeks since they met on bad terms and parted on worse. She was the only person Victor had found who was seemingly immune to his powers, when he had them. The only way to hurt June was to hurt the *real* her, and that was the one body she never wore.

But it was there, somewhere, under all those skins.

He spun the magazine end of the gun before snapping it out, the wire looping around Mitch's right wrist. The stolen eyes widened in surprise as Victor pulled, and the steel cord cinched, locked in place by the magazine. "Oh, aren't we full of tri—"

Before she could finish, Victor pulled *hard*, hard enough for the wire to bite down, blood welling on Mitch's skin. Somewhere, the real Mitch would feel it. For that he was sorry.

This body only responded by slamming a boot into Victor's ribs. Pain cracked across his abdomen, but he moved with the force of the blow, wrenching Mitch's body off-balance. He was a big man—clearly bigger than June was used to wearing—and she stumbled, one knee hitting the floor. Before she could shove back up, Victor pinned the length of wire under his shoe and drew it tight, forcing Mitch's wrist down against the tile.

It almost looked like she was swearing an oath.

"If you came to kill me," said Victor, "you'll have to do it wearing someone else."

June scoffed and shook Mitch's head. "Oh for fuck's sake, Victor. I don't want you *dead*."

That was a surprise. He frowned. "Then what do you want?"

She looked up at him with Mitch's stolen face, mischief shining in the eyes.

"Well," she said. "For starters, how 'bout a drink?"

## II

██████. THEN.

TEN minutes later, they'd traded the men's bathroom for a corner booth, and June had traded Victor's cellmate for a curly brunette in a peasant dress.

But it didn't matter what she looked like.

When his powers were online, he'd been able to pick her out by the current, the energy signature, as specific as a thumbprint. Even now, as she met his eyes over a bottled beer, Victor could see the real June, glinting like a blade behind them.

"You were a hard man to find."

"And yet," said Victor, "here you are."

"Here I am," echoed June. Her smile sharpened.

Victor didn't bother asking how she'd found him. She'd probably been with him since he left Merit three weeks earlier. Hard to spot a tail when it was always changing shape.

She gestured at the bar. "Keep this up, and someone else might find you, too."

Victor could have pointed out that those who made an effort to conceal themselves usually ended up standing out. Or that the hotel—and by extension its bar—was in a fairly suburban corner of a city roughly a thousand miles from Merit, with a closed security system. But he knew that, statistically, it was only a matter of time before he came up on EON's radar. He'd been working on a solution, but it required Mitch, and Victor had yet to reestablish contact with his cellmate since they'd parted ways.

Parted ways.

As if the decision had been mutual. As if Victor hadn't severed himself from Mitch, and Sydney, and the dog. The only three things that mattered to him, especially now that Eli was dead.

They shouldn't matter, but they did.  
So he'd left.

"Killing Stell," said June, picking at the label on her beer.

"That was a choice."

The gunshot echoed through his mind. Victor's mouth twitched. "That," he said, "was a long time coming."

"A parting shot?" she mused. "One might think you were provoking EON. That, or drawing their attention off of other targets."

Victor held her gaze.

"How *is* Syd?" asked June, as if they'd ended up on the subject of her obsession accidentally.

"I wouldn't know."

June snorted. "Come on, Victor. We both know you're the controlling type. You don't expect me to believe you'd actually let our girl out of your sight."

*Our girl.* She said it to get a rise.

He shrugged. "I don't know where she is. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

Her expression darkened. "And here I thought we were building bridges."

"What do you want, June?"

She looked down at her beer. "I made a list," she said. "Four names. The ones who—who made me like this."

EOs weren't born. They were made. Sometimes by accident, like Syd and her sister falling through the ice. Sometimes by intention, like Victor and Eli running their experiments, playing scientist and specimen. And sometimes EOs were the product of a violent crime, a murder that didn't take. Like Marcella.

Like June.

"Being able to change shape, become anyone I wanted—it made it easier to get to them. And there was some poetic irony in that. I took on a few other jobs along the way, to pay the bills, but it's not like I was thinking, oh, I will be good at this. The killing part. Only, I was—I am—I don't know what that says about me."

Victor thought of pointing out that EOs on the whole possessed a diminished sense of consequence, a separation between action and emotion. He didn't.

"And then I ran out of names, the list was done, and Marcella was there, and I thought, why not? Everybody needs a purpose. And then . . ."

And then Marcella set out to wage a war between the ordinary and the ExtraOrdinary, intending to drag EOs into the spotlight, and make the city—the *world*—recognize her power. But she would have burned them all, just to keep herself warm. Victor clocked it, and eventually so did June. She turned on her boss—claimed she was protecting Sydney—and threatened to kill Mitch if Victor didn't help put Marcella down.

"These days, I take on the odd gig, to pass the time. But . . ." June trailed off, frowning at the beer. Then, "There's all these quotes about revenge. People waxing poetic. But no one talks about what happens after."

Victor cocked his head. "Which is?"

She swept her fingers through a wet spot on the table. "Nothing."

The word landed like a gavel, and with it, an image flashed behind his eyes. Eli, on the ground. Blood spreading from the gunshot wound above his heart, his ability to heal negated by Haverty's serum.

Fifteen years ago, Victor had sat on the edge of a bathtub filled with ice, and watched as Eli went under, knuckles going red, then white, where they gripped the handles under the surface. He'd pulled his roommate's lifeless body from the water, and restarted his heart, and the whole time, he'd known Eli wasn't really gone. He was waiting, just out of reach, and it had been Victor's job to lean into the chasm, pull him back.

But when Eli's heart stopped that second time, Victor felt the difference.

Felt the absence in the room.

In himself.

"People like us," said June under her breath, "we don't do

well without a purpose." She spun the bottle's neck between her fingertips. "So maybe that's what I'm here for."

Victor cocked a brow. "You want a *job*?"

"I have jobs. I'm looking for"—her gaze escaped to the window—"a reason. Something to fight for. Someone."

Victor wasn't about to put Sydney back in June's crosshairs. But the body-stealing EO was a sharp tool, and Victor could make use of her.

"I need eyes inside EON."

"Oh, you mean the organization whose sole mission is the capture and containment of ExtraOrdinaries?" Her expression darkened. "Remind me, how did that work out for Dominic Rusher?"

Dominic.

Victor had taken away the shadow-walking EO's pain, in exchange for his service. Sent him undercover into EON, and he'd never made it out. The ex-soldier had died there, protecting *him*.

Victor clenched his teeth.

"For someone with your skills," he said, "avoiding detection shouldn't be a problem."

She snorted. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"If you want to help *Sydney*," he pressed, "this is how. By making sure they don't go after her."

"Or you."

Victor held her gaze. "I can take care of myself."

"So it seems. You know," said June, rolling her neck, "I can't help but notice you seem less on the verge of imminent death. Would it have anything to do with this?" She flicked her wrist, producing a vial—*his* vial. Victor swore inwardly. He should have felt her lift it. And he hadn't. Now, he wanted to lunge forward, grab her wrist, but that was exactly what she wanted. So he watched as June toyed with the only thing keeping him alive, held the compound to the low bar light.

"What does it do?"

"It kills EOs."

Victor's mouth twitched as she recoiled in horror. The

reaction would have been more satisfying if she hadn't dropped the vial when she did it. Victor caught the last of the compound before it hit the table.

"Well," he amended, staring at her through the blue, "it kills what makes them ExtraOrdinary."

For the first time, June looked nervous. And she should be.

One dose, and he could tear away her armor, her infinite supply of masks. Expose June's soft, killable core. That had been his plan, if things had gone another way.

"In my case," continued Victor, "it keeps the current from electrocuting me. But in yours . . ." He ejected the half-empty vial from his inhaler and replaced it with the full one. "I'm willing to bet it would show me who's really hiding behind that pretty, stolen face."

He set the device on the table between them and spun it, as if it were a gun at the center of another, equally lethal game.

"Want to play?" he asked as it came to a stop.

"Pass," said June curtly. She shook her head. "So, you just—what? Cut off your own power to stay alive?"

"Like a trapped wolf gnawing off a leg," said Victor dryly.

She scowled at the blue liquid. "Where did you get it?"

He lifted the inhaler. "I . . . *inherited* the current batch. But it requires a highly trained professional, and the one who made it is, regrettably, dead."

June leaned back in her chair. "So you need a new chemist."

"Ideally one that I don't have to kill."

"Moral qualms?"

"Practical." Victor frowned. "Bodies have a way of adding up. Speaking from experience." That was how Eli and Stell had tracked him down the last time, following the corpses of those who'd failed to fix him.

June hummed to herself. "What was it Marcella said? Men are so keen to make enemies, they forget that they can make friends."

As she spoke, she drew something from her pocket. At first glance, it looked like an ordinary set of playing cards. But as she thumbed through them, plucking out the face cards, and

tossing them down, he noticed a system.

In the corner of each card, she'd written a name, followed by a word.

*Jacob Herald. Nature. Charlotte Tills. Future. Malcolm Olipett. Cyber.*

"What are these?" he asked.

June smiled. "Friends." She spread the face cards between them. "My talent allows me to tell when people are . . . like us. And when I find them, I like to keep track. Never know when a skill might come in handy."

Victor scanned the pile. A dozen EOs. A dozen different talents. A dozen potential tools.

"Aha." She found the card she wanted—the jack of spades—and flicked it toward him.

*Xavier Pascal. Memory.*

The cogs in his mind began to turn. It was tempting. With the right EO in his arsenal—but Victor stopped himself.

"Thanks," he said, tossing the card back down. "But I'm no longer collecting strays."

June rolled her eyes. "You don't have to feed and water them, you know." She swept the others back into her deck. "Last time I checked, most people actually prefer cash."

Rising to her feet, she pulled a joker from the deck, and scribbled her own number on the back, letting it land face up beside the jack of spades.

"As for EON, I'm not setting foot in that place again. But I'll do some digging. See what I can learn. For Syd."

"For Syd," echoed Victor.

He watched June go. As she stepped through the door, she traded the brunette in the flowing dress for a middle-aged man, innocuous amid the evening crowd. But the body wasn't the only difference. There was a fresh spring in her step.

*Purpose*, thought Victor, as he palmed both cards, and finished his drink.

But purpose could wait.

Right now, he needed a fix.

### III

■ THEN.

MEANWHILE, IN MERIT . . .

DR. Gabriel Gray liked things *a certain way*.

He rose at 6 a.m. every day, ran three miles at the same pace he'd held since seventeen, then took a five-minute shower—cold—before his first espresso, which he preferred to drink in silence on the back porch, before his wife and son woke up.

Iris, who would tease him by ruffling his hair after he'd just combed it, and Ian, whose small act of chaos was turning one or two of the spoons the wrong way on the top rack of the dishwasher.

But that was fine.

Gabriel simply set things right again.

His attention to detail had been a source of amusement among his colleagues at the hospital before he started his own practice. He was the first to admit, his was a level of routine bordering on ritual, and if a patient presented a similar pattern of precision, he would inquire about that patient's past. After all, effects usually had causes, and most behaviors did not manifest without a source.

But for Gabriel himself, there was no underlying trauma. No need to counterbalance some childhood sense of disruption.

He simply preferred to impose a state of order on his day. His life. His self.

He kept his hair and nails both neatly trimmed, his glasses polished, and his pencil sharp. He kept his mind and body tuned and moved with the calm precision of a carefully wound watch.

Speaking of—Gabriel glanced at the time.

His four o'clock was late.