



Mr. Barry, or maybe it was Spite, crossed his arms. “You were Hal Lewis yesterday, weren’t you? I can still smell him on you. You can shapeshift. That’s a neat trick. But you’re not a werewolf, you’re something more.”

Midnight’s Pawn

A Workplace Tale

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Jason worked in the Information Technology department at Schrodinger and Sacks. He spent most of his days being yelled at by his clients. A good half of them didn't understand the difference between a keyboard and an off switch. As a result, many of them found the operation of complex software frustrating and hated their management for forcing them to use it ... often without any training. Employees were desperate to give Microsoft a piece of their mind, but they couldn't even begin to imagine how to place such a call. They also couldn't yell obscenities at their managers, so Jason became a substitute for their ire.

His heart sank as he listened to another flourish of invectives about the mail system. An itch started on his back as he listened. They always start in the one place you can't reach. Fortunately, Jason had a resolution. He forced his back into the chair and rubbed with gusto. After a few moments, the itch subsided. At least the uncomfortable office chairs had one useful feature. He returned his attention to the phone and the stream of anger and frustration flowing from the receiver. He listened. Jason, unfortunately, didn't have a choice in the matter. He was required by his job description to pick up the phone and listen to angry voices who really intended their hatred to be directed at software companies and management schools. But they found Jason a good substitute. At the end of the day, he was also forced to withstand a barrage of vitriol from his own management who detested the massive volume of complaints which passed over the department's desks about the companies' software choices. By the close of business, Jason's self-esteem had more holes poked in it than dartboard in an English pub.

His life was a roller-coaster of emotions. From the peaks of an artist elation for creating new work to the depths of a journey between tedium and boredom. His days revolved around fending off his customer's vicious demands. There were times he thought overseers had been more respectful to slaves. The negatives tended to outweigh the positives. In the same way, an ocean liner was heavier than a feather. His health had slowly deteriorated over the years. His stance was more of a slouch now than an upright posture. The pale and clammy look of his skin had become his normal appearance. When he was ill, it turned more of a hollow green.

His head sank down between his shoulders as he made his way out to the car. It was already dark. Not only had he been balled out by his supervisor for something he had no control over, but he also had to stay late to hear it. The parking garage smelled of oil and car fumes. He could hear the rapid footfalls of a dog pounding on the cement. More strays in the neighborhood. Before he could get to the aisle his car was parked in, the creature jumped him. He was pushed into a space between two parked cars, the animal on top of him. It was huge, the size of a bull mastiff. "All right boy," he was expecting a big, friendly dog. Until he felt the pain. The animal's claws had ripped right through the arm of his \$100 suit and through his \$5 J. C. Penny dress shirt. He could feel the warm blood trickling down around his elbow.

Swinging his briefcase as if it were a medieval mace, he caught the creature unaware. It staggered back into the driving lane. Jason could hear the dog's painful squeal as the car hit him. The Buick turned the corner and exited the garage without even stopping. Some drivers have no respect for animals. Still bleeding and clutching his arm, Jason walked out to see what he could do.

"Jesus shit." What he saw was a heavy-set man in his mid-twenties, completely nude, lying on the garage floor. Jason's stomach churned. He struggled to get out his cell phone to dial 911. But he had to let go of his elbow to get it out from his suit jacket pocket, but it only resulted in his arm bleeding more.

Damn. Must have hit the artery. He felt light headed. His only choice was to staunch the bleeding. He leaned back on a nearby car. "Siri, call nine, one, one." The phone beeped and dialed. Jason could hear the ring over the speaker.

Markus Stratham, one of the lawyers from the upstairs offices had been working late as well. He didn't see either the dog or the nude form on the floor. But he could smell the blood. Markus was late for dinner and the smell went directly to the reptile center of his brain. He dropped his briefcase and was next to Jason in a flash, fangs extended. He sank his incisors into Jason's neck. In the back of his mind, Marcus knew it was cliché, but it was the most easily accessible part to get at in a rush.

"What the fu..." was all Jason had time to say. Sound hurdled out of Jason's pocket as the cell phone rang again and then connected.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" The voice called out. It was an immigrant's voice, it had a slightly Near-Eastern tone to it. Not the Indian accent Jason was so used to hearing. "Is someone there? What's your emergency? Can you hear me?" Jason's body shook uncontrollably as Markus lowered him to the ground, still draining his blood.

"I'm sending the police to the site," the voice on the phone called out. At this announcement, the rational side of Markus regained control. He let Jason's body go and withdrew his fangs. Wiping his lips with a handkerchief, he rushed off to his Maserati and was soon out of the garage leaving only the roar of his over-powered engine.

Nuru Htuabi did not call the police as he had promised. Instead, he left work early and proceeded to the location of the call himself. When he arrived, the naked man on the ground was dead. He was of no use to him. But the other man in the cheap suit was still breathing. He was perfect. Still living, but he was nearly in a defenseless coma. Nuru picked him up in a fireman's carry and placed him in the back of his windowless panel van. Returning to the nude form, he dragged it over to the storm sewer. Levering up the heavy cover with a long pry bar from the van, he dumped the body and returned the cover.

The drive was a short, but bumpy one. Jason occasionally let out a moan as the vaulted over some of the bigger bumps. The van stopped with a sudden slide, causing Jason to slip toward the front of the van. But in his semi-conscious state, he hardly noticed. Nuru crawled over him and opened a cardboard box. Removing a large roll of Egyptian linen, he pushed both of Jason's legs together and began wrapping the cloth around them.

"Isis," Nuru mumbled, "Let this man serve you in the afterlife. Let the unbeliever wash your sacred feet. I give him to you as a domestic retainer. Let him care for your house until it is my time to join you in the afterlife." He chanted and sang until Jason's form was almost completely covered in the wrappings. Nuru noticed his eye flutter open as he wrapped the head. "Good," Nuru explained, "you are still alive. Perfect. You do not know the honor I bestow upon you. You are unworthy, but you will serve." He wrapped Jason's face as he struggled pointlessly.

Nuru took the body and hefting it over his shoulder, opened the door to the van. He'd parked it deep in a cemetery, surrounded by mausoleums. He opened one of the metal doors and entered. Inside was a pile of other bodies, all wrapped in a similar style. Nuru laid his latest catch on top of some of the older bodies. "Isis, accept my offering." He called out something in ancient Egyptian ... or it might have been in

Sanskrit for all Jason knew. It was dark. He heard the man stand up and the sound of the heavy tomb door. What little light he could see through the wrappings disappeared with the sound of the door closing. Now Jason lay helpless and alone in the dark. Not the evening he was planning. Not at all. *The damn medical plan probably doesn't cover wolf bites.* Then everything was silent.

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Jason stretched. It was dark, but he could hear his clothes ripping. It dawned on him that it wasn't his pajamas. He sat up. He remembered the jerk with the bandages. *Anybody could get a job as a paramedic these days.* He tried to get up, but the floor kept moving under him. He struggled until he found the door. The brightness made him squint as he stumbled out into the light. He could smell pine and sap from the trees. He swore he could even smell the birds. Like he was standing near the bottom of a birdcage. He was trailing white linen strips of material. His jacket was coved in dried blood, but his arm no longer hurt.

He removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. He pulled his arm up and looked on both sides. Not a scratch. He was sure the dog bit him. Otherwise, where had the blood come from? He continued his search but came up empty-handed. As he moved his arm he caught a glimpse of his watch. *Damn, he was going to be late.* He put his jacket back on and headed for the cemetery entrance, trying to kick off the strips of linen he was trailing. By the time he got to the street, there was a clear trail of white material between the mausoleum and the gate.

He pulled out his cell phone. Nothing happened. *Damn.* Must have been on all night, the battery was dead. An Uber was out of the question. Fortunately, there was a bus stop across the street. He checked his other pocket. Thank God. The old bus pass he had bought was still in the pocket. He was going to use it if his car wouldn't start. This would be just as good.

The bus pulled up and he showed the pass to the driver. He motioned him towards the seats as he put the bus back in gear and it lurched forward. No one even noticed that his suit was torn and bloody. That's was the way it was on a city bus. Everyone pretends not to see you, and in turn, you pretend not to see them. It was an unwritten rule of urban survival. If you made eye contact with anyone they would turn out to be an unstable paranoid schizophrenic who would talk at you until you got to your stop. The paranoids had to use the bus. He found an empty seat. He could smell the perfume of the woman who had sat in the seat before him. It was more like a mix of perfumes. Some older than others. It was almost as if he could smell the whole history of the seat.

He got off at the stop nearest his apartment and ran in and changed his suit. Then it was back out to the bus stop. He spent a lot of time looking at his watch. The buses never run when you are in a hurry. He thought about running back to the apartment to plug in his phone. But he realized the bus would undoubtedly come the minute he left. So, he stayed tapping his foot and stealing glances at his watch. Exactly on schedule, the bus finally arrived. This time, Jason wasn't surprised no one paid him any attention. He looked normal. He tapped his foot all the way to the office.

Once he arrived he took another glance at his watch. It was after ten. Jesus, he was in trouble. In a perfect imitation of the bus, no one seemed to notice him as he walked to his desk. Everyone was afraid to talk to everyone else. After all, they might ask you to do something ... or worst yet, ask you a technical

question you didn't know how to answer. This always leads to the impossible choice of making something up or looking red-faced as you said, "I don't know."

Jason breathed a sigh of relief, he'd made it unseen to his cube. Sometimes it's worthwhile to be invisible. Sitting down at his desk, he plugged his cell phone into the wall. It beeped as it began to charge. He flipped the switch for the PC and began the long wait for it to boot up. This was a dangerous phase. Anyone who came by your cube would know you'd just made it into the office. You couldn't hide it by flashing a spreadsheet up on the screen. You had to wait. *Damn Windows logo. Get off my friggin screen.* It was like the bus stop at his apartment all over again. Melanie came by and put her hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Lewis wants to see you."

Great. Physical contact from your co-workers. This could only mean one thing, you were screwed. Hal Lewis was the office manager. He was the kind of individual who took every opportunity to make the workplace as joyless as possible. An MBA who fluency in technology was akin to his fluency in Ancient Etruscan. He hung his MBA up on the wall like the University of South Bend Night School was in the same league as MIT. He had a voice like Medusa and a temperament like Archie Bunker with a hangover.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Close the door."

The door snapped shut with a click. "This company runs like a team. What would happen if a team member didn't show up at the line of scrimmage for an Atlanta Tiger's game?"

"That's the Falcons, sir."

"What?"

"The team in Atlanta. They're called the Falcons."

"You see Jason, that's what I'm talking about. You're not being a team player." Jason was only half listening at this point. He seemed to smell an expensive beer. The odor was strong. And it seemed to be coming from Hal's mouth. Jason tasted steak with fresh pepper sauce. It was very distinctive. It was as if he was living what Hal Lewis had for dinner last night. Then came the sudden realization he had not eaten in over twelve hours. Hunger gnawed at his belly. He felt like he could drink a gallon of Gator Aide. Lewis droned on. "Always disagreeing with people. You've got to learn to be on time and work with the people in your department. You have to ..."

Jason noticed a group of white, sparkly lights which appeared to be tiny stars emanate from Hal Lewis. They floated over to his hands and were sucked into his fingers as if the digits were vacuum cleaner nozzles. Hal stood frozen, a look of half shock, half terror in his eyes.

Everything in the human body is controlled by electrical impulses. Tiny discharges across the joints between the neurons of the nervous system. Now imagine there is a finite amount of charge in any human being, like a double AA battery. Once the battery runs dry, everything does dead.

It was only a few moments before the white sparkles stopped leaving Hal Lewis. Once that happened, Hal slumped to the floor. His face was white and clammy, frozen in a grimace which didn't look happy. At first, Jason didn't move, but then he imagined "Shorty" Balsam taking over as Hal's replacement.

Shorty was a bigger monster than Hal. He rushed to Hal's side. There was no pulse. Jason started CPR. He closed Lewis's nose and opened his mouth. The jaw snapped off in his hand. Remembering his training, Jason blew air down into Hal's nose. Then he reached over and pressed down on Hal Lewis's chest to pump blood ... it collapsed like a papier-mâché covered balloon.

Jason leaped up and back peddled until he ran into the office wall. He watched as Hal's body crumbled into dust like a scene in an old horror movie. He had to think fast. Jason stood up and pulled down his jacket. As he turned to leave he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind Hal's door. Lewis kept it up on the door, so he could gaze at his MBA while sitting at his desk.

He felt his cheeks with his fingers. Jason looked exactly like Hal Lewis. The suit was still his, but the face was Hal's. Before he could react, the door opened. Mark Barry, the General Manager stepped in, closing the door behind him. "Hal, did you figure out who we can dump?"

Jason gave Mark a nervous smile. "Not yet, but I'll get right on it."

"Good," Mark returned a wry grin, "How about that Jason Morgan fellow? He keeps making the rest of us look bad by building systems which work. Remember the sooner you get rid of them the faster we get our promotions."

Jason stood, stunned.

"You all right Hal?"

"Yes ... Yes, I'm fine. Thinking about who needs to be cut is all." Jason replied.

"Good man." Mark left the office and Jason started to breathe again. Jason glanced at the mirror again. He still looked like Hal Lewis. He decided the best course of action would be to go back to the apartment. He could think better in the apartment. He left Lewis's office and headed for the main door.

"Mr. Lewis." Anne greeted him with a nod and a smile. She was the floor brownnose, and everyone knew it. Jason could feel himself starting to sweat so he ducked into the Men's room. He checked the stalls. It was empty. In the mirror over the sink, he could see he still was wearing Lewis's pudgy appearance. He washed his face in cold water, burying it deep in his palms. "Please God. Don't make me go through the rest of my life as Hal Lewis. I'd have to kill myself."

He looked up at the mirror and Hal's face was gone. He appeared as himself again in the mirror. He wiped the water off his face with a paper towel and headed back out. Melanie was standing right there.

"Did you find Mr. Lewis?" She asked.

"No," Jason replied, "I went to his office, but no one was there."

"I know. Strange isn't it?" She paddled off down toward the break room. What seemed unusual to Jason was how unobservant everyone was. No one seemed to have noticed when last seen, Hal Lewis and Jason were wearing the same style suit. A situation less plausible than someone breaking Newton's Law of Gravity. Without further thought, Jason slinked off. Back to his cubicle.

Getting any work done at this point was going to be an unfulfilled dream. Jason found he couldn't concentrate. Every thought he had flowed back towards answering the same question, what in the

blazes is going on. Dogs which do ... or do not ... bite you. Graveyard sleepwalking. The worst form of stolen identity. None of it made any sense, unless ... Frank. *Yea, it must have been Frank. That bastard from the third floor. He put something in my coffee last night. I've been hallucinating the whole thing.*

Jason couldn't do any work. He'll screw it up. He couldn't know if he was typing in real code or putting everyone's bank account numbers in a clear text file. *Shit.* He'd have to get out of the office. But that was the rub, wasn't it? As blind as everyone was about what was going on in the office, everyone noticed when someone left early. It was like painting a target on your back for the managers to use. Jason always believed that's why Mr. Barry's office was right by the elevator.

He spent the rest of the afternoon faking doing work. Typing out garbage on the screen and then erasing it. Jason just prayed he wasn't posting a list of all their clients to the company Web site without my realizing what he was doing. He watched a couple of YouTube videos designed to look like they are training sessions. God, I hope they are not Al-Qaeda bomb-making instructions. Well, at least no one is standing behind him, open-mouthed.

By the late afternoon, Jason was starting to panic. Had the stuff worn off yet? How would he know? *Damn.* He couldn't take it anymore. Jason shut down the PC and went over to Melanie's desk. "I still can't find Mr. Lewis. I have to leave for a dentist appointment. I sent him a notice last week."

"OK," she replied.

Jason felt really pleased with himself. It was an ingenious ploy. Without Mr. Lewis to ask, she'd never find anything in his mailbox. The man didn't know the difference between archive and erase. He went down to the garage feeling almost giddy. Once he got off the elevator he spotted Hal's BMW. *Damn.* If they find it here someone will get suspicious.

Without realizing it he walked over to the BMW. The door opened without any trouble. *Lewis is such a jerk. He forgot to lock his car.* Jason got into the car. He'd never even sat in a BMW before. *OK, is Hal stupid enough to leave his keys in his car?* Jason reached for the ignition behind the steering wheel. No key. It was a thumb pad which read your fingerprints. To Jason's amazement, the car started up. The car hummed with power. Without thinking twice, Jason drove it home.

Jason felt strangely powerful, but he felt kind of funny parking Hal's BMW in the apartment parking lot. That's when he noticed the license plates. *Damn, they said Lewis01 on them. Stupid vanity plates.* Jason went to his area of the basement and dug up his old set of license plates. It took a while to find them. At last, he located them. They were from Alaska, but that was OK. People will think a rich relative had dropped by for a visit. He swapped the plates and went up to his apartment.

What he found was the torn and bloody jacket still on the living room floor where he left it. The drugs still hadn't worn off. He changed into his pajamas and turned on an HBO movie. He wasn't hungry at all, but it was a movie. You've got to have popcorn with a movie, right?

He halted the microwave when the cornels stopped popping and poured the bag into a large bowl. He sat on the couch and watched the movie. The popcorn tasted funny. It was extraordinarily bad, like eating a solid piece of mold. Can popcorn expire? He threw the popcorn away and headed for the bedroom. Jason assumed that it was all the drug doing. Illusions, bad tasting food, everything. Maybe he

could sleep it off. Jason tossed and turned. It was too early to go to bed, but he was determined. He needed to get this out of his system.

His alarm went off in the morning. It was dark. *Oh, crap.* When he got up at least the floor was solid and when he flicked on the light, he was in his bedroom. Jason breathed a sigh of relief. At least he didn't think he was in a cemetery. He made eggs but threw them away. They smelled bad as he was cooking them. He knew eggs could go bad. Nothing amazing there, only he was almost sure he had bought them a few days ago.

Jason wasn't hungry anyway, so he got dressed. He went down to the BMW, but then he changed his mind. Best not to have Mr. Lewis's car in the parking garage. He got out his bus pass and took the #3 route into work. Melanie met him before he even got to his desk. "I can't find your email anywhere. Mr. Lewis still isn't in so, you'll have to go to HR and explain why you left early."

Jason gave her a snotty look. "I'm not going to HR."

Melanie blinked. "You shouldn't go to HR. What a silly idea." She shifted the stack of papers she was carrying from one arm to the other and simply wandered off.

Jason felt elated. It was like he'd learned the Jedi Mind Trick or something. His step brightened as he headed toward his desk. That is until he spotted Mr. Barry walking towards him. *Crap.*

"Can you step into my office?" He asked.

Jason's head drooped as he followed the general manager into his office. Mark Barry closed the door and showed Jason the chair. "Have a seat. Why don't you tell me what happened to you?"

"Excuse me?"

Mr. Barry took a seat behind his desk. "There's something different about you. I can see it. I just don't know what it is. What are you?" He asked.

"I'm a Senior Program Director," Jason answered.

"No, that's not what I meant." He leaned forward across his desk and stared into Jason's eyes. When he didn't find what he wanted he shifted his gaze from one eye to another. "I don't want to know what you once were. What have you become?"

"I don't understand."

Mr. Barry leaned back in his chair. "OK, be coy. But I can tell. I'm a Kuri."

"A what sir?"

Mark Barry smiled. "A Kuri. It's a sort of disembodied spirit who can inhabit human bodies. That's' how I know you are not the same. I can't jump into you. I could the other day. The only possible answer is you're no longer human."

"Are you feeling OK, Mr. Barry," Jason asked puzzled.

Mr. Barry's eyes flashed bright green, but just for a second. "You're not talking to Mark Barry. My name is Spite. Oh, Mark's in here all right. I love to torture humans. I like to let them watch. He's no longer in control of his body, I am. So, that's all he can do is watch. This company is his prized possession. I've been running it into the ground, or haven't you noticed? It's killing him. I can feel him squirm as I destroy it. I love that feeling."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Jason inquired.

Mr. Barry, or maybe it was Spite, crossed his arms. "You were Hal Lewis yesterday, weren't you? I can still smell him on you. You can shapeshift. That's a neat trick. But you're not a werewolf, you're something more."

"Can I go back to work now?"

Whatever was sitting across from Jason, gave him a malevolent grin. "No. I found the werewolf in the storm sewer yesterday." He held up both his hands. "Don't worry, I took care of the body. But you're not the wolf's victim, are you? I can feel your power. Werewolf's get their power from moonlight and this is broad daylight. So, I don't get it. Don't worry, I'll figure it out. In the meantime, I'll give you Hal's job. Since we both know he's not coming back. You going to help me. You going to help me ruin this company. In exchange, I'll let you feed on anyone you want."

Jason was uncertain about what was happening. Perhaps it was still the drugs, but he was beginning to doubt it. The only degree of certainty he had left was his desire to leave the room. "I'm going to back to work now."

As he rose and exited, Mark called after him, "Have Jeanne get you an expensive company car. I can't have my managers driving around in beat-up Toyotas."

Mark's assistant Jeanne met him outside the door. "Would you like blue or red?" She asked.

Jason gave her a quizzical look. "Blue or Red?"

Jeanne smiled politely, "Company car color."

"Oh, I don't know," Jason simply wanted to get away from her. He wanted to get away from everyone. He called back to here as he was leaving. "You pick."

Jeanne followed him. "Red, I think." She batted her eyes. "You seem like a red man to me. Yes, a nice deep red."

Jason wondered if this was all an elaborate practical joke. Whatever it was, Jeanne seemed to be in on it. He still could accept what Mark Barry had told him was true. This was the real world. There weren't ghosts, goblins, UFOs, or the kooree ... whatever Mark said he was. Jeanne led him back to Hal's office. A maintenance worker had already removed Mr. Lewis's name tag from the sliding name panel and was inserting Jason's. He'd always felt the purpose of the sliding panels was for the rapid change in staff which occurred in the department frequently. It was much simpler than the old painting-your-name-on-the-door trick.

He stepped into the office, mostly to get away from everyone. His things were already on the desk and on the walls. Only the mirror remained. He closed the door and looked carefully at his face. It was as

tired, worn and as pasty as he remembered it to be. If he was now some kind of creature, he couldn't see how Mr. Barry, or anyone for that matter, would be able to tell.

Alan Mandel opened the door and stuck his head in. "Congratulations, Jason. What happened to old Hal?"

Melanie was passing in the hall. She was always around when something was going on. "He's was transferred to St. Louis." She remarked.

"I hear that's the place to be. Out in the Midwest where sales are looking up," Alan commented. "Anyway, congrats. Nice to see they are promoting from within. Gives the rest of us some hope." He closed the door and Jason was once again alone in the office. He looked at himself in the mirror again. Alan's comment made him think of poor Hal Lewis. As he watched, his face gradually went out of focus in the mirror. When everything was sharp again, Jason wasn't looking at himself, but at the face of Hal Lewis. *Shit. Is this what Mark meant by shapeshifting?*

Jason concentrated on his own face. There was a blur in the mirror and then his own face was back. He crossed to behind his desk and slumped down in the seat. His drug theory was going out of the window. Something else was going on, something weird. But what did it mean? Who ... or what was he now? Barry didn't seem to know. And he seemed to be much more in tune with this paranormal shit than Jason. Jason shook his head.

Did this mean he now had to believe in the Loch Ness Monster? The very thought shook Jason to his knees. He'd always laughed at the quacks and eccentrics who believed in such crap. Jason believed in the concrete. He believed in the power of technology, not mystical bullshit. Jason's life was all ones and zeros. On or off. He lived his life by the binary principle. You were alive, or you weren't. You were human, or you were ... he didn't want to finish the thought. He began to wonder about his sanity. *Is this how people start thinking before they are consigned to the rubber room? Illusion, belief in the supernatural?* The thought was intensely depressing. Terrific. Last month they took away the mental health coverage in the medical plan. Too expensive they said. Besides no one ever cracked up in the Information Technology department. He started to consider how long it would be before the uncontrollable drooling started.

Still, he didn't feel like drooling. He felt pretty good. This morning was the second time he had woken up and didn't have to vomit. He recalled mentioning this once to Alice Graham.

"You throw up every morning?" She asked concerned.

"Yea," Jason had proclaimed, "doesn't everyone?"

He could still recall the look on her face, as if he had claimed *Dancing with the Stars* had won a Pulitzer Prize. She kept her distance from him after their discussion. As if he might be contagious. As a result, he'd never mentioned it to anyone again. He went on continuing to spend a bit more time in the bathroom than a regular guy might have before going to work.

Could it all be true? Was he now some kind of creature? What Mr. Barry had explained to him about the company had the ring of truth to it. Things had not been looking up and they had every prospect of getting worse. His gut was telling him it was all true. But then Jason hated his gut. It tended to vomit a

lot. *Oh, God. What if he wasn't a creature?* What if Mark had got it wrong. What would they do to him when they found out.

If that wasn't bad enough, Jason's mind drifted into what he would have to do as a manager. He hated managers. More than that, he hated what managers had to do. Endless meeting after endless, pointless meeting. His spirit started to melt. If he wasn't already crazy, those kinds of meetings would send him right to the looney bin. He'd almost rather become the weird monster Mr. Barry seemed to think he'd evolved into.

The idea was so depressing, Jason when home early. *Heck, he was a manager now, he could go home early if he wanted.* There was a dark red BMW in the garage with the plate Jason01. His old car was gone. You had to hand it to Jeanne, she knew how to take care of the managers. If she'd take care of staff this well, the company would have no turnover. He got in and the engine roared to life. He had a hard time keeping it under 40MPH on the drive home.

Hal Lewis's BMW was gone, but Jason's Alaska license plates were neatly tucked behind his screen door. Jeanne had to be in on it. Nobody was this good. She had to know something. But all she did was smile when he walked past her in the office. Maybe she was one of those funny, spirit things Mark was. He didn't know how anyone could tell.

He hung around his apartment and even went to bed early. The next day it was back in the office. It was almost as if nothing had happened. Except he was still sitting in Hal Lewis's old office. He spent most of the day looking at supernatural Web sites. Strange faces on Mars. All the things he'd ignored for his entire life. They made him feel stupid and sorry for the people who believed in this crap.

OK, werewolves got their power from moonlight. Big deal. You became a werewolf when one of them bit you and you survived. Check. When the moon is full you turned into a wolf and hunted. Well, last night was a full moon and he slept fine without turning into a canine. Jason still hated the outdoors. Scratch one theory.

Vampires drain the energy from their victims in the form of blood. Close. He had definitely drained Hal Lewis, but there wasn't any blood involved. Only those tiny star-like sparkles. Vampires healed incredibly fast. Check. They had fangs. Jason looked in the mirror. Nope. No fangs. They could control humans with their minds. The Jedi Mind Trick. Check. Vampires were destroyed by the daylight and only appeared at night. Scratch theory number two. Jason got a sunburn if he spent more than five minutes in the sun. But he'd been sensitive to the sun since he was five. None of the Web sites talked about five-year-old vampires.

Then there was the whole thing with the mummy wrappings. Jason found several sites on Isis worship and they all talked about the stuff the crazy paramedic was chanting. They were supposed to be able to shape change at will. Check. They couldn't be killed. Well, there was no way he was going to test to see if he was immortal. They were super strong. Right. Jason laughed. Babies could out bench press Jason. He picked up a solid metal paperweight and squeezed it. It collapsed like a sponge. He set it down and it bounced on the desk blotter with a heavy thud. It was now one third its former size. OK, super strength. Check. That could be useful in a pinch. Mummies were long dead and dried up. They detested technology. OK, scratch theory number three.

He kept looking. When he looked up, everyone had gone home for the day. The BMW shot him home. He spent more time with his foot on the brake than on the accelerator. He was sure he was going to wear the disk brakes out in a matter of days. Things seemed to be returning to normal, so Jason decided whatever he'd become ... he could live with it. If it made him immortal, it was an added bonus.

The next morning, he was up bright and early. He felt a little strange, he wasn't a morning person. However, what he liked best was not vomiting before going to work. Anne continued to brown nose him, which made him feel uncomfortable. Mr. Barry gave him a thumb's up every time he walked into the office. It was spooky as hell.

Frank, well Frank kept bugging him to get him money for some project, money for some other fool new technology ... even Jason didn't know what it was good for. VPN this and secure tunnel some other kind of thing. Frank loved chaos. If there wasn't any in the office, he worked extra hard to create it. Jason got the distinct impression Frank thought he deserved Jason's new job. Frank had no problem making sure Jason failed, so he could move into Hal's old office.

Jason spent less time on the weird Web sites. They didn't make much sense anyway. They seemed to be written by people who had only a limited understanding of how the things worked they were trying to talk about. Sort of like trying to write a book in Hungarian when you only knew a couple of hundred words in the language.

By about lunchtime, Jason's belly was twisting into knots. It dawned on him, he hadn't eaten for several days. Now his stomach was demanding to be filled. Jason thought of the restaurant across the street. Jason had always liked the place. Good food. He imagined the menu in his mind. But no matter what he looked at, the thought turned his intestines inside out. He didn't know what to do. Something inside him took over control. Something darker. It knew what to do. It knew exactly what he needed to do.

He picked up the phone and dialed a third-floor number. "Hey Frank, this is Jason Morgan. Yea, thanks. It was a surprise to me too. Listen, can you come down here for a moment?"