

SKIN CHANGER

By

R. Austin Carver

Chapter 2: The Bat Cave

By the time they finished eating Lon felt better, but still very weak. For a while they sat in awkward silence, scarcely looking at one another.

“Thank you,” Lon told Clancy after the waitress left with their empty plates.

Clancy looked up, her eyes red and puffy, a shy smile on her angular face.

“What for?” She asked him softly.

“For rescuing me up there,” Lon said pretending to look at the check.

Clancy wasn't sure how to respond so she laid her right hand over his and looked into his eyes. They were the eyes of an older person, full of concern, pain, and regrets. He looked away quickly, afraid of what she might find in the mirrors of his soul. He retrieved his wallet, and laid fifteen dollars on top of the check.

“We'll go to the bus station and catch the next bus to Fort Worth,” Lon said as he stood up gingerly.

Clancy looked up at him from her seat and nodded; then got up and grabbed her overnight bag.

“Where is he going Lon?” Clancy asked as they walked out of the cafe.

“I'm not sure exactly, it's in the Panhandle somewhere, I know that much. We'll find it,” Lon said confidently.

The Panhandle, that was where she was from, what if Telcotti was headed to Memphis, what if he was already there. Her hand flew up to her mouth in shock.

“Oh my God,” she told him. “Where Lon, where in the Panhandle?”

Lon looked at her, confusion plain on his tired face.

“Some place called Hanging Mesa, ever heard of it?” he asked as they walked towards the downtown bus station.

“It's not around Memphis,” she said with a sigh of relief. “I've never heard of it.”

Lon looked at her for an explanation.

“I live in Memphis now, on my Dad’s ranch. I was scared he might be going there,” she explained.

Lon nodded, “I think this place is up on the Canadian River somewhere. It seems like I should know where it is, but I can’t remember.”

They made it to the bus station. Lon was sweating profusely again and feeling light headed. They walked past the derelicts and degenerates to the ticket window. The next bus to Fort Worth was leaving within the hour. Lon purchased two tickets and staggered to the pay phone with Clancy in tow. He pulled out his wallet, and dug around in it till he found a black business card with a red X in the center. Beside the X was a phone number. That was all that was on the card.

Clancy watched while Lon dialed the number. He looked bad, spent, but he was still standing. Clancy was impressed with his intensity and strength.

Lon came to attention as someone on the other end answered the phone.

“What do you want?” the voice on the other end of the line said.

“Orpheus?” Lon asked.

“Yeah, this is O. Who are you?” the voice responded.

“Dr. Cameron,” Lon told him. “I need an ask.”

“What do you want?” Orpheus responded.

“Meet me at the downtown Fort Worth bus station in three hours,” Lon told him as held the receiver between his cheek and shoulder, and rubbed his throbbing temples with his good hand.

“I don’t do personal appearances, you know the rules,” Orpheus told him.

Lon gritted his teeth against the pain that seemed to come from everywhere in his body. “I told you, I need an ask.”

Orpheus paused on the other end of line, then Lon heard a deep sigh.

“Alright, but if I smell cops, I’m gone. Understood?”

“Understood,” Lon told him. “You’ll recognize me by the bandages on my arms. I’m with a woman, she’s a friendly.”

Orpheus hung up the line without saying goodbye.

“We’re on,” Lon told Clancy as he took a seat on a bench next to the phone.

Clancy took the seat next to him and placed her overnight bag between her long legs.

“Who was that?” Clancy asked as she fiddled absently with the cuff of her shirt.

“An acquaintance, I met him during the manhunt for David Leonard Wood. He’s a computer expert,” Lon told her, as he wiped away the light glaze of sweat on his forehead.

“A computer expert?” Clancy asked. “Then why all the clandestine stuff?”

Lon looked at her and grinned, he looked tired and strained, but the smile lit his face.

“Well, by computer expert I mean hacker. Wood was posting pictures of his victims on the Internet and we needed a hacker to crack his server. It was Orpheus that gathered the evidence that eventually put DL away. But I’ve never actually met Orpheus in person; Danny Rolling was the one who introduced us.”

“Danny Rolling,” Clancy said with mild surprise. “The serial killer from Florida?”

Lon sighed and looked up at the clock on the wall.

“Yeah, he’s big computer buff, has his own web site and everything; quite the slime ball,” Lon explained.

“How did you meet Danny Rolling?” Clancy asked.

“I interviewed him for my last book,” Lon told her.

“You’re a writer?” Clancy asked with mild astonishment.

“I’m actually a forensic psychologist specializing in serial killer profiling, I’ve written some text books.”

Clancy looked at him again and nodded, “I was wondering why a Doctor would be doing this kind of work.”

“How did you know Orpheus would help us?” Clancy asked, mostly for the sake of conversation, while they waited on their bus.

Lon looked at her and grinned wryly, “Well see, Orpheus breaks the law for a living. There’s not many hackers out there who actually make a living doing that stuff, most of them are just teenagers pulling a prank, or malicious whacko’s out to screw something up. That makes Orpheus almost unique, or at least in a very elite group. He works for companies pulling off corporate espionage, private investigators digging in off limit files for information, rich people trying to cheat the taxman; all very discreet, and all very illegal. This is his chance to do

something good, a chance he doesn't get very often in his line of work."

He looked Clancy in the eye and winked, "We're all looking for redemption."

"And, if you're an outlaw, it doesn't hurt for a cop to owe you a favor," Clancy added.

Lon looked down at his boots and laughed quietly.

"How cynical of you Ms. Herndon," he told her. "You sound as bad as me."

They sat for a while, waiting quietly. After about thirty minutes the ticket clerk called for the Fort Worth Bus.

Once they were on the bus and settled in, Clancy turned to Lon and checked him over. He looked okay, but still pale. He was weak, but all she could do was hope like Hell he would make it. She admired the tenacious strength he exhibited, because she questioned her own at times.

After she quit school she took over her father's cattle ranch, a year later she was forced to put her father in a nursing home in Claude, Texas. She ran the ranch practically by herself; her only help being purely labor. This took a strong person, a person of intelligence and will, but it was easy to overlook that, easier to look back to when she had dropped out of college. She considered her victories hollow when compared to her defeats.

"How did he get you Lon?" Clancy asked him.

Lon fidgeted in his chair and grimaced at the pain in his left arm and hand.

"Just like he got you," Lon told her.

Clancy raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"I was an open book, practically begging for it," he continued, shaking his head. "He came to me as a woman, a very beautiful woman. She seduced me, screwed with my head, then he cut the strings. It still hurts."

"He came to you as a woman?" Clancy asked, the confusion plain in her voice.

"I know, it sounds crazy. But he can present himself in any form he chooses. The woman he came to me as, was one he had murdered a few days before."

Lon told her the legend of the Nahual, and what Crow Woman had told them. Clancy listened in stunned silence.

"So that is why he skins them," Clancy said in awe.

"Yes," Lon replied. "And, he has three days to use the skin. But I don't think he is just

Nahual, or just a Curandero. He is something else, something more.”

“He’s the devil,” Clancy said scarcely above a whisper.

Lon nodded, “Maybe, I had pretty much quit believing in any of that stuff till three days ago.”

“What did he tell you?” Clancy asked, obviously shaken by what she had heard.

“He told me about the same thing that he told you,” Lon said, seeing her distress. “He’s using us, taunting us into doing what he needs us to do. Goading us on.”

“And we are doing it,” Clancy gritted, tears of frustration welling in her eyes.

Lon grabbed her marred left hand with his right hand.

“Maybe,” Lon told her in a stern whisper. “But maybe he doesn’t know us like he thinks he does, maybe he’s got a tiger by the tail.”

Clancy looked up and the roof of the bus and sniffled, she briskly wiped her tears away.

“Yeah,” she thought. “*But maybe not.*”

Lon squeezed her hand and they settled back into their awkward silence.

The trip to Fort Worth took almost two hours, when they arrived, Clancy had too shake Lon awake in the high backed seat of the bus. He had napped for the last hour of the drive, but instead of appearing refreshed when she woke him, he seemed to be doing worse.

“Are you okay?” she whispered to him as she tried to help him out of his seat.

“I’ll be alright,” Lon told her. “I just need something to drink.”

She watched him closely as they exited the bus. He was barely able to keep his feet, and it was plain that he was weakening by the minute. Once they were in the bus terminal, she ushered him to a chair and asked him what he wanted to drink.

He looked up at her appreciatively, his bangs wet with sweat. He looked flushed, like he was running a fever.

“A soda will be fine,” he told her in a raspy voice.

She returned with his soda and took a seat beside him. She placed a hand on his forehead, half expecting him to resist, but he did not. He was hot as a depot stove.

He gave her a tired smile as she looked at him with eyes full of concern. He was getting sick, and in this weakened state, even the flu could be serious business.

“You’re burning up,” she pronounced, as she reached in her bag to get some aspirin.

He took the aspirin without comment while she watched him like a worried mother, the concern stark in the shallow lines of her face.

“What now?” she asked him.

He washed the aspirin down with the soda and shrugged.

“Now we wait.”

People came and went from the bus terminal like bees from a hive. After thirty minutes she was ready to give up and take Lon to the nearest hospital, when a portly man, with round spectacle type glasses and dingy clothes, seated himself directly behind them. Clancy didn't notice the man, but Lon, even in his fevered state, did.

“Dr. Cameron?” the portly man asked quietly over his meaty shoulder.

“Hello,” Lon said, smiling at the lengths to which they were going to be covert.

“Follow me please,” the portly man said as he got up from the seat.

Lon and Clancy followed him out of the terminal and into the parking lot. They stopped beside a non-descript brown Ford pickup.

“Nice to finally meet you O,” Lon told him as he leaned against the truck.

“You said you had an ask,” Orpheus said as he looked at him carefully over his spectacles. “What is it?”

“We need a clean car, and some information,” Lon told him.

“Information I can help you with. A car, well, that's not really my line of work,” Orpheus told him, his blank expression never changing.

Clancy finally saw what Lon thought was so funny about this situation. This was like playing Agent 007 with a fat uncle pretending to be James Bond. This was comically childish.

“Then let me borrow yours,” Lon said eyeing the truck.

Orpheus looked at him and then at the truck, “Sure I'll let you have this piece of shit. Only one problem, it's not mine. My car is on the other side of the lot.”

Lon smiled tiredly, “Tell you what O, let's worry about the information I need first, we'll worry about the car later.”

Orpheus crossed his plump arms over his protruding belly. “What information do you need?”

“Let's go back to your place and we'll talk about it,” Lon said, leaning more heavily on

the truck.

Orpheus looked at him hard, then at Clancy.

“No one goes to my place,” he announced.

Just as Orpheus finished his proclamation, Lon collapsed, fell forward and barely broke his fall on the cement with his casted hand. He let out a strangled cry as his broken arm struck the hard pavement, but he was already out cold.

Orpheus stepped forward and looked down at Lon, shocked, and unsure of what to do. Clancy rushed to Lon, and knelt down beside him, cradling his head in her lap.

“Jesus,” Orpheus said in a high worried voice. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s sick you moron,” Clancy said in disgust. “Just bring your car over here, we need to get him inside right away.”

Orpheus froze, unsure of what to do next. He seemed to weigh his options in his head, but he still didn’t move.

“Listen, if you don’t help us, I’ll have to call the cops and an ambulance. The cops will be asking me questions,” she told him angrily. “He might owe you something, but believe me, I don’t owe you shit.”

A look of concern etched itself on Orpheus’ plump face.

“He’s gonna be alright isn’t he?” he asked.

“He will if we can get him somewhere other than this parking lot,” Clancy barked at him, “Now go get your car!”

Her tone of voice broke the stunned paralysis that held Orpheus in place. Causing him to jump, startled, and making his belly jiggle beneath his dingy plaid shirt. If Lon’s condition hadn’t been so serious, Clancy would have laughed at this funny looking man. Instead, she shot him a stern fiery look that only a true redhead could produce.

Orpheus dashed off, jiggling all the way. Clancy concentrated on Lon. She was tempted to have Orpheus take them straight to the hospital.

As she rubbed his damp hair back, and stroked his burning forehead, Lon came too with a grimace.

“What happened?” he asked her in a hoarse voice as he looked up from her lap.

“You fainted,” she told him.

“Jesus, my arm hurts like hell,” Lon said, his face contorting in pain as he tried to get up.

“You landed on it,” Clancy explained. “I think you need to go back to the hospital.”

Leaning heavily against the truck, Lon gained his feet slowly, holding his arm protectively against his stomach.

“I can’t Clancy,” he told her as he wiped the sweat off of his forehead with the bandage around his good arm. “I go back to the hospital, and it’s all over.”

“Why?” she asked angrily, still sitting on the concrete of the parking lot. “Why is it over? Or do you mean our revenge is over?”

Her question hit Lon like a brick.

“I just know it’s over if I don’t get there Clancy. I have to get there, and if the Rangers get ahold of us, I won’t get there,” he explained in his best calming voice.

“We’re playing into his hand,” Clancy raged. “The worst part is, we don’t care. Do we really want to play his game?”

Orpheus squealed up in a bright blue Cadillac, and opened the passenger door, motioning them inside.

“Damn O,” Lon said as he walked slowly to the car. “I have to pass out to cop a ride from you, some fuckin’ friend you are.”

Lon slumped into the passenger seat while Clancy grabbed their gear and got into the back.

“I can’t fucking believe I’m doing this,” Orpheus complained as he drove off.

They arrived at an old brick building in a deserted industrial area of East Fort Worth twenty minutes later. Orpheus pulled in through an automatic garage door on the side of the building. Once inside, he parked the car, sat back in his leather seat, and sighed.

“Here we are,” he told them.

“Welcome to the Bat Cave,” Clancy said, looking around the structure in awe.

They were in a large open area of the two-story building. A workshop had been setup in one corner of the open space; several computer towers and assorted parts littered the workbench. Despite the appearances on the outside of the building, the inside was immaculate. Even the cement floor was coated with epoxy paint. In another corner, a room that looked vaguely like a walk-in freezer, only larger, had been erected. Electrical and phone wiring boxes lined every

wall. It was an impressive site.

Orpheus got out of his Cadillac with a grunt.

“Come on up, we might as well get something to eat,” he called back to them.

Lon and Clancy got out of the car and followed Orpheus to a set of painted iron stairs that led up to the second story of the building.

The second story contained the living quarters of the building, complete with a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom, and of course, a huge office, with numerous computers that hummed quietly. The spaces were open, and brightly lit from the thinly painted warehouse windows that surrounded the entire second story. It was quite the opposite of what Clancy would have thought about Orpheus and his abode.

“You guys hungry?” Orpheus asked as he stepped into the kitchen.

Lon carefully took a seat at the bar that separated the living area from the kitchen. His face was still pale and worn looking, but the aspirin were kicking in, and he felt better than he had since he’d gotten off of the bus.

“Thanks,” Lon told Orpheus, “Whatever you have will be fine.”

Clancy pulled up a stool next to Lon and looked around in awe at the vast area that served as Orpheus’ home.

“Quite a place you have here Orpheus,” she told him, and she meant it.

“Thanks,” Orpheus told them as he rummaged through the double size stainless steel refrigerator. “You’re the first people that have ever seen it, besides me.”

“What about the people that did all the work in here?” Lon asked tiredly.

“What people?” Orpheus said returning to the bar with an armload of sandwich stuff. “I did everything myself. No one else has ever been here; no one even knows I’m here.”

“You did all this?” Lon asked; he was impressed. “Bob Villa would be proud.”

“Thanks,” Orpheus said proudly, a smile on his fat face.

Orpheus was obviously pleased to finally show someone his handiwork. Proud would have been an understatement, he went into every detail as they ate their sandwiches. When asked why he located here instead of in the suburbs, he almost jumped off of his stool.

“Are you kidding, I pull some serious power,” Orpheus declared, waving his half eaten sandwich around for emphasis. “You think if you use this much power out in the suburbs it goes

unnoticed. I have T3 redundant Internet connections, generator backups, and complete state of the art security systems. You think stuff like that goes unnoticed out in suburbia. With a flip of a switch I can cut this building off from the outside world, nothing in, nothing out, and be completely self contained. You think that would go unnoticed out in the Greenways?"

Clancy giggled with a mouthful of sandwich. Just watching this pudgy man get on his high horse made her laugh.

Lon grimaced instead of laughing and held his left arm in close to his stomach. Clancy was worried he might have re-broken his arm, or un-set it from his fall, but she was glad his fever appeared to be under control, at least for the moment.

"Alright," Lon said. "Let's see what it's all good for. I need some information, and an FBI dossier."

Orpheus took a bite of his sandwich, and licked the mayonnaise from his lips. He closed his eyes behind his spectacles, as if calculating a complex math problem, but he didn't appear concerned in the least.

"I can have the FBI file by morning, maybe tonight if I already have the passwords they've rotated too," he said without concern.

They finished their sandwiches and adjourned to his vast offices. He paused, his eyes scanning the computers, printers, and other computer paraphernalia that lined the walls of the office. He stopped and pointed back towards the kitchen.

"You guys better grab some stools. I only have one chair in here," he explained.

He rubbed his chubby hands together, and gazed at the computers with childlike enthusiasm.

"Lets use Shadowfax for this little job," he said as he nodded to a large powerful looking computer.

Clancy grabbed two stools and brought them into the office.

"Shadowfax," Lon said, smiling distantly. "Gandalf's horse from Lord of the Rings."

Orpheus looked back at Lon over his spectacles.

"Right," he said with a broad smile. "So what are we after here?"

"Do a search on The Black Curandero," Lon said distantly.

Orpheus' pudgy hands flashed nimbly across the keyboard, a list of Internet sites

appeared from nowhere.

“Here’s one,” Orpheus said pointing at the screen, and using his mouse to click on the link.

A page from the New Mexico State University web site appeared on the screen. It was mostly text. Lon stood up and tried to read it over Orpheus’ shoulder. Orpheus growled at him and nudged him back to his seat.

“Sit down,” he told Lon. “I’ll print it for ya.”

Lon grabbed the pages as they came hot out of the large laser printer in the corner of the massive office.

“Where’s your bathroom O?” Clancy asked, standing up from her stool.

Orpheus pointed to the other end of the loft and gave her directions. Lon read the pages as the printer spit them out with a growing knot in the pit of his stomach.

Legend of the Black Curandero:

A Thesis by: Robert Ashford Cavenau

The Legend of the Black Curandero originated with the indigenous Aztec and Mayan tribes of Central and Southern Mexico. The Legend, dating back as far as the 1500's, spread from its origins to the tribes of Northern Mexico and the South Western United States by word of mouth.

I first learned of the Legend from a Yaqui Indian guide while on an archeological expedition to the Fuego de Corazon meteor crater in the Sierra Madres of North-Central Mexico.

The following is the Legend as related to me by a Yaqui guide:

In the years after the Spanish colonization of Central America, the Aztec empire retreated and entrenched itself in the hidden city state of Cibola. In Cibola, a powerful Nahuatl high priest named Zacacoatal held court, protecting the treasures and remnants of Azteca from the Spanish marauders.

At the waning of the harvest moon, in the year of Calli, a brilliant light was seen burning like a torch across the sky, and a great earthquake shook Cibola. Far away in the North and West, a fire could be seen on the horizon, and ash fell like snow from the sky.

Zacacoatal called the people of Cibola together at the central pyramid and made offering to Tezcatlipoca for three days. At the end of three days, he announced that the light in the sky had been a weapon sent down to the Aztecs from Tezcatlipoca, a weapon that would save the Aztec people from the Spanish invaders and their plagues.

Zacacoatal announced that he had a vision during the three days of sacrifice. A vision that the Gods of Azteca would rise up from the ground and throw down the Gods of the Spaniards. Turning the plagues back against the Spanish, and returning Azteca to its former glory.

Zacacoatal announced that he would travel to the fire of the North, where the Gods of Azteca awaited his call. With him, he took one hundred Nahuatl priests, and he instructed the remaining to feed the sacrificial fires ceaselessly until his return.

That very day Zacacoatal traveled North with his priests, and after one full cycle of the moon, came to the Sierra Madres and the fire of the North. There the whole of the mountains burned and smoldered, leaving the skies dark with smoke and ash. Zacacoatal walked deep into the Sierra Madres, towards the heart of the fire. And at last, with only half of his priests left, he came to a deep crater, which he named Fuego de Corazon, or burning heart, in the language of the invaders.

For three days he prayed at the rim of Fuego de Corazon. He prayed for guidance. He prayed that the Gods of Azteca would cease their infighting and come to the aid of their people, by bringing a plague on the Spaniards, as the Spaniards had brought the plagues on the Aztecs.

At the end of his prayers, every hair fell from Zacacoatal's body, and was carried on the wind into the crater. When he returned to his encampment his priests fled from him in fear, for his eyes had turned an ice blue. Colder than the eyes of the Spanish marauders they opposed.

He announced to the frightened priests that his prayers had brought him an answer. At the beginning of the next New Year, the year of Tochtli, and the end of the fifty-two year cycle of the Aztec calendar. On the full moon of the winter solstice, the Gods of Azteca would rise from the Earth and destroy the Spaniard Gods with plagues, fires, and floods. Azteca would be reborn, and the Aztecs would wipe the Spaniards from the land and feed their hearts to the jaguars.

Zacacoatal returned to Cibola with only nineteen of the original one hundred priests

remaining. He returned to find the sacrificial fires damped, and his priests loafing about the streets. His anger was huge, and he punished the loafers with horrible deaths. Their hearts were not sacrificed to Tezcatlipoca, but rather fed to wild animals and jaguars. Zacacoatal relit the sacrificial fires atop the central pyramid, and his first sacrifices were his nineteen loyal priests who had followed him to the fires of the North. They were honored by the opportunity, and their hearts were given lovingly to the Gods with the greatest of reverence.

After months of continual sacrifice, Cibola's streets ran red with blood, and Zacacoatal was forced to raid surrounding villages and Spanish settlements to feed the fires of the Gods.

For months Zacacoatal presided over the fires, without sleep or sustenance. Each sacrifice was cleansed, and then given over to the Gods by Zacacoatal himself. Zacacoatal performed each and every sacrifice until his entire visage was permanently stained with blood, and the entire pyramid shown red against the horizon.

Two months before the New Year, a group of Spanish prisoners were herded through the streets of Cibola. One after the other they were sacrificed under the knife of Zacacoatal. Then, a red haired woman, the wife of a Spanish Captain sent to Mexico as punishment for heresy, was brought forward and presented to Zacacoatal. Zacacoatal raised the knife then stopped, mere inches from her heaving breast.

Instead of sacrificing her, Zacacoatal paraded the woman through the streets of Cibola, proclaiming her the mother of the Gods, and his future wife.

The Spanish Captain, Juan de Jesus Armanderas, heard of his wife's capture, and set out to find Cibola with a garrison of veteran soldiers. His wife was pregnant with their first child and he feared the worst. For days they wandered until they captured a Nahuatl priest who had escaped the slaughter at Cibola. The priest, a foe of Zacacoatal, willingly led them back to the city. The garrison attacked without warning.

The siege of Cibola lasted for one full cycle of the moon. Then, on the New Year, under the blood moon of the solstice, all the hearth fires in the city were damped, and the sacrificial fires allowed to burn out. The Spanish Captain seized this opportunity and snuck into the city while his garrison continued the fight at the walls.

As the dawn approached, and the blood moon settled into the horizon, Zacacoatal lit the first fire of the New Year in the chest cavity of a virgin with the Captain's wife at his side. At

that moment, the Captain struck the blood stained Zacacoatal from behind and they fought a mighty battle atop the pyramid. For a full day they fought. Back and forth, the battle went, until finally, forced to make a choice between Zacacoatal and the Captain, the Captain's wife plunged the sacrificial knife into Zacacoatal's back, and the Captain pushed him from the top of the pyramid.

The Captain and his wife hurried down the pyramid, followed by the Nahual priests. At the bottom, where the body should have been, only Zacacoatal's skin lay on the bloody cobblestones of the Cibola street. Zacacoatal's body was never found.

The Spaniards never won the city of Cibola, they were killed down to a man, but the empire of Azteca died with the fall of Zacacoatal, and Cibola disappeared into the ground.

The Captain and his wife were never heard from again, though they were not counted among the dead. It was rumored that he returned to Spain shortly thereafter under an assumed name, and lived out the remainder of his days as a peasant.

The elders said that Zacacoatal left his skin behind but his body returned to the sanctuary of Fuego de Corazon under cover of darkness. The natives tell of a creature in black robes who still lives in a cave somewhere deep within the crater. At night, under the full moon, the women in the villages of the Sierra Madres lock their doors and do not venture out into the darkness, for fear of the old Aztec, The Black Curandero of Fuego de Corazon.

Lon frowned at the pages in his hands.

“Do you have a shredder O?” Lon asked quietly.

“Of course, what’s wrong?” Orpheus asked, seeing the look of concern on Lon’s face.

“Nothing,” Lon mumbled. “Drop this in there, it’s not pertinent to our investigation.”

Orpheus shrugged and dropped the document into the shredder as Clancy walked back into the office.

“What did you come up with?” She asked them.

“Nothing,” Lon said, retaking his seat on the stool. “It was just an old legend. It wasn’t anything we’re looking for.”

Orpheus looked at him over his spectacles, questions plain on his chubby face, but he said nothing.

“Do a search on Hanging Mesa,” Lon told him.

Again Orpheus’ hands ran across the keyboard. On the screen a message displayed. *“No matches found.”*

“Nothing,” Orpheus told them. “What now?”

“Now,” Lon said, his voice dire and low. “Lets get that FBI file.”

Orpheus smiled, cracked his knuckles with a flourish, and turned back to his computer.

Clancy wondered if she should remain silent while Orpheus worked, but Orpheus seemed glad to engage in conversation while he pounded away at his keyboard, happy to show off his considerable skills.

“Now,” he told them. “The FBI is a tough nut to crack, but I’ve been in there before, so I know my way around.”

“You’ve hacked the FBI?” Clancy asked incredulously.

“Not in a couple of weeks, but I did a job in there not long ago,” Orpheus said, concentrating on the computer screen that lit up his grinning face.

“How is it they haven’t caught you?” Clancy asked, doubt still permeating her voice.

“Well, I don’t *“Hack”*, as people like to put it. I ease in – gently, quietly. They know I’m there, but they don’t see anything wrong with me being there,” Orpheus said as his plump fingers played nimbly across the keyboard.

“And how do you manage that?” Lon said as he intently watched Orpheus work.

“Government IP’s,” Orpheus said, adjusting his glasses, his eyes firmly fixed on the computer. “In this case, I clone FBI IP address’. It recognizes my computer as one of their own.”

Clancy and Lon looked at each other and both shrugged. Orpheus had lost them, but as long as he knew what he was doing they didn’t care.

“The FBI has some of the best security in the world, state of the art. A real masterpiece I’m telling you,” Orpheus continued, his fingers working faster and faster across the keys. “They have some seriously fine tuned proxies, 128 bit encryption, overlapping protocols, IP lockouts, logging throughout the system, one slip, and they own you.”

Clancy and Lon smiled at each other, Orpheus sounded more like a teenager discussing sex than a middle age computer geek talking shop.

“Here’s what I do, I hit the system using government IP’s, but that means jack, it’s like letting you walk up to the gates of Fort Knox. Three tries, and they lock out your IP, three lock outs, and you trigger an alarm. Here’s the trick, find the password without tripping the alarm. All the while they are logging you, pinging your computer, hunting you down. Of course you have to get past the proxy if your not located on premises, that’s an automatic flag right there.”

“So how do you do it?” Clancy asked the question that Orpheus was begging to be asked.

“Well that’s the trick, you have to make the proxy think that the server is requesting this information so it will let it by without tripping alarms and lockouts,” Orpheus said with a child like giggle.

“And how do you do that?” Lon asked, smiling at Clancy.

“Ancient Chinese secret my friends,” Orpheus said as he hammered the keys harder.

Programs switched back and forth, different screens played across the monitor at blinding speed.

“Ancient Chinese secret.”

Orpheus slid back from the computer and held his pudgy arms in the air in a sign of victory.

“I’m in,” he announced.

“Your in the database?” Lon asked in awe. “Already?”

Orpheus gave him a disgusted look.

“Good God man, what do you think I am?” Orpheus said giving him a withering look from over his spectacles. “I made it to the log in screen.”

“Oh,” Lon said, the disappointment plain in his voice.

Orpheus rolled his eyes.

“Amateurs,” he mumbled.

“Don’t worry,” Orpheus told him as he turned back to the computer screen and pushed a button on a boxy contraption next to Shadowfax. “It’s just a matter of time now.”

They talked while Shadowfax beeped and hummed in the background, Orpheus attempting to impress them with his knowledge of computers. He was a man who knew secrets, a lot of secrets. He told them some of them just to impress them, others because he considered them injustices, and didn’t know anyone else to tell.

“You’ve never been caught?” Clancy asked in awe after he told her how he had broken into NASA for an aerospace company he refused to name.

“Never,” he said proudly. “They never even really knew I was there. That’s the difference between *“hacking”* and what I do. I sweet talk the computer; wine it and dine it. Then, when it least expects it, I fuck it like a tied up goat.”

At that Clancy burst out laughing, a merry sound, like bells ringing. Lon looked at her, a thin smile on his tired face. She was truly beautiful, and her beauty was not lost on him.

Orpheus blushed.

“Pardon my French,” he told them meekly. “I don’t get many visitors.”

“I’ve only had one close call,” he continued. “I was in the Department of Defense mainframe a few years ago, and they locked me for a split second. First and only time I ever had to use the kill switch.”

Orpheus nodded to a large red toggle switch that sat directly in the center of the computer bench that ran the length of the room.

“I took too long,” Orpheus explained shaking his head.

“What does it do?” Lon asked looking closely at the red switch.

“It cuts this building off from everywhere; electricity, phones, the works. It breaks all connections. I’m lucky I had it or I’d be in Leavenworth even as we speak,” Orpheus told them.

Behind him the computer screen changed and Shadowfax issued a loud beep. A smile twitched across Orpheus’ plump face.

“We’re in,” he announced before he ever looked at the monitor.

He spun around in his chair and manned the keyboard. Lon and Clancy leaned in for a closer look.

“We should have about thirty minutes before they ping around enough to realize I’m using a clone IP. Who are we looking for, Bill Clinton, Bill Gates? Just give me a name, we have full access,” Orpheus told them, his meaty hands hovering over the keyboard.

“Telcotti Cantrell,” Lon told him quietly. “We’re looking for a man named Telcotti Cantrell.”

Orpheus nodded, and began typing, his face a childlike mask of sheer glee. With a flourish, he hit enter, and rolled back in his chair. A blue screen appeared, and the computer

issued a complaining beep. A frown drove the glee from Orpheus' face.

“What's this?” he whispered, as he dove back into his computer.

He studied the screen for a moment then shook his head.

“This is wrong; I should have full access, I'm using a top level IP. It's asking me for a password again.”

Lon frowned, “Can you crack it?”

Orpheus reached over and tentatively hit the button on the boxy contraption next to Shadowfax and shrugged.

“We're about to find out,” he said cautiously.

Instead of turning his back on the computer this time he watched intently as it worked at breaking the code to get in. Ten minutes passed and Orpheus was looking at his watch frequently.

“I might have to make another run at this with a new IP,” he said quietly.

Ten more minutes passed, finally the screen changed and Shadowfax beeped at him again.

Orpheus' shoulders slumped in relief.

“We're in,” Orpheus announced. “But I still don't know what the Hell that was about. I'm gonna download this thing and get the Hell out of here alright?”

“Lets do it,” Lon said looking anxiously over Orpheus' shoulder.

Orpheus started the download and turned around with a perplexed look on his face.

“That was fucking weird,” he said with obvious concern. “I can access the President's file from the previous security screen. Who the hell is this guy?”

“That's what we're here to find out,” Lon said, his look sharing Orpheus' concern.

Behind Orpheus the computer let out a loud alarm sound. Orpheus spun around in his chair so quickly he overshot the computer completely and had to adjust back to it.

“Hit the kill switch!” he screamed at them as he attacked the keyboard. “Hit it now, they've locked on us!”

An Excerpt from Book II
SKIN CHANGER

A novel by

R. Austin Carver

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