

Ridgeway Drive, Lansing, Michigan: 0730 hours.

“So what are you going to do with yourself today?” Diane asked.

Shaun had people to see. He was in no rush, but there were trails that couldn't be allowed to go cold, like the arcane referral system for getting discreet work done by a man who knew a man who only knew some nameless guy in a bar but could hire him.

“Golf,” Shaun said. “I need to show my face. Let them know I'm not going to hide and lick my wounds. Keep my contacts up to date.”

Shaun realised that he was now almost in a position of power. There was no leverage left to be exerted against him. Leo had played all his cards. Shaun's power lay in the fact that his greatest fear had come to pass but it hadn't destroyed him. He'd lost KWA to Halbauer, but he was still standing.

“Just as long as I don't become a golf widow,” Diane said. “Ration your time.”

Shaun cross-examined himself as he drove to the golf club, checking every word, and satisfied himself that he was actually telling her the truth. He really did need to be seen out and about. It was more than just proving he could still hold his head up in the business community. It was also about keeping some structure and wider human contact in his daily life, because he'd seen what happened to men like him when they retired to live in some kind of old man's purdah of rose-pruning and jobs around the house after a lifetime of making things happen on a multi-million dollar scale. If they didn't keep the lights on, if they went cold turkey on being who and what they were, then they simply died. They fell into the water like spent mayflies. While that was better than fading into senility – seen from the outside, anyway – the short unfairness of it was too much to bear.

He rolled slowly through the parking area, looking for Harry Emerson's car. The man played a round early every morning before heading for the office, regular as clockwork. When Shaun caught up with him on the terrace, he didn't look surprised to see him.

“That's mergers for you,” Harry said, pushing the coffee jug in his direction. He was a thin, balding man with the wire spectacles of a book-keeper, which was as far from the reality of him as Shaun could imagine. “I hope you made them pay through the nose. So what are you planning to do next?”

“Finish some business.”

“There's no loyalty these days, Shaun. Partners, employees, goddamn subcontractors, they're all ripping you off. If they're not, it just means you haven't caught them yet.” Harry had a construction firm that built grand projects and won awards. Shaun never asked him too many questions about how the business got to be that big or how he dealt with disagreements. “And the courts are just there to keep the legal community in Beamers. So the last enquiry didn't yield anything, then?”

“It did,” Shaun said, slipping into the same oblique code. Harry seemed to think they might be overheard. “But not enough, and now that I'm outside the tent, it presents logistical challenges.”

Harry stared at the perfect emerald horizon with narrowed eyes. “I had this *accountant*,” he murmured, squeezing the word out in such a way that Shaun heard it as *dead*, or at very least *busted kneecaps*. “The bastard thought he was smart, but I knew I was patient. I'm a great believer in informal dispute resolution. If you hire a lawyer, they'll always manufacture more trouble to bill you for and you still might not get your property back.”

“Agreed. Is there a private investigator you'd recommend?”

“I know a couple.” Harry took out his wallet and scribbled on a three-by-five card. “This

one's a regular ninja. Cash only. But then you're used to that by now."

It was a phone number and a name, nothing more: Nathan. Shaun wasn't clear if that was a surname or a first name, but the question didn't need asking. "Thanks."

"Or do you need something more *direct*? You want someone to call someone and get back to you?"

Shaun respected a man who understood. "I'd be grateful." He handed Harry a plain card with one of his burner numbers written on it. If Charles – or Dru Lloyd – thought they were the only ones who knew how to play the deniable game, they were mistaken. Shaun had learned a lot. "The last operator ran into difficulties."

"How difficult?"

"He made a rash decision and it didn't work out for him. I only hope he didn't have colleagues who think there's unfinished business to bill me for."

"Well, these guys organise themselves a little like the French Resistance. Cells. Nobody knows anybody more than one level above them. It's good for confidentiality and resilience." Harry folded his arms and placed them on the table very slowly, bending forward until he looked like he'd simply relaxed rather than deliberately leaned closer to Shaun to whisper. "All I do is ask someone to throw a pebble in the pond and you wait for the ripples to come back to you. I don't know the links in the chain, which is exactly the way it should be."

"Understood."

"Just a thought... "

"What?"

"Instead of rinsing and repeating, why not try something different?"

"Such as?"

"Shaun, I don't know what this guy took, and I don't want to, but who's got a vested interest in helping you get it back? Even if you have to split the takings with them, it's better than letting the asshole get away with it. Maybe you're not thinking big enough."

Shaun had tried to keep the circle as tight as possible. He hadn't even thought about recruiting allies because it seemed too dangerous. But he probably couldn't do this alone, and he didn't want another contractor like the last one. Harry had a point. The only direction to move in was *bigger*. Shaun felt an odd sensation of his lungs expanding even though he hadn't taken a conscious breath. A weight was lifting.

Harry scanned his face as if he was making sure that things were sinking in, then carried on.

"Just throwing a few ideas out there." Harry drained the coffee pot into his cup. "Who's this guy afraid of? Who can do him most damage? Or if this is a company we're talking about, who wants a piece of their action? Rivalry's a terrific motivator. My old man always told me to sort out my own playground fights, but there's character-building, and then there's *winning*, and I was never too proud to enlist a bigger kid to help me out in a scrap."

"Okay," Shaun said. "Let me think about that before you put the word out."

A waiter approached to clear the empty cups. Harry switched straight into a conversation about a new university building that he was bidding for, and the topic didn't stray back to stolen property and untrustworthy business partners again. Shaun was glad. Harry's advice had set him thinking. Even if he wasn't entirely sure why, he knew this was a breakthrough.

After Harry left, Shaun played a few holes for the exercise and to be seen to be living life as usual. There was a kind of cleansing zen about any pointless repetitive action. On a lovely summer day, with nothing much to do except look after his own small personal interests and

choose his own timetable, he felt able to think.

He needed someone bigger than Charles. He also needed someone bigger than Leo Brayne, which wasn't going to be easy, but Forbes List or not, the man wasn't God Almighty. He wasn't even the Mafia.

Shaun felt better than he had in months. The worst was over and all things were possible again. He just needed to scale up his plan. There were no limits now except the ones he chose to have.

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