

Anna woke up with a start, gasping for air. Sitting up, she looked over her body and sighed in relief. Her nightmare was just that, a nightmare. Yesterday really did happen. She was healed.

A smile plastered onto Anna's face. She felt so good! Her parents had fawned over her the entire day and were planning a big vacation. They were also making plans to move to a new city and start fresh. Plans. She could make plans for the future now. Go to college, date a cute guy, start a family, get a job, travel, sports. Anything she wanted.

Anna started to get ready for the day. All by herself, thank you very much. In the shower, she once again marveled at her new body. For the last four years, her body had been withering away. She was overly skinny, so much so that her breasts hadn't completely developed. Her skin had been a sickly pale color, and her hair had completely fallen out. But now, her breasts had come in, full and shapely, along with her hips. Her skin was still somewhat pale, but she could live with that; she could always go to the beach to get a tan. Then her hair. It was long and luscious. And heavy when wet. Anna couldn't help but laugh as she washed it thoroughly.

As she let the warm water envelope her, she thought about the events after leaving the old mall. Dr. Wilson had given her a clean slate of health, though he still seemed a bit angry that Aunt Caitlyn had brought Justin without asking. His anger receded when Aunt Caitlyn received a message from her son saying he was doing just fine and that he was going to eat a hamburger for the first time in years. Dr. Wilson wanted to start a video call, but Aunt Caitlyn refused, saying that Justin left a code in the message that only he and she knew to reveal that everything was okay.

The nurse, Erika, who had gone with them pulled Anna aside before they left and gave her a card. She said, "I was there for the original healings. Seventeen girls were healed that day. You make eighteen. That we know of, of course. Here take this." The nurse handed her a piece of paper. "The girls created a group to keep in contact and to provide support. Things might feel a bit surreal the next few days but know that others have gone through a similar situation."

Anna finished getting ready and sat behind her computer. Since she was bedridden for the last few years, she had spent plenty of time online, playing games, and on social media. She was no stranger to online communities. She took a deep breath as she took out the slip of paper the nurse had given her. It had a link and an invite code. She put in the information. She stared skeptically at the name of the group: Order of the Flame. Sounded like a cult. Immediately, she received a private chat.

<[Otowan001]: Hey, welcome Pandar! I assume you're the new girl Erika told me about?>

<[Pandar]: Erika? The nurse? Yeah, that's me.>

<[Otowan001]: Awesome! I can't believe someone else met her. So, what's your story? I didn't hear anything on the news, so I assume it was done in private.>

<[Pandar]: Yeah. I can't go into too much detail, but my parents were able to get in contact with the Mystic and begged her to heal me. I've been sick for the last four years. And now I'm better.>

<[Otowan001]: I've got a similar story. I was the first one who got healed. I still feel amazing after a couple of weeks. Life has finally started to calm down; I got bombarded with interviews for like five straight days afterward.>

<[Pandar]: I would have hated that. So, what? This is a support group to deal with the changes?>

<[Otowan001]: Note quite. When we all got healed, it was almost a religious experience. We were all joined in purpose, and it felt amazing. I pledged myself that day to help the Mystic in any way possible. All of us who got healed felt the same, so we made the group to keep in contact and help each other. And to find anything we can about the Mystic.>

Anna leaned back in her chair. She thought back to how she felt when she got healed. Devotion, gratitude, awe. Anna felt a sudden bond with both the Mystic and this girl she had never met. Tears welled up in her eyes at the emotion.

<[Pandar]: . . . Yeah, I know the feeling. You don't mind me joining you guys? Even though I wasn't there?>

<[Otowan001]: Of course! Glad to have you. We only have two rules here. 1. Don't give out invitations unless they're for people who have been healed. We want this to be as private as possible. Erika vouched for you, so you're clear. 2. Your username for the group should have the number at the end where you joined. You'll be 018.>

<[Pandar018]: I think I can do that.>

<[Otowan001]: Excellent! Let's jump over to the main group chat. I know you can't share everything, but I'm sure the other girls would love to hear anything you have to say.>

----

David yawned as he walked down the hallway. He had transformed two people the previous day, Anna and June. He had planned for Anna, but June was a complete surprise. He felt a little bad for Nancy since she'd have to clean up after him by pushing through the paperwork and creating a new identity. He'd have to give her a massage; she loved those.

David heard a sound reverberate through the mansion. A song. A very pleasant song. Curious, he walked towards the music. He joined Juliet and Nancy who were also walking towards the sound.

“Any ideas what that is?” David asked.

Juliet replied, “If I had to guess, it’d be June. New girls always bring some weird quirk to the house that we have to adapt to.”

“At least she can sing,” Nancy replied. “She is really good.”

“Nancy, I’ve been meaning to ask,” David said. “Are we running into any issues making new identities? I’m certain if someone looks a little deeper, they’ll find it very suspicious.”

Nancy shrugged. “New identities aren’t too much of an issue. It just takes a bit of moving papers around and money in the right spots. Faking someone’s death becomes a bit more complicated because they usually have to investigate the cause. It’s easier if we could just mark them as going missing to avoid any complications, or be declared dead like June was.”

“As annoying as Eliza is,” Juliet said. “She is doing an excellent job keeping us ahead of the curve and making sure our documents aren’t suspicious. It’s not a long-term solution, but it’ll work until we get to the next stage of our plan.”

When they got closer, David saw a group of girls outside the bathroom. Marci, Satie, and Ellie. All of the girls looked at him. David could feel their devotion in their eyes. However, it didn’t phase him at all. Strange, the things a person can get used to.

“Is that June singing?” David asked.

Marci nodded. “Yep. When she got in the shower, she started to sing. It sounds so . . .”

“Amazing!” Ellie proclaimed. “She sings like one of those people on those talent shows where the judges are left speechless.”

“I think she’s making up the words as she goes along,” Satie said. “At least, I haven’t heard the song before and the lyrics are somewhat haphazard.”

June opened the bathroom door and saw everyone standing outside. “Um, hi? I’m sorry, did I take too long in the shower? I don’t know the rules here yet”

David laughed. “It’s not that. We heard you singing.”

“Oh, is that all?” June sighed in relief. “I hope I wasn’t disturbing anyone. I have a habit of singing in the bathroom, even when I was a guy. However, when I was sick, I didn’t have the strength. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to sing, so I might have overdone it.” She smiled sheepishly.

“Your voice is great!” Ellie exclaimed.

“Were you trained before?” Nancy asked. “I took a few music lessons when I was younger, but I didn’t have talent. You have perfect pitch.”

June nodded. “Yeah, I was sort of an oddball one when I was younger. I loved to sing and make up random songs. My mom was so proud; she put me into lessons, even though we didn’t have a lot of money.”

“Your mom sounds amazing,” Marci said.

June smiled brightly. “She really is.”

“I wonder,” Juliet said thoughtfully. “Would you be willing to put on a mini concert?”

June gaped at her. “What?”

Juliet explained. “We need to create some sort of event at the mall to advertise the Order of the Flame. We’ve officially tied ourselves to the mall since we transformed you, and I want to publicize it soon. At first, I was thinking of doing a food drive, a festival, or something like that. And we still can, but it was lacking a central attraction. I know you barely transformed and are still getting your bearings-”

“Oh, can I, can I?” June said with sparkling eyes. “It’s my dream to stand on a stage. Can I invite my mom?”

Juliet hesitated but nodded. “We will be advertising it, so it makes sense that she would come. However, you shouldn’t personally invite her through your texts. That would be too suspicious. We’ll make sure she gets the invite, OK?”

“Ok,” June nodded eagerly.

“So,” David asked. “When are you thinking of holding this concert?”

“We still have a long way to go,” Juliet answered. “The mall is still under construction, and we have a lot of preparation. I’d say three months at the earliest. Is that enough time, June?”

June considered the question. “That depends on how many songs I’ll be singing. I can maybe write five songs at the most in that amount of time.”

Juliet nodded. “That would be great. We can also hire another band-”

“Oh!” Ellie exclaimed. “What if we do a music festival? It can be a way for local bands to advertise themselves. I’ve been to a few of those when I was a guy and always loved them.”

"I'm not sure everything that would entail," Juliet responded. "But, it sounds great. Ellie and Nancy, can you get together and research everything that needs to happen? Oh, June go with them as well and let them know what you need."

Ellie saluted enthusiastically and grabbed June by the arm. "Come on, June. I have a feeling we're going to be best friends." Nancy followed after the two girls with a slightly exasperated look, but David could tell she was happy.

Juliet turned to Satie. "Satie, can you go fill in Debby? She always likes to be informed as soon as possible about upcoming events. Tell her to start thinking about security and what would be required. I don't want there to be any holes this time."

"I can do that," Satie nodded and ran off.

David walked over to Juliet. "I'm glad Ellie has something to do. She's been down ever since her acting job finished, while Aubree still has work to do as the costume designer."

Juliet nodded. "I have been thinking about which job would suit Ellie best. It's a little more difficult with the girls who were teenagers before the transformation; June's the same way. It's not like they automatically receive an education or job experience when they transform."

"Should we have them go back to school?" David asked. "We did send Susan and Leah to college."

Juliet shook her head. "No, that's a bit too risky with little gain. I think we could set up a home school here. We have enough experts. Who knows, maybe somebody will have the inclination to be a teacher."

"Hey, Jules," Marci said, breaking into the conversation.

Juliet's eye twitched. She glanced at Marci. "Yes, Marci?"

Marci grinned. "Just wanted to see if you'd respond to that name. I'll be sure to pass the word around."

"Please, don't," Juliet said. "Is that all you need?"

"Nope," Marci responded brightly. "David, I've been going through my old contacts as a lawyer to fill some of our needed spots. I think I found a guy."

"Really?" David said. "Who is it?"

Marci rubbed the back of her neck in embarrassment. "Truth is, I was on the opposing side of his case. He sued the company I was hired to represent after he'd gotten in a lab accident. Needless to say, he lost, and it probably ruined his life. I sort of want to make it up to him."

-----

Chris groaned as he opened his eyes. Pain. Every day. So much pain.

He reached over to the nightstand with deformed hands and grabbed his painkillers. Carefully, oh so carefully, he poured the pills onto the counter. In the past, he had rushed to take the pills, but after dropping the expensive pills multiple times, he had learned.

Chris swallowed the pills and waited. Slowly, so slowly. The pain abated. He breathed a sigh of relief. More than most, he knew the pills were killing him. He didn't care. He had nothing left. His fiancée had left him. His parents were dead. Friends, gone. They had stuck around to help him, but his bitterness at the world rubbed them the wrong way. His money. Chris laughed. That was gone with his pills, surgery, and failed legal suits. He chuckled darkly thinking back on his naivety. How could go against a multi-million dollar company? He guessed he should be grateful they still paid for the pills he was addicted to.

Unwillingly, he looked at his hands. They were scarred, had lumps, and three fingers were missing. More than that, he had lost a leg, and his face was scarred. The accident. A chemical explosion had blasted through the lab. In one moment, his life was over. He was lucky to be alive, but more often than not, he wished he wouldn't have survived.

Chris turned on the TV and let his mind numb as he watched show after show. He did this day after day. Sleep, eat pills, and watch TV. Waiting to die.

Chris heard something at the door but ignored it. Again. It took him a while to register that someone was knocking at his door. He rarely got visitors. He hobbled to the door and looked through the eyehole. The sight made him pause. A beautiful girl in her early twenties with tanned skin. She wore casual clothes, held a hat in her hands, and wore a kind expression. Immediately, he felt suspicious.

While keeping the bolt locked, he cracked the door open. "Yes?"

The girl smiled brightly. "Hello, Mr. Christopher Anderson. My name is Marci. May I come in?"

"What do you want?" Chris asked curtly.

"I don't know if you remember a lawyer named Marcus Evans. He was the lawyer representing Solaris Solutions during your court case."

Chris winced. He remembered the arrogant man who tore apart his cheap lawyer. "Yeah. I remember him. What about it?"

"I'm his niece," Marci said. "He passed away recently."

"Good riddance. What does that have to do with me?"

"Before he died, he left something to you through me," Marci explained, not phased at the insult to her uncle. "Uncle Marcus had a lot of regrets in his life. Your case was near the top. He wanted me to come by to try and make amends."

"And how is he able to do that?" Chris asked skeptically. "No surgery will help my hands or legs anymore."

"Please, just listen to my offer."

Chris sighed. "Fine." He unlocked the door and let the young woman in.

Now that he got a better look at her, she was gorgeous. Curves all in the right places and a face that held a beauty only seen in photoshopped pictures. He led her inside. Chris felt incredibly self-conscious about the state of his apartment. The dishes were piling in the sink, a layer of dust covered nearly every surface, and random things were thrown all over the floor. He guessed he should be grateful she wasn't going into his room. Marci took in the apartment with a swift gaze. Her expression didn't change at all. That almost made it worse, like it was expected. Chris cleared off the kitchen table.

Marci said, "I won't take up much of your time. Before my uncle passed, one of his investments focused on healing and de-aging. Well, he passed away before it was finished. However, his slot is still available. He gave the slot to me, but he made me promise to give it to you if he died before using it. I am honoring that request."

Chris looked at her with suspicion. "There's no such thing as a cure-all drug or treatment."

"Of course, there's a side effect and corresponding requirement," Marci said. "The treatment will give you a new body. As such, you will have to leave your life behind."

"You aren't making yourself more credible."

Marci smiled. "I never said it was through science. Tell me, have you heard of the Flame Mystic?"

The statement had caught him off guard. Of course, he had. Everyone had, especially those with sicknesses or disabilities. People have been clamoring to gain any information about the

enigma but very little was found. Chris had dreamed of being healed by her ever since he heard the stories and followed all of the news articles. "You mean to tell me you know who she is?"

"Yes," Marci nodded. "I have access to her through my slot."

"And you're giving this slot to me? I thought she only healed women."

"You know your stuff," Marci said. "It's not that she can't heal men; it works differently. Hence the leaving your life behind requirement. There is one more reason I choose to give it to you. Your mind."

"What?"

"I did my research on you before. You are a genius. Your work paved the way for many advancements. I felt it a pity to let you waste away here." She motioned at the filthy room.

Chris thought for a long moment, letting what she said sink in. He stared at his hands. He could get healed. He could continue his work. He could live again. "Please, don't give me hope."

He flinched when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Marci stood over him with a gentle expression. "Hope is a wonderful thing. It keeps us living." She sat back down. "Honestly, you have nothing to lose by doing so."

"I could end up dead because of it," Chris said.

"Please, you gave up a long time ago," Marci said. "You drove everyone who cared about you away and have done nothing with your life since the accident."

"Alright, fine. You've got me. When and where?"

Marci grinned and put on her hat and a mask to cover her face. "Right now."

Five minutes later, Chris and Marci climbed into a van and were driving to an unknown location.

"You need to work on not appearing to be so sketchy," Chris said. "I can't believe I got into an unmarked van with a stranger."

Marci removed her mask and smiled. "At least I didn't offer candy."

"I don't know, complete healing is much much worse," Chris replied. "Was the hat and mask really necessary?"

"I wanted to be safe. You'll be marked missing in a few days, and I didn't want anybody to get a good description of me. I double-checked there were no security cameras between your



apartment and the van. Very few people are out and about during this time, so there shouldn't be any witnesses. If we're lucky, the investigators will think you jumped off a bridge or something. Or if someone saw me, they'd think you found a woman and left with her. Either way, there shouldn't be anything to tie you back to the Mystic."

"It feels like I'm being complicit in my own murder."

They drove to an abandoned mall that was under construction and went to an underground parking lot. A woman approached them.

"Welcome back, Marci," the woman said. "I take it all went well."

"Yep, he's right here, Debby."

"Good job," Debby said, then turned to Chris. "Right this way."

Chris followed, but something felt off. They felt too . . . familiar. "Marci, are you that lawyer's niece?"

Marci looked surprised. "Wow, you picked up on that? Nope, I am Marcus. Or at least I was. Getting healed will turn you into a woman. Nice to meet you again."

Chris tripped on his prosthetic leg and almost faceplanted if Marci hadn't caught him. "What?" He couldn't comprehend what she said.

The woman leading glared at Marci. "Marci, you said too much."

"Debby, please, David would have said as much. Especially since he can't leave. Or do you think you won't be able to handle a one-legged man? I want to see if it'll have better results if he knows everything. I'm doing a study, remember?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Chris said. "Back up. I'll turn into a woman?"

"Yep, and a beautiful young one at that." Marci posed. "Just look at me. You're in your forties, right? You'll lose at least two decades. Debby and Satie over there were also men before."

"Wha-? How?"

"I'll keep it short," Debby said. "A young man named David found a magic stone that gave him the power to transform anybody he touches into a beautiful young woman. He's the Mystic. David wants to use the power to help those around him. That's why he did the hospital visit that made him famous."

"I try my best," a young man said, stepping out of the room they were walking towards. "I see you already gave him the rundown. Hi, my name is David."

"Um, hi," Chris said dully. His mind was still reeling. The young man in front of him was in his teens and looked painfully average. He had short brown hair, but he held himself with what seemed like a newfound confidence. Still, Chris couldn't reconcile he was the famous Mystic. "So, I'm going to turn into a woman?"

"Afraid so. I can't control that part."

"Can you control anything about it?"

"The time of the transformation. Maybe your age at a subconscious level. We haven't quite figured that out. But, you'll have more control than me."

"I will?"

"As far as we can tell, you will gain the body type and personality of your ideal girl. One of the reasons we wanted to recruit you was for you to research exactly what happens. We still have a lot of questions."

"Can I say no?"

David eyed him. "Do you not want to be healed? I thought you came here with the intent to leave your life behind."

"I did, but . . ." Chris hesitated. "A woman?"

David shook his head. "I'm sorry, at this point, we can't let you leave unless you transform. If you really don't want to go through with it, we can probably keep you here until we go public. Kidnapping someone will be the least of our crimes by that point."

"You're going public?" Chris asked. "You're going to tell everyone about this? That's . . ."

"Don't worry," David said. "Debby worries enough for all of us."

"And for good reason," Debby called back.

"Anyway," David continued. "We are making preparations to keep me and the girls safe."

"How do you know I won't tell everyone about you after I transform?" Chris asked.

“Oh, you won’t,” David said. “Your mind will adjust to become completely devoted to me. It’s one of the hardest things to get used to. Not that I would, but if I asked one of these girls to die for me, they would.”

“Yep,” Marci said.

“Without hesitation,” Debby replied.

“And you want me to become like that?” Chris asked.

“If I wanted to transform you, I would. All it takes is a touch. But, I won’t. Your help would be nice, but we could find someone else to do the research.”

Chris thought about it, then the painkiller started to wear off. His whole body throbbed, even worse than usual. He groaned as he took out his pills, but his hands were shaking way too much and the pills dropped to the floor. Marci rushed to pick one of them up and handed it to him. Chris immediately swallowed it.

When the pain was reduced to a manageable level, he stood up and looked at David. “Will the pain go away?”

David nodded. “With everybody that I’ve touched, no matter how bad it was before, they were completely cured.”

Chris nodded. “Then do it. Now. Before I change my mind.”

“Ok, here I go. Have an image of the girl you want to be.” David touched his shoulder.

Chris immediately felt a shock run through his body. The stump where his missing leg was started to itch. Then, like a loaded spring, something pushed the prosthetic leg out. The force of the push caused him to get launched to the side. He ended up on the floor with a few new bruises, but he ignored them all. His leg had grown back! He looked at his bare foot and wiggled his toes. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. He didn’t even mind when his foot took on a distinctly feminine appearance.

Chris climbed back to his feet and almost toppled back to the ground. He was short! At least eight inches smaller. His clothes felt incredibly baggy. Until they weren’t. When he left his house, he only put on some jeans and a worn-out T-shirt. However, his jeans melted away into nice slacks and his shirt became a collared green shirt with a brown vest, though it was a lot v-neck that revealed his chest. Then out of nowhere, a white lab coat materialized around him along with a pair of glasses on his face. Chris felt incredibly confused. Where had those clothes come from? It broke every rule that he knew of.

Underneath the clothes, he felt changes. His chest swelled, his manhood disappeared, and his hips got wider. His face even felt a bit numb where he could imagine any masculine features melted away into femininity. His hair remained short, though it did grow to his shoulders, and Chris thought he saw a hint of blue in his dark hair.

But, Chris ignored all of that. He only focused on his hands. The scars had disappeared. And so had the pain. He touched his face. Smooth. No pain. Tears welled up in his eyes. Even the addiction he felt towards the drugs faded to nothing. He was clean.



“How are you feeling?” David asked.

Chris looked at him. The world faded to nothing except him. HIM! He was everything! Her heart beat faster. What was this feeling? She remembered courting her old fiancée, but this? This was on a completely different scale. Passion! She felt passion like she'd never felt before.

“I feel . . .” She stepped forward licking her lips. “I feel like I want to do . . . many things to you.” She felt alive. Before anyone could stop her, Chris pushed David to the ground and kissed him hard.

Chris felt hands lift her off of David as she was ripping off his shirt. She fought like a feral cat, but she couldn't move. “Let me go!”

Debby groaned. “Looks like we've got another problem girl. Ouch! Calm down!” But, Chris kept thrashing.

Suddenly, Chris felt a sharp pain on her cheek. Marci had slapped her! Chris glared, but the passion faded and the world came back into focus. What had she been doing? She lost control. It felt really good but scared her at the same time.

Marci looked at her with hard eyes. “Better?”

Chris nodded. “I, uh, think so?” Her mouth was dry. She looked around, but David was nowhere to be seen. “Where is he?”

“He thought it'd be best to leave the room while you get your feelings sorted,” Marci replied. “I don't know if I've seen a girl react this strongly. Did you have a thing for aggressive girls?”

Chris thought of her life as a guy. “Yeah, you know what, I think I did. I was engaged before the accident. We were both students at grad school when we met. We matched well. Maybe too well. We never fought or were overly physical or passionate. We had a logical relationship. I occasionally wanted to lose control but never took the initiative. In the end, nothing happened and the accident broke our relationship.” She looked at Marci with a fire in her eyes. “I felt alive, Marci! I've never felt like that!”

Debby squeezed her grip a bit stronger, and Chris squeaked in pain. “Well, you'll need to tone it down. We've got about two dozen girls in love with David and if you do that in front of them, you'll probably never see the light of day again.”

“R-right, I'll work on it,” Chris said. “You can let me go.” Debby let her go but remained attentive.

“The next item on the list, are you still interested in research, or was the lab coat a fetish thing?” Marci motioned at her lab coat.

“What? Fetish?” Chris blushed when she thought about how her male self felt about cute girls in lab coats and glasses. “Okay, maybe a bit. I had a classmate who pulled it off quite well. I was never the same after that. I . . . should probably erase my browsing history, huh?”

Marci smirked. “I think that boat has sailed. But, back to the question, do you want to do research? We’ve got a lot of questions about these transformations, and you have the expertise to figure out exactly what happens. If you don’t, it’s fine. I was initially brought in to be a lawyer, but I have absolutely no interest in that now.”

Chris thought about it. “Yeah, I do. I miss the work a lot. I’ve been wasting away for years. It’s time to do something with my life.”

“Good,” Marci nodded. “We’ll support you as much as possible. We even started buying lab equipment. Final question for now, what do you want us to call you? Chris can be a girl’s name, so you can keep it if you want.”

“Hmm, I think I want to move away from my old life. How about Caitlyn? That was the name of that girl who I had a crush on with the lab coat.”

“Welcome to the team, Caitlyn,” Marci said.