

She lay awake, staring at the ceiling wondering for the umpteenth time if she should go out to the kitchen for a glass of warm milk. Pulling back the blankets she swung her legs onto the icy floor. Shivering, she pulled a threadbare peach terrycloth robe about her. She slipped her feet into a pair of fuzzy lamb slippers. Wriggling her toes, a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. She made her way into the kitchen, walking through the pitch-dark halls by rote. She opened the refrigerator and retrieved the milk. As she was reaching for a glass, a cold hand came across her mouth. The glass tumbled from her fingers, shattering on the floor around her feet. She felt several shards dig into the soles of her slipper covered feet as she was dragged from the room.

The sound of tearing cloth shattered the silence of the secluded house. Screams rent the night, echoing for miles yet reaching no living soul.

Michael Taggart stood just inside the room. The heavy wood furniture had been overturned and even turned into splinters in some cases. In one corner someone had already lost his lunch. Several more looked like they wanted to. He crossed the floor of what had once been an elegant bedroom, surveying the crime scene. “Dr. Montoya?” He gestured to the mutilated body. “What have we got?”

“Caucasian female. Mid to late twenties. Been dead less than twenty hours, if I had to guess. I’ll be more exact when I get her back to the office. She died from severe trauma. Her neck is broken.”

“She sustained several lacerations as well.” He murmured thoughtfully.

“Where’s all the blood?”

Michael looked up. He met the county coroner’s deep green eyes. “Where’s all the blood,” he echoed. “I don’t suppose there’s blood anywhere else in the house?” He took in the shaken head with stoicism. “Another one for the serial killer.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Just great!” He dropped his hand to his side with a sharp slap. “Get back to work. I need that report on my desk tonight.”

“Tonight?! Tonight when?”

“Top priority Maggie. Tonight!” He turned and left. Moving deeper into the house, he found the master bedroom. It had been tossed. Clothing was torn and strewn everywhere. The scent of perfume wafted up from broken bottles, overpowering any other scent that might be there. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he covered his nose and mouth before stepping inside. Coughing, he pulled a pair of rubber gloves from his pocket and donned them. Running his finger over each surface he passed. When he reached the bedside table he found a book lying face down on its surface.

“She was neat as a pin. An artist, according to her financial records.”

He looked up and found a lieutenant in the doorway. “Does she have a name?”

“Madelaine Grey, Detective Taggart.”

“Grey?” Michael dropped his head into his hand. “This just keeps getting deeper. Thank you lieutenant. Get back to work.” He lifted the book from the table and idly flipped through the pages. His attention was caught a few pages into the book. Backing up a page, he scanned the careful script again.

He followed me to the gallery again today. I don’t know what he wants. I wish he’d stop following me.

Reading further he found several more entries talking about a mystery man following her.

He was in the west hall again. I ran into him coming out of the exhibit hall. His hands were icy as they bit into my shoulders. Made me wish I had worn my jacket. He scares me.

A sound outside the room startled him from his reading. Snapping the book shut, he slipped it into a glassine bag. Glancing at his watch he hurried out of the room. Pointing at the cop guarding the front door, he gestured with the book. “I’m returning to the station.” Handing the book to the uniformed officer, he frowned. “Have this booked into evidence and see that I get copies ASAP.”

“Yes sir.”

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A single lamp burned in the darkness illuminating a snifter of amber liquid. A slender white hand appeared from the shadows and lifted the glass from the table. Ice clinked hollowly as the empty glass was set back down. A phone rang and was answered. “Yes?” Silence reigned for several moments. “I told you, she’s dead.” Another silence

reigned. "I'll take care of it. No! Don't ask me that again!" A dark shadow detached itself from the rest and moved swiftly away from the light. Moments later a door slammed.

He stood on the narrow ledge. His keen eyes watched the lighted window more than fifty feet away. He watched the shadow's moving on the wall. His patience was unmatched. When the light went out, he waited three minutes. One step forward and he was in free fall. His body plummeted towards the ground, even as his spirit acquired wings. He almost lost himself in the joy of his death defying flight. He let loose a high-pitched squeal, which echoed off everything around him. He bunched his legs up in preparation to land. His feet hit the sidewalk moments before the elevator reached the ground floor, his long black coat flapping and settling around him. Fading back against the building he waited for his quarry to appear.

The seconds were ticking slowly by when he caught a whiff of the target's cologne. "Mmm. A little spice always adds to the flavor." He watched closely as the door opened. His foot was kicked up on the wall and he was studiously looking at his fingernails when the man came out of the building. He smiled nonchalantly and nodded. "Good evening detective." His voice was like liquid smoke, hanging in the air. "Got a few minutes?" He pulled the collar of his coat up around his ears and pushed away from the wall. The cop was eyeing him suspiciously and he almost smiled.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any change."

"I'm not interested in your change detective. I have information for you." He smiled slowly. "I know who your serial killer is." *That got his attention!* He almost chuckled as the cop's eyes widened. "Interested?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets and started down the street whistling a jaunty tune.

"Wait! Just a minute! What do you mean you know who the killer is? Where'd you get the information?"

He stopped and let the cop come abreast of him. "It's a long story. Walk with me and I'll tell you." Gesturing forward, he started walking again. "It was a dark and stormy night." He chuckled as the cop fell into step with him. "Corny line, I know, but it's true. He approached me about six months ago when we had that really nasty storm." His mind flitted back to the stormy night he'd been on this same bridge. "He approached me on this bridge. I was out walking, minding my own business. Called himself Fletcher. Tiberius Fletcher." He turned to look out at the water. "Was right here that he asked me to help him kill his first victims."

"You turned him down, I assume, since you are coming to me with this information?"

"Naturally. I don't go in for that kind of business. I told him as much. He said he'd heard my name mentioned in connection with the Harper killings." He shrugged elegantly. "I simply told him that I'd been exonerated and left it at that. All I know is that he left me with the same calling card as he leaves on his victims." The pale man pulled an object from his pocket and handed it to the cop. "He leaves a silver hatpin on each of his victims. He gave me one that night and told me if I ever changed my mind to look him up."

"Mind if I keep this?"

"By all means detective. It's why I gave it to you in the first place. I just want vermin like this to be removed from the streets. His kind are dangerous for society."

"I understand completely, sir. If you could just tell me your name and give me an address where you can be reached. Also, you'll want to stay in the area. I'd like to confirm your information and may need to question you further."

"I understand detective. My name is Adeo Sidonius. 7312 Overton Rd."

"You're a local?"

"I have been here for many years, if that is what you are wondering." He felt someone watching him and turned casually. A feral smile crept onto his face as he recognized the man he was setting up. "Detective, what would you say if I could tell you where Fletcher is right now?"

"That'd be fortuitous. Why?"

The pale man gestured. "Because he's standing right over there watching us." When the cop turned and started after the suspect, he leapt into the air and disappeared over the railing.

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Michael started off after the man that his informant had implicated. Turning back, he spoke, "Mr. Sidonius, please..." He trailed off as he realized that the man had disappeared. With a frown, he turned back towards the suspect. Crossing the street, he walked up to the short, balding man. It surprised the detective that the man just stood there waiting for him. He stopped before the man and noticed a spicy aroma. "Tiberius Fletcher?"

"That'd be me. S'pose he told ya that I was responsible for the killings?" The detective nodded and pulled the pin from his pocket. "Thought so. Damned foreigner. I knew I shouldn't a got mixed up with the likes of him."

“Mr. Fletcher, I’m Detective Michael Taggart. Are you trying to tell me that you know he implicated you in the killings?”

“Well duh!”

“I see. Mr. Fletcher, would you mind coming down to the precinct? I’d like to fill out a statement and get your side of the story. You do realize that he’s implicated you as the murderer, right?”

“Yeah, I understand. You arresting me, or am I goin on my own volition?”

“I’m not arresting you, so long as you cooperate.” The detective gestured back down the street. “Shall we?” They got up to the fifth floor and he opened the door to an office. “Step inside and take a seat.” Switching on the lights, he moved around the desk and sat. Frowning at the balding man, he gestured to a seat again. “Sit down, Mr. Fletcher.”

“You got a swanky office here detective. What’s a desk jockey like you make?”

“Mr. Fletcher,” Michael steepled his fingers. “Perhaps you should sit down and start at the beginning. Tell me what you know about the Atropos Killings.”

“That freak you were just talking to, Trimmer, he approached me several weeks before the first killing. Said he was looking for someone to do the dirty work for him. Couldn’t get his lily-white hands dirtied with someone else’s blood. I says to him, that I’m not in that line of work no more. Did my time in Sing-Sing for it. Don’t want nothin more to do with that work. I’m an honest man now.”

“And just what **do** you do, Mr. Fletcher?” Michael tapped some instructions into his computer and brought up the Criminal Investigations database. He searched for Fletcher’s record and nearly gagged when it came up.

“I’m a commodities broker now. I deal in art mostly.”

“I see. And Mr. Fletcher, when was the last time you spoke to your parole officer?”

“Six months ago. Don’t see him for another two weeks. Why?”

“Just gathering as much as I can. Now, Mr. Fletcher, when this man approached you. What exactly did he ask you to do?”

“Well, see. He asked me to ice a couple of broads that had solicited him. Said they were too... independent, if ya follow me? Wanted me to do em while I did it. Said it was a reward for being good at my job.”

Michael Taggart felt his stomach churn at the images of defiling women came to him. “And you didn’t report him to the cops when the women were found dead?”

“Shoot! Now why would I do that? You think I want my name linked with more killin? You gotta be outta your ever lovin.”

Michael watched carefully as the seeds he’d planted began to take root and the man’s tirade lost steam. “Mr. Fletcher,” he said quietly. “An honest citizen would have reported the crimes. He would have helped bring the killer to justice.”

“Detective, I ain’t sayin that I’m in on this, but what do you think it woulda looked like to my parole officer? He woulda had em throw me back into the clink! Stupid copper! Never have trusted you smarmy bastards.”

Michael pushed a button hidden under the edge of his desk. “Sit down Mr. Fletcher. I’d like to hear your story from beginning to end but you have to calm down. Remember, you’re here of your own volition.” He watched the agitated man pace. Shaking his head, he gave no outward sign of the relief he felt when the door opened and two uniformed officers stepped in. Rising from his desk, he came around the edge and... “Oof!”

“You lied to me copper! You said I was here at my own volition!”

“Mr. Fletcher, you were... until now.” Michael straightened and gestured to the two cops that had stepped in to restrain the man. “Arrest him.” He rubbed fingers over his still tender stomach. “Book him on charges of assaulting a police officer.”

“Yes sir, Detective Taggart. You need a doc?”

Michael waved the officers away. “No, I’ll be alright. Watch his right hook, though.”

“Yes sir.”

Michael walked back to the computer and hit the print button. Following the officers out the door, he locked his office and joined them in booking. He took notes on what came out of the suspect’s pockets. When the silver hatpin came out of his jacket, the detective grimaced. “Damn!” He threw his notebook across the room, hitting the two-way glass in the observation room. “Smarmy bastard indeed!” He stomped out of the room and into the booking area. “I also want this man charged with homicide. We’ve found our serial killer.” Sickened by the smug look on the prisoner’s face, he turned and stalked from the room.

The shadows concealed his face; his hands were sheathed in black leather. He watched the woman through the trees. Her red hair picked up the moonlight. His breath caught as her dress dropped and her alabaster skin was revealed. A predatory grin spread across his lips. Moving as silently as the breeze, he slipped through the trees. He watched her move towards the water and licked his lips. At the edge of the trees he shed his coat and gloves.

The moonlight glinted off his snow-white shirt. He stepped slowly across the sand, dressed like a buccaneer of old. When he saw her emerge from the water he glided to its edge. His eyes glittered, jewel bright. A song, ancient in origin and tongue spilled from his lips. He drew her as a siren draws ships in the sea. He opened his arms to her.

Detective Michael Taggart stared down at the body. It was bloated and unnaturally white. Disgust burned the back of his throat as lack of sleep burned his eyes. He turned away from the scene and trudged back to his car. Lifting the radio microphone from its cradle he called dispatch. "Lucy run a check on the cell block. Find out if Mr. Fletcher had any visitors last night or today."

"Will do."

He waited several minutes listening to the general chatter coming across the line. Accepting the cup of coffee that was thrust under his nose without looking up.

"Michael? No visitors but he did make a phone call."

"Thanks Lucy." Dropping the microphone he turned to look out over the beach. Uniformed officers dotted the sand like ants marching to a picnic. Several more filtered through the edge of the trees like hummingbirds searching for nectar. Shaking his head he pushed away from the car. "Dammit! Who is your accomplice? Who are you working with?"

"There was no calling card this time, sir. All we found was this."

Michael looked up to see the uniformed officer that had handed him the coffee holding out a glassine bag. Inside it was a scrap of cloth. He took the bag and examined it. The material was very old, the lace exquisite, and embroidered in the outside corner were two small letters. He couldn't quite make out what they were. "I'm going to take this back to the station. Give it to the lab boys. Thank you, sergeant." Nodding absently, he turned and slid behind the wheel of the car. Starting it up he turned to the officer. "Get this crime scene buttoned up."

"Yes sir."

The drive back to the precinct was filled with thoughtful silence. Broken only by the static and random chatter of the radio beside him. His mind was slowly processing the information it had been fed. *Fed... food. I need to eat something. Mom always did tell me that I thought better on a full stomach.* Pulling into his slot he switched the engine off. Lifting the glassine bag from the seat beside him the detective tapped it against the steering wheel. Deep in thought he didn't see the pale man dressed in a long black coat and a wide-brimmed hat approach. A sharp rap on the window jerked him out of his reverie.

"Detective Taggart?"

Michael recovered from his shock and gestured the man back. Opening his door, he stuffed the glassine bag into his pocket and got out. "Mr. Sidonius, what can I do for you?"

"I heard you caught the killer. Does this mean that the murders will stop now?"

The detective shook his head. "I'm sorry Mr. Sidonius. I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of this case. If you have any further information for me, I'd be happy to speak to you in my office. Otherwise, if you will excuse me? I have a great deal of work to do and my day is just beginning."

"Forgive me, detective. I am just worried about my own safety and yours."

"I'm trained to take care of myself in any situation. As for your own, did Mr. Fletcher ever threaten violence against you?" He eyed the man carefully. There was something niggling at the back of his brain something off color.

"Once or twice. I am glad he is behind bars again."

"Again?" Taggart took a step towards the door. "Why don't you come to my office, Mr. Sidonius? We can discuss what you know about Mr. Fletcher." He opened the door and gestured for the pale man to precede him. "I think it's time we had a chat, don't you?"

"I don't know that I can really tell you anything at all, detective. I don't know Fletcher all that well. Just what I was able to dig up about him in old newspaper archives."

"Well then we'll have a nice short chat. I'd be interested to see if my information coincides with yours." He watched the man shrug and reach under his coat. Michael's eyes were alert, his body tensed in an instant. He felt a bead of sweat trickle under his collar. His hand itched to reach under his jacket. When the pale man's slim hand came out from under his coat holding a plastic baggie and a folder, he relaxed marginally.

"This is everything I was able to dig up and the letters he sent me."

The detective frowned. "Come on. We can discuss this in my office." He led the way to his office and unlocked the door. Going around the desk he brought up his computer. Seeing a flashing window, he gestured to the visitor's seat. "Give me just a minute and we'll get down to business." Opening the window he read the message and blanched. "No!"

"Detective?"

“Huh?” Michael looked up. “Sorry. Inner office memo.” He cleared his throat. “Now, where were we? Ah yes. You had more information for me. May I?” He gestured across the desk for the folder and baggie.

“Of course. I don’t want to sound rude, but you look like someone just walked over your grave.”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “I’m all right.” He took the folder and flipped through its contents. There were several old newspaper clippings concerning the trial and Mr. Fletcher’s eventual incarceration at Ossining prison. There really wasn’t anything new. He’d read court reports on the case until his eyes bled. His head ached just remembering the midnight oil he’d burned the night before. Flipping the folder closed he set it on the desk between them. “This matches the information I have. Now,” he gestured to the baggie, “why don’t you tell me about those.”

“These are the threatening letters I was telling you about. He sent them from neighboring townships, even as far away as New York City once. Never signed them, but I could tell his handwriting.”

“Hmmm...” Michael dumped the contents of the baggie on his blotter. He picked up the top sheet and read it carefully. The letter was done in a looping script. It requested that a man named The Trimmer meet him. The next letter added a threat. There were seventeen letters in all, each one more viscous than the last. “How long have you been receiving these? And who is the Trimmer?”

“Since he first approached me. I was saddled with the name years ago.”

“Mr. Sidonius, I have to ask. Why didn’t you come to the cops before now? Why did you wait six months before you reported these letters? Were you planning a little vigilante justice?” His eyes narrowed when laughter spilled from the man’s lips.

“Now why would I do something that stupid? That would imply that I thought I could get away with it. We no longer live in the colonies. Time has marched forward. This is no longer the time when one can safely be a vigilante.”

Michael’s hand crept under the edge of his desk, his finger hovering over the button embedded there. “You haven’t answered my questions?” He kept his voice carefully schooled, despite his growing trepidation. “Why did you wait for so long before coming to us with this information?”

“Detective, I am a private man. I do not go out seeking trouble.”

Michael nodded. “Very commendable sir, but the point remains that you did not come to us with this immediately. Do you realize how that looks to us? For my part I’d be willing to give you the benefit of doubt. However, you need to be straight with me right now. Why didn’t you come to the cops when you got the first letter?”

“I wasn’t worried about the threats. I have received threats before. I have survived.”

“Mr. Sidonius, I am inclined to believe that you can take care of yourself. What I really want to know is why, when you knew this man had asked you to help him, didn’t you come to the police and report it? You could have saved those women.”

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He is pathetic! Look at the way he scrambles to understand without pointing fingers. How long should I play with him? He is weak. An almost feral growl erupted from his lips as the detective continued to probe. “Detective Taggart.” He held up a hand. “I understand how suspicious it looks. But you have to understand something. I am from a very influential family. For as long as I can remember there have been threats against someone. It is not something I have ever really worried about.”

“I’ve never heard a name like Sidonius before. What is that, Russian? Italian? French?”

“Roman.” Adeo almost laughed at the incredulous look the cop gave him. “I come from a very old family.”

“After the first women died, which it’s apparent you knew about. Why didn’t you come in and report it?”

Adeo rose. “I think we’re done here. I would keep Fletcher under watchful eyes if I were you.” With a swirl of his long coat, he stole out of the office before the detective could even blink.

I lie here awake every night wondering what its all for. Shadows surround me always. I never feel the warmth of the sun. Why do I keep killing them? They didn’t do anything to me. What is it about these women that compels me to kill them? Adeo lay stretched in a patch of moonlight. Through the skylight directly above his bed, he could see the stars their pale cold orbs winking billions of years in the past. The weight of his crimes crushed in on him from all sides sending a spike of pain from ages past lancing through him. His eyes closed like the curtains of a stage are drawn after the last act. Waves of pain rolled over him. Crashing like an ocean at high tide, then easing to gentle swells. Relief came when he slipped away into oblivion.

Six hours later he rose. Gone were the fleeting questions. Gone was the doubt. He showered and dressed in denim jeans, a ragged t-shirt, and leather. An anticipatory grin formed for an instant before it was replaced by a look

The detective nodded. "Been a few years since I had someone sneak into my bedroom. Call it reflex. What's your message?"

"Close the file on this one. Give up the chase. Just let the women die. The alternative could be detrimental to your health."

"That's supposed to frighten me? Come on. Surely you can do better than that."

"You don't want to listen?"

Michael shook his head. "I can't do that and you know it." He found himself lying flat on the floor in the next second. The man kneeling on his chest looked familiar yet for some reason he couldn't place him. "What are you going to do about it? If you kill me another cop will just come in and take my place. Turn yourself in and save us some trouble." Darkness stole over him, a cruel chuckle following him into a disturbing nightmare scene.

"You should have listened to me Michael. It would have been a simple thing. Just let the women die and leave me alone. But no, you have to be the hero. Well... There is a price for your heroism."

The face of something beyond the grave loomed out of the darkness. Light glinted off of its teeth, all of which were razor-sharp. The face loomed over him for a second and then buried itself in his throat. There was a soft slurping sound in his right ear that made Michael sick. The last thing he remembered was the sharp lancing pain up his arm.

His head throbbed. Without opening his eyes he knew he was alone. There was a cold burning sensation in his arm. Putting a hand to his right arm, he sat up and opened his eyes. The lamp still burned on his night table. Looking around, he noticed nothing out of place. The gun still lay on the bed. The only difference was the curtains billowing before the open bedroom window. He looked down at his arm. His eyes grew wide and he scrambled to the light for a better look. A long, thin, red line ran from his inner elbow to his wrist. "What the hell?" Surging to his feet, he shoved his legs into his pants and pulled on a shirt. "Damn," he hissed.

His head swam as the fire shot up his arm. Leaving his shirtsleeve unbuttoned, he slipped his holster on and slid his gun home. Stumbling out the door, he managed to make it to his car and crawl behind the wheel. He reached for the radio with his left hand. Dropping the microphone, he hit the power switch. It took him two more tries before he managed to retrieve the microphone. "Lucy," he rasped keying the mic. "Lucy, its Michael. I need medical assist..."

"BP seventy over forty! Heart rate sixty-two and falling. If we don't get him stable now, we're gonna lose him!"

White light filtered around the edges of his vision. Shadows rapidly flickered past.

"BP forty over seventeen! We're losing him!"

"You wanted to play the hero Michael. Was it really worth the price? Don't you want to go out in a blaze of glory, rather than on an operating table?" A cold chuckle filled the air. "I could make the pain go away."

"What did you do to me? You bastard! What did you do to me?" The angry yell echoed through his head. "What did you do?"

"You will soon see."

"He's flat-lining!" A monotonic hum filled the room. "Get the paddles. Charge to one-fifty." Electronic whirring reached a harmonic peak. "Clear!"

One hundred fifty joules of electricity coursed through his skin and straight to his heart. Michael reared up off the bed and flopped back like a dead fish.

"Charge to two hundred." The harmonic peaked again. "Clear!"

Two hundred joules of electricity coursed through Michael's skin and into his chest cavity. He reared up off the table and flopped back. Rhythmic beeping filled the tense silence and a cheer went up in the room.

"All right. Monitor his vitals. Someone get Laboratory up here to take some blood. I want a complete panel done on his chest. Move people!"

Twenty-seven hours later, Michael opened his eyes slowly. "What the hell happened to me," he muttered.

"It appears you had some sort of foreign substance introduced into your bloodstream. It caused you to have a mild heart attack." A white-coated doctor held out a hand. "Good evening Detective Taggart. Frank Delaney. I operated on you."

Michael shook the man's hand. "Dr. Delaney... Delaney? Frank G. Delaney?" His eyes scrutinized the man before him. A sudden thought flickered in his mind like a candle. "Persian Gulf, '91."

The doctor nodded. "That's right. Do I know you?"

Michael cracked a wry smile. "Second Lieutenant Michael Taggart. You operated on my leg when we found that landmine. I was a Sergeant at the time."

"The stoic!" The doctor took his hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically. "Sixteen years! Been a long time son. What happened to get you into the ER?"

"Someone attacked me in my bedroom last night. Gave me this." He showed the doctor his arm. "Knocked me out, did this, and disappeared."

"You want me to get an officer in here to fill out a report?"

Michael winced as the doctor prodded his arm. "I'll fill one out eventually. What exactly did you find, Doc?"

"Foreign agent introduced into your blood. Seems that whatever it was breaks down real easy and leaves no trace. I suspect from the amounts of broken down material we found in your system, that you weren't supposed to survive though." He stepped away for a moment. "I'm going to have to clean this up before it turns septic. Looks like it was done by a razor-sharp blade. I'll want to test it of course, but I'm pretty sure that's how they got the substance into your bloodstream."

"Likely," Michael agreed solemnly. "You better send an officer in. This is going to be a long night."

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Adeo smiled into the darkness. His visit had been fruitful. His stomach tightened and he sighed. The hunger was upon him. He growled softly and rose from his bed. Slipping his leather jacket on, he drifted into the night. The hunger drove him, sinking its teeth into him like it rarely did anymore. He searched the darkest parts of the city for his meal. He found her struggling with a large man, who m reeked of bourbon. A devil's smile twisted his lips as he started forward. "Hey pal! Let the lady go." He sauntered up to them and stopped. "She doesn't want your help man. Let her go."

"Beat it shrimp! This ain't yer concern."

He smiled wider. "But it is." His words flowed over the large guy like honey. Raising his left leg high, he planted his foot in the man's side. Ribs cracked and a howl of pain rent the night, followed by a scream that was abruptly cut off. He scuffled with the man for a few more minutes. When it was all said and done, the man lay on the sidewalk in an undignified heap, bleeding from the nose and ears. His leather jacket torn, Adeo turned back to the frightened woman. "Are you all right?"

"Please don't hurt me!"

He crouched down and put gentle hands on either side of her face. "Shh..." He smiled encouraging her to relax. "I'm going to walk you home now, all right? I wouldn't want you to be attacked again." He raised her to her feet and wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. "It's all right miss. I'll make sure you get home safely."

"Stephanie."

He smiled at her murmur. "A very pretty name for such a nice lady." He pulled her close and walked down the street. When they were several blocks from where she had been attacked, he led her to a door. Lifting her hand, he caressed her flesh with his lips. He felt her shiver and smiled against her hand as he lingered. "May I call upon you again?"

"I know I don't know you very well, but would you come inside for a moment? I'm still scared. I mean what if he knows where I live? What if he breaks into my house? I'd be all alone... defenseless!"

Adeo raised his eyes to hers. Tightening his grip on her hand, he smiled. "Of course, my dear. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if that man came after you again." He followed her inside and closed the door, suppressing a chuckle of satisfaction. He dutifully inspected the house, looking for intruders. Finding none, he returned to the kitchen. "No prowlers," he said coming up behind her. "I'll be going now. You're safe. If you hear anything odd call the police." The hunger gnawed at him, robbing him of speech for a moment. *She smells so good.* His mouth watered and his teeth descended.

"Stay for coffee? It's the least I can do to say thank you."

He nodded in agreement, not trusting himself to speak yet. The change was still happening, the animal coming to the fore. His senses sharpened acutely. He smelled her musky scent and smiled. *She's turned on by me. Even better than I'd hoped.* His eyes picked up her every movement, right down to her trembling. He moved up behind her, his own body exuding a scent that would appeal to her. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her back against him. Weaving a web of erotic promise around her, he bent his head and pressed his lips to her flesh. His spell took firmer hold with each touch to her skin. He felt her submit and turned her to face him. He took her lips in a passionate kiss, losing himself in the flavor of her.

As the sun was rising, the woman reared up off the bed, lost in the pleasure of mating, oblivious of the man sucking the life from her body. He pulled away as she slumped back on the bed. A satisfied smile formed on his face

as he continued his assault on her lifeless body. A growl of animal pleasure rumbled from his throat several minutes later. The warmth bled from her body as he pulled away. He stared at her body as he dressed. Buttoning his shirt, he leaned down and placed a reverent kiss upon her lips. "Such beauty. Thank you for sharing it with me." The sun shone through the window making him sigh. "Another beautiful beginning to a beautiful day." He was whistling a jaunty tune as he stepped out the front door a minute later.

⌘ ⌘

Detective Michel Taggart felt like he'd been run over by a semi. He ran a hand down his lean face and found the sandpaper roughness of a day's growth. His eyes felt like they'd been dipped in coarse sand. He stared at the white walls of the hospital room. Splashes of color, from flowers sent by well wishers, broke the monotony. He ground his teeth in frustration. When the door opened, he smoothed his face into placid lines. The man in a dark suit that came through the door gave him pause.

"Detective Michael Taggart?"

"Can I help you?" Michael crossed his arms over his chest, feeling decidedly naked without his gun.

"Detective, I'm Lieutenant Stevenson, from Internal Affairs. I'd like to speak with you about the recent incident. Normally," Michael gestured the man to a seat. "Thank you. Now, normally we'd have you come down to the office. But given the circumstances, I'm here. Detective can you tell me, in your own words, what happened on the night of October twenty-third?"

Taggart leaned back against his pillows. "I was attacked in my home in the middle of the night."

"Mhmm. And Detective, is it true that you were in the Marine Corps?"

Michael frowned. Mention of his military service rankled him. "That's correct. Now Active Duty Reserves. What is this all about Lieutenant?"

"Standard procedure, Mr. Taggart. Sir, can you tell me why you were removed from the..."

"I'm sorry Lieutenant. My military record is both classified and irrelevant here. Now if you wish to know what happened the other night I will tell you, otherwise get out." His eyes rested calmly on the man's face, though he felt less than calm. "I received a call that my suspect for the Atropos Killings was murdered in his cell. That is still under investigation. A man I could only identify as the serial killer I've been tracking broke into my house just after I received the call. He managed to knock me unconscious. When I came to I had this," he held up his arm revealing the gash. "I struggled out to my car and called dispatch. The next thing I knew I was waking up in the recovery room."

"I see. Detective why are you reluctant to talk about your military career? This is relevant, I assure you. It would seem that you are hiding something. Your behavior of late and the company you have been keeping have drawn the attention of IA. We just want to get to the bottom of this mystery. I hope you understand"

Michael's mouth set in a grim line. "Oh, I understand. I'm telling you right now. I have no connection to the killer. He's some twisted sociopath that we're hunting. My military career is not relevant here and requires particular government clearances to view. Are you telling me," he paused suddenly. "Are you telling me that I am under investigation because I have been talking with witnesses?"

"Not witnesses, Detective. The man that you arrested dies in a jail cell. You, in the thick of a high profile case, are assaulted and nearly killed in your home. Too many coincidences for our taste."

He shrugged. "Lieutenant, I'm not inclined to argue that point. Conduct your investigation. It isn't going to affect me one way or the other. I'm innocent. Now, if you don't mind, I need a nap. Good day."

"We'll be in touch."

The detective nodded. "I've no doubt you will." When the door closed behind the man, Michael swore under his breath.

"Now what has you so worked up soldier? Surely you conducted yourself well."

Michael sat up straight and snapped off a salute. "Sir!"

The salute was returned. "At ease soldier. How are you feeling?"

"I've been better Major Davidson. Definitely been better. Not sure how he overpowered me. I shot him before he managed to." He shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense. None at all."

"I talked to your doctor. He said there was some sort of foreign agent introduced into your bloodstream. Nearly killed you from what I hear."

"Yes sir. Whatever he did, he did it here." He bared his arm so the Major could see the wound. "It was the serial killer I've been trying to catch."

"Hmm... I might as well tell you. Internal Affairs was snooping into your background."

Michael's head came up and he opened his mouth to speak, a hand forestalled him.

"They were told nothing of your current assignment. Just that you are Active Duty Reserves. Tell me more about this man that attacked you."

Michael shifted into a more comfortable position. "He's about my height. Slender but apparently well muscled. If I had to guess I'd say that he's about my age. Quite pale, and blonde. I don't know much beyond that. Though I have my suspicions. I don't have any real evidence yet, but I suspect this man that's been feeding me information. He knows an awful lot and he knew about the one suspect that I had."

"Interesting. I'll look into it for you."

"Major, I don't want to put you at risk. This man is good."

"Do you have a name of your suspect? Strictly off the record?"

Michael sighed. "Adeo Sidonius. This stays strictly off the record?"

"It does. What else do you have for me?"

"In the nightstand on the far side of the bed. There's a hidden compartment in the back of the top drawer. Inside you'll find a disk with all the data I've collected so far. I still have a few leads out there. I just have to tap them."

"Understood. You're making progress?"

"I am." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I want retribution for this crime. I just have to keep on this case too. Benny was a good woman. She didn't deserve to go out that way."

"We'll get em. Now, why don't you get some rest? I'll have something for you in a day or so. Get well soon Mike."

"Yes sir." He saluted tiredly. His head hit the pillow as the door closed.

Michael stared at his computer screen. He ran his hand through his hair again. He'd been back in the office for a week and still had no leads. "How did you get into that cell?" He rolled through the video camera footage again. He slowed it down to watch each frame separately. One minute his prisoner was alive, preparing for bed. The next he was lying in his bunk with a silver hatpin sticking from his forehead. "Through the bone," he muttered with a shudder.

A knock sounded on his door. He reached into the half open top drawer next to him and flicked the safety off. His hand rested on the blue-black steel of the Berretta 9mm it contained. "It's open!"

The door opened. A tall skinny boy with acne stepped in. He held a package in his hand. "Lieutenant Taggart?"

Michael's eyes narrowed as he took in the obvious bearing of a raw recruit. The delivery uniform the boy wore was obviously two or three sizes too large for him. "What can I do for you son?"

"I have a package for you, sir. Special delivery, needs your John Hancock."

When the boy pulled a sealed envelope and a scanning device from under his bulky clothing, Michael nodded. He pulled his hand out of the drawer and reached for his wallet. "I have the necessary clearance." He produced a special military I.D. and swiped it through the scanner. After giving his digital signature, he took possession of the package and dismissed the delivery boy. "Must be important if I'm getting it here." He slipped a knife under the edge of the envelope, then hid it away again. The contents weren't quite what he expected. Dumping them on his desk, he sifted through the data discs and other debris. Lifting out a key ring he grimaced.

The shutter closed with a snap. "Did he take it?"

"Yes sir."

"Good."

⊗ ⊗

Water splashed. Laughter spilled from the lighted doorway. A louder splash and more laughter followed a shriek of indignation.

Adeo smiled softly. *I love a challenge.* He listened for several moments pin-pointing each woman's laugh. *Five! My lucky number.* His smile became a feral grin as he sauntered towards the open doorway. He surveyed the room for a moment. White tiles surrounded the large kidney-shaped pool and deep-set circular hot tub. Crème-colored strap lounges littered the room. On the opposite side of the pool from his stood a circle of women laughing and talking excitedly.

He drifted into the room a cloud of steam converging on the floor around him as the door whispered closed. He nonchalantly laid his towel on one of the chairs and dropped his robe beside it. Raising his arms above his head, he stretched like a cat. His stomach muscles rippled and flowed as he moved. He studiously ignored the stares he got

from the women and moved towards the diving boards. Climbing to the highest one, he took a rearward facing position and fell backwards. His hands came up above his head to form a sword point before him as he entered the water.

When he broke the surface of the water moments later, he swam to a side and hauled himself from the water. He climbed to the top board again. This time he leaped up into the air and did a quick triple somersault before disappearing beneath the surface. He took several minutes to come to the surface this time. When he did finally break through a layer of fog covered the water and obscured the view of the women. He swam silent as a shark, towards the wall of the pool and slithered onto the deck. He emerged from the mist like some glistening Adonis.

The women were gathered near the side of the pool and gasped as he materialized from nowhere. He flashed a cocky grin. "A new record." He moved his hand lazily and the door slid shut the lock tumbling into place without a sound. He bowed slightly. "Forgive me for frightening you ladies. I have been trying to break my record time for breath holding. He noted that the one who had been tossed in the pool simply nodded and turned away. Her cheeks pink with embarrassment. *I wonder what it is that embarrasses her?* The others were cooing and pawing at him as he tracked her movement. Ignoring them he started off after her. When she sat on the edge of the pool, he sank down next to her. "Hi."

"Hell...hello."

"I saw them throw you in earlier." He paused as her embarrassment grew. Linking his hands nervously, he continued tentatively. "I could teach you how to swim...if you like?"

"You'd do that for me? But you don't even know me. Why would you do that for me?"

"I like you." He looked down at his hands. "I just don't like to see a pretty girl cry." He smiled a soft reluctant smile and started to his feet. "I'll just go."

"No, wait! I'd like to learn!" He noted her blush again and felt his stomach turn. "If you'll still teach me?"

He hid his grimace of disgust and slipped into the water. Proffering a hand, he gestured for her to join him. When she showed a touch of trepidation he fairly ground his teeth in frustration. "It isn't deep. We're only in three feet of water. Come my dear. I will teach you to swim like a fish." He helped her into the water and held her steady with a hand at her waist. "Ready?" He let go for a moment and felt her sway precariously. His hand shot out and wrapped itself around her hip. "Come into deeper water. It will help you stabilize."

"I don't know. I'm afraid of deep water."

"Nonsense. There's nothing to worry about. I'll be right here with you. See?" He slid his arms around her and pulled her deeper into the water. Their heads disappeared beneath the eerie fog. He smiled more personally. "Now that we're alone," he whispered in a velvet voice, "I can do this." He pulled her against him and took her lips in a passionate kiss. He threaded his hand into her wet hair, pressing against her scalp. He felt her arms come around him and had to hide a shudder of revulsion. He drew her deeper into the web of deceit he wove. When he had her firmly under control Adeo sank beneath the water.

He felt her begin to struggle and held her more firmly plundering her mouth; stealing her breath. He felt her struggles intensify and opened his eyes to watch her fear change to terror. His eyes narrowed and he bit down. He saw the pain shoot into her gaze and felt the sweet tasting blood hit the back of his throat. His eyes closed as his pleasure built. He drank deeply until he felt her struggles weaken to nothing. Releasing her, he surged to the surface. He broke the surface and swam to the edge. He leapt from the water, his muscles bunching like a feline's as he landed.

The other four women were in the hot tub, talking. He approached as quiet as a mouse. Crouching down he spoke into the ear of one woman. Her head came around and he helped her from the hot tub. "Come with me." He led her through the fog to the edge of the pool. "I want to ravish you," he murmured against her lips. He felt her succumbing and growled. *Damned women! Towering strengths until they get in a man's arms. Weak willed bitches! Just like Faustina!* He savagely bit into her neck spraying hot blood all over his face and the tiles. He held her hair in one hand, bending her neck until it snapped. He felt her body twitching against his as her death throes gripped her. Disgusted by what he'd done, he cast her into the pool to join her companion. Glancing at himself, he dove into the pool after her.

Clean again, he climbed out of the pool. Slipping through the fog, he took the hand of another of the young women and led her away. He took her to one of the lounge chairs. In moments he had her writhing beneath him, as he slaked his lust for blood. When she was limp, he rose and crossed to the hot tub. This time, he slipped into the water with the two remaining women. "Ladies."

"Hello there handsome. What brings you here this evening?"

He shrugged. "Just trying to relax." He openly ogled both women. "I must say the view is very nice." He turned on the charm and licked his lips. "Not often I get to see two beautiful women in here." *Perfectly matched blondes. I wonder if they are as much fun as their friends were.*

He stopped and turned back to her. His eyes searched her face like it was a radar screen with a phantom blip on it. Their eyes met and he felt his breath stolen from him. "Maggie?"

"Later."

He nodded and turned back to the job. Stopping beside the paramedic, he spoke in a low tone. "Is she coherent enough to answer a couple of questions?"

"I don't know. She seems to be pretty deep in shock. The police shrink is supposed to be on his way. You can try, but we haven't been able to get her to talk."

"Thank you." Michael knelt down beside the woman. "Miss?" Her eyes swung toward him and he smiled gently. "Miss can you tell me your name?"

Her mouth opened but nothing came out at first. After several seconds she closed her mouth and licked her lips. "Zoe Sanna."

"Zoe? That's a very pretty name. Can you tell me what happened here?"

"Thank you. I don't really know. I went into the locker to use the bathroom. The floor was wet and I fell. When I came to I found this." She gestured to the bodies as she began to sob. "They were all my friends. What happened to them? Who would do such a terrible thing?"

His heart went out to the young woman. "There's a serial killer on the loose ma'am. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to stay here a bit longer. Stay with the paramedics. You'll be all right." He pulled a folded page from inside his jacket and opened it. Holding it up in front of her, he spoke gently. "Miss Sanna, I have one more question for you. 'Have you seen this man?'" When she shook her head in the negative he put it away. Resting a hand on her shoulder, he patted it gently. "Try to remember what you saw, if anything before you went into the bathroom."

"Yes detective."

Michael looked up and saw the station shrink coming in with another man he recognized. "Excuse me a moment." He strode across the room. "Hi Frank. Thanks for coming."

"No problem Mike. What's the situation?"

"Victim's name is Zoe Sanna. She was knocked out in the locker room. She says she fell. The lacerations on her arms and the bruise on her temple tell me another story. Says she doesn't know what happened out here. I believe her, but she's holding something back. See if you can't work with her, huh?" He turned his attention to the other man who came in with the shrink. "Lieutenant Stevenson. What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to get first hand information on how you handle a crime scene. You don't mind if I tag along do you?"

Michael Taggart rarely lost his temper but at this moment he felt like Mount Vesuvius. "Lieutenant," he began with deadly calm. "I am trying to investigate a crime scene. Your presence jeopardizes the containment of evidence." He felt a hand on his arm and swallowed his anger. "You may stay Lieutenant, just make sure it's out of the way. And for God's sake man, don't touch anything!" Turning his attention to the hand's owner, he nodded. "What is it Magdalene?"

"Mike, you need to come look at this."

Her voice carried a tone he rarely heard from her. It set the hairs on the back of his neck on end. "What have you got," he asked forgetting the Internal Affairs lieutenant completely.

"The last woman, the one we found in the hot tub. She had an interesting set of marks on her chest. They're somewhat similar to a set of marks that were found on your throat when they brought you in to the ER."

Taggart stopped dead. "What do you mean? I wasn't told about any marks on my throat." He watched as she turned a chalky shade of pale, the color heightening on her cheeks. "Maggie?"

"Just come look at this Michael."

He frowned and followed her closely. "Have you found these marks on any of the other victims?" He crouched down as he awaited her response.

"The marks are here on her breast. And yes. I have found these marks on other corpses. I noted them in my reports, didn't you see?"

He noted the impatience in her voice. "Probably," he answered carefully. "I've had a lot on my mind recently." He fingered two identical marks. They were two perfectly round blemishes approximately an inch apart. "I had marks like these as well?" He felt fingertips on his throat.

"Here."

"This complicates things, doesn't it?" He looked up and sought her eyes. "It means that I'm compromised. And it makes this personal," he said in a low growl.

"Is there something amiss, Detective?"

Michael's head swung around and he regarded the Internal Affairs official with an almost venomous stare. "No, Lieutenant Stevenson, something is **not** amiss! Everything about this case stinks to high heaven and here I am with

four more murders and a victim that can barely remember her own name.” He trailed off as a thought occurred to him. “Maggie. Talk to the paramedic and examine the woman. See if she bears the same strange marks anywhere.”

“Yes sir. And if she does?”

He pushed to his feet. “Then we have a new lead. If they ask be honest. Tell the paramedics that you’re checking her for signs of strange markings.”

“Yes sir.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “This thing just keeps getting more and more complex. What the hell am I going to do now?” He absently ran his fingers over the scars of his own bite mark. His mind suddenly sharpened and he focused on his fingertips for a moment. Running his fingers over the marks again, he looked down at the body lying at his feet. “I’ll be damned! It can’t be!”

“What can’t be, Detective?”

Taggart looked up, his eyes wide. “It’s nothing Lieutenant Stevenson. I just had a bit of a thought. Gotta go do a little digging before I divulge it though. Good evening Lieutenant.” He strode across the room and spoke to the uniformed officer in charge. Then he crossed to the paramedics and conferred with the coroner. He glanced pointedly at the Internal Affairs guy staring down at the bodies. “And Maggie? Don’t let the rubberneck touch anything. This is a crime scene, after all.”

“Sure thing. Mike…”

He felt her hand on his arm and covered her it with his own. “Don’t worry Magdalene I will. Once a marine…”

“Always a marine. I remember.”

He squeezed her hand and pulled away. “I’ll be on the radio.” He hurried from the scene. In his car he picked up the radio and pulled into traffic. “411639 to base.”

“Go ahead Detective.”

“He smiled at the tired feminine voice. “Lucy, I need an address on one Adeo Sidonius.”

“Okay Mikey. Give me a minute to run it down for you.”

“Sure thing. I’m headed for the city library at the moment. Call me as soon as you get it.” Racking the handset, he pulled into a parking lot. Finding an available slot he switched the engine off and pulled his jacket out of the backseat. Slipping it on, he closed the car door with a thud. He shivered and zipped his coat. Shoving his hands into the pockets he steamrolled across the sidewalk. Stepping into the library a few moments later, he headed towards the archive section. He stopped at the desk and asked for access to the special section of newspapers.

“Detective Taggart, how nice to see you again. Yes, yes. Come this way.”

“Ms. Higginbottom, I’m working on cracking this serial killer case. Do you remember a similar story about, oh, twenty years ago?” He saw her spine stiffen and knew he’d hit pay dirt.

“My daughter-in-law was killed in that crime spree. Why do you want to dig into that information? I thought that case was closed years ago.”

Michael hedged a bit. “It was closed ma’am, but I need to compare this crime with that. If I find connections you can bet I’ll have that case re-opened. Truthfully, I remembered reading something about it in the papers not too long ago. Something happened in one of the murders that triggered a memory. I want to cross-reference my facts before I act.” He absently rubbed his neck again. “I need to get to the bottom of this. Quickly.”

She unlocked a door and snapped on the lights. Inside were several stacks of microfilm cases and a reader. “This is the morgue. We keep all the oldest archive information down here.” She handed him the key. “Lock-up when you’re done and return the key to me at the desk.” She turned to go but stopped. “I hope you find what you’re looking for Detective. I really hope that you do.”

“Thank you Ms. Higginbottom.” He waited until the door was closed and he was alone before going to the stacks and beginning his search. He’d seen the pain of loss in her eyes as she had mentioned the case from twenty years earlier. It made him angry. Finding the appropriate stack of films he went to the reader and sat down. Feeding the film into the machine, he searched the articles. There was a brief description of the man responsible for the killings but nothing clear and concise. A police sketch was shown next to one article. Pulling the artist’s sketch from his pocket, he held it up next to the reader and groaned inwardly.

“It can’t be! That was twenty years ago!” He stopped the reader and stared from his picture to the picture rendered twenty years before. The artist’s name was present in the caption below the sketch. He stared at it in disbelief. It was odd to mention the name of the artist. His eyes scanned the article. Halfway down the page he found what he was looking for. The sketch artist’s daughter had been victim number three. “More loose ends.” Inspiration struck him finally and he did a global search. Hit brows knitted in consternation, as he found nothing.

Pulling out the film, he placed another microfilm in the reader. He read through each article with growing trepidation. He found several more references to the killer but nothing solid. Doing a separate search he found sixteen instances of odd markings on the bodies. “Damn!” He searched for the killer’s calling card and felt his

The high nasal voice grated on his nerves as it had so often over the years. He turned with slow deliberation. "You ungrateful bitch! Four years I have endured this hateful marriage. Four years I have endured you cuckolding me with every man that catches your fancy. I have funded your extravagant lifestyle without question. I have endured the sniggers and snide comments. I will endure you no longer!"

"You can't divorce me. Caesar will never allow it. Father will stop you... force you to continue to endure me. Gods, I can't bear the sight of you! Leave me and take your trash with you."

The anger misted his vision. What he did next he only remembered in snippets. It wasn't until he was standing on the hill above the villa watching it and the olive grove burn in a funeral pyre. It was there that the soldiers found him. Loud maniacal laughter spilling from his lips. He didn't fight when they took him before Caesar.

"You are positively mad man! What happened to my daughter? Who has done this? Tell me!"

Adeo laughed for a minute more. Abruptly he sobered and bowed deeply to his ruler and father-in-law. "My lord Caesar. That bitch you saddled me with got precisely what she deserved. All of her fripperies and fancies followed her cold black heart straight into hell!"

Now if he hadn't said those things in front of the soldiers he might have gotten away with it. But he had shamed his Caesar in front of others. That could not be overlooked. "Blasphemy! How dare you speak of my poor dead daughter in such a manner! How dare you blacken the good name of your wife! You shall be punished for this! Take him away!"

Rap. Rap. Rap.

Adeo sat bolt upright. A sound had intruded into his dreams.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

Swinging his legs from the elegant bed, he made his way to the balcony surrounding the walkway outside his second story room. "Just a minute," he shouted down. Stepping back into his room he slipped into a deep gold robe. He relished the silk sliding along his bare flesh. Belting the material closed, he walked barefooted down the carpeted stairs. He opened the front door and stepped back out of the glare of the setting sun. On his doorstep stood a familiar man. "Good evening Detective Taggart. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Mr. Sidonius, I'd like to ask you a few questions. May I come in?"

Adeo hid a grin and stepped back with a sweeping gesture. "Please come in Detective." *People can be so predictable. A soft unpleasant voice in his head chided, "Yes but he found you didn't he Adeodatus. He knows your crimes. He's here to kill you. Best to kill him before he has a chance!"* His face contorted briefly as he recognized his dead wife's voice. *Be silent Faustina! You're dead! Leave me alone you bitch!* Blanking his look he moved his arm towards the kitchen. "If you'll come this way, Detective? I was just about to make some coffee."

"Thank you Mr. Sidonius. I won't take up much of your time. I just need to fill in some gaps in my information. You look like hell. Are you feeling all right?"

Adeo smiled thinly. "I haven't been sleeping well recently, no. Please sit." He gestured to a chair in the spacious kitchen before moving to the counter to begin making coffee. A few minutes later he set a steaming cup of the horrid brew in front of the detective. Settling down across the table with his own steaming cup he took a sip and looked expectantly at the officer.

"Mr. Sidonius can you tell me your whereabouts last night?"

Adeo let a frown cross his brow as he set the mug down. "I'm sorry? I was out last evening walking by the river at about sunset. Then I had a nice supper and came back here."

"Hmmm. Can you tell me what restaurant you visited last night?"

"I didn't go to a restaurant Detective. I was simply not at home when I ate."

"Mmm! Were you anywhere near the pool?"

Adeo sat back, his fingers drumming on the tabletop. He grew thoughtful. His mind drifted to the woman he'd let go. After several moments he realized that the detective was watching him intently. "I'm sorry Detective. I've been a bit under the weather all day. It's a bit chilly to be walking down by the water this time of year. I may have caught something. Anyway, to answer your question. No, I wasn't anywhere near the pool. Has something happened?"

"There was another killing. Four young women, this time the fifth survived. She's being detained for questioning."

"Detective, I do not mean to be rude here, but why are you questioning me? I'm not connected to your case," he paused, "am I?" He read the cop's expression and nearly laughed. *Preposterous! He wants to accuse me but can't!*

“You pointed a finger at a man who ended up dead a few days later. You’ve given me vast amounts of information. That reminds me. You’ve been in town a long time. Do you remember the serial killings from oh about twenty years ago?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I was away for several years. When my parents were killed I was taken to live with an uncle. Someone else stayed in the house, I’m told. He rented the place for years and then disappeared.”

“Hmm. Well I thank you for your hospitality Mr. Sidonius.” They walked to the front door. “It occurs to me, sir. That you know entirely too much about this case. I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know if anything else occurs to you.”

Adeo growled softly and took a step towards the cop. His anger was piqued by all the veiled implications of guilt. He put one hand behind the man’s head on the door and held it shut. “Why don’t you just come right out and say what’s on your mind Michael?” His gaze shifted to the marks he’d left then drifted closed for a moment. He smiled ferally. His eyes opened and bored straight into the other man’s. “Ah Michael. Benigna was a good woman. It’s a shame I killed her so quickly though. She was good sport. I told you that the price of being a hero would be high.” He surged forward and buried his mouth in the detective’s neck. His teeth pierced the flesh and he screamed.

“I suspected what you were when I saw you that morning at the station. You struck me as odd.”

Adeo hissed and grabbed the detective’s throat. Lifting him off the floor, he pinned the larger man against the wall. “You should not have pressed the advantage,” he hissed. His thumb ran over the area he’d bitten and he dropped the man to his feet but didn’t let go. Advancing one slow step at a time, he stepped toe to toe with his quarry. His fetid breath rolled over the man and he licked his lips. “I shall enjoy this.” His lips found their way to the cop’s throat again. His eyes closed as he heard the sound of revulsion the cop made.

“You are a beast! An animal! You perpetrated the murders twenty years ago and you’re doing it again! I will stop you! I will stop...”

His teeth pierced the flesh in exactly the same spot as both previous times. Drinking deep of the now untainted meal he sighed. *You cannot stop me.*

§ §

Michael woke to the blur of lights pulsing through the night. He shivered uncontrollably. The wail of the siren had yet to die down. A man was hovering over him. “Mmmhnnnnmmmm.”

“He’s conscious!” Michael’s eyes registered a feminine voice and frowned. “Detective Taggart? Can you understand me?”

A light, bright white at first, illuminated his rescuer’s face. Slowly the light receded to reveal a woman of indeterminate age or beauty. “M...m...my n...n...name?”

“Detective, I found your badge when we pulled you out of the water. Can you tell me what happened?”

His mind was foggy. It hurt him to think. Shaking his head he groaned and coughed. The shivers racked his body and suddenly he was being rolled on his side. Water poured from his mouth as he heaved up the contents of his stomach. When he was done, he felt light-headed and dizzy. He was rolled onto his back and his shirt was cut away. A hard plastic collar was placed under his neck but not clasped. He saw the rescue worker looking at his throat quizzically, then felt a gloved hand slap over it.

“Joey get me the following: gauze, tape, thread, and a needle!”

“Natalie we need to get him onto the stretcher and to the hospital. Let the docs take care of the other stuff.”

Michael heard the fury in the woman’s voice as she responded. “Don’t argue with me Joey! Get the stuff now! If we don’t sew this up he’s going to bleed to death before we **can** get him to the hospital! And I need more light!”

Michael opened his mouth to speak only to feel a hand come over his lips. “Don’t you start! Just sit tight while old Natalie patches you up. You have a very nasty gash in your throat, Detective. And the only reason you didn’t bleed to death already is the fact that you were just in the freezing cold water of the Hudson.” He shook his head slightly and her hand was removed.

“No drugs,” he croaked through chattering teeth. “Need to think.”

“You have to be kidding!” His hard stare made it clear he wasn’t. “Damn you’re a tough cookie. Okay Detective. We’ll play it your way, no drugs. Now relax or you’re going to be having a **really** bad day.”

He nodded thankfully and stared up at her. “Why are you a paramedic?”

His question was met with a derisive snort as medical equipment was set beside them. “Why are you a cop?” He wasn’t given a chance to respond as he felt the hand removed and replaced with another one. “Joey, keep the pressure tight until I say to ease up. He’s got a pretty deep cut here and I’m going to need to look to see if it really

has hit the artery. Shine the light on his neck right here!” Michael was momentarily blinded as the light was switched on.

“Jesus jump in’ catfish! Is he gonna be all right? There’s so much blood!”

“Great Joey! Scare him now why don’t you. For crying out loud! Just shut up and do what I tell you, okay?”
S...s...sure.”

Michael heard nothing else as a needle pricked his skin. He felt warm and fuzzy, his mind floating on some distant cloud. Time passed but he wasn’t aware of it or how much. His eyes closed and nothing had meaning any longer.

When Officer Ray Nakano stepped into the alley for a smoke he frowned. The car was half-covered by refuse. The Dumpster on the hood guaranteed that the car was totaled. He lit his cigarette and meandered around the car. At the back end he saw the license plate and stopped. His cigarette hung from his lower lip as his jaw dropped open in shock. The moment of shock passed and he clicked on his radio. “Dispatch? Nakano here! I need any available officer in the alley post haste.”

“Officer Nakano what’s the nature of your emergency?”

“I’ve found Detective Taggart’s car.”

An hour later the car was uncovered and a forensics team was going over it with a fine-tooth-comb. Inside they found Taggart’s coat, a few files of a dubious nature, and a crumpled up receipt. The receipt was for a case of silver hatpins.

Michael awoke in a bleak hospital room for the second time in a month. He groaned and stared at the ceiling unable to sit up. He was still so tired. He quickly took mental stock of his body. *Arms and legs were still present, hands and feet still work. Now for my head, the square root of pi...* He groaned again. A spike of pain lanced into his brain. He groaned softly at first then louder. The machine that monitored his vital signs went haywire as his blood pressure skyrocketed. The door banged open and a man in a white coat, bustled in. “Mr. Taggart! Mr. Taggart, calm down!” The door slammed open behind him as a nurse, bustled in. “Five cc’s of epinephrine, stat!” Michael heard the words but nothing would stay in his tortured brain. He writhed and jack-knifed on the bed

“God! Make it stop! Please, make it stop!” He sobbed as the pain began to subside. When he was settled again, Michael focused on the man that was standing beside his bed. “Who are you?”

“My name is Dr. Mitchell. Mr. Taggart can you tell me what you remember?”

“What I remember? From what?”

“Mr. Taggart, do you know where you are?”

“I’m in the hospital?”

“Yes sir. You’re in a special hospital. Can you tell me how you ended up in the Hudson River two nights ago?”

“Two nights?!” Michael sat upright only to be pushed back down. “I don’t know how I got into the river.” His eyes closed for a moment as he tried to process everything the doctor had said. “Wait a minute. What do you mean a special hospital? What kind of hospital are we talking about here?”

“Mr. Taggart you’re in the Northern Westchester Hospital, Behavioral Health section. We’re just trying to evaluate why you suddenly displayed suicidal tendencies. I’m going to ask you some questions so we can set up an effective method of treatment that will return you to a normal life.”

Michael snorted. “You think I’m nuts. Wouldn’t the boys back at Quantico love that? Listen Doc, I think you’ve been fed some misinformation. I’m not nuts. I didn’t throw myself into the Hudson River. I don’t rightly know how I got there, but I can tell you I’m not suicidal.” He watched the doctor make a few notations on his file.

“Mr. Taggart, why don’t you tell me what you remember?”

“All right.” Michael sighed. “I’d just found a bit of information pertaining to the case I’m working on. I requested a subpoena for records from the Sing-Sing Public Library. Then I went to question an informant.” He hesitated, a frown marring his features.

“Mr. Taggart? Is everything all right? Are you in pain?”

Michael shook his head. “It’s just that this is where things get real fuzzy. I can recall snippets of the conversation but I don’t remember leaving the man’s house.” He looked at the doctor for a moment as an idea gelled in his mind. “If you want to find out what really happened contact my informant. His name is Adeo Sidonius. His number is 914-762-2253. He can tell you.”

“I will contact him, but first I’d like to ask you another question or two. Mr. Taggart, can you tell me what you’ve been feeling lately?”

Michael shot a look at the ceiling, rolled his eyes and turned back to the doctor. “Gee doc let me see. Anger, because the Atropos Killings are still going on. The body count is piling up. Exasperation because the case seems to

have so many loose threads it's a wonder anything is coming together. I will admit to a touch of disgust and even a smidge of despair. It's a tough business to have to go to these women's families and tell them that their daughter, sister, wife, mother is dead. But nowhere near enough to even contemplate killing myself. Believe me doctor I want this killer brought to justice. As quickly as possible," he added under his breath.

The puzzled frown that flitted across Michael's face at those words prompted a new question from the doctor. "Mr. Taggart. Have you had any personal connection with any of the victims?"

He shook his head. "No sir. So far the only people we've found are complete strangers to me." He felt a knot of tension form in his stomach as the doctor pulled a note from the file.

"So you don't know one Lucy Perry? It says here in my notes that she worked for fifteen years as a dispatch officer."

Michael groaned and felt the tears well in his eyes. "No!" It came out in a tortured whisper. "Not Lucy." He rolled to the side, his face a mask of anguish.

"I'll go make that phone call and give you some time alone Mr. Taggart. I'm truly sorry."

Michael watched the doctor leave through pain hazed eyes. His heart constricted for a moment or so more before he was able to push it all aside and focus. His mind immediately set to work on trying to remember all of the events from before he'd lost consciousness. *I went to the library and looked at the microfilms. I went to the courthouse to obtain a subpoena for the records. I then went to visit Mr. Sidonius.* He grabbed his skull as it nearly shattered in pain. A scream of agony was nearly torn from him. It took all of his years of training to keep the pain locked inside him. He knew that any outward sounds would bring the doctor and nurse back in, he fought for control.

He felt the pain gradually subsiding. As his body relaxed consciousness slipped away. He felt as if he were floating on a gentle sea. *He lay with his eyes closed floating and listening. A splash near him barely registered he was so relaxed.*

"Nice place to swim. Come here often?"

His eyes popped open at the familiar voice. "What are you doing to me?"

"What makes you think I'm doing anything to you Michael?"

"I don't rightly know son. I just know you're in my head. At least tell me what you're doing."

There was a sigh of exasperation. "I'm disappointed. I had you pegged as being much smarter than this."

Michael pushed himself upright and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He lay on a floating slab of snow-white alabaster in a sea of dark red. "Blood?!"

"Mmm... Yes. It's wonderful isn't it? Why don't you join me for a swim?"

Finding himself falling Michael pin wheeled his arms trying to gain purchase on the slab. A sudden sharp intense pain accompanied the bone-jarring thud that rattled his teeth as he hit the floor. His eyes flew open. He found his arm and hands covered in blood. Hearing the echo of laughter he seethed. "You won't get away with this Adeo! You won't win!" Surging to his feet he took two steps before he collapsed in a heap.

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Adeo spoke into the phone with a cultured voice like velvet. "I'm sorry doctor, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know any detective Taggart. Isn't he that detective working on the serial killings?" He paused for several moments before continuing. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you more Doctor. You have a great evening too. Goodbye." Smiling he set the receiver down. "Ahh. Some days it does pay to get out of bed, now to find my lady fair." Turning back to his mirror he straightened his tie. "I wonder if she missed me." He felt a certain amount of trepidation. Frowning at his reflection in the mirror he thought for a moment. Trepidation was a foreign concept to him. He hadn't felt this way in more than two thousand years. Not since the days of Vitellius' rule had he felt like this.

By the time he left the house he was whistling a spritely tune. He walked and walked. Finally he stopped on the banks of the Hudson. Staring out across the water he sighed. "So much like my sweet Zoe." The icy water rippling by seemed to beckon him; seemed to invite him to slip beneath the icy surface. He fought back the urge to take a dip into the freezing cold water. Stepping away from the bank he turned and made his way back into the village. He walked for hours; his senses attuned to the woman that drew him onward. Finally nearing eight of the clock, he stopped before a small house behind a picket fence. He felt a smile of sheer pleasure curve his lips and was amazed. *When is the last time I enjoyed anything in this world?* He thought for several minutes and swallowed his amazement. *Has it really been that long? By the Gods!*

He watched the light within flicker for a moment and then go out. His sensitive ears picked up the unfeminine swearing. It made him chuckle. Stepping through the gate he strode to the door and rang the doorbell. There was a crash from within before the swearing became more pronounced and the door was flung open.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. Why don't you give me the phone number and I'll make the call for you."

Michael snorted. "I'm sorry doctor that information is classified. Just let me make the phone call. I'll have someone down here tonight with proof." He ground his teeth when the doctor shook his head. "Then doctor, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I'm done talking to you."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Mr. Taggart, until you give me the information I want to know you're staying put."

That's what you think. Damn, this is going to create a huge mess. Major Davidson going to have my head. He watched the doctor leave in stoic silence. His eyes narrowed as he began to search the room. The window was on the far side of the room. Throwing back the covers, he grabbed the robe at the foot of the bed and crossed to it. Pulling back the shade he looked out into the late afternoon sunshine. The trees on the hospital's grounds were beginning to shed their colorful leaves. He glanced to the left and right as far as the window would allow. To the right of the window he could just make out the edge of a drainpipe. "Good!" He looked down at the ground. "Third floor, huh? Piece of cake." He made his way to the cabinet where his clothing was supposedly being stored. Opening the doors, he found the cabinet empty. Shaking his head he chuckled. "How'd I guess?"

Unheard a motor whirred and a camera tracked the patient's movements. The tape-recorded, him standing before the window for a long stretch of time before moving away to the cabinet. When he moved out of the range of the first camera the second one picked up his movements. It recorded him sitting on the bed.

In the metal on his hospital I.D. bracelet, Michael caught the reflection of a red light. Shifting slightly, he saw the camera mounted in the corner across the room and behind him. His eyes hurriedly scanned for any others. He found the second camera on the wall where the door was located. Lying down on the bed, he pondered his situation. His fingers steepled over his chest and his eyes drifted shut. His ears began picking up every sound as his senses attuned. The whirring of the motors on the camera assembly nearest him made a soft ratcheting sound as it hit the stops and began its backward trek. He listened to it for a moment. When it hit the stops on the other side, he began to count. *Twenty seconds. If both cameras move at the same rate, which they obviously do.* He listened for a discordant whirring and heard none. *Then that means they track only a small arc of the room.*

He drifted through many different plans as he dropped into a light sleep. His mind continued to churn over the details as he slept. When the sun dropped below the horizon his eyes opened to slits. The orange glow of the sodium vapor lamp outside his window gave him plenty of light to maneuver by. Walking with apparent ease he crossed to the window and twisted the latch. Lifting the sash he took a deep breath of the fresh air. His eyes landed on the mesh covering his escape. He frowned. *Damn! Now what marine? Think man!* He leaned nonchalantly on the windowsill inspecting the fastenings casually. *Staples... Worn wood, staples, and humidity. Perfect combination of circumstances.* He leaned his face against the mesh and heard a tortured squeal.

He pulled back and saw that the mesh was actually attached to a slim wood frame. Luck was with him, however, because the nails were rusty and gave way easily. Behind him the door rattled slightly. He quickly slid the window sash down and leaned against the frame. When the door opened several seconds later he wore an almost bored expression. "Good evening doctor. Come to grill me for more information?"

"No son, I didn't. I actually came to tell you that you have a visitor. This goes against my better judgement, but I'm allowing you to see her. If you'll follow me?"

Michael's brow furrowed. "A visitor?" He followed the doctor down the short hall and into a clean, almost sterile white room. There was a chair seated before a table with a piece of Plexiglas mounted in the front. He looked through the Plexiglas and saw Magdalene. In a few short strides he had crossed the room and settled into the chair. Picking up the phone the doctor indicated he held a hand over the receiver. "Thank you doctor. Can I have some privacy?"

"You have twenty minutes Mr. Taggart."

He nodded his acceptance of the time allotted. When the door closed behind the doctor Michael uncovered the phone. "Maggie, what are you doing here? Honey you shouldn't be here."

"Mike, I'm so glad to see you! They said you tried to kill yourself. Are you all right?"

He rested his head in his hand for a moment. Looking up he stared directly into her eyes. "Maggie do you trust me?"

"Of course Michael. You know I trust you with my life."

He blew out a breath. "I didn't try to kill myself. The Atropos Killer did. They think I'm crazy. I'm not, I swear it." His hand snaked across the tabletop and pressed against the glass. "Maggie, I need you to do something for me. I wouldn't normally ask you to do this, but I haven't got a choice. They won't let me make a phone call to anyone."

"Michael, I'll do whatever I can to help you. Will it get you out of here?"

He stiffened slightly. "I believe so." He glanced around, catching sight of the video camera he smiled. "Remember when we went out to dinner two weeks ago?" He winked at her nod. "Remember the restaurant we went

from ages past doing just the same thing. Lying alone on a couch in the moonlight. *Only then I couldn't guarantee her safety.* He pulled back the afghan and lifted her from the chair.

"Adeo?"

"Rest easy honey. I'm just bringing you back to bed. It's lonely there without you." He brushed his lips over her forehead and climbed onto the bed with her in his arms. Laying her gently among the pillows he pulled the blanket over them both and gathered her close. "Close your eyes and rest, my love. You mustn't tax yourself." Holding her with all the tenderness he felt Adeo drifted into a light slumber.

The smells of crisping bacon and singed eggs drifted into his consciousness and roused Adeo from slumber. The bed beside him was of course empty. The bedroom door stood slightly ajar allowing the scents to drift in along with the sounds of cooking. He smiled and thought of how right the world seemed.

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Detective Michael Liam Taggart stood staring down at the mutilated body. It was the end of his first day back on the job. "Lovely end to an already horrible day!"

"That glad to be back on the job, eh detective?"

Disgusted didn't begin to cover the emotion that rippled across his mind as Michael spun to face the man in the rumpled suit. "I was hoping that today would have gone better, Lieutenant. What are you doing here? This is a crime scene."

"Ah, so I'd heard. You know why I'm here, Detective Taggart. Just ignore me and go about your business."

"Hardly," the detective muttered under his breath.

"I'm sorry?"

Michael pasted a business-like smile on his face and turned back to the crime scene. "Just observing how big of a pain in the ass you're becoming, Lieutenant Stevenson. You're under my nose; dogging my footsteps; and generally making a nuisance of yourself wherever I go." He gestured to an uniformed officer. "Officer Nakano? Get this body bag and tagged. I want this mess cleaned up ASAP. I need to notify next of kin and the ME needs to make him pretty again."

"Yes sir, Detective Taggart. I'll get right on it."

Michael reached into his jacket and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. Shaking one out he produced a lighter from his pocket and lit it. Muscling his way past the urge to cough he blew out a stream of blue-gray smoke. "God, I hate these things!"

"Didn't know you smoked, Mr. Taggart. Your file says you're a non-smoker."

"Yeah, well I used to smoke a long time ago. Gave it up for personal reasons. The stress of the last several days has been getting to me. They say that you reacquire old vices in times of extreme stress."

"Indeed they do. Would you say that you've been under extreme stress?"

Michael laughed disdainfully. "Surely you can do better than that Lieutenant Stevenson? You've read my psyche profile. I know you have; I know where it came from. Look, of course I've been stressed. A serial killer on the loose in a small village like Ossining is a VERY stressful thing to deal with. I'm sworn to protect the citizens of this village. If you're fishing to see if I'm so stressed that I'd snap, go bark up another tree. I haven't got time for the amateur detective trying to play Sherlock. I have a killer to catch; families to notify, and a caseload as high as my office door. Since you aren't here to do anything productive I'm going to ask you to leave. You want to talk, come by my office tomorrow morning." With that he turned away from the rumpled Internal Affairs officer and got back to work.

"Eight a.m.!"

He made a somewhat obscene gesture over his shoulder. "Fine! Now get outta here before I cite you for impeding an investigation." Signing the clipboard that was thrust at him, he b-lined to the officer that had called it in. "Officer Caldwell?" When the man looked up, Michael gestured him to step away for a moment. When they were alone he sighed. "Okay, you were the first officer on the scene. I want to ask you a couple of questions. First of all, do you remember if there were any other people in the vicinity when you discovered the body?"

"No, sir detective. I didn't see anyone. Doesn't mean that someone couldn't have taken cover in the alley, but I didn't see no one. I hate to admit it sir. I was a bit surprised by the body turning up in the middle of the sidewalk I'd just finished patrolling ten minutes before."

The detective shook his head as he watched the younger man rub the back of his neck. "Don't let it get you down son. All right, so next question. Does the deceased remind you of anyone? Could be someone you've seen recently, or perhaps someone you know." He watched the man closely. He could almost see the gears turning as the man thought. "Now that I think about it sir, I believe you're right. The deceased does remind me of someone."

Dreading the answer, Michael asked anyway. "Who?"

"You sir. Not an exact match but this man looks enough like you that it could have been you."

Michael nodded solemnly. "The killer is making this personal. Help Nakano get this buttoned up." He took out another cigarette and lit it.

"Do you need an escort Detective Taggart?"

He shook his head and took a long drag. "I'll be alright. Just get this mess cleaned up. I have to go." An absent wave and several steps later, he was crushing out his cigarette and leaned against the wall breathing heavily. "What do you want from me Sidonius?" His words echoed in the alley ricocheting off the moldering bricks like a fusillade from a fifty-caliber machinegun. An earth shattering silence followed as he abruptly cut himself off. Heaving a weary sigh, Michael trudged to his car. *Still stinks! Even after the industrial strength Pine-Sol and the airfreshener.* He shook his head and climbed behind the wheel. Picking up his radio he keyed the mic. "Freddie this is Taggart. Let the Chief know I'm going to be a few minutes late for our meeting. I have to make a detour on my way back to the station."

"Will do Mike. Don't be too late. The Chief's already stewing about something."

"Thanks for the heads-up Freddie. Taggart out." He started the car and drove sedately down the street. Stopping in front of the courthouse he got out and ran up the stairs. Hustling down the corridor he slipped through an oak door. Taking the new corridor with efficiency, he rapped on a heavy oaken door. He received no answer. Raising his fist, he knocked again.

"You can knock at my office door all day long, Detective Taggart. I'm not going to answer the summons. But if you give me a minute and step back I'll unlock the door."

The red-faced detective stepped back. "Sorry sir," he intoned sheepishly.

"Nonsense boy! Get yourself a seat and tell me what's troubling you."

Michael followed the older man inside the office and closed the door. Sinking into a chair he blew out a deep breath. "Gunny, I..." His hands were shaking uncontrollably as he raised them to run down his face.

The blue eyes that normally crinkled with amusement turned to stare at him in concern. "Whoa Mike! What's got you all riled? I haven't seen you this messed up since you almost lost your leg. What's happened?"

Michael stared at his hands, willing them to stop shaking. "He's making this personal Gunny. I got called in on a body. Guy was pretty torn open. Looked like a bed of prawns in cocktail sauce." His hands shook more violently. He could almost see the blood dripping from them, despite the fact that the body was already hours old by the time he got there.

"Mike? Slow up a minute. Take a deep breath and tell me what you found. What is it about this body? Is it because it was a man? I thought the killer only targeted women?"

"He did. It's turned personal. First he assaulted me in my own home. Then when I go to talk to an informant and wake up with two paramedics fishing me out of the Hudson." He shook his head. "And that ain't even the worst of it! It tops off with the wonderful two-week vacation I had in the nut house. Now today!" He threw up his hands. "My first day back and I get this body...this body," he repeated with a shudder.

"What about the body Mike?"

"Looks so much like me. I mean this guy could pass for a relative. Bastard's trying to send me a message. Well he's not going to get me that easily!" Anger rolled off of him in waves. He surged to his feet wobbling unsteadily.

"Whoa mate! Easy now." Hands came under his elbows and eased him back into the visitor's chair. "You have anywhere you need to be right now Mike?"

"Aye. Meeting with the Chief. Just need to pick up the butter."

The comment earned him a curious stare. "Uh huh, right. You just sit tight mate. I'll see what I can do." The phone on the desk was picked up and Michael vaguely heard the conversation. "Yes. Bud this is Dave Mackey. Yeah, I heard that you were supposed to be meeting with Detective Taggart. Yes sir. He's here in my office. No sir, he's in no shape to drive. He's pretty shaken up. No sir, I'll leave him explain it to you. I'm keeping him in my office for now. He's not capable of driving at the moment, no. You can use my office. No, I have a case to hear in a few minutes. Aye, he'll be here. Yeah, I'll take all the boys out fishing this weekend. It's a deal! Bye."

Michael pushed himself out of the chair and waved absently. "We'll talk later, Gunny." Turning he stumbled towards the door. A hand latched into his shoulder.

"Hey Mike, wait! You're not going anywhere mate. Bud's coming over here."

Confusion addled his brains further. He went back to the chair without a fight and sank into the soft leather. "Thank you Gunny. Why'd they ever drum you out of the service?"

"Who says they did, boy?"

Michael leaned back in the chair, deflated. "Serious? Jesus man! First some two-thousand-years-old mad man is trying to kill me. Now you're telling me that you weren't drummed out of the Corps. What the hell is the world coming to?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk! Two-thousand-year-old madman! Really detective, I'm surprised at you! I'm not quite two-thousand-years-old and I'm not mad."

Michael's eyes snapped open and shot around the dim room. The single lamp he'd turned on when he'd come in cast the room in shadow. In the corner near the bay window a long shadow detached from the rest. "Don't come any closer! Get out of my house! Just stay away from me!"

"Oh come now detective. Surely you're not afraid of me?"

Michael scrambled to reach for the drawer in his nightstand. His mind felt fuzzy and his actions slow. He yanked open the drawer only to find it empty. *Damnit! Where's my gun?* His eyes were jerked upward as a slim icy finger gently lifted his chin and a sleek black weapon was held aloft before him.

"Looking for this, Marine?"

Michael's eyes collided with the pale orbs and his breath became trapped in his lungs. He felt the press of the icy finger into the tender flesh beneath his chin. He read a dark sort of need in those colorless depths and responded without thought. His head tipped to the side and he pulled his unbuttoned shirt aside exposing the flesh. His invitation was clear, yet he was puzzled by the uncertainty he saw in his captor's eyes. "Please don't poison me again."

"You fear death?"

Michael shook his head.

"You fear me?"

Again he shook his head.

"Then I don't understand. What is it you fear?"

Michael swallowed. "Leaving my family alone."

"An odd thing to fear, Michael Taggart."

Michael felt twin quicksilver's of pain as Adeo's teeth pierced his throat. Then he didn't care anymore. He was pinned back against the pillow clutched to the breast of a beast from legends and folklore. His eyes stared at the ceiling unseeing. The willingness with which he gave his life to the demon sipping on his blood gave him a mild sense of amazement. He lay listening to the soft sucking until he lost consciousness.

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Adeo perched on a straight-backed chair in the billowing shadows. On the bed across the room from him lay the man who had become a major pain in his backside. His senses were alert as he watched the man. Satisfied that there was still movement within the man's chest, he turned his attention back to his thoughts. *Why can't I kill him? What in the nine hells is it that intrigues me? He is like Mark Anthony was to Cleopatra, a diversion. He's seen so much in his short life, and yet... and yet he's managed to retain his humanity. How?*

"I'm not dead?"

"No. I do not require the life of everyone I sup on, Michael." Adeo smiled. "Besides, what would I gain from killing you?"

"You wouldn't have a thorn in your side any longer. You would not be scrutinized for the murders you've committed."

"Indeed. How long were you a marine?"

Derisive laughter met his question. "Son, you never stop being a marine once you've become one. To answer your question, I'm still in the Corps. I'm just not a frontline man anymore. Almost lost my leg in '91 in the Gulf. Got shifted to other things once I'd healed."

"So that's why you were so upset about that woman. You knew her?"

"Benigna was very dear to me yes. She was my best friend. She was there when my wife left me. I'm Godfather of her son, Liam. She was a good woman."

"The plot thickens. You are an enigma Michael Taggart. Why did your wife leave you? You do not strike me as the type that would beat a woman." Adeo cocked his head to the side, watching from the shadows with intense concentration.

"I nearly lost my leg when a landmine went off beside the jeep I was riding in. She said she couldn't stomach being the wife of a veteran. She had plans for her life, and they didn't include a disabled veteran. She was a superficial woman."

“Sounds like Faustina,” Adeo interrupted. “Spoiled, superficial, bitches!” A sound caught his ear. “You have been unlucky. I have...”

“On the contrary. I have been pretty damned lucky. Brittany was a learning experience. She taught me what to look for and avoid. I was young. We were high school sweethearts.”

The sound caught Adeo’s attention again and he uncoiled himself from his perch. Emerging from the shadows he sank down on the bed. Running a hand through the man’s short hair he smiled. “You are a very interesting man, Michael Taggart. For what it’s worth I’m sorry about Benigna.” He buried his teeth in the man’s throat again. As he slipped his fangs into the tender flesh he murmured, “Forgive me.”

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The scream ripped through the silence of the house like a mortar blast from beneath a tank. “Michael!”

His eyes refused to open. He was aware of his surroundings, but little else. His body was leaden. He felt someone patting his cheeks, shaking his shoulders. He wanted to speak but his mouth refused to open. And then he heard her scream again.

“Oh God! Mike you’re bleeding! Hold on honey, I’ll get an ambulance!”

He was finally able to break the paralysis and grasped her wrist. “No,” he croaked. “No ambulance. No more civilian doctors. There’s a first aid kit in the bathroom.” His eyes focused on the woman’s face. “Please Maggie. Calm down. I’m fine.”

“No you aren’t Michael. Your throat is ripped up and you’re bleeding all over the bed. That is not fine!”

“Just get me the first aid kit. I’ll clean it up.” He tried to shove himself into a sitting position and found a firm hand pressing square in the center of his chest.

“You’re not going anywhere except to the hospital. Now stay put!”

Michael frowned at the woman as she walked away. *Remember man, she’s a fantastic forensic pathologist, but she’s still only a woman.* “Maggie,” he called. “You can clean it up and fix it. I don’t need an ambulance. I have you. You’re a skilled physician.”

“I’m a forensic pathologist Michael. It’s not quite the same working on the deceased.”

“Fine,” he growled. “But I’m going under my own steam. I’m not going to ride with Dirty Harriet and the Sundance kid again.” He pushed his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. He grabbed the towel that dangled limply from her fingers and pressed it against his throat. Pushing himself off the bed, he went to the mirror. He was a little light-headed, but that was it. He wiped the towel over the bloodied area and frowned. Wiping the area clear he saw a set of short scars but no open flesh. “Mag’s?”

“What is it? Is it worse than you were willing to admit?”

“No! It’s not even bleeding. All the blood must have been from before.” He wiped his neck and shoulder.

“What do you mean before?”

“I had another visit from...” Something cautioned him from finishing his sentence. “I cut myself shaving.”

“You cut yourself shaving? What were you shaving with, hedge clippers?”

Her derisive tone tore at him making him turn from the bathroom mirror to face her. “Maggie, I just don’t think you’ll believe me. It’s not the sort of thing I find easy to believe.”

“Try me Mike. I’m not as simple as you seem to think!”

He heard the hurt and anger in her tone and cringed. “Maggie, I don’t think you’re simple. I just don’t know that you’d believe what I find myself having a hard time believing. Come look at it and I’ll try to explain.” He felt the change in her and audibly sighed in relief. When her fingertips ran over the new scars he sucked in a breath. “This was done by a vampire.” He paused, waiting for her to laugh at him.

“You’re sure that’s what he is? You’ve confirmed it?”

“He told me himself,” he squeaked in surprise.

“That must have been quite the conversation you had with him at his house a couple of weeks back.”

He shook his head, dislodging her hand. “He told me here in this room. When he attacked me the first time. This time...this time he didn’t seem to be interested in killing me. This time he seemed more interested in talk. Asked me a bunch of questions, fed on me, and left me alive. This,” Taggart gestured to the scars on his neck. “I assume this was a reminder not to talk about this with anyone. I shouldn’t even be telling you.” His eyes locked with hers. “It’s just that I don’t want you to worry. I don’t want you to think that I’ve gone around the bend. There’s something about this guy. Something’s changed and I’m not sure he knows how to handle it. They say, be careful what you wish for. Something tells me he got far more than he bargained for this time.”

“Michael, what are you talking about? You had the killer here in your house? You had a conversation with him? He...what did you say...fed on you? This complicates your case doesn’t it?”

The weary detective sank against the countertop. “Yes it complicates things further, but not in a bad way. I think I may be able to talk him into giving up now. I feel as if I reached a break in this case.” He let his head fall forward as the silence stretched between them. Finally, he raised his head and looked her straight in the eye. “Magdalene, do you think I’m crazy for allowing him to feed off me?”

“You did what?!”

He pushed away from the counter and stalked past her into the bedroom. “I let him feed off me. I could see the hunger. It was there in his eyes,” he added absently. “I knew what he was here for, and I had to do something to save myself. So I gave willingly. He didn’t kill me.” His eyes focused on some point in the distance as he remembered their conversation. “I need to take a new track with this investigation. I don’t have the proof I need yet, but it’s only a matter of time before he gives it to me.”

“I hope you’re right. I don’t like this in the least Michael. It makes me feel uneasy. You’re effectively making this madman out to be a saint. He’s murdered at least twenty innocent women and a handful of men as well. He’s cold-blooded and empty. I’m asking you not to do this.”

“I have to. He and I have an old debt to settle. Benny deserves to be laid to rest. I have to get him to give himself up.”

“Who is Benny?”

“Benigna Machado. Sergeant in the Marine Corps, best-damned sniper we had. Her son Liam is my Godson. She and Rico named him after me. Poor kid was only a few months old when she was found.” He shuddered as the memories assailed him. *She was lying facedown on the deck. Her dark hair was a riotous mess around her head. That was the first clue something was wrong.* “God, why couldn’t I have been the one to draw the watch. Then he wouldn’t have gotten to her.” He felt a hand on his arm and refocused his attention on the present. “Sorry Maggie. It just hurts. I’m the one who found her. I had to tell Rico that she was dead and then I was a pall bearer.”

“I’m sorry Michael. I didn’t realize that he really had made this personal. Maybe we can trip him up. Maybe...”

“No Maggie. I forbid it! I don’t want you involved in this. I don’t want you to get hurt. Please?”

“You’re going to need bait for your trap.”

“Yes, me! I don’t want him touching a hair on that beautiful head. Please stay out of it Maggie? I want to be able to marry you and settle down. I don’t want to lose you too.”

“There’s something you aren’t telling me. Mike what is it? What are you worried about? I spent two years at Quantico, first as a student then as an instructor. I can take care of myself.”

“You... When?”

“When what?”

“When were you at Quantico?” His eyes searched her face. There was something familiar about her eyes now that he thought about it.

“’94 through ’96, why?”

“I thought you looked familiar. We met there. I was taking a couple of courses with the FBI.”

“Sergeant Taggart?”

“That’d be me. Maggie, please understand why I want you to stay out of this. I couldn’t lose you too. I’ve got to do this alone. Besides, if I get caught or anything happens to me, you’ll still have your career to fall back on. I want the hope that you’ll be there for me to marry when this is all over and done with. Promise me you’ll stay out of this. This is my fight with Sidonius.”

“If you feel so strongly about it why aren’t you staying away from him too?”

“Because I have to do this.” He ran a hand down his face and sank onto the bed. “I have to do this.” He fell back against the bloody pillow. “I’m so tired.”

“Michael, at least let me change the bedding before you fall asleep.”

His eyes rolled in her direction a moment before they went askew and closed.

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Adeo sat back in the leather chair. *Comfortable!* Kicking his feet up on the desk, he folded his hands and waited for the man whose office he’d invaded to arrive. He didn’t have long to wait as the door handle jiggled a moment later. He smiled and slipped his feet to the floor. Folding his hands before him he leaned on the blotter. The door opened and he smiled. “Good evening Detective Taggart. I trust you aren’t too surprised to see me?”

“Not really, Mr. Sidonius. In truth I was getting worried. There haven’t been any new killings of late. Care to explain?”

Adeo chuckled. “Call it a change of priorities.” He vacated the seat he’d commandeered and came around the desk. “I have been doing some research. You have a rather interesting background Detective.”

“Why the sudden interest? I could have told you more than the paperwork you were able to dig up on me. What brings you to me now?”

“I want your help.” He watched the detective drop into the leather chair and leaned back against the doorjamb.

“My help; with what? You might as well sit. I’m not going anywhere.”

Adeo pushed away from the door and took a seat in the visitor chair. “As you know I’ve lived a very long life.” He ignored the derisive snort and continued. “And I’ve done some very evil things. I want to make it right. I want to turn myself in.”

“Whoa! Hang on a second. You want to turn yourself in? You understand they’re going to throw you in the clink and throw away the keys, right?”

“I’m hoping that by doing this, I can spare my wife and son. Please Michael? I need help. This is the only way.”

“You’re serious?”

Adeo hadn’t worn his sense of humor any. Adeo grinned for a moment and leaned forward. Turning serious he laid his hands on the desk. “I want my son to know me, Michael. The only way I can do that is to get the help I need. I am prepared to face the consequences. I have taken a lot of lives. It is past time I pay for my crimes.” He sighed and let his head fall forward. “I will provide you with whatever evidence you need. But!” He held up a hand and impaled the baffled detective with a look that spoke volumes. “I want a promise that you’ll help me. I need you to look after Zoe and our son when he’s born. Please, do this for me. I don’t want Zoe to end up like that poor woman’s husband.”

“You mean Benny?”

“Yes. Benigna was taken just after her son was born. I want to make sure that Zoe is taken care of. Financially she will always be taken care of. I’ve made some wise business investments over the years. But she’s going to need someone there.”

“I’m not getting involved with your wife man. I’ve got my own girl.”

Adeo laughed outright. “No! I don’t want you to get involved with her. I’d kill you if you did. What I want is for you and Ms. Montoya to look after her.

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Michael Taggart was baffled to say the least. He scratched his chin and stared at the man across from him. *I’ve been chasing you for months and now you want to turn yourself in? What’s your angle?* “This isn’t just a ploy to buy yourself more time is it?”

“No.”

The flat answer surprised him. “You’re sure about this?” Michael felt an odd sense of relief and a deep sadness. “I hope then that the court is merciful.” He rose from behind his desk and pulled a pair of handcuffs from under his jacket. Gesturing to Adeo’s wrists he snapped the first cuff in place. “Hands behind you, please.” Never had the words of the Miranda Rights been stuck in his throat, but he finally managed to spit them out. “You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney and to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided to you at no cost. During any questioning, you may decide at any time to exercise these rights, not answer any questions, or make any statements. Do you understand these rights?”

“I do.”

“Let’s go.” Michael opened the door and guided his prisoner into the hall. “What follows now is simple. I’ll take you down to the jail. There you will be searched and all of your possessions will be confiscated. Then an officer will take you to a holding cell while you’re processed. I’ll fill out some paperwork, and then we’ll give you a chance to call your lawyer or your wife. After that I’ll get a taped confession as well as a signed copy. From there, you’ll be in the legal system. Now, depending on how good your lawyer is will determine how long it takes you to get to trial.”

“I understand Detective Taggart. Thank you.”

The meaning behind those quiet words was not lost on Michael. Outside the interior doors to the city jail he stopped. “You’ve managed to earn my respect in one move, son. I have faith that you’ll get the help that you need.” He sighed. “And I’ll keep my word.”

“Thank you detective. I am going to use my phone call to contact my lawyer. He’s on retainer. I want you to tell my wife. She’ll take it better from you.”

Michael nodded. He needed a drink. “As you wish. Please step inside now, Mr. Sidonius.” Taking the man’s arm again he led him through the foyer.

Michael dropped down in the booth and glanced at the woman across from him.

“I heard you got a break in your case.”

He looked up at the woman he loved. "A break?" His chuckle slowly turned into a full-blown laugh. "My case blew wide open Maggie. The killer gave himself up."

"What?!"

He caught a glimpse of a reporter he knew from New York coming through the door at the same moment. "Maggie," he hissed, "Keep your voice down! There's a lot at stake still." He had hoped that the reporter wouldn't notice the sharp question, but his luck wasn't holding. The tall blonde woman was stalking towards their table like a tigress on the hunt. "Maggie, let me handle this." He rose and extended his hand. "Miss Evans. What can I do for you?"

"Ah Michael! Just the handsome police detective I was looking for! Have a drink with me?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry Monica. Have you met my fiancée Magdalene Montoya? Maggie, this is Monica Evans. She's a TV journalist, for Channel 4."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance Miss Evans. I would ask you to join us, but this is a private dinner."

Michael smiled his thanks. "Yeah, I'm sorry Monica. I've been promising Maggie an evening alone for a while. I'll take a rain-check on that drink though, k?" He steered her towards the door. "Great, thanks. I'll get in touch with you. Goodnight Monica." Returning to the table he sank back into the booth. "Thanks honey. You have no idea..." An oppressive weight seemed to hang in the air like a pall. Trailing off he looked up and found himself impaled by a pair of diamond hard green eyes. "What?"

"You tell me Michael. What's going on here? Your suspect just miraculously gives himself up; you've got a New York news anchor calling on you personally; any of this seem odd to you?"

He sighed. "All right. It is odd. I'm just glad that this case is winding to a close. And I don't look forward to what I have to tell you next." He ran a hand over the back of his neck and murmured softly. "I made him a promise."

"My God! Michael, you have to be kidding me! You made a serial killer a promise! For the love of everything Holy! What did you promise him?"

Unsure of whether her tirade was over or not, he looked up at her warily. "I told him I'd check on his wife and son once in a while. He gave himself up, Maggie! I had to do something."

"You arrested him," she scoffed. "That was what you had to do!" She scooted out of the booth and turned to face him. "Michael, you're changed. I don't know who you are anymore. You're willing to bend the rules and cut corners. I love you honey, but I can't sit by and watch you throw away your career."

He watched in stunned silence as she turned and walked away. His head fell into his arms as the door to the restaurant closed behind her. When a hand landed on his shoulder, he didn't bother looking up. "Go away!"

"Now son is that any way to speak to a superior?"

The gruff voice immediately registered and had Michael shooting out of the booth. "Sir!" He hastily wiped his eyes and saluted. "Forgive my greeting sir, I thought you were..."

"I know very well who you thought I was, son. She won't be bothering you anymore. I had her sent back to the city."

"Thank you sir." Michael averted his gaze and chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "I assume you've heard then?"

"News travels fast around this sleepy little dot on the map. I was in my office. So tell me what happened."

Michael gestured to the booth and slid back into his seat. "This one is hard to follow sir. Frankly, I'm not sure I can explain it. The story just gets stranger the deeper it gets."

"I've got a couple of hours. Would it be better if we took a walk? This sounds serious."

Michael reluctantly nodded. "Aye, it might be best." Running a hand down his face he fished in his pocket for his wallet. Dropping a five-dollar bill on the table he followed the ranking officer out the door. "Let's take a drive. I know a quiet place where we can talk and not be disturbed." Piling into his car he drove them to a little used area south of the bridge where he'd been fished out of the Hudson River. Switching off the engine, he opened the door and walked to the edge of the river. "How much do you believe in old legends, sir?"

"Depends. What legends are you talking about, son?"

"You're gonna section eight me for this," Michael muttered under his breath.

"You're a good soldier, son. Just lay it out for me. I've known you too long to dismiss what you say out of hand."

Blowing out a breath, he clasped his arms behind him and stood stiffly. "How much do you know about the supernatural? Vampires, witches, demons, and the like?" Receiving a grunt in response, he continued. "You remember when I landed in the ER a couple of months ago? I mean the first time, before they fished me out of the river."

"That foreign agent that was introduced into your bloodstream? Yeah I remember it, why?"

He yanked a penlight from his back pocket and shined it on his neck. "Left side about where the neck and shoulder join. You'll find two red scars about an inch long. They bisect two small circular scars roughly incisor distance apart." The light was taken from his trembling hand.

"At least hold the light still man! What the hell happened? Why wasn't this in your report?"

"Major, if you'll give me a moment I'll explain. The man that killed Sergeant Machado did this. He tried to kill me twice. He's a vampire. He turned himself in this morning. He understands that what he's done is wrong, and he wants to get help." Michael switched off the light and walked several steps away. "I don't expect you to believe me, George. You can read his confession for yourself. The file's in the car." He continued to walk into the darkness, unsnapping the flap of his pistol as he went.

"Attention!"

He ignored the command. "Forget it Major. I'm... I just need a few minutes." Gunshots erupted from the darkness. After nine shots a moment or two of silence followed. Then the gun began to fire again. A cry of pain and anger echoed through the trees.

"Lieutenant? Michael! What the hell are you shooting at soldier!"

He walked out of the trees looking less haggard, more invigorated. Saluting crisply, Michael holstered his weapon. "Just burning off some steam Major. Doc Gorman at Quantico recommended that I blow off some steam once in a while. It helps." He shrugged.

"Gorman recommended this? Wouldn't it be better to go to a shooting range?"

"Aye sir. Just not as convenient as a deserted forest at night." He looked at the man before him. "I should get you back. I have some business to take care of." He headed back to the car and paused with his hand on the handle. "I'm not sure how this is all going to work out, sir, but it will work out."

"Have you been compromised soldier?"

"No sir."

"Michael, you seem distracted. What's going on around here?"

Sliding behind the wheel the junior lieutenant blew out a breath and stared out the windshield. "It's just backlash from this case sir."

"How are things between you and Dr. Montoya?"

Michael stiffened. "Fine!" He said it a little more forcefully than he wanted and groaned inwardly as his commanding officer's eyes narrowed like a hawk with prey in sight. Turning to his right, he held up a hand. "I'm not really sure at the moment. We've run into a little hitch."

"That's a shame, son. I was really rooting for you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He snorted. "Unless you want to explain to lovely Miss Montoya that I'm a deep cover agent working for the United States Marine Corps. The things I do in the line of duty are making my personal life very difficult. Even Gunny hasn't been able to offer me any advice." He started the car and threw it in reverse. "I don't know Major. Am I doing the right thing? I've put myself on death's doorstep three times to catch this devil."

"Well now. I don't know. Maybe you should answer that one yourself. You said you've put your life on the line three times and managed to catch this guy. Putting this killer behind bars will solve a lot of crimes on the books won't it? According to your own report it will solve the case on Sergeant Machado's death. What do you think the answer is?"

"He's not convicted yet. Truthfully," Michael gave the older man a sideways look as he drove through the darkness. "I don't know that he deserves to be locked up. I think he needs a shrink. He's had a pretty messed up life."

"You learned this from his confession?"

"Mostly. Though he told me some things during a couple of our encounters. When I walked into my office this morning I made a comment about his lack of activity. And you know he told me that it was less from lack of need to kill than it was from a change in priorities. He has a wife and a son on the way. He asked me to look out for them." He was absently speaking now as he ran a hand over his throat. "Says he wants to pay for his crimes and hopefully have a future with his family."

"Your throat bugging you soldier?"

"No sir?"

"Then why are you rubbing it? Seems to me you ought to get that checked out."

Michael held up a hand. "No more civilian docs. I've had it with their poking and prodding and thinking I'm crazy."

"Every Marine is a little crazy man. Keep me apprised. I'll send Leonidas out tomorrow to talk about the military's case against this man."

"Yes sir. Thank you Major Davidson. I'll fax you my report at the end of the week."

“Drop me at the courthouse. Seems Gunny and I need to have a little chat.”

“Yes sir. About Maggie.” He paused, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. “She knows I was in Quantico. We met briefly there. She’s been led to believe that I was discharged after I nearly lost my leg.”

“I’ll get back to you on that matter. Just sit tight.”

“Yes sir.” He pulled to a stop before the courthouse. “Take it easy George.” When he was alone in the car, Michael took a deep breath and let it out. Putting it in gear he drove through the quiet residential streets to Overton Rd. Stopping before a brightly-lit house, he got out of the car and walked slowly up the path to the door. He rang the doorbell and waited. After several minutes a lovely young pregnant woman came to the door. She looked like she was ready to pop. “Mrs. Sidonius?”

“Yes? Can I help you sir?”

“Ma’am, I’m Detective Taggart with the Ossining Police Department. May I come in?”

“If you’re here to speak to my husband, detective. I’m afraid he’s stepped out for a bit.”

“Mrs. Sidonius, I’m here at the behest of your husband. Adeo asked me to come and talk to you. May I?” He gestured to the interior of the house. When she winced and stepped back he entered the foyer. “Ma’am, Perhaps we should go into the kitchen. You’ll want to be sitting.”

“Detective, what’s going on? Is my husband in some sort of trouble? Is he all right?”

He detected a hint of pained panic in her voice and took her hand. Leading her into the kitchen, he seated her. “Mrs. Sidonius, I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this. Your husband turned himself in this morning.”

“What do you mean he turned himself in this morning? Turned himself in for what?”

“Mrs. Sidonius, your husband is the Atropos killer.” He saw her wince and blanch. “Are you all right, ma’am?” He cleared his throat softly and returned to the subject at hand when she waved a dismissive hand. “He accepts his guilt ma’am. Personally, I think he needs help. He asked me to come tell you.”

“I’m not sure I understand Detective. What does this mean?”

“Mrs. Sidonius, your husband will be standing trial for the murders he’s committed. I’m sorry.”

“But Adeo didn’t commit any murders. It’s not possible. He’s innocent!”

He heard the pain before she grimaced. “Mrs. Sidonius? Ma’am are you all right?” When she shook her head, he groaned inwardly. “Ma’am, are you experiencing labor pains?”

“I’m not sure! It hurts! Here!”

Michael was out of his chair the instant he saw her hand go to her abdomen. Coming around the table he knelt beside her. “Describe the pain.”

“Like rolling waves. Sharp and intense then they subside.”

“How often?”

“I don’t know. I can’t time them myself.”

“Okay. Tell me when another pain starts and I’ll time them.” He pulled up his sleeve and marked the time. Taking her hand he felt it tighten on his own. “Now?” When she nodded, he marked the beginning of the contraction. “Breathe,” he said softly. When her grip on his hand lessened, Michael noted the time. “That was a long one. You’ve been through Lamaze, right?”

“Yes!”

His eyes widened as her grip tightened again. “Another one?” At her emphatic nod, he noted the time and reached inside his jacket for his portable phone. Flipping it open he dialed 911. “This is Detective Taggart! I need an ambulance sent to 7312 Overton Rd!”

“Please state the nature of the emergency Detective.”

“I have a woman in labor. Her contractions are about a minute apart.” Frowning, he looked to the woman before him. “Ma’am, how long have you been having pains?”

“Off and on for about four hours.”

Turning his attention back to the phone, Michael began rapidly describing the situation. “This is the lady’s first child. She’s been having contractions off and on for hours. Get that ambulance here ASAP!” Hanging up, he turned his attention to the woman. “Mrs. Sidonius, you need to lie down. I’m going into the living room to get a couple of pillows for you. We’re going to lay you out right here on the floor. You’re too far along to move you.”

“But!”

“No argument’s ma’am. I know what needs to be done. Just sit tight. When your contraction starts breathe but whatever you do, don’t push!” He gave her a long stare. “Understand?” His whole demeanor had changed. Moving with speed and agility that he rarely showed Michael hustled into the living room. Returning a few moments later, he helped her onto the floor and settled her. “Mrs. Sidonius, where do you keep your towels? And I need a large bowl.”

“Zoe! In the closet under the stairs, bowl... bowl... in the cabinet above the sink!”

“Breathe Zoe. Don’t push yet, just breathe!” When her pain had subsided, Michael ran to gather what he needed. Coming back with an armful of towels he dropped them beside her and turned the hot water on. Pulling a large punch bowl down he filled it with water and returned to her side. Stripping out of his jacket, he began rolling up his sleeves.

“What...what are you doing?”

He gave the panting woman a sober look. “I’m going to deliver your baby, ma’am. The paramedics won’t be here in time. You’re too far along to wait.” He saw the fear in her eyes.

“Have you ever...”

He nodded. “Aye ma’am. I have. Now, when I tell you to push, I want you to do exactly like they taught you in Lamaze class, okay?” Her reluctant nod was punctuated by another contraction. With a quick flick of his wrist, he threw her skirt around her hips. “Push!” he put a hand on her stomach and felt the baby moving. He felt the contraction subsiding. “Okay, relax now.” He braced her feet beneath his knees and dabbed her clean with a damp towel. Feeling her tense, he looked up. “Alright, push hard with this next contraction.”

She did and he saw something that filled him with dread. *Great! Another breech birth!* Keeping his face straight he looked at her. “Very good. One or two more pushes and we should have the baby. Now, you’re going to feel my hands a lot. Don’t be alarmed. I’m just maneuvering the baby to make the delivery easier. Okay, now push.” As she did, he grasped the infant’s feet and began pressing around the sides.

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Adeodatus stared at the blank gray ceiling. He was worried. *She was in labor when I left. God, I hope she is all right. I hope that Michael kept his...* A shudder of dread washed through him suddenly. He leapt to his feet and grabbed the bars. “Guard! Guard!”

“What do you want?”

Adeo ignored the terse tone. “Guard, I need to know...”

“You don’t get to know nothin’ Mr. Atropos Killer. Just lay yourself back down on the cot and get some shut-eye.”

Adeo tensed and growled softly. His hands tightened on the bars and he felt them mash flat. “I need to speak to Detective Taggart.” He enunciated each word carefully, trying to maintain a tight reign on his temper. “I need to have him check on my wife. She was in labor this morning when I left. Please officer. I am worried about her.”

“Look man, I don’t know how you warranted a wife. But I’ll go talk to the desk. Just sit tight.”

Adeo bowed his head and stepped back. “Thank you.” His hands left the bars and he heard the guard gasp. A small, satisfied smile played across his lips as he backed away and sank onto the cot. When the guard was gone his head fell into his hands. *Something is wrong! Pain! All I feel is pain. Zoe!* His hands grew wet and the floor between his feet accumulated a rose-colored puddle. “Zoe!”

Something inside him snapped. Thrusting to his feet, he grabbed the bunk and threw it against the bars. Tearing the sink out of the wall he threw it at the opposite wall. Water gushed from the ruptured pipes spraying the small cell. He picked up the bunk again and flung it at the wall. Bricks crumbled and dust filled the wet air splattering him with muddy droplets.

“What the hell?”

A sharp pop followed by an electric hum filled the air. As the two electrified barbs of the taser pistol hooked into his skin, Adeo turned to face the bars. His lips pulled back in a feral snarl. The electrical current running through his body made him tingle. “My wife?” he growled.

“She is on her way to the hospital with Detective Taggart. Apparently, the detective had a medical emergency...”

“The baby?!” Adeo yanked the barbs from his neck as he fell to his knees in the growing puddle of water. Electricity arced across the surface of the water, wreathing Adeo in ribbons of current. His back arched and he gritted his teeth. “God!” The current suddenly disappeared. He crashed backward into the puddle. His eyes rolled up in his head and he lay motionless.

“Ralph! Get a medical team down here now!”

“How the hell did he do that? Are you sure you saw it?”

“I’m tellin you, I saw his hands come away from the bars and they were flat as pancakes! Man isn’t human, he can’t be!”

Adeo opened his eyes and stared at the green ceiling for several confused seconds. He went over the words he’d heard the guards utter. “I am not,” he murmured slowly. “Has there been any news of my wife?”

“Well, I let me...”

A new voice spoke. “Zoe, Marius, and little Flavia are fine.”

“Twins?!” Adeo turned his gaze to the doorway. “Did you say twins?” His eyes rounded as Michael entered with a curt nod. “There was an emergency? What happened?”

“I just had to deliver the wee ones. Seems your missus was unsure of what to do. And twins do have a habit of coming rather quickly. Everyone is fine though. Mrs. Sidonius’ mother arrived from New York before I left.”

“Thank you. I can never...” His eyes bored into the detective’s. “Did you say you delivered the babies? How is that...?”

“I’ve had some training. Remember, I haven’t always been here in Ossining. Your son was born breech and your daughter almost didn’t give me enough time to get her brother wrapped up. It was over rather quickly though, and everyone was doing fine the last I checked. I’ll go on up to the hospital again to escort your missus home. They want to keep them for a couple of days for observation. Seems even her doctor couldn’t tell she was carrying twins.”

“Aye, I know. I am in your debt, Detective Taggart.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened here tonight? Why does your cell look like it was torn apart by a wrecking crew? I have a report here,” there was a rustle of paper, “that says you just sorta went berserk and ‘tore apart his cell with his bare hands.’ Were you trying to escape?”

“I was not. I was...upset. I asked about my wife and was sneered at and belittled until I lost my temper. I apologize.” He slumped on the hospital bed. “I take it you are transferring me somewhere else?”

“Might be. Depends on whether you get violent again. You did cause hundreds of dollars in damages with that little fit you threw.”

Adeo sighed. “I’ll be happy to pay for it. I just...”

“Oh don’t worry, you’ll be getting a bill.”

He sat up slowly, shaking his head to clear the nausea. “I will not cause any further troubles Detective. Now that I now my wife is safe.”

A pair of handcuffs were snapped around his wrists and he was helped off the bed. “Your arraignment will be soon. Tomorrow or the next day most likely. We can’t hold you much longer than that, even with your confession. Have you gotten in touch with your lawyer?”

“Yes. He’ll be here tomorrow morning. His flight got in tonight. I’ve instructed him to cooperate with the local law. He will do whatever is necessary.”

“I’m sure he’ll do what is in your best interest. Come along now, Mr. Sidonius. Let’s get you back to the cell block.”

⌘ ⌘

“All rise! The honorable Judge David Mackey presiding.”

“Be seated. Before we begin I would like to remind you folks in the gallery that this is merely an arraignment hearing. All we’re here to do today is get Mr. Sidonius’ pleas. Now, if we’re all ready? Bailiff please read the charges.”

“Your Honor. This is the case of Ossining Village vs. Mr. Adeodatus Sidonius. He stands accused of 30 counts- first-degree murder, 2 counts- assault with a deadly weapon. 1 count- kidnapping, and 1 count- sexual assault.”

“Would the defense please rise? Mr. Sidonius do you understand the charges?”

Adeo and his lawyer exchanged glances before he sighed. “Yes your honor, I do.”

“Good. I’m going to read each charge and ask you to enter your plea. You are by no means required to enter a guilty plea to any of these charges, despite your signed confession, do you understand?”

“Yes Your Honor.”

“Good. Now, do you understand what each plea means?” He shook his head. “A Plea of guilty means you are admitting that you committed the crime and you may give me an explanation as to your actions. A plea of not guilty means you are denying any responsibility for the crime. A plea of no contest means that you are neither admitting guilt nor denying it. Let’s begin, shall we? On the first count of first-degree murder, how do you plead?”

“Your Honor, might I point out that we have spoken with the District Attorney and reached an agreement for settlement of this case given that certain provisions are met?”

Adeo looked at his attorney in shock. “What did you do Rafael? Have you condemned me?” He heard the judge rustling through the papers before him and frowned. “I don’t have any such plea bargain.”

“I apologize Your Honor. I was unable to give it to you before court convened. Something about a private meeting with classified personnel.”

Adeo waited stoically as the District Attorney approached the bench and handed over a sheaf of papers. He held his breath waiting for the judge’s response. He didn’t have long to wait.

“I see. The agreement is amicable.” A loud thunk reverberated through the room. “I will deliver my verdict shortly. Court recessed.”

Adeo nearly sank into his chair as the gavel came down. He felt his lawyer's hand underneath his elbow and stiffened. "Sorry," he hissed. When the judge was gone he sank down and rested his elbow on the table. "What plea bargain, Rafael? You didn't discuss this with me."

"Apologies boss. But I spoke with a man claiming to be your spokesman. We worked out a deal with the DA and that's what the judge is reviewing right now. Be still, sir, and trust me."

The door behind the judge's bench opened up ten minutes later. "All rise! The honorable Judge David Mackey presiding."

The black-robed judge took his seat. "Be seated. Mr. Sidonius would you and your attorney please approach the bench?"

Adeo exchanged a glance with his lawyer. Receiving a tight shrug he complied with the judge's request. "Your honor?"

"Mr. Sidonius, I am going to grant this plea bargain on two conditions." The judge turned the microphone off. "This is strictly off the record. Understand?" When they nodded he continued. "You will comply with the mandates of the agreement. In addition you will sign a secondary affidavit stating that you are indeed guilty of murdering Sergeant Benigna Machado. You will pay restitution to her husband and young son. Your plea of temporary insanity will be accepted if you accept my terms."

Adeo tapped his chin for a moment. Looking the judge directly in the eye he sighed. "You too were a friend of Benny's." It wasn't a question, he just knew. "I agree, your honor. You can tell Michael Taggart he has served his country well." Returning to his table he sank into his seat.

The judge switched his microphone back on. "Would the defense please rise?" He waited for them to comply. When they did he continued. "According to the agreement that was decided between your lawyer and the prosecutor, I consider this case closed." His gavel banged against the plate on his bench and he rose. "Court is adjourned."

⌘ ⌘

Adeodatus Sidonius stared up at the lifeless ceiling of his cell. He was still in solitary confinement awaiting transfer to the Northern Westchester Hospital, Behavioral Health Section. He was frustrated.

Why did you do this to yourself Adeodatus? Surely you knew that this would be tedious? You have outlived me by a thousand years and now you are reduced to this. Sitting inside a stone box waiting for someone to come let you out. You are a powerful being. Break out of here, Adeo. Come to me.

He growled softly. "Go to hell Faustina! Your death is the only one I do not regret! You were a cold-hearted bitch in life, and you are a cold-hearted bitch now. I at least have a reason for living now." His thoughts turned to Zoe and the children. "It took a thousand years, but I have been reunited with my love. I suppose I should thank you Faustina."

Thank me?! Surely you are jesting? I hated you even when father insisted that I become your wife. I have never done anything to benefit you!

The disgust he heard in his dead wife's voice was enough to make him smile. "Ah but you did, Faustina. You killed my beautiful Zoe and set me along the path of darkness that I have traveled. You fueled my hatred for life through the centuries. And now, at the end of it all, you have given me the strength to accept my crimes and serve a greater purpose. You have given me the strength to love my Zoe freely. You have given me the strength to make amends for my past and live a new life. Thank you my beloved wife. For once, I actually feel that my love has been returned."

The scream of outrage echoed through his head as she raged at his callousness, while his laughter echoed around the cold cell. He was still laughing when they came to transport him.

Detective Michael Taggart stared at the picture on his desk. *Four months! She's been gone four months. Let it go, man. She doesn't want anything to do with you.* Anger reared its ugly head. *This case ripped us apart! I don't believe that she hates me!* He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a stack of letters. Each bore the familiar stamp 'Return to Sender'. He flipped through them idly, reliving the pain each one caused. A light rap sounded on his doorframe as a head poked in.

"Hey Chicken Little! Let's grab a bite to eat?"

Mike looked up at his long time friend and one time superior. "No thanks, Gunny. I've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on."

The gunnery sergeant turned judge stepped into the office and closed the door. Flipping the latch, he shook his head. "Not a chance! I'm sick to death of you moping around the office and so is the chief. You come to work," he perched on the edge of the desk and snatched the letters away. "You come to work and hole up in your office. You

work from sun up till well after midnight. You barely sleep. From the looks of you, you barely eat. Come on man, lighten up! It's been four months. The dame obviously wasn't serious about you!" His mind flitted back to the evening before and the lovely conversation he'd had with the chief of police about the two of them. From what Bob said, Maggie was just as bad. He scratched his chin. "Listen comrade, don't make me pull rank on you. Have lunch with me. We don't have to talk about anything, just spend time together. Maybe have a couple of beers and jaw about the game that was on last night. Deal? No work, no women, no other work. Just a couple of old mates out having lunch. What do you say?"

Mike frowned at the desk blotter then heaved a sigh. "Why the hell not. It isn't as if I have a desk full of work around here. Things have been kind of slow since the Atropos Killer was caught." He switched his computer off and took the letters from the judge. Tossing them in a drawer, he locked his desk and grabbed his jacket. "Where we going?"

Gunny waited until the office door was locked and they were walking down the hall to respond. "I figured we'd slip over to Dale's Sports Bar & Grill. Been a while since I've had one of his Philly Cheese Steak's, and I figured you wouldn't mind. Was I wrong?"

Mike shook his head. "Nope. Let's go. Hey, who's driving, me or you?"

The judge took a set of keys from his suit pocket. "Me, sport. You're just along for the ride. Hey, George wanted me to pass this along to you. Said Rico sent it to him, knowing it'd find its way to you."

Michael took the slim envelope and slit it open with his pinky. He pulled out the neatly folded page and hesitated. "I thought you said no work?"

"This isn't work Mike. This is personal."

They pushed through the doors and crunched along the parking lot. Winter was lingering as they went into April. Trusting to his heavy tread dress shoes and his balance, Michael unfolded the sheet of paper and read. A sad sort of smile quirked his lips as he read. By the end of it, he had tears in his eyes. "Damn!" he muttered. Stuffing the page back into the envelope he scrubbed at his eyes. When they were clear again, he noticed the small photograph in the envelope. Pulling it out, he felt his first genuine smile in months. His face was stiff.

"What you got there hombre?"

He looked up and held out the picture to his companion. "It's Benny and Rico's little boy. He's about two now."

Gunny took the picture and gazed at it. It was a little boy dressed in a blue sailor suit with a familiar thatch of dark hair and deep blue eyes. "Man, they made a great looking kid! I bet Benny is sitting up there looking down on this little tyke and smiling. What did you say they named him?"

"Liam," the cop responded softly.

"After you, huh? What'd they want to go and do a wacky thing like that for?"

Michael chuckled. "Well it sure beat naming him Gunny!"

"Hey!" The cry of indignation was all show. "What's wrong with Gunny? You wacky bastards didn't have no trouble calling me Gunny!"

Michael laughed. "Yeah, but I doubt this little critter is going to be manning a shipboard gun anytime soon." He took the picture back and gazed at it. "Let's go get that lunch." He slipped the photo back into the envelope and tucked the envelope into his jacket. "So how have the boys been, Gunny?" He slid into the judge's Lexus and hooked his safety belt.

"The boys are doing good. Brian's getting ready to head back to West Point tomorrow. Marcus will be heading there in two weeks. He begins his semester just after spring break. Nothing could make this military pop prouder."

Michael chuckled. "You couldn't boast any louder." He fell silent as he caught sight of Magdalene's car. *Damn! Why can't I get through a day without hurting like this? I bet she's just having a grand old time, living it up!* His thoughts were cut short as they passed her car and he noticed she was inside. Turning his head as they passed, he realized that she was crying. *No, she's sobbing.* "Hey Gunny? Why's Maggie sitting in her car bawling?"

"Bawling?" The judge stopped the car. "Go find out."

Michael shook his head. "I can't. She doesn't want anything to do with me."

"Damn it Mike! Do you love her or don't you? You see her crying and you're too damned cowardly to go find out why? Jesus, man! I thought you cared for her!"

Michael's head whipped around and he growled, "I love her more than life itself!" He was pushing out of the car before he really thought about it. "I won't be long!" Crushing the snow under his shoes, he stalked over to her car and pulled open the door. "Maggie?"

Her head came around at the sound of his voice. "Go away!"

He knelt down in the cold snow. "Magdalene, I'm not going anywhere. I've been dying a little each day since you walked out of that diner. Honey, please! Don't push me away? It's why you're crying, I know. I can't count the number of tears I've shed." He let out a slow breath. "Damn! Listen to me. Here I am carrying on about myself

when all I've been thinking about is you for months. God, Maggie!" he wrapped his arms around her. When he felt her arms come around him, his control snapped. "I'm so sorry, Maggie! I let so many things get in the way of us! I know I don't deserve it, baby," he whimpered into her hair, "but please...please come back to me!"

She shook her head vehemently against his shoulder. Her body trembled, but she refused to let go of him. "Michael! You are an arrogant sonofabitch! Trying to make this ALL about you! Damn you!"

He cut her off. "No, no, no!" Framing her face with his hands, he spoke in a low fierce growl. "Magdalene, I... This isn't about me. It isn't about you. It's about us! We've been foolish long enough. I made some mistakes in letting this case get in the way of us. Haven't we been punished enough? Four months ago I asked you to marry me. Four months ago, you said yes. Then, all of a sudden, you just walked out on me. You didn't give me a chance to explain. You wouldn't take my calls...you returned all of my letters...turned down the flowers I sent you. You tore out both our hearts, and now you're going to listen!" He gave her a gentle shake.

Her eyes rounded and her mouth fell open.

He reached up and closed it for her, then cleared his throat. "Four months ago, the Atropos Killer gave himself up. He'd been stringing me along for months, killing people that looked enough like me to be family, just so he could send me a message. He tried to kill me three times. Then he admitted to another murder that I was investigating. His admission tore me apart. The woman he'd killed was a very dear friend of the Judge's and mine. The more personal he made it, the further I pulled away from you. I didn't want you to get hurt because of me. And I couldn't explain what was really going on." He looked down at the floorboard of the car. "You wouldn't have believed me."

"I would have. When you told me he was a vampire, I didn't laugh at you. I accepted what you said to be true. I never once questioned your sanity. I never once questioned you at all. Not until the night in the diner when the leggy blonde came up to you acting all familiar with you, and that man in the suit," she continued hotly. "That man was a lawyer wasn't he? You have a wife somewhere that you don't want to tell me about!" Her voice hitched as she tried to continue. "You're just a two-timing two-bit hustler, aren't you?!"

He hung his head and held up a hand. "You're right and you're wrong. I have a wife in New Mexico...an ex-wife! Brittany is a superficial bitch. She was my high school sweetheart. We married right before I went off to join the Corps. When I came back from the Gulf in '92 and the section eighted me, she left. Said she didn't want to be married to a veteran. Said she had big plans for her life and they didn't involve being tied to an invalid." He shook his head in disgust and looked up. "I won't lie to you Mags. I love her... I'll always love her. However, that doesn't mean I want to be with her. I'm not in love with her! Truth of the matter is, you couldn't pay me enough to want to get close to that viper again!"

His vehemence lent credence to his words, but she still wasn't convinced. "How do I know you aren't lying? Who was the man in the suit?"

He pulled his wallet from the interior of his jacket. "His name is Major George Davidson. He's the man you spoke to when I was in the loony bin. He's my commanding officer."

The honorable judge, David Mackey put the car in park and stepped out. He crunched up and stood behind the couple. "Lieutenant Taggart?" He'd heard the tail end of what the detective had said. "You know, it occurs to me that perhaps kneeling here in the snow isn't such a hot idea."

Michael looked up and blanched. "Yes sir. I understand." He turned his attention back to the woman he still held. "Maggie come with us. Have lunch with us, and I'll try to explain. I'm assuming that is permissible, sir?"

"Alright." The judge let out a sigh that rivaled fireplace bellows. "Come on Magdalene. You've got a lot to learn about this young desperado... and a bit about me too."

Michael rose and proffered his hand. "Ma'am?"

She looked up him, her eyes gritty with shed tears and lack of proper sleep. "No more lies? You're going to tell me the truth just like that?"

He couldn't blame her for being skeptical. "I know how you feel, but you have to understand. The information I've kept from you is classified. Telling you now, is reckless at best, but I owe it to you."

She nodded and took his hand. Letting him pull her out of the car, she grabbed her handbag. "I'll sit through lunch with you two class acts on one condition." She locked the door to her car and pocketed the key.

The judge frowned at the back of her head as the silence lingered. Finally, he broke the silence. "What's your stipulation Lady Medical Examiner?"

She turned to him with a frown firmly on her elegant face. "That you two stop talking in circles and come right out with what the hell is going on around here!" She stamped through the snow and slid into the seat that Michael had vacated. Knocking the snow from her boots, she pulled her feet inside and closed the door.

The judge and the detective looked at each other for a moment before the judge chuckled. "You've got a spitfire there, Mike. Come on. Let's go have that lunch and be straight with the lady. I'd hate to see what she could do to us with that scalpel of hers."

Michael nodded. "Yes sir. She has a wicked midline cut." He slipped into the backseat and reached over the seat in front of him to put his hand on her shoulder. "Thank you."

She turned to face him, pulling his hand off her shoulder as she went. "Listen Mike, I don't know what is going on with you, and this seems to be my only chance to find out. You won't tell me otherwise."

"I have to follow orders, Maggie. I'm part of a special section of the Corps. Dave here can attest to it!" He gestured to the judge. "Tell her Gunny!"

The judge held up a hand. "When we get there, Mike, when we get there. Just suffice it to say she'll be given irrefutable evidence." He punched some numbers on his car phone and listened to it ring. When it stopped ringing, he punched in several more numbers and it began to ring once more.

"Davidson."

"George, David. I'm taking them to the pub. Meet you there?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll be there in twenty. Don't forget to order me a beer, huh?"

"Sure thing Major." David hung up the phone and put the car in gear. Turning his gaze to the rearview mirror, he smiled sheepishly at the cool gaze. "What? You didn't expect that I would call in the big guns?"

"No, I didn't. Though I suppose that it's for the best. George can explain it better than I can anyway. He's got a higher clearance after all." He sank back and stared at the seat in front of him. His hand slipped into his jacket and found the inner pocket. He fidgeted with the box it contained. *Don't press your luck. She isn't going to want it back, or you either.* "I need a drink!" He shook his head and corrected himself. "No! I need a cup of coffee. No alcohol for me, I'm on duty."

"It's not as if you're going to get tanked."

Michael's gaze was drawn to the woman in the front seat. "Tanked? I don't drink when I'm on duty."

"Not even in the line of duty? I mean if the job called for it, wouldn't you drink? Haven't you ever had a drink while talking with an informant?"

Michael snorted. "No! I don't drink when I'm on duty." When they arrived at the pub, he exited the car and opened her door. Extending a hand towards her. "Ma'am?"

She took his hand and tried to hide her smile. "Thank you, detective."

"Anytime, Dr. Montoya. After you madame." He opened the door to the pub and gestured her inside. "I owe you one, Gunny."

"Hey man, wait to see if it works."

Michael shook his head. "Even if it doesn't at least we tried. This is more contact I've had with her in months. Ever since she gave back my ring," he muttered softly.

Gunny stopped him at the door with a hand on his shoulder. "You never told me that. When did all this happen?"

Mike shook his head. "Months ago. I proposed and two days later the ring was sent back to my office via special courier. We were still in the middle of the Atropos case." He shook his head again and went inside. "I don't understand it myself." He looked around for Magdalene and found her at a table. "Sorry for the delay Maggie, his honor wanted to ask me something."

She looked from the judge to the detective and back again. "More classified information?"

David shook his head. "Not at all, ma'am. I was asking him why he hadn't told me that you'd given him back his ring. He said he doesn't understand it, so maybe you can shed some light on it?"

She met his questioning gaze with a frown. "I don't know how it matters, nor how it is any of your business."

He looked at her solemnly for a moment then turned to the detective. "Get a load of this, Mike! Lady Medical Examiner wants you to be up front and honest, but she won't even answer a simple question. Sounds like she's evading, doesn't it?"

Michael shrugged. He really didn't want to get into a fight with her. "Let's just drop it shall we, Dave? I didn't get to watch the game last night, who won?"

The judge looked from one to the other. He saw the wariness in his long time friend's eyes and the quiet anger in his long time co-worker's. *You've got a choice here Davey. Answer the benign question or attack the hypocrisy head on.* Choosing the latter he sat back and crossed his arms. "It occurs to me, Ms. Montoya, that you are practicing a little of what you've been callously ignoring Mike for. You shouldn't throw stones at glass houses and all. I mean you accuse Mike here of keeping secrets from you, then you turn right around and drop him like a hot potato with no explanation. Geeze! You didn't even bother to give him back the ring in person. You had it delivered like a bouquet of flowers. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!" He fell silent, watching the seeds he'd planted bear fruit.

She steamed. Her first response was to lash out at him. She opened her mouth to speak and snapped it closed a moment later. *He's right, you know. You are judging Mike for his secrets when you are keeping your own. But he kept them first! On the other hand keeping them just to get back at him is mean-spirited and vindictive.* The emotions that accompanied such thoughts played across her face vividly. Finally she sighed. "You're right. I've behaved deplorably. A girl knows when she isn't wanted, and... I suppose so does a guy."

Michael shrugged. He studied the cup of coffee that the waitress set down before him. He said nothing, even though he knew she was waiting for some kind of response. *Not want her!? How could I not want her? I love her more than I can ever say. I never should have opened up. I should have kept things light. I vowed I wouldn't fall in love again, not after Brittany. And here I've gone and screwed myself.* "Damn me for a fool," he swore silently at the steaming black brew.

"She isn't Brit, Mike and you know it! That bitch didn't give a rat's ass about you, and she showed it in her speedy divorce! Magdalene is different man. Come on, give her a chance."

Michael looked up and found a look of grim determination staring back at him. Heaving a world-weary sigh, he slumped and looked at his cup. "Where do you want me to start Maggie?"

"At the beginning," she answered firmly.

He nodded and pushed his coffee cup away. "It started when I was in high school I suppose. I met Brittany my sophomore year. We dated and flirted around with others. Over the summer before our junior year, things changed. She gifted me with her innocence. We started going steady, and between then and graduation it grew serious. I asked her to be my wife at the prom. We were married in a private little ceremony with just her folks and a few friends right before I shipped out to boot camp. For the first five years she was a dedicated military wife. When I got deployed to the Gulf, she changed. Her letters were less frequent, more disjointed." He stared at his hands.

"Oh God, Michael! I never knew."

He snorted. "Of course you didn't, Maggie. No one knew about Brit's distance but Gunny here. When I came home from the Gulf, I went straight into a military hospital. She served me with the divorce papers then. It damned near confined me to a wheelchair...especially when she had the baby so soon after." He picked up his steaming coffee and downed half of it in a single swallow. Wincing, he cleared his throat.

"You know you shouldn't try to boil your throat, don't you?"

Michael shot out of his chair. "Sir!" He sounded like he had a frog in his throat. "Major?"

The older gentleman waved him off. "Sit down, son." He looked across the table at the young Hispanic woman. "You're looking well, Miss Montoya. Well," he pulled a file from inside his briefcase. "I'll just cut to the chase here. You wanted to know about Lieutenant Taggart's past." He passed the file across the table. "Read at your leisure, madame. But I'll tell you this." He waved a finger at the detective. "Michael here is as honest as they come. His loyalty to family and country has been unmatched. What that witch he married did to him," He shook his head. "She was a real piece of work, she was." He picked up a bottle of beer that had been set before him. "She was a dedicated wife at the start. After the first couple of months we were in the Gulf though, she got kind of distant." He looked at Mike. "Didn't think I knew, huh? I know everything about my men. I make it my business. Anyway," he said gesturing with the beer. "She started getting distant. It was beginning to effect his performance so I poked my nose where it didn't belong."

"You looked into my wife's activities? You put your nose in my private business?" The detective was mildly indignant.

"Yes I did, son. And it's a good thing I did. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to pull your ass out of the rut you put it in during your convalescence." He wagged a finger at the younger man. "You wouldn't have lasted a month after what she did to you. The way she screwed around on you was enough for me to drop her a letter. She told me how dissatisfied she was being a Marine's wife. Said she wanted out so she could marry that rat-nosed pharmacist. So I pushed her to stop writing to you and talk to a lawyer. She was more than happy to divulge to me about her infidelity." He shrugged. "I guess she figured that I'd tell you."

"You encouraged her to get the divorce? You sonofabitch!" Michael came up out of his chair.

"Sit down, Marine! It ain't worth getting in a tussle over. I saved you from a very painful public scandal, son. She was already four months pregnant when I told her to get a quiet divorce."

Michael pushed in his chair and walked out of the pub. Heavy footfalls took him down the street. Pain wrapped around him like a cocoon. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and trudged into the lengthening shadows.

She stared at the two men across from her as he stalked out. The judge looked away, uncomfortable. The other man met her gaze stoically. "Major, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions. First of all," she started without waiting for him to respond. "What gives you the right to meddle in the affairs of others? Second, what in the hell were you thinking by divulging that information here?" She rose quickly enunciating each of the words she said, never taking her eyes off of the man across from her. "Your Honor, would you take this file to my office?" She

pushed the file that the older gentleman had given her over the scarred tabletop. "As for you," she said coolly. "You owe Michael one hell of an apology! That you could callously bring up painful information is deplorable! I expected more from a United States Marine! Yes, you are trained to blow shit up and break things, but you're also people. If you could show enough concern that you wanted to get the divorce done in silence, why the hell would you bring up something he didn't know in public! Don't you know that reporters *still* hound him because of the role he played in the Atropos Killer's apprehension?" She made a frustrated sound and stormed out.

He heard the clatter of boot heels on the sidewalk behind him, but Michael didn't turn around. He didn't want to see the sympathy...the disgust.

Maggie ran over the freshly salted concrete. "Mike, wait!" She came abreast of him and grabbed the sleeve of his coat. "Hang on a minute, honey!"

He shook her off. "I don't need your sympathy Maggie. It's done and over with!"

Her eyes rounded. *Does he mean the bit with his ex wife, or what's between us?* Her temper, still not fully cooled, peaked again. "Now you just hold it right there, Michael Taggart! I don't know what you think I'm doing here, but you are **dead** wrong!" She stomped up behind him, grabbed his coat sleeve and spun him around. Jabbing her index finger into his chest, she snapped. "Of all the underhanded, sneaky, devious things anyone could do to another human being! What the hell is the matter with people? Do they think they can just hook up with someone and walk out on them when they feel like it? *Madre de Dios!*"

He gently took hold of her jacket as she jabbed him and ranted. Her accusations hit him like the spiny barbs of a tiger fish. When she ran out of steam, he began buttoning her coat. "You walked out on me, remember?"

She stared at him in dumbfounded silence. After a moment she shook her head and queried, "What? What did you say?"

"Since you're going to be throwing out accusations of me walking away from you, I figured I ought to set you straight. You walked out on me," he repeated simply. "If you want answers to your questions, you should ask yourself." Releasing her jacket he started away. Her soft words stopped him cold.

"I'm sorry."

He turned, an incredulous look on his face. "What? What did you say?"

She gave him a sad smile. "I said I am sorry. For walking out on you, that is! You're right. I am the one who walked out on you. I suppose I'm no better than that, what's her name... Brittany! I just thought you ought to know that I am sorry for walking out. I told you from the beginning that I don't deserve you."

He stewed, staring at her as she walked away. "No!" It was said in a low mournful growl. Taking a few steps he grabbed her shoulder and whipped her around to face him. He didn't give her time to react as he took her mouth in a fierce kiss. His arms snaked around her slender frame as he devoured her. All of a sudden the kiss changed. It was less punishing and gentler. He framed her face with his hands and pulled her away. He met her eyes. "I am not letting you go again! I was a fool once, Maggie, and I don't intend to push you away again!"

Her head was still reeling and she gripped his arms for balance. She opened her mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. Taking a deep breath she tried again. "Michael you... I never knew just what you'd been through."

He shook his head. "I don't want pity, Maggie. Brittany was a bitch... and she is part of my past. I want you to be a part of my future. I asked you before and I'm asking you again. "Maggie, will you marry me?" He pulled the velvet box out of the interior pocket of his jacket. "We've both been dying a little each day since that night four months ago. Let's put that aside and try again?"

She bit her lip and looked at the box in his hand. Pulling out of his arms she stepped back and turned away from him. "Mike, I don't know. I want to say yes, but there's so much that I don't know about you."

He turned her to face him. "Once a marine, always a marine, Maggie. You know about my ex-wife, you know that I'm in a special unit. What else do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "Will you be staying here for long, or will you be moving on?"

He shrugged. "I've been here for two years now. With the Atropos case closed, I'm not sure. You have to understand, Maggie. I have to go where they send me, but I..." He turned to kick at the wall. Memory of doing the same thing a few months before sped through his head. "This is where they found him," he muttered. Shaking his head he turned back to face her and encountered her puzzled look. "This is where they found the body of the man who resembled me." He waved it away. "It isn't important. You are, though. You are very important to me. I'm ready, right now, to retire. Maggie, I'd give it all up to stay here with you." He took her shoulders again. "Don't you see? I love you so much that I want to do whatever I have to, to be able to stay with you!"

She gripped his arms and shook her head. "No, Michael. I wouldn't allow you to give up your place in the Marine Corps just to stay with me. I couldn't do it. It would kill something inside of you."

“But I’d adjust! I’d give up everything if it meant staying with you! For the first time in a very long time, Maggie, I have found happiness. The Corps ruined my first marriage, I don’t want that to happen with this one. You just say the word and I’ll give it all up!”

“You won’t have to Lieutenant. Ms. Montoya, I apologize for my behavior in the pub. It seems,” Major Davidson looked over at the burly judge and gave an uncomfortable smile. “I have been put in my place. Lieutenant, I’m going to officially post you here. You’ll be called on to travel once in a while, but we’ll try to keep that to a minimum.”

Michael looked from one person to the next, his eyes finally settling on hers. “Come on Maggie! What do you say? Will you marry me? Will you share my life with me?”

Overwhelmed, she stared up at him. “I don’t... I don’t know what to say! I mean, all of you are standing around telling me what you’ll give up and what you’ll do, but none of you has asked me what I really want! None of you have even considered my opinion in this!”

David Mackey, judge, confessor, and friend walked up and put an arm around her shoulders. “What do you want Maggie? You have a man here that is willing to give up a twenty-year career in the United States Marines, just for you. You have a man here,” he gestured to Davidson, “whom has humbled himself before you. I can attest, he doesn’t do that for anyone, not even the brass. He has come to assure you that he will do everything in his power to ensure that Mike stays in Ossinning Village.” He took her chin in his hand and smiled at her in a fatherly way. “Tell me what you want Magdalene Montoya? Do you want the man who loves you, or do you want to continue beating yourself up for a man who got away?”

She looked down at her feet suddenly feeling like she had right before her first date. A wry smile tickled her lips and she punched him in the side. “Trust you to remind me of Papa!” Pulling away from the judge, she turned to Michael and took his hands. “I’ll consent to be your wife on one condition.”

“Name it! Anything!”

She squeezed his hand and chuckled at his eagerness. Jerking a thumb over her shoulder, she snorted. “On the condition that these two turkeys and their families, should they have them, attend.”

He let out a whoop of joy and swung her around in his arms. The quiet creaking of the hinges on the velvet box seemed dissonant after the loud whoop. Taking the ring out, he slid it part way onto her finger. “What do you say, fellas? Are you going to concede to this little lady’s wishes?” His eyes were hopeful.

Gunny chuckled and nodded. “You bet, Georgina and I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

Major George Davidson toed the icy slush and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Aw hell! Caroline would skin me if I turned down an invite to your wedding Mike. We’ll be there with bells on.”

Maggie stepped forward pushing her finger into the ring. “Michael,” she whispered softly. “This is the point where you’re supposed to kiss me.”

He looked down at her a broad dopey smile on his face. His hand slid behind her head and he pulled her up on tiptoe. “Like this?” His lips touched hers and a gentle warmth spread through them both.

Magdalene wrapped her arms around him for support. “I love you,” she whispered, “with all my heart.”

⌘ ⌘

Adeodatus looked sadly at his wife through the mesh and glass window of the Northern Westchester Hospital Behavioral facility’s visitor’s room. “How are you Zoe?”

“How do you think I am, Adeo?” She pulled a handkerchief out of her purse. “I have two four-month-old twins at home that don’t sleep through a night! I have a nagging mother, who can’t stand that my husband is in a mental health facility! And I can’t sleep at night, because I’m not used to sleeping alone!” She dabbed furiously at the tears that always seemed to flow. “I miss you, Adeo.”

He heard the weariness in her voice and felt the guilt of her grief on his shoulders. “Zoe, beloved, you know I am ill. I am getting better every day, the doctors tell me so.” He dropped his head into his hands and wept. “I am so sorry that I drug you and the children into this! I just couldn’t keep it up anymore. I know that what I was doing was wrong! I need help, and I’m getting it!” He looked up at her, the torture he was going through plain in his face. “I want to get well again! For you, Zoe... for the children! God help me, I do!”

She pulled back away from the window, her mouth a surprised little O. “I believe you!”

The frightened whisper came through the small black phone he held. Immediately his temper cooled. “Oh God, Zoe, I’m so sorry! It’s just so... cold... so lonely in here! I long to be with you and the kids.” He wiped his face with the back of his hand. It came away pink. He sighed. “Zoe, I want you to speak with Dr. Martin. You need to sleep more. Let your mother take care of the kids for a bit. Please, honey, take care of yourself?”

She nodded as the doctor came back into the room. "I'll speak to Martin, and maybe start taking naps during the day." She looked at him solemnly and dabbed at her eyes again. "I love you Adeo, with all my heart. Marius, Flavia, and I will be waiting for you when you get out of this hellish place. Farewell, my love." She hung up the phone, knowing his response would not be spoke aloud.

He smiled as she set the handset down. *I trust you, Zoe. You are my life. You and the children are my reason for doing this, my reason for living. I'll love you until the end of time, beloved!*

She gave him a radiant smile before she left.

Adeo watched her go, concern written on his face. "She's pale, Dr. Mitchell. I'm worried about her. She admits she isn't getting enough sleep. I just... I'm worried."

Mitchell had seen how pale the young woman was. "She gave birth to twins four months ago, right?" At his patient's nod, he sighed. "Stay here," he commanded and walked over to the phone on the wall. Lifting the handset he dialed a series of numbers. "This is Dr. Mitchell, Howard Mitchell. There is a young woman, roughly thirty, coming down in the elevator right now. Her name is Zoe Sidonius. I want you to stop her and have Dr. Martin paged."

Adeo's senses suddenly became alert. "She's in danger." He said it quietly but the doctor still whipped around to face him. He shrugged. "Just call it a hunch. I know my wife. We have a very special connection."

"She will be taken care of. Come on, it's time for you to go back to your room."

Anger flared hot and violent in his heart. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slow he followed. "Yes, doctor. Will you tell me how she fares?"

The doctor opened a door to one of the patient rooms. "I will. Get some rest, son. We have another session in two hours."

Adeo nodded. "Yes sir." Worry coursed through him. Slumping back on the bed, he stared at the ceiling. He could feel that she was not well. She was too tired... too restless.

Zoe leaned back against the wall of the elevator as it descended. *Lord, I'm tired, so tired.* Closing her eyes, she waited for the doors to open. When they did she pushed away from the wall and reeled. Staggering out of the elevator, she stumbled to her knees, then rolled to her side as she fainted.

A security guard rushed up followed by a nurse. "She's the one we were told to watch for," he said. "Mrs. Sidonius. She's supposed to be detained until Dr. Martin can look her over." He looked up at the nurse and frowned, "It would seem that she's about to be admitted. Bring me the first aid kit from behind the desk, would you?" When he had it, he rummaged inside for a jar of smelling salts. He uncapped the jar of noxious material and waved it under her nose. When she started coughing, he put the jar away. "Mrs. Sidonius? Now, you just take it easy ma'am." When she lost consciousness again a moment later, he patted her cheeks. "Mrs. Sidonius?"

The elevator door opened and a man in a white coat stepped out. Seeing the situation, he hurried over. When he heard the young woman's name, he knelt down immediately. "How long has she been like this?"

"Just a few minutes, doctor. I used the salts to revive her after she fainted. She stayed conscious for moments and then she lost consciousness again. I have been unable to revive her since."

"I see." The doctor timed her pulse. "Her pulse is slow. Get me a gurney down here now!" He plugged a pair of ear buds into his ears and listened to her heart through the stethoscope. "She's in real trouble here! There's no time to get a gurney." He lifted the young woman into his arms. "Nurse, get her purse and follow me." Walking quickly, he hurried towards the emergency room. "Hold on Zoe, I know what Adeo would want me to do." He pushed through the doors and headed for an empty treatment room. "I need a pint of blood, stat!"

Zoe forced her eyes open. "R...R...Richard?"

"That's right, Zoe. Now you just rest. I've got a transfusion coming in. We'll get you all fixed up, I promise."

"Thank you."

Adeo felt a surge of peace and relaxed marginally. *Martin! What is wrong with you Zoe? What is it that has you so ill?* His mind flitted back over the months that he'd been with his wife before he'd given himself up. The night he'd gone to her house and held her while she'd cried. The day they'd married. The day it had been confirmed that she was carrying his child. The day he'd killed the man who had looked so much like Detective Taggart sped through his head, making his stomach churn. He shook the memory aside and thought of Zoe. His eyes closed and he groaned as he remembered the day that he'd found her in the kitchen with that horrible cut in her hand.

"Zoe, what happened? How did you get this?" He remembered the stricken look on her face and the way her uninjured hand had strayed to her abdomen. "Zoe, I asked you a question."

"I cut it in the garden."

He'd let out an exasperated sigh and snapped, "On what? What did you cut it on?" He remembered that the cut had been deep. And how he, without thinking, had cut his own palm with his pinky nail and had pressed it to hers. The wounds had closed immediately, and he'd thought nothing more about it until now. "Oh God! What have I done? Zoe!" He sat up, shaking. He realized what he had done and what Martin now had to do to help her. He buried his face in his hands sobbing. "I'm so sorry! God forgive me, I am so sorry, Zoe!"

When Dr. Mitchell opened the door half an hour later, he found his patient still sobbing. The duty nurse had alerted him to the man's condition, but he'd thought nothing of it. *'Just let the man have a good cry.'* Wasn't that what you said to yourself, Howard? He heaved a sigh and silenced the voice. Stepping all the way into the room, he closed the door and leaned against it. "What is it that you think you did to your wife, Mr. Sidonius? Is it the guilt you feel for committing the crimes, or is it something else, we haven't talked about yet?"

Adeo's red-rimmed eyes shot upward. His cheeks were streaked with pink and his hospital attire was stained. "How is Zoe?"

Frustration warring with exhaustion, Dr. Howard Mitchell pushed away from the door. "She's better. Dr. Martin had to give her a blood transfusion. It would seem that she's anemic."

"Anemic?" Adeo snorted. "Listen, doctor," he began changing the subject. "There is something that we need to talk about. I need to get it off my chest. You're likely not going to believe it. Lord knows I find it hard to believe, myself sometimes." He pushed himself back against the headboard and gestured for the doctor to sit on the bed. "You'll want to sit down, because I'm not really inclined to pick you up off the floor, right now. It's hard enough to focus myself away from the anger and self-loathing I feel."

The doctor sat and looked at him in surprise. "Your candor is something new. I guess your wife should have come to see you sooner. Now, what's on your mind, son? What is it that you have to tell me?"

Adeo grumped. "What do you know of the Roman Empire, Doctor?"

"I studied classic literature, but not so much the Roman Empire, why?" Howard was clearly intrigued.

"In the year 48 B.C., Vitellius was the Emperor of Rome. He was said to have no children, yet this was incorrect. He had a daughter, Faustina. Faustina was a spoiled, frivolous woman. When we were married, I was unaware of the failings of my virtuous young bride. She quickly disabused me of my notions of having a family, carrying on my family's name as well as the bloodline of a Roman Emperor." He sighed and plunged ahead. "She spent my fortune with little care for my wishes. She entertained her lovers in our home when I was away on business. I was an olive farmer, you see, and my work took me out on the road for at least four months of every year."

"You were an olive farmer in 48 B.C? You're asking me to believe that you are over two thousand years old?"

Adeo looked at him solemnly. "I am asking you to listen to my story. Whatever you believe is up to you doctor. Now, as I said, my work kept me on the road for roughly four months of each year. Imagine my surprise when, the year after we were married, I came home to ridicule. A long time friend of my family felt it was prudent to inform me of my wife's infidelity. I tell you now, I probably could have lived a lifetime without knowing." He sighed. "But I digress. When I found out about Faustina's treachery, I confronted her. She laughed in my face and freely admitted that she was cuckolding me. She firmly refused to give me any children, no matter how I tried to give her what she wanted. I told her I would overlook her lovers, if only she would give me a child."

He remembered her laughter at his suggestion. "Surely you don't expect me to ruin my figure by siring a screaming brat, do you husband dear? I will beget no children of yours!"

His eyes narrowed as he remembered. Suddenly he shook himself and focused on the doctor again. "She did not want to ruin her figure by bearing children. I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do to get her to give me what I wished for. I even tried to use her father against her. She said she didn't care. She wasn't going to ruin her figure for a screaming brat." He folded his long white arms. "So I let her have her way, and when I was comforted by her lady's maid, I did not object. In truth, I had watched the young maid and had craved her from the beginning. She was a willow slim and golden-haired beauty. I took her to my bed many times before Faustina grew suspicious. It was one night, when I had returned from a long journey, to Persia I believe, we were to meet in the grove of olive trees as we had many times before."

He smiled. "I waited for a long while, growing worried when she did not appear at the time we had agreed upon. I was relieved, however, when I saw her coming a few moments later. She ran towards me, falling into my arms. It was there, kneeling in the moonlight, that my beloved Zoe spoke her last words to me." He looked at the doctor with a wry smile. "She said that Faustina had found out about us. I knew then that she had been poisoned by that spoiled bitch, I was married to. I carried my beloved's lifeless body into my bedchamber. Faustina and I had our confrontation there. I do not remember exactly what happened next, but I remember standing on the hills above my estate watching it burn." He shook his head. "If I had not embarrassed Caesar in front of his guards, things might have turned out differently. By then I was quite mad with grief, and did not choose my words carefully."

“So you burned your wife alive and your lover’s body as well?” Mitchell tried to put the puzzle pieces together in his head.

“No. I believe Faustina was dead before I started the fire. But I didn’t want any reminder of that pale golden shell. Caesar was quite angry at being publicly humiliated and threw me into jail. I sat there for days... weeks... months... even I don’t know how long I sat there awaiting execution, before Marius found me. He was smooth and elegant, so handsome. I think I may have been in love with him at some point, but I can never say for sure. He was as elusive as a butterfly in those days. Since then he has disappeared. Yet it was in a cold jail cell that he found me rotting. He took me to his bosom and warmed me. He whispered all sorts of dark promises into my ear as he stroked my hair, and I like a fool fell under his spell. I let him defile me. I let him feed on me, and in the end I let him take my life away from me. He took away my life and gave me a new one, one that was dark and sordid, and filled with murder after murder. I’ve lived for over two thousand years, and the only thing I have to show for it is a twenty-six year old wife and two beautiful little kids who have to try to live with my mistakes.”

The doctor blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “You have a rather colorful tale there, Mr. Sidonius. I’m inclined to believe that you are a history buff, who made up this wild tale in order to avoid the truth of what you’ve done. You’ve murdered thirty...”

“Many times that number. I’ve killed more than ten times that many people in the two thousand years I have been as I am. I am not proud of the things I have done, but I can’t let it tear me apart either. Many of the people I killed deserved to die anyway. Some were innocents, many of the women I killed were.” He rested his chin on his crossed arms and closed his eyes. “I don’t know what I can do to make it up to the families I’ve hurt. I honestly don’t think I can. I just know that I have to fix what is wrong with me. I think, at least it is my opinion, that I killed those women because they reminded me of Faustina.”

“Faustina was your wife, right?” The doctor turned to face him. “You said that she was cheating on you. Didn’t you also say that you killed her?” He noted the nod of his patient before pushing on. “Tell me about her, more than just the willful spoiled woman. What did she look like? How close to her were you before you married? What kind of man was her father? Did she have a history of health issues? Do you?”

Adeo chuckled. “We did not have the medical know how then that we have now.” He frowned as he tried to call up Faustina’s face. “She was a statuesque blonde. Her blue eyes were like those of a dove. When I met her she was nice. She was attractive and virtuous. Innocence surrounded her like a cloud. What I didn’t know at the time was that it was only a cloud. A very pretentious white cloud, covering a heart as black a pitch. The woman was rotten through and through before I ever met her!” He turned his head away from the doctor and fought to wipe the image of his dead wife out of his head.

“You can’t get rid of me forever, Adeo. I’m always going to be right here in the back of your mind. It was your mistake telling me that you loved me. Then giving your heart to that whore from Persia! If only you had stayed true to me, my darling. You would have been rewarded handsomely.”

He snorted. “Like you were true to me, my brazen wife? You rewarded me for my years of devotion by cuckolding me with every Praetorian Guard this side of the Euphrates!”

Startled, the doctor stared at him. “Adeo?”

“You hear that Adeodatus? He sounds worried about you. I bet he suspects your sanity, beloved.”

He growled. “Don’t call me that! You are unworthy of my love. I love Zoe! I always have! Leave me in peace woman! You are nothing more than a restless spirit that my mind has conjured up to torment me for my crimes!” Laughter filled his head and he began to tremble.

Dr. Mitchell reached out tentatively, jerking his hand back at the last moment. Rising from the bed, he went to the cabinet and retrieved a blanket. Wrapping it around his patient’s shoulders he sighed. “You just try to relax a moment, Adeo. I’ll be right back with something that will help you sleep.”

Adeo didn’t look up. He just pulled the thick blanket around his shoulders and huddled like a child. When the doctor came back several moments later, he docilely gave the man his arm. He felt the prick of a needle and a silver dart of medication race up his veins. He grabbed the doctor’s wrist as he turned away. “I wanted to say thank you.” He paused and gritted his teeth. “I want to silence her voice in my head. I believe that you are the man who can help me do that.”

Mitchell settled his free hand over the pale patient’s. “That’s what I’m here for Adeo. To help you get well again. You have a wife and two little ones depending on you.” With a final nod, he disengaged Adeo’s hand and exited the room. Going back to his office, he watched his patient on the monitor. When he saw the man lie down, curled into a fetal position and wrapped in the blanket, he made a notation in his journal. He watched the sleeping man until his own eyes began to droop closed. Sometime in the night he heard a sound. “Huh?” The scraping was punctuated by a soft click. He sat up as someone came into his dimly lit office and closed the door.

Adeo looked at the groggy doctor and smiled. "I won't hurt you, doctor. Just relax." He flipped the lock and glided across the floor. Sitting on the inside edge of the desk, his knees nearly touching the doctor's hand, he smiled again. Reaching out with a pale hand, he stroked the good doctor's sable hair. "So much of your life has already been spent, Doctor."

"Howard," was the soft reply.

Adeo nodded. "You want to know if I'm really what I say I am, don't you Howard? You want to know if all those legends and ghost stories you heard when you were a youngster are true? Come here and let me show you." He slid his hand around behind the doctor's head and dropped to his knees beside the chair. Turning his head just enough so that the light glinted off his teeth, he let his blood teeth descend. "I am."

Howard Mitchell felt fear curl in the pit of his stomach. *This man is the demon he claims to be! Good God! What am I going to do? He'll kill me!*

Adeo shook his head and responded as if he heard the doctor's thoughts. "I will not kill you, Howard. Much like Detective Taggart, you are willing, are you not? You want to see that which defies medical science? To see how the man, who is neither living nor dead, survives?"

Howard nodded but held up a hand. "I see now that you can read people's thoughts at will. What I want to know now is..." *Will it hurt?*

Adeo smiled gently. "What do you want to know, Howard?" He'd read the thought, but he wanted the man to say it aloud. Only then would he know his subject was willing.

Howard sighed. "Will it hurt?"

Adeo nodded and shook his head. "It will only be a brief pain before..."

"Before you kill me?"

Adeo frowned at the doctor and stroked the back of his neck. "No, Howard. It will hurt for a moment as I penetrate your throat with my teeth, then the pain will be gone. I will not take enough to kill you. I shall only take a little, just enough to show you that I truly am the demon I say I am." He leaned forward then, but felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait!" When his patient looked up, Howard continued. "What will it feel like? What will you be doing to me?"

Adeo let a grin spread across his lips. "Why doctor, how good of you to ask!" He raised his head and slid his hand into the doctor's hair. He softened his look and brushed a thumb over the man's lips. "I intend for you to enjoy this, Howard." He let his thumb brush over the man's lips again, drawing a gasp from him. Then without warning, his own lips replaced his thumb. He used gentle persuasion to part the doctor's lips and kissed him passionately.

Howard Mitchell, widower for twenty years, sank further into the web of desire the vampire was weaving around him. His mind protested, weakly. *This is a man... a demon kissing you. What are you doing? You're not into men!* He found his hands gripping the patient's shoulders, but rather than pushing him away, he was pulling the man closer. His mind railed against his body's actions. He fought against the arousal that stirred in his loins. In the end he let himself be cradled against this man's chest, like a lover. "Take what you want of me," he whispered hoarsely.

Adeo flicked the tip of his tongue over the doctor's throat, near his ear. "Oh I will, Howard, I will. And it will be ecstasy for you. I promise you that." He bit down swiftly, his right hand straying to the doctor's lap. As he sipped on the doctor's blood, he slipped his hand into the man's trousers and fondled him. *You are so young. You should marry again.* He slid his hand over the doctor's swollen member, drawing the pleasure out of him with great care. He dined slowly, causing the man to feel a gentle pull at his throat. Soon, he knew the doctor's attention was drawn away from the sensations at his throat, by the sensations in his lap.

"Oh Lord," Howard groaned.

Adeo smiled and knew his subject was close to orgasm. Pulling his fangs free of the man's throat, he held the man on the precipice of pleasure until the wounds closed over. He pulled with his hand one more time and felt the heat rush out of the throbbing erection. He pulled and pushed, milking the pleasure for what it was worth and chuckled lightly as the man in the chair lost consciousness. Releasing the man's penis, he rose. "I don't think we have to worry about you telling anyone about this, Howard, but all the same, you should keep it to yourself." He slipped out of the office and returned to his room. Curling up in the blanket on the bed, he drifted into a pleasant sleep.

The sun shone through the closed blinds. Dr. Howard Mitchell stirred groggily at his desk. The door across the room opened and a tall brunette stepped in closing the door behind her. Her eyes traveled across the large wooden desk to the man asleep in the chair. Her eyes rounded and her mouth dropped open. Quickly flipping the latch, she hurried to the desk and set down her notebook. She delicately touched him, settling him back inside his trousers.

Howard Mitchell's eyes flew open at the warm touch on his cold skin. He grabbed her wrist and made a choked sound. "Francine!"

“Dr. Mitchell? I was just trying to save your dignity. You shouldn’t do things like that in your office at night.” She felt him growing hard under her hand and looked down into his eyes. “If you’ll let go of my wrist I’ll remove my hand.” She swallowed. “Howard? I won’t tell anyone what I found this morning, if that’s what you’re worried about. I promise!” Her cheeks tinted as he continued to watch her.

He shivered slightly under her touch. “Francine, I...” He pulled her hand out of his trousers and pulled her into his lap. “Let me take you out to dinner? I’ve wanted to ask you for a while, but after this...” He flushed in embarrassment. “I’ll understand if you don’t want...”

She silenced him with her lips. “Howard, I’ve been waiting for nearly twenty years for you to open up to me.” She kissed him tenderly. “I’d love to have dinner with you, and then maybe a nightcap afterwards?”

He chuckled warmly and wrapped his arms around her. “Why didn’t you tell me years ago?”

“Would you have even responded to me then? I don’t think you would have. You were so wrapped up in Maureen’s death that you were oblivious to everything and everyone.” She scooted out of his lap. “You have a clean suit in your cabinet. I’ll lay it out for you.”

He frowned at her sudden change in mood. “You were in nursing school then, weren’t you?”

She lifted the suit out of the tall pine cabinet. “Yes.”

He zipped his trousers and rose. Crossing the floor he took the suit from her and set it back on the bar in the cabinet. Taking her shoulders, he turned her to face him. “Have you been in love with me all this time?” She didn’t need to answer, he saw what he needed in her eyes. “Francine, I didn’t know. How could I?”

“You never would have noticed me if I hadn’t found you here in your office this morning with your fly open and your penis hanging out. All I wanted to do was help you save some face. I’ve kept my feelings to myself all these years. I can continue to do so for as long as it takes.”

He pulled her against his chest and smothered her with his lips. “You’re wrong you know. I noticed you about ten years ago. I just never had the courage to say anything about it. I was so dedicated to my work, that I couldn’t...” He smothered her lips again. Backing her into the cabinet, he let himself go.

§ §

It was early evening when the door to his room opened. Adeo cracked open an eye and frowned. “Good evening, Doctor.”

“Good evening, Mr. Sidonius.” He had a spring in his step when he entered the room. “How are you feeling, tonight?”

“You seem chipper.” Adeo sat up and looked the man over. “If I had to guess I’d say you were in love.”

The doctor smiled. “You could say that. I wanted to talk to you about... last night,” he finished in a low tone. “Take a walk with me, Mr. Sidonius. I’m going to take you to your wife’s room as we discuss it.”

Adeo eyed him suspiciously. “A conversation off the record? I’m intrigued.” He rose and followed the doctor out. “What do you want to know?”

Dr. Mitchell eyed the man at his side. “Why did you do it?”

Adeo shrugged. “You needed proof.”

“You didn’t have to get all hot and heavy with me.” He turned to his patient and took his shoulder. “Look, I get the point. You are what you say you are. But don’t ever violate me like that again, understand?”

Adeo reversed their positions and back the doctor into a vacant room. Backing him against the wall, he held him there with one hand. “I understand perfectly doctor. Just so you understand what I can do to you or anyone else at anytime. I want to forget my dead wife. I want to get on with my life.”

Howard grabbed the hand that was planted in his chest and pulled the patient into a hug. “Listen very carefully to me now Adeo. An orderly has seen us and is coming this way. Pretend to be broken up about something so that I can console you. That way, he won’t cause problems.”

Adeo nodded and turned on the waterworks. He buried his face in the doctor’s shoulder.

The doctor held him and spoke gently. “Your wife is much better now. Dr. Martin gave her a transfusion last night and one this morning. Let’s go see her...” The orderly opened the door and he waved him back. “My patient has just received some good news. Go about our business. I have this under control.” When the orderly was gone, he pushed Adeo away. “Just so we’re clear here, Mr. Sidonius. We’ll work through your problems a lot quicker if you would just quit fighting me. Now come on. I’m taking you to see your wife before I go off duty for the evening. I have a date tonight.”

Nodding, Adeo followed docilely. “I think we understand each other well, Dr. Mitchell. Very well indeed.” They walked through the halls and out a set of double doors. *The same double doors they brought me through four months*

ago. Nothing in this hospital changes. He looked over at the doctor. *Okay, well some things change.* They took an elevator to another floor; Adeo didn't really pay attention. When they arrived outside a door he hesitated. "Is she in there?"

A voice behind him spoke. "Yes, Adeodatus, she is in there. Your mother-in-law and children are also in there."

Turning to face the man who had spoken, Adeo nodded. "How are you Richard?" He swallowed and asked in a choked voice, "How is she?"

"She is doing better for the moment. I'm going to have to do a complete flush, though. We don't want this happening again."

The pointed look the man was giving him made Adeo cringe inwardly. "No sir." He gestured to the man standing beside him. "This is Dr. Mitchell. He's my Psychiatrist."

"Dr. Martin." Howard shook the other doctor's hand. "I believe it would do my patient a great deal of good to see his wife." He turned to Adeo. "Have you ever seen your children?"

Adeo shook his head in the negative, but did not speak. He could hear his mother-in-law beyond the door. She was pushing for Zoe to divorce him.

She won't do it you know. Her mother has been pushing for it for months now, and Zoe has refused each time. Dr. Richard Martin gave him a pointed look and spoke aloud. "You may see her for a few minutes. We need to get her down to the operating room soon."

"Thank you Richard." Pushing through the door, he stopped beside the dual stroller. His heart constricted as he saw the two youngsters. His son and daughter stared up at him for a moment in silence before they both began to gurgle and reach for him. He looked up at his wife and smiled radiantly. *They're beautiful, my love! Are you feeling better?* The papers his mother-in-law was shaking at her made him frown. "Hello Irene."

The woman turned and glared coldly. "What is this murderer doing in here? Get him away from my daughter and grandbabies!"

Adeo reached down and picked up both of his children and hugged them.

"Marius and Flavia."

He looked up as his wife spoke. "I know. Michael told me. They are absolutely perfect." He rocked his children in his arms and looked at the older woman still rattling the sheaf of papers at his wife. "What are you badgering my wife about, Irene?"

She glared at him again. "These are divorce papers, murderer! I don't want my daughter throwing her life away on a heathen like you! She and my grandbabies can come and live with me! They'll grow up believing that their father died!"

Adeo growled. "Heartless bitch! You would lie to my children in order to make your life easier!" He looked to Zoe and saw the tears running down her face. Laying the babies back in the stroller, he advanced on the older woman. Snatching the papers from her hand he held them out to his wife. "Zoe, do you want to sign these?" He held up a finger. "Before you answer, I want you to know that you are under no obligation to me. If you feel that it would be best for you and the children, then I will abide by your decision." His eyes never left his mother-in-law. When he felt the papers being taken from his hand, his heart constricted. The smug smile on the older woman's face made him want to kill her, but he kept it in check. When he heard the sound of tearing paper a moment later, his eyes flew to Zoe.

She tore the papers again and again. Piling up the shreds, she held them out to her mother. "Mama, I told you before, I am standing by Adeo. He is my husband... the father of our children. I will not be badgered into divorcing him. I believe that he will get better. He has seen the error of his ways, Mama, and he is repenting for it. You have no right to tell me what to do, nor to keep the children away from their father. I love him, Mama, and I take my wedding vows very seriously. The only way he and I are parting is when one of us dies. Understand?"

"No right! I have no right to make sure that my baby and grandbabies are taken care of? I have no right to make sure that you aren't living with a murderer? Zoe Regina Sanna, don't you dare tell me what I can or can't do!"

"It's Sidonius, Mother, Zoe Regina Sidonius! You have tried from the beginning to keep Adeodatus and I apart. When are you going to figure out that I am a grown woman? When are you going to stop trying," her breathing became labored, "to dictate my life to me?" Her eyes rolled wildly, before landing on his. "Adeo, help me!"

He rushed around the side of the bed, casting a thought into the babies' heads. *Sleep little ones. All is well.* He held her hand. "Zoe? Zoe! Hang on honey!" He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Please hang on!"

Dr. Martin began firing orders at everyone in the room. "Dr. Mitchell! Take the children outside! Mrs. Sanna, get out of the way! You've caused enough of a mess! I told you not to upset her." He glared at Adeo. "You stay put! Your wife needs you right now!" The door to the room closed as the stroller was wheeled out into the hall. "Damn it you two," he continued. "Couldn't you just bury the hatchet?"

Adeo smiled. "I'd like to bury my fangs in her throat!" He felt Zoe squeeze his hand and repented. "I promised you I wouldn't, honey. No matter how mad she makes me!"

Dr. Martin looked up at him with a frown. "I wasn't aware that you'd made her such a promise."

Adeo nodded. "I did. Right about the time of the wedding. When Mother Sanna, here was still trying to talk her out of marrying me. Richard, what do you need me to do?"

Dr. Richard Martin gave him a nod of approval. "You must share it with her."

"No!" The word exploded from Adeo's lips like a cannon shot. "I will not curse her the way I was cursed!"

"We have little choice, Adeodatus! Either you share it with her, or I have to rush her down for immediate surgery!" The doctor looked at him sternly. "I haven't asked how it happened, and I won't. But you have to make a decision right now! Do you want the change or do you want me to do everything I can to reverse it? Decide, now!"

Adeo looked down at his wife. "I have waited this long to find you again, my beloved. I will not lose you again... not now. When the time comes I will let you go." He looked up at the woman who detested him. "Richard, do what you must to reverse it. Save her. I want her to have a normal life. I cannot bear her having a life like ours."

"If that is your decision?" He saw the pale man he'd befriended many centuries before nod. "Very well." He hit the nurse's call button and lowered the bed. Pulling a syringe out of his pocket, he inserted it into Zoe's I.V. "I'm going to give her something for the pain. We'll begin the procedure as soon as I get her down to the OR. Stay with her Adeo." He turned to the nurse as she bustled in. "Prep OR 2. My patient is ready." He turned to the older woman. "Mrs. Sanna, I don't know why you hate Adeo so much, but listen to me now. For the sake of your daughter and your grandchildren, you need to set aside your feelings. Go home for now. I will call you in the morning and let you know how it went."

"You will call me tonight, as soon as you are done, young man. I want to know the minute my daughter is out of surgery!"

He chuckled at her young man comment. "As you wish madam." He turned his attention to Adeo. "You'd better go say goodbye to your kids before she leaves."

Adeo watched the woman that was his mother-in-law hustle out the door. "I get your meaning. Will I get to stay with Zoe?"

Martin shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow it... hospital policy and all. You just sit tight in your room and I'll come visit you when I'm done."

Adeo nodded and hurried into the hall. He saw the stroller being pushed furiously away. "Irene, wait!" He stalked up behind her at the elevators and slapped his hand over the plate before she could push the call button. "I want to tell my children I love them" He looked up at her. "I know you don't believe a monster like me could ever love anyone or anything, but I do. I love Zoe and the kids so much more than you could ever know. It's because of them that I gave myself up. I want to change. I want to get better. I want to have a future with my family."

"Like all those dead people have a future with theirs?"

Her barb stung. "If I could take back what I have done, I gladly would. I would take back all of the deaths I have caused over the centuries. But I cannot undo what I have done. I have been ill for a very long time. All I want is a chance to get better... to make something of my life." He looked down at the two sleeping infants. "I have told Zoe from the beginning that I love her, and will understand if she decides to leave me. I know what I have done is wrong. She chooses to stand by me. She is a very courageous woman. If you'd give yourself and her half a chance you might find out that you've raised a very competent daughter. Sometimes you have to cut the apron strings and let them fly on their own."

"You are mixing your metaphors, young man."

Her tart reply brought a smile to his lips. Looking up he made eye contact with her. "I have seen more than you will ever know, Irene. All I'm asking is that no matter how much you hate me. Give your daughter a chance. She and the children deserve it." He stroked his babies' cheeks and kissed their hair. "I love you wee ones. Don't give Grandma or Mommy a hard time. They are both pretty smart ladies." He straightened and took her shoulders. "Irene, I know you don't like me. You've made it clear from the start. You're convinced that I've taken your daughter away from you. Yet here we are the both of us looking after her. I want you to be a part of both of our lives... ours and the children's." He pulled her into a hug. When he felt her arms come around him and her begin sobbing, he smiled gently.

"You're right, all of it! I do hate you for taking my daughter away. She is the only one I have left since my husband Jarred died. I just don't want to see her hurt. I don't want to wake up some night and find out that my daughter and grandchildren were murdered by you."

He held her as tightly as she held him. Her death-grip squeezing his ribcage. "I promise you that won't happen, Irene. I would sooner give my own life to protect them." He pulled her back and ran his thumb under her eyes gently. "Has Michael Taggart been checking in on you and the babies?"

She nodded. "Regularly. He hasn't stayed long the last couple of visits though. He seems kind of preoccupied."

Adeo nodded. "I've sensed that something was wrong there, myself." Tipping her chin up he kissed her forehead. "Don't worry, Irene. Zoe will be fine. And if you'd just stop fighting with me, you'd see that your daughter loves you very much. She has been torn apart these months because you won't quit badgering her to get a divorce. She has made her decision to stand by me. Please don't make her choose between us? I don't want to see either of you hurt."

Dr. Howard Mitchell had been standing behind them for several moments and heard what his patient had said. It touched something inside him. "Come on Adeo. It's time to go back to your room."

Releasing her with a sigh, the pale man nodded. He brushed a finger over the cheeks of the babes sleeping in the stroller and cast one last look at his mother-in-law. "Take care of them, Irene. They need you." Turning, he followed his psychiatrist back down the hall they'd come from. Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his robe, he bowed his head and stared at the floor as he walked.

"You have a couple of beautiful kids there, Sidonius. You should be proud of them."

Adeo cracked a tired smile. "I am. I'm even more proud of their mother, though. She has been raising them virtually on her own since they were born. I turned myself in the morning before they were born, so that they could have a future."

His doctor nodded. "I've read your file." He scratched the back of his neck. "I heard what you said back there to your mother-in-law. You were right, you know. I've seen it a hundred times. Parents that don't want to let their children go. I think that things will be much better, now though. I think you struck something inside her with your impassioned plea."

"I just want her to go easier on Zoe. She's always been adamant that Zoe should never have married me. From the beginning, she hated me." He shrugged and stepped into the elevator. "I can handle her hating me. Enough people have done it over the long course of my life that I'm not overly concerned by it. But Zoe hasn't had to really deal with it yet. Hopefully I've made her think about Zoe for a minute. I pray that I've gotten her to see her daughter for the capable adult she is." When the elevator door opened and he saw the director of the center standing by the admitting desk with the police commissioner, he clammed up.

Dr. Mitchell also spied the two men standing there and groaned. "Just let me do the talking." He walked up to the two men and greeted them. "Good evening, Director Sinclair, Commissioner Ferguson. What brings you gentlemen here this evening?"

"Him," the commissioner responded pointing at Adeo.

Keeping his hands in his pockets he stopped before the men. "Yes, sir?"

"I want to talk to you Sidonius."

Adeo waited patiently.

"I'm taking Mr. Sidonius back to his room now. If you gentlemen will follow me?" Dr. Mitchell pushed through the double doors leading Adeo back to his room. As they stepped inside he turned to the two men. "May I ask what this is in regards to? My patient has just been through a very traumatic experience."

"Really?" The commissioner closed the door and locked it. Leaning back against the wall, he kicked a foot up behind himself. "Tell me about this traumatic experience, Mr. Sidonius."

Adeo paced to the window. He didn't care for the man's patronizing tone, but he wasn't about to make a beef about it. "My wife is in emergency surgery. Dr. Mitchell can tell you more about it."

Howard looked over at his patient, then back to the commissioner. "Mrs. Sidonius came to visit her husband yesterday. As she was leaving she collapsed. Her physician, Dr. Martin gave her two blood transfusions last night and scheduled her for surgery this evening. Mr. Sidonius was worried about her, so I spoke to her physician and cleared a visit with him. We just returned from there in fact. They wheeled her down to Operating Room 2, ten minutes ago."

"I see. Mr. Sidonius, I'm sorry for the stress you're under. I didn't actually come here to add to it. I came to ask you a few questions about the women you killed."

Adeo's eyes narrowed. "The women I killed. What else do you want to know?" He strode to the bed and sank down on it. "There isn't much that I could tell you that hasn't already been said in my deposition."

"True, but I want to know how you chose your women, the ones you killed. You see we have what appears to be a copycat on the loose and I want to keep a lid on it. So, I'm here to see if I can get your expert opinion."

Pale as he was, he still blanched. "My expert opinion? What is this...copycat doing?"

"He's draining them of blood, slashing their throats, and sticking a silver hatpin in them."

"I never used a silver hatpin. That was Tiberius. He used the hatpins. I didn't usually leave a mark on the women that they didn't get themselves. Tiberius would slash their throats and leave a hatpin stuck somewhere in their body. Where are the bodies being found?" He looked ashen.

"The riverbank mostly. We've found a couple in the park, too."

Adeo shook his head and fell backwards on the bed. "This person whoever he or she is, doesn't have a clue how to copycat correctly. It's like whoever it is; they took the flashiest acts from the newspaper reports of the Atropos stuff. Do you have any suspects yet?" He turned his head and looked at the commissioner. "I'll help you with this, because no one has the right to take another human being's life, but I want one thing perfectly clear."

"That you want amnesty? You want your sentence commuted? What is it that you want for this Mr. Sidonius?"

"I want my wife and children kept out of it. I don't want my name linked with this case. All I'm asking for is a chance to start a new life, Commissioner Ferguson."

The commissioner let out a low whistle. "Wow! You only want anonymity. I am surprised to say the least."

Adeo snorted. "Those are my terms, Commissioner. Take them or leave them." He looked at the officials for a moment before his eyes slid to his doctor. "I haven't slept well the last several nights."

Howard took the hint and turned to the two men. "Let's step outside, gentlemen. My patient needs to rest if he's going to be of any use to you." When they began to protest, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. Mr. Sidonius is still my patient. For his mental well being, I'm going to have to ask you to come back in the morning." He turned back to look at Adeo. "Goodnight, Mr. Sidonius. I'm sure your wife will be fine."

The police commissioner started making noises about a court order.

Howard shook his head. "It is my professional opinion that Mr. Sidonius should rest. He has made a significant amount of progress in the last forty-eight hours, and I don't want to jeopardize that. You can see him again in the morning." He ushered the commissioner and his boss out of the psyche ward. "I'm sorry Director Sinclair. I would stay, but I have a previous engagement. Perhaps we can meet in my office at 8 a.m.?" When the man nodded, the doctor smiled. "Thank you." Turning back into the psyche ward, he headed to his office. Stepping into the outer office, he found it empty and glanced at his watch. *After five o'clock... She's quick!* He stepped into his inner sanctum and shed his lab coat. Reaching for his sport jacket, draped over the back of his chair, he flipped on the monitor that fed him an image of Adeo's room.

Adeo stared at the cameras for a moment after the doctor and two suits had gone. Frowning, he rolled onto his side away from the door and stared at the wall. He felt the wetness on his cheeks as his mind flitted to Zoe and he swore. *Since I found her, I've been a mess! I've cried more in the last several months than I have in a lifetime! Jesu! Get it together Adeo! Be a man, not a whiny baby!* He punched the pillow and the bed repeatedly.

Howard looked at him beating the bedding. His finger hovered over a switch. When he saw his patient settle down, he sighed. "Rest well, Adeo. We'll talk in the morning." Turning off the monitor he pushed his arm into his sleeve and headed for the door. His mind turned to the woman he'd fallen in love with years ago. *It's time I put Maureen's memory to rest.* Stepping into the outer office, he shoved his other arm into a sleeve. Looking up, he froze. Before him stood the most attractive woman he'd ever seen. "Francine?" He choked her name out and swallowed painfully. "You look... stunning!"

She smiled and pushed away from the desk she leaned against. Taking the lapels of his jacket, she pulled the brown material into place. "I thought you were taking me to dinner," she said with a chuckle.

He caught her around the waist and pulled her close. "I am." He barely touched his lips to hers before he released her. Straightening his tie, he buttoned the sport coat and proffered an arm. "Shall we?"

She hesitated. "What do you think the others will say? I mean, this will get around the hospital pretty quick if they see us leaving arm in arm."

"This isn't a business dinner, Francine. I love you, and I don't care who knows it!" He held his arm out to her, waiting.

"You...love me? Howard?" She pushed him back against her desk, knocking over a cup of pens in the process, and covered his face in kisses. Her lips found his and she felt his hand come up to the back of her neck. "Say it again," she whispered. "Tell me, I didn't mishear you?"

He wrapped his arms around her and applied gentle pressure to the back of her neck. When she was looking at him, he spoke in a soft, serious tone. "I love you Francine Belmont, with all my heart." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at her eyes as she began to cry. "Aww honey, don't do that. You'll smudge your make-up!" He smiled at her outraged gasp and kissed the tip of her nose. "Why don't you step into my office and fix your face, love? I'll call the restaurant." He waited until she was safely ensconced in his office behind the soundproof door before he picked up the handset and pushed 9. Dialing a number he spoke quietly.

Francine powdered her nose and repaired her eyeliner. Staring at herself in the small mirror that hung on the inside of the cabinet door, she chuckled. "Jeez woman, pull it together. After all these years, he says that he loves you and you fall to pieces. Sheesh!" The monitor on the desk flickered. "That's odd." Crossing the floor, she reached for the switch to turn the monitor off and froze. She was looking into the deepest blue eyes she had ever

seen. Her hand went to her throat and she swallowed. As she watched, he beckoned her closer. She leaned forward, placing her hands on the desk for balance.

“Good luck to you, Nurse Belmont.”

She stared at the screen, long after it had gone dark again.

Concern began to fill him when she did not return after a few minutes. Rising from the desk, he went into his office and found her staring at the dark screen. “Fran?”

“Howard!?” She turned and raced into his arms. “Oh, Howard, he was speaking to me! It was so... creepy. He just said, ‘Good luck to you, Nurse Belmont’ and then the screen went dark! He scares me, Howard!”

The doctor looked at the monitor on his desk. It was off, as he had left it earlier. Wrapping an arm around her he smiled tenderly. “Come on, Francine. Let’s go to dinner, you’ll feel a *lot* better.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Her voice was shaky.

He rubbed a hand up and down her arm. “On the contrary. I believe that he spoke to you. But I don’t believe that he wants to harm you. He does have a wife and two beautiful children. He’s very much devoted to them. You should have heard how he laid into his mother-in-law earlier.” He chuckled and led her out of the office. “He did it in such a way that the poor woman hadn’t known that she was being talked around from her own stubbornness. He has a way with people. Though it is a shame about his first wife.”

She snuggled close to him as they stepped into the elevator. “What happened to his first wife?”

“He killed her. Said it happened some two-thousand years ago.” He shrugged and pulled her closer. “No more shop talk tonight. For once I want to talk about the things that interest you. No more doctor...nurse. Tonight it’s just Howard and Francine. Tonight the only thing I want to think about is you.”

She smiled and raised on tiptoe to kiss him. “I like that idea.” She was still touching her lips to his when the door opened and she heard the shocked gasps of co-workers. Leading him out of the elevator she turned back to the people getting on. “What? You didn’t think he was celibate did you?”

Howard flushed a bright shade of crimson and hurriedly guided her from the hospital. “That was... uncomfortable.”

“Why?” She giggled. “They asked for it by reacting so childishly to seeing me kiss you. Besides, Howard, when they do find out that you’re available again, I don’t want you to be too available.”

He chuckled and helped her into his car. “Nonsense! After tonight,” he shut her door and rounded the hood. “After tonight, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.” He got behind the wheel and drove them to a little Italian restaurant in Ossining Village. Guiding her inside he walked up to the *maître d’*. “Dr. Mitchell, reservation for two.”

“Ah si...si! Right this way, Dr. Mitchell. Your table is ready.”

Howard smiled when they were guided to an opulently set table in a secluded corner. He saw the wine chilling and everything just the way he’d asked for it earlier that afternoon. “Thank you Luigi.” He seated his date and took the chair opposite. He noted her confused look and smiled serenely. “Something troubling you dear?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “You wouldn’t happen to be up to something would you, Howard?”

He chuckled. “Now what would make you think that, my dear?”

She picked up her menu. “Nothing.” Studying her dinner choices she tried to pinpoint exactly what was making her uneasy.

Luigi reappeared a few minutes later. “Would you like me to pour the wine now, sir?”

Howard nodded and tipped his head towards her glass in a questioning gesture. When he received a nod in response he smiled. “Certainly Luigi.” He turned his attention to his date. “Are you ready to order Francine?”

She nodded. “I am.” She lifted her glass of wine and sniffed. “A fine rosé before dinner?” She smiled and set the glass aside. Looking up at the expectant waiter hovering at her elbow. “I will have the eggplant parmesan.”

Howard nodded. “Make it two, Luigi.” When the waiter had gone, he lifted his glass and waited for her to do the same. “To a wonderful evening.”

She smiled and clinked her glass against his. She took a sip of her wine and caught a flash of something in the bottom of her glass. Disgust washed through her until she got a good look at what it was. Her eyes rounded and she picked up her spoon. Fishing the object out of her glass, she dipped it into her water glass a couple of times and dried it on her napkin. Holding it up, she stared at him through the candlelight. “What is this?”

He looked up from the breadstick he was mutilating. “Hmm? What is what?” He caught sight of the ring in her hand and fought to keep a straight face. “Where’d you find that, in your breadstick?”

She tossed her napkin on the table and prepared to get up.

He set aside his breadstick and grasped her hand. “Stay?” His eyes fell to the flame for a moment. “I put it there.”

She put the ring down. “Why?”

He picked up the ring and came around the table. Dropping to one knee beside her, he said in a voice that shook. "Because I intended to ask you to become my wife. Will you marry this poor old sinner and try to make an honest man of him?"

She ran her fingers through his hair and slid them under his chin. Leaning forward, she touched her lips to his. "Of course I will!" She felt him slip the ring onto her hand and wrapped her arms around him as clapping and cheers rang through the restaurant. "Why did you wait so long to ask me," she whispered in his ear.

"Because I was afraid you would say no," he replied just as quietly.

She pulled back and kissed him. "Oh, you're cute."

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Adeo stared at the ceiling. His mind refused to focus anywhere but on his wife. *Pull through Zoe, please!* He knotted his fists in the bedclothes and continued to stare. A smell suddenly grew strong in his nostrils. His head whipped towards the door as it opened. By the time his long time friend came into view, he was salivating and his blood teeth had descended. Eyes widening at the sight of so much blood, he leaped off the bed and hissed.

Richard stepped all the way into the room and closed the door. Locking it was a simple flick of his wrist. He shrugged out of his bloody operating gown and let it fall to the floor. "Adeodatus?"

"She was mine! You had no right to take her from me!"

"Calm down, Adeo. Zoe is fine. She is in the recovery room right now. She's going to be just fine." He found himself pinned back against the door. "You and I have done this before, haven't we?" When he felt the fangs sink into his throat, he wrapped his arms around his attacker. Love and pride filled him. "Take what you need." The room shimmered and disappeared, then reappeared. A four poster bed lay in the center and candles sprang to life in the stands around it. Richard fell back on the bed beneath his aggressor.

Adeo was oblivious of the changes. His anger burned hot enough to block out the world coming to an end. Despite his fangs buried in the man's throat, he felt himself losing control of the situation. Only when their positions were reversed and he felt something clasp around his wrist did he pull his fangs free. Glancing about in confusion he frowned. "Where are we? When are we?" He shivered as a memory, long buried, came to him.

Richard just smiled and clasped the other manacle over the slim white wrist he held. "You've been a naughty boy Adeodatus. Killing all those women. Surely you didn't think I would ignore it?" He smiled and brushed his finger over the pale man's cheek. Kneeling on the bed beside his captive, he trembled with excitement. "It has been far too long."

Adeo struggled against the chains, the delicate metal making a beautiful tune against the antique headboard. The chains held him fast no matter how much he struggled. He flung his body this way and that, staring at his captor. "Why am I chained? Richard, what...?"

The slap rang through the silence.

Understanding dawned in Adeo's eyes. He understood where he was and why he was there. Terror sped through him like a jet breaking the sound barrier. When he felt his robe being taken away, he swallowed painfully. *No other has ever made me fear anything in two thousand years, and now, after all these years, he still strikes terror into my heart.* "Why," he asked meekly.

"Why did you show the doctor?"

"I...he..."

"To prove a point, eh? Is that what you wanted Adeodatus? Did you want to prove a point to the doctor?" He reached over the side of the bed and came back with something that made the man tied to the bed cringe. "Did you want to prove that you were the king of the hill? Prove that you could conquer anyone or anything?"

"No, Richard, please! I wasn't trying to prove anything! He required persuasion to believe me! I wasn't trying to be the king of any hill! Honest!" He tried to bring his hands up to protect his exposed skin. They only moved marginally. "Please!"

Richard smiled and brought the small handled device downward to lay across his bare flesh. Swirling it over the skin, he smiled. Goose bumps appeared on the exposed flesh and he swirled the item around again. Smiling. "You like that, don't you?"

"No!"

Richard laughed and ran the feather duster up over the captive man's bare chest. "Your body betrays your mind, Adeodatus, it body craves my touch." His hand followed the feather duster and he ran razor sharp nails over the exposed flesh. Thin ribbons of blood trailed down to the stomach and he bent to lap at them. "Heady! Your fear makes you taste better than compliance."

Adeo's struggles weakened as the web wound tighter around him. Finally all the fight went out of him and he smiled up at his captor. "Take the shackles off, Richard. I want to stay." He wrapped one leg over that of his captor and pushed gently on the man's backside. When the man landed on his chest, he smiled. "Or were you planning to prove to me again, who is master who is not?"

Richard played along for a moment. "The shackles stay. You are forgetful of respecting your elders." He gave the captive a lightly playful slap. "You need to be corrected." He leaned down and kissed the hand-printed cheek. "Let me show you the right way to behave, my young one."

Adeo thrilled to the husky growl. Pushing himself up off the bed, he sought to get closer to his captor. "Please!"

Richard smiled smugly. "You are eager. Good! Maybe I'll make you wait a while." He rose and slipped out of his jacket.

Adeo whimpered as he watched his captor undress. "Richard, please! Please correct me?"

Richard turned with a smile and faced the bed. "Good boy Adeodatus. Now come here and..."

Adeo woke with a start. The door to his room had opened and closed quietly. He looked down at his clothing and found himself still wrapped in his robe with his pajamas beneath. His hands flew over his body looking for any marks.

"Good evening, Adeodatus. Your wife is finally in recovery. She's doing...well." Dr. Richard Martin looked at the man he'd known for centuries and frowned. "Adeo, you look as if you've seen a ghost."

He looked up then. Seeing the man from his dream, he shook his head violently. "No! You stay away from me! You won't do that to me again!"

Dr. Martin saw the hysteria in the patient's eyes and approached slowly. *He has been dreaming, but of what?* When the man didn't calm, he exerted just enough will to calm him on command. "That's enough Adeo! Tell me what you saw in your dream." He sat on the side of the bed and opened his arms. "Come here. Let me take away the fear and tell me all about the dream."

"Nightmare, Richard. You were in it. It was... it was..." he shook his head. "I'm not sure I can tell you. I don't want it to happen again."

Richard ran a soothing hand over his hair. "Come now Adeodatus. I only want to protect you. Tell me what happened in your dream."

"You know what happened. I was young then... so much younger than I am now. You were... so darkly handsome." Adeo felt the longing, poignant and deep, spike through his central nervous system. The gnawing desire...the need. "Richard, you know what I dreamed." He raised his head and looked into the stormy depths of twin silver pools. "Just as you know what I want now." He dropped his gaze and pulled away. Readjusting his robe, he rose and paced.

"And here all I did was come in to tell you that Zoe made it through the surgery. She's going to be fine." He swallowed the urge to laugh at the younger man and rose. "Adeo, come here."

The command was clear to him. Walking much like the about to be chastised, he kept his eyes downcast and moved to stand before his long time friend. "Yes sir."

Richard slid a finger under the down turned chin like a lover. "What is it that you want Adeodatus Valerian Marius Sidonius?" He stepped into Adeo's personal space. "Tell me," he said softer than silk.

His breath caught in his throat and he yearned forward. "No one has called me by my full name in a *very* long time." He didn't stop until his right foot was planted between both of the doctor's and their thighs brushed. His eyes were on his quarry's. One hand was on the man's throat and the other was deftly unbuttoning the shirt he wore. His hand snaked into the open front of the man's shirt and found the scar that he remembered well. Gentle pressure had them blocking the door. Adeo flexed his fingers on the smooth chest. "I want to forget her," he whispered against the man's throat. His lips touched the warmed skin. "Richard..."

Richard Martin did not let him get any further. He gripped the back of Adeo's head and tipped it to the left. "You shall," he whispered in return. "Faustina," he felt the man stiffen and cradled him. "She will haunt you no longer." He bit down. Blood spurted against his lips as he sealed them over the wound. *It has been a long time since I've fed from you my beloved son. Let me take away the evil, which haunts you? Let me lay that ungrateful bitch to rest!* When Adeo submitted to him fully, the doctor lifted him into his arms and carried him to the bed. Laying the man down on the bed, he knelt over top of him. *Trust me, my precious one. I will rid you of the evil and leave you whole.*

Adeo felt the blood seeping from his body into that of his friend. "Do not take the gift from me," he croaked.

Richard held him tighter. *I will not take the gift from you, beloved. You are mine forever!* He entered into the younger vampire's mind and walked through the paths of pain and sorrow. At the end of the path he found what he was looking for. "Ah, Faustina!"

She turned to face the newcomer. "Marius! Ah, my beloved plaything! What are you doing here in this Gods forsaken pit?"

He smiled at her and opened his arms. "I have come for you, my dear." He wrapped her in his arms and tilted her head to the side. He kissed her throat tenderly. "You are mine, Faustina, not that fool Adeodatus!" He felt her sigh and bit down hard enough to crack bones. He drained her to the point of death and released her. Pulling her back he looked down at her with blood smeared lips. "You cannot have my Adeo! He's mine!" He dropped her onto the floor and looked up at the youthful man standing before him. "Look at her Adeodatus. Watch her die, once and for all. Be free of her hate."

Adeo reared up off the bed with a cry of anguish. His heart soared at the same moment it broke. "Ah, Gods! Faustina!"

Richard held him down with the weight of his body. Covering him as intimately as a lover. *Hush, beloved. You will bring the orderly or a nurse!* He wrapped his arms tighter around the younger man and pulled his fangs free. He trailed his bloody lips from the wounds, which were healing on their own, and smothered the man's lips. His tongue darted between the younger man's lips as he fought the need inside him. Bracing himself on one knee, he pulled back and towered over the younger vampire. "No! The time is not yet right. You will come back to me when the time is." He rose and stared down at the younger man. "You will always belong to me Adeodatus Valerian Marius Sidonius. Go and live a whole life, now. You are free of her, forever."

Adeo's eyes slowly opened. "Richard?" He struggled to sit up and found that he could not. His collar felt wet so he pulled it away from his neck. When he looked at his hand, his eyes shot up to the doctor's. "Blood! Richard, what happened? If they see blood on my robe, they'll put me in one of those damned hug me jackets again!" He stared up at him. "Why can't I move?"

Richard smiled and knelt down. "I have helped you, my friend. Now, lets get you out of that soiled robe and into something dry." He helped the younger man to stand and pulled the soiled garment off. He saw the blood on the top of his pajamas as well. "It seems that you will have to strip for me, son. I'll have to have these garments cleaned for you." He wadded them up in a ball and rolled them into his lab coat. "I'll clean them myself and return them in the morning. For now, you can get into bed and get some rest."

"I'm starved," Adeo whispered faintly. "I must feed."

Richard sat on the edge of the bed beside him. "Get under the blankets and I'll see what I can do about that." He pulled the covers over him and dragged his nail over his wrist. Holding it to Adeo's lips he urged him on. "Drink."

Adeo needed no further encouragement. He took the wrist and pressed his lips over the wound. His blood teeth descended but he did not bite down. He sucked gently like a newborn babe. After several long minutes, he pushed the arm away. "Enough!" He grimaced in pain. "Gods!" After a moment more, he fell back on the bed, unconscious.

Dr. Richard Edward Martin rose and picked up his coat. "Sleep well, my beloved. I will come check on you in the morning." Flipping the latch, he exited the room and went about his business. *Time to head home for the evening. I need rest.* He shook his head and smiled. *The things we do for our children.*

⌘ ⌘

Michael Taggart lay in the bed holding his new wife. She slept deeply after the long day they'd had. He stared at the corner where his late night visitor had hidden in the shadows so many months before. He sighed and held her tighter. *I wonder how Adeo is doing.*

"You're not really here are you?"

Her soft voice startled him. "Maggie?" Looking down, he saw her smiling up at him. "I was thinking. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"So what were you thinking about?"

"More like who," he answered softly. "I was wondering about Adeo. I know Commissioner Ferguson was supposed to go see him this afternoon."

"Did you want to call him and find out?"

Michael looked at the clock. "I should at least wait until morning. It's after midnight, after all." He pulled her closer, his hand wandering over her hip. "No, right now I want to focus on my bride."

Hours later, Michael lay awake staring at the shadow filled corner. His mind flitted back over the intimacy of the talks he'd had with Adeo. His eyes drifted closed and he immediately found himself in a dark room with billowing curtains. "Hello?"

"Good evening, Michael."

“Adeo? Where are we?”

The slim white man came out of the shadows. “I’m not sure, to be honest.” He extended a hand to the man who had caught him. “I wanted to thank you.”

Michael took the hand and frowned. “There’s something else on your mind.” It was a statement of fact that twisted his guts.

Adeo released his hand and nodded. Pacing around the confines of the room they were in, he ground his teeth. “Something has been troubling you for months. I’ve felt it, and my mother-in-law confirmed it earlier this evening. She said that your last visit was rather short and you seemed pre-occupied.”

Michael sank back against the wall the windows were on. “Shortly after your arrest, Miss Montoya and I... well not to beat around the bush, we split up. She felt I had changed too much. That I was keeping too much from her, and she was right. I was keeping a lot from her. So for the following four months I’d been pining for her. Then some rather well meaning friends decided that she and I needed to be Shang Haied. They engineered a lunch where she and I were put face to face. When my commanding officer stuck his foot in his mouth, I walked out. She had words with my CO and followed me. We had a reconciliation and got married today. We’re going to go on our honeymoon after this copycat jerk is caught and we can both get away for a few days.” He watched the other man for a response of some kind.

Adeo wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Copycat murders are always a pain in the ass. I’ve already given the commissioner my terms... anonymity for my wife and children ... and myself. I don’t much care for someone who is trying to gain from the suffering of others. Even in all of my murders, I never once did it for the suffering of the girls. I did it to wipe away to memory of my bitch of a wife, Faustina!” He clenched and unclenched his fists.

Michael pushed away from the wall and stepped in front of him. “Adeo?” He took the man’s chin and turned him to face him. “I’m going to play with fire here and ask you a personal question. Did you love this Faustina woman?”

Adeo’s eyes glittered. His hand came up and he grasped the man’s hand. Cradling it like a precious gem, he whispered, “Yes.”

Michael flattened his palm against the man’s smooth white cheek. “Then let her go. She has been dead for centuries. Let her go and find some happiness with your wife and children.” He found himself unable to continue.

Adeo smiled and ran his hand over the detective’s face. “I intend to. I want you to find happiness too.” His fingertips traced over the scars he’d left behind many months before. Tilting the cop’s head to the side, he growled deep in the back of his throat and bit down gently. Much like a snake injects its venom into its prey, he injected some of his saliva into the wound. Pulling his teeth free, he placed a reverent kiss on the flesh and stepped back.

Michael’s breath caught in his throat. His fingers slowly rose to touch the sensitized flesh. The small scars that had been there for months were gone. “It sounds weird, I know, but it feels like you’re saying goodbye... Like this is a final farewell. Adeo, tell me you aren’t planning anything stupid?” He took a half step forward. “Are you...?”

Adeo smiled kindly and reached out to touch him again. “Michael, in a way you are like a child. So sure of yourself and yet so needy.” He ran his thumb over the man’s jaw. “I do not intend to do anything stupid. I just want to live a peaceful life. I cannot do that with certain things on my conscience.” He felt the detective shiver as his thumb traced the contours of the man’s throat. “You have given me so much,” he murmured.

Michael stepped in close. “I give freely, so long as we have the understanding that you don’t kill me.” He bared his throat to the fiend before him. “Do not be afraid of me.”

Adeo sighed and fought back the urge to sink his teeth into the man’s throat. Tipping his prey’s head back to a normal position he smiled gently. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he whispered. “Dawn is approaching. We have a killer to find, Michael. Give Magdalene my best.”

Michael’s eyelids fluttered open and he sat upright with a jerk. Looking around, he saw the curtains billowing at the windows. Frowning, he threw back the covers and rose. Shutting the windows, he returned to the bed and snuggled back into his wife’s arms.

“Nightmare?”

He shook his head. “Not really. More of a visit from someone unexpected.”

“You mean Adeo.” Magdalene sat up and switched on the light. The sun was rising slowly and cast the room too deep in shadows for her peace of mind. “What did he have to say?”

He blew out a breath and pillowed his head on his hands. “He was apologizing, I think.” He shrugged noncommittally. “I’m not a hundred percent on what transpired.”

“I don’t like this!”

“Hmm? What don’t you like, Maggie?”

“That this Adeo character can get into your head so easily. That he seems to have a certain amount of control over you. It scares me, Michael. I don’t like the idea that he could make you do things that are wrong.”

He shook his head and sat up. “I don’t believe he would do that to me.”

Turning his shielded gaze on the man beside him, the vampire slumped. “No, no it did not. Take me home Rafael, please? I need to see my wife and children. More than anything in the world right now, I need to feel them...hold them in my arms...” He turned his face away.

The man who had served him faithfully through the centuries frowned. *What did that woman say to him?* He saw his long time friend twitch as the thought sped through his mind and quickly closed himself off. *I'll take him home and then I need to come back and have a chat with the lady doctor.* Pulling onto Overton Road, he sidled up in front of a large house. Putting a hand on the much older man's arm, he forestalled his departure. “Adeodatus, we have been friends for so long it ages us both. You would tell me if there was something wrong, would you not?” His eyes softened with concern. “You are a good friend and I shall help you however you need me to. Just tell me what needs be done.”

The alabaster hand on his arm felt reassuring. Mustering a sad half's mile, he shook his head. “It is nothing, my friend. I would invite you in, but the twins are teething and my mother-in-law is visiting.” He turned his azure eyes on the man behind the wheel. “It will keep, Rafael. Go and enjoy your evening.” Pushing his friend's hand away, he exited the car and trudged up the walk to the front door.

Rafael watched his step lighten the closer he got to the door. *Strange... He seems to feel incredibly uncomfortable everywhere but in that house. What happened to him in that hospital? It's time I had a talk with Richard.* Putting the expensive car into gear he sped out of the posh neighborhood. His desire to speak with Dr. Richard Martin was almost overwhelming. Shaking himself, he drove back to the town Coroner's Office. Pocketing his keys he made his way down the stairs and into the building. The scent of death assailed him the moment he opened the door. Inhaling the sweet scent he stepped into the cavernous room. She was standing over the body of a young woman talking into a small tape recorder.

“Victim appears to be twenty years of age. Female...Caucasian... apparent cause of death, complete loss of blood.”

Sliding up behind her, the sophisticated vampire breathed in her ear. “Intelligent and beautiful is a rare combination. Makes the experience delightful and satisfying like a glass of well-aged wine.” When she turned around he was ten feet away leaning against her desk. “Good afternoon, Dr. Taggart. May I have a moment or four of your time?”

She set aside the scalpel and tape recorder. “Mr. San Nicolas! I didn't hear you come in. What can I do for you?” She removed her gloves and crossed the room.

The vampire openly watched her. “I'd like to speak with you about...” He hesitated, “Adeodatus.” He watched her carefully, his face a perfect mask of serenity. “He was here earlier, was he not?”

Her expression darkened. “That manipulative bastard!” A litany of defamatory remarks trembled on her lips struggling to be released.

Rafael raised a brow at the unshed words. “Madame?”

Magdalene blew out a breath. “He was here, though I have no idea why! Lord knows he's already made my life enough of a living hell, I don't know why he had to come here and make it worse.” She swallowed and looked the attorney straight in the eye. “Look, I don't care that your client has made a full recovery. Not that I believe he has. I just want him to get his undead hands off my husband!”

His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned into a grim line. “Mrs. Taggart, I know not what hold you think my client has over your husband, but I'm afraid you cannot keep them apart. The Commissioner has requested that they work together for the duration of this case.”

“I don't care,” she interrupted, “I want him out of our lives before he ruins everything!”

Michael stood quietly in the doorway, listening to his wife's tirade. He knew whom she was talking about, and it ate at him.

“Madame, my client, Adeodatus may not be the epitome of the model citizen, but he is not a home wrecker. He wishes no malice on anyone. The way you treated him when he was here earlier was very damaging. In fact,” he said quietly advancing on her, “you hurt him so deeply that he was almost catatonic all the way to his home.” He stopped inches from her. “I cannot bear to see him like that again, so I am asking you nicely to back off.” He felt his teeth descend and tensed. “Just stay away from him,” he snapped. Striding to the door he paused beside the man who had helped his friend. Baring his teeth he growled, “Now you know!”

Magdalene's eyes rested on the man standing in the doorway. “And what do you want? Have you come to advocate for him too?” Snatching up her gloves, she stomped back over to the body.

Michael, taken aback, stepped further into the room. “Hello to you to, Mrs. Taggart. What was that lovely little scene all about?” Crossing the floor he stared down at the body they'd found in the wee hours of the morning waiting for his wife to speak.

He shook his head. "I don't know." He sat up straighter as images began running through his mind. Panic filled him with dread that wasn't his, and he heard the echo of a gunshot in his ears. Leaping off the couch he raced for the door. "I have to go. I'll be back, Zoe. Call Dr. Martin and have him meet me at the Coroner's Office! I love you! Bye!" Racing out the front door he leaped into the air.