

A Snake Among the Roses

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Chapter 1

Once again, Adrian was leering down the secretary's low necked blouse.

Simone sighed and ducked her head, letting the edge of her short black hair brush past her chin to shield her face. Really, especially more often of late, it seemed as if she was the brains driving the outfit of the whole business. Whereas he was busy pursuing other things that were more testosterone driven. Like pursuing Danny the secretary who probably had her body edited more times by a plastic surgeon than she had edited the paperwork that Dubois and Sung occasionally generated.

She quickly stepped into her office and shut the door. It was oak and no sound carried through it. She strode to the chair at her desk and sank into the chair. There was nothing like barking dogs at four am to disturb the sleep of any sane person. Simone considered herself rather average although on the short side; it was quite annoying though when she had to talk down to Adrian, he was at least a head and a half taller than she. Her eyes were warm brown cognac, tilted slightly in an Asian slant which she thought quite frequently gave her a disadvantage. People tended to defer to Adrian although she was a full partner. She tapped a pen idly and opened a manila folder. Bland government paperwork. She stared for a moment out the window.

The view was from the second story of a recently restored building. In fact, the whole neighborhood had been recently restored. Many new businesses had moved into the area in the past year causing the area of Elanne to experience growth in the sector. Most of the buildings were red bricked and white trimmed blanketing the whole area in a colonial feel. Across the street on the second floor was an accounting firm. Below it, a florist. She absently wondered when Danny would see a dozen roses from Adrian. Perhaps when he tired of her. There was just something about surgically altered barbie blondes that made her think of the word 'disposable'.

The phone rang, jarring her from her reverie. Grabbing the receiver, she said, "Yes?"

"Ms. Sung? Your mother is on line one." Danny's bubbly voice rang out hitting a few of the shrill frequencies. Simone winced, her sleep-aching mind ringing.

"What? Oh fine, I'll talk to her." She jabbed a button to cut any extraneous remark the secretary might have deemed necessary to insert. "Mom?"

There seemed to be a flurry of Chinese before her mother's girlish voice came through clearly. "Simone? You're finally at work? I've been trying to reach you all day." She frowned. "You know I don't get to work until ten."

"Your sister gets to work at seven-thirty. Every morning."

She hated being compared to her sister Evelyne. Never good enough. She should have become a famous painter or an architect. She should have married a doctor or lawyer and produced a couple of kids. Should have, should have, should have. She was sick of it. She was a private investigator, but that wasn't good enough. It didn't have the same ring as professional chess master.

“For Christ’s sake, Mom, I own a business. I set my own hours.”

Her mother made some sort of sound that resembled the croaking of a frog and the belching of a hippo. “Actually, I wanted to confirm that you’ll be coming to the party this Saturday.”

“Of course I’m coming. I’m not going to miss Caroline’s birthday.” Caroline was Evelyne’s second child. Simone hated parties, but that was a petty excuse for neglecting one’s niece.

“Is Adrian coming?”

“I haven’t asked him. Most likely he will if we don’t have a case then.”

“Good.”

That sounded suspicious. “What are you up to this time, Mom?”

“Caroline is fond of Adrian.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of strange. Adrian usually doesn’t think much of children.”

“Huh. Look, dress nicely will you? No jeans. I’m also inviting some friends of mine...”

Simone mentally groaned. Her mother was trying to set her up. Again. “It won’t work.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“But.”

“Good-bye Mom. I believe I have an appointment I have to see,” she lied.

“All right.”

She placed the receiver back with a little more force than necessary and immediately rubbed her temples. This day was not working.

That morning, she awoke to the thin shrieking howls of a couple of neighborhood dogs who had suddenly developed a hankering for a walk outside. And it had kept her up for the rest of the time. She had lain in her bed for a few more hours before becoming fed up and later had attempted to go on her day. The strange thing was, it was not the dog howling itself that had kept her awake. It was the lack of her usual dreams. Instead of the nightmarish flicker of swords, pain, and blood, her unconscious mind was treated to an innocuous conversation with owner of the deli down the street. Perhaps she was suffering from some sort of depression or withdrawal from her deprivation of the daily dose of violence.

She glanced again at the forms in the folder and quickly filled it out. Bureaucratic work was a mind numbing drug. Time seemed to fly away and when she looked at her watch, she found that it was already a couple minutes past noon. She stretched her legs under the table and kicked off her shoes before standing up to stare out the window. The accounting firm had their blinds drawn. The whole office was probably out to lunch. Her stomach suddenly protested and reluctantly, she turned away from the view to put her shoes back on.

Out in the reception area, it was empty except for Danny who was slurping a chocolate slim-fast shake.

“Is that all you have for lunch?” Simone had once asked her.

“And a protein bar.”

“That’s hardly enough for a bird.”

Danny had laughed. “Well, look who’s talking. Not everyone is like you. We can’t

just eat whatever we like and keep our figure.”

What about plastic surgery? She had mentally sneered. Danny was a walking dream for plastic surgeons. Gifts from rich ex-boyfriends, no doubt. Instead she had said, “But I'm not tall like you. I'm short. Very short.”

“Petite. But don't worry about me, Ms. Sung. This is more than enough to fill me.” Simone just shook her head. If people insisted on abusing themselves, who was she to stop them? Perhaps after all this time, she had become dull, desensitized, uncaring. A gray blot on an otherwise colored world.

“Danny, I'm going to Willard's. Do you want me to get you anything?”

The secretary waved an absent minded hand that was crowned with bright red nails. Her puffy frosted blonde head bobbed a little. Her eyes were glued to the computer, no doubt surfing some rather cheesy singles sites. “That's all right, Ms. Sung. You just go on ahead.”

She slightly shrugged. “Okay. I'll be back in an hour.”

The secretary nodded again.

Simone turned and tugged at the handle to the door out of the office. Behind her, she heard a door slam.

“Wait a sec. You are going to Willard's?”

She turned her head a little to see Adrian stroll towards her. He was wearing his jacket and his tie was still neatly in place around his neck. A record, if she ever saw one. Usually before an hour passed at work and his jacket would be slung over a chair, the collar unbuttoned, and the sleeves rolled up. What was the occasion? He had longish dark hair which he tied back at the nape of his neck. Dark free strands caressed his forehead. There was a strange bright glint in his gray eyes. Simone narrowed her own eyes in response.

“What do you mean? What's going on here?”

His eyes briefly flickered to Danny who did not seem to be paying them any attention. “You are going to Willard's?” he repeated.

She took the hint. “Yeah,” she replied. She turned to walk out the door, without bothering to see if he was following.

The sun was out in full force, bathing the buildings in a strong yellow light. The concrete hard and actively soaking in the sunshine. It would be an oven by mid-afternoon. There were no trees about, except for the small sad saplings that lined the streets in grates and cages. A few other people were about, mostly in suits and dresses, carrying briefcases, and oblivious to anything else around them.

Simone was aware that Adrian had already caught up in his long loping strides and then shortened them to keep pace with her. She looked straight ahead when he began to speak.

“A client is meeting us at Willard's. I was pretty sure you were heading there so I went ahead to make the appointment.”

“Yes, that was very sure of you,” she replied dryly. “Who is it?”

“A Mrs. Edna Greenville.”

“Ah. Why wasn't I informed of this earlier?”

“Well, she didn't make an appointment with Danny first. She called me directly.”

“Ah yes, wouldn't want Danny to get all huffy about bypassing her.” From the

corner she saw him grin.

"You have a point. She is a bit tyrannical when it comes to that."

"Not like she does all that much," she mumbled under her breath.

Adrian pretended not to hear the comment. "Edna Greenville was recently widowed. Sixty-three years old with one son who is working at a biotech firm out in Ridgefield. Came into a lot of money but she's planning to move in with a spinster sister in the northern part of town. She's planning to put her house on sale, but she wants us to get rid of something there first."

"Get rid of what?"

"A ghost."

"Oh yeah, we're exorcists." She rolled her eyes heavenward.

"Or it could be an intruder, Edna Greenville wasn't particular as long as we figure what it is and move it out."

"Open and shut case already. Ghost is a hallucination. Edna needs to take her medication on time. End of story."

"Simone. Just wait until you hear her story, okay?" He smiled a little. "Don't judge so fast." He was used to her caustic moods.

Two blocks down was Willard's, a trendy cafe that occupied the entire building. Outside, there was a dark green canopy overhang that sheltered a few tables that stood out in the sidewalk. All those tables were filled. Inside was cooler, though, and darker which Simone preferred. A perky brunette waitress who cast sidelong looks at her partner led them up a wide staircase to the second floor and offered them a window seat that overlooked the neighborhood. With another perky voice she offered them menus and told them that another waiter would be back to help them.

She took a chair at the round table set for four and picked up the menu. She already knew it by heart, but she read it anyway to take up what time the waiter would come back. Down on the street below, more people were streaming into the cafe by the minute. Idly she wondered which one was Edna. Most of the patrons were businessmen, there were a few younger people, probably from the nearby community college, and perhaps a few tourists. Tourists were always easy to spot because they brought kids with them. Rowdy kids who kept spilling drinks and whining about the vegetables.

A waiter with an outrageous handlebar mustache was approaching their table. Ah, our orders are about to be taken, she thought. But then she spotted the woman trailing behind him.

Edna Greenville did not fit her mental image of a recently widowed woman. She was wearing one of those rather loud sparkly cocktail dresses with a white feathered boa slung across her neck. Quite a few cafe patrons were turning their heads to stare. The dress was a shimmering satin blue that matched her still sharp eyes. She was wearing strappy heels that probably added about four inches to her height. And she looked unnaturally young despite her solid gray hair that had been expertly curled. Another plastic surgeon patient, Simone thought wryly.

"Good afternoon," she told them, stepping past the waiter who got a disgruntled glint in his eye. "Sorry I am late. Got caught in the traffic."

Simone briefly glanced outside again, noting that even though there were quite a few people and cars out, the traffic seemed to be moving efficiently. She looked back and caught the slight upturn of Adrian's mouth. Well, what do you know, an old lady

who wants to be young and fashionably late.

"You must be Mrs. Greenville," Simone said shaking her hand. Firm grip. She did not seem to be the type to forget her medication, let alone even have a condition that required it. "I'm Simone Sung."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Adrian Dubois," he inserted.

Edna gave him a curt nod and turned back to Simone. "Yes, yes, I believe you were the one I called."

She grinned. It wasn't every day that she saw Adrian being rebuffed by a woman. "Adrian told me you had a little problem you wanted us to solve?"

"Yes." Edna sighed. "I'd swear it is wrecking all our plans."

The mustached waiter gave a discrete cough. "Are you ready to order or do you need a few more minutes?"

The older woman waved her hand. "Whatever you have for soup. The soup of the day would be fine."

"The chicken pasta please." Simone promptly gave the waiter her menu.

Adrian's eyes had wandered back down to the menu. "Well..." Amused, the women watched the waiter fidget which was only indicated by his twitching eyebrow. "Hmm. Well, I could have that, but I had that last time. How about the halibut?"

"Very good sir," the waiter interjected before he could pretend to change his mind again. "We will have it out in a few minutes."

"Thanks." Adrian smiled and the waiter seemed to melt under its heat. He bowed and apologized profusely before retreating. Unforgivable charmer, Simone suddenly thought sourly.

"I want whatever that is living in my house to leave."

Simone blinked. "Living?"

"In a manner of speaking," Edna said a little vaguely. "I'm not quite sure what it is. Two nights ago I had a friend staying over. She saw it, actually. Never was quite the same. And Carmen had the audacity to leave right away too."

"What exactly did she see?" Adrian asked.

"The dead ghost of my husband. Ha!" The older woman snorted in derision. "My husband, for goodness sake. Wherever he is now, he is not masquerading as a ghost. He knows I'm pretty well off for the rest of my life. Our son will get the inheritance once I'm gone. Nothing contested at all."

"So she could actually identify who the ghost was?" he said surprised.

"Yeah. Carmen went to the study to try to find a book. Avid reader she is, I wouldn't be surprised if she had already read half the books we owned already. She said she saw him sitting at the desk writing something. He looked up to say hello to her."

"Doesn't sound like a very scary ghost to me," said Simone.

"Oh, you don't know Carmen. She's an atheist. So it was a great shock to her that the possibility that people turn into ghosts after they die was very disconcerting."

"Did you ever see the ghost?"

Edna shook her head sadly. "Nope, never did Rob when I went down to check the study myself. It would have been nice to talk to him."

"You don't seem like the type of person who is too distressed about the idea that your deceased husband is a ghost," Simone replied. "So why come to us?"

"Well, ghost or not, I need to get rid of him," Edna said resolutely. "I'm moving to my sister's in about a week. My son already has his own house and doesn't want to take care of another. I need to sell it and I don't want anything undesirable in it to scare off potential buyers."

"It could be an intruder that perhaps bears some resemblance to your husband," Adrian pointed out. "The police will have to deal with it then."

"Yes, I've thought that possibility through too. And I wanted someone to deal with the two possibilities. That are capable of dealing with both of the possibilities. In fact, I am willing to pay triple your ordinary rate if you get the job done. The money from selling the house would more than cover that expense."

Simone's eyes suddenly gleamed at the mention of tripling the rate. "I'm sure we could find out what the problem is."

"Don't both of you have to decide on this?" For the first time, Edna turned her eyes consideringly to Adrian. "I don't want to force you to take a job that you don't want to take."

Adrian gave both women a congenial smile. From underneath the table, Simone tapped the tip of his shoe in warning. She grinned at him. His eyebrow raised fractionally in feigned amusement.

"Sure," he finally said. Simone silently let out a held breath. "Sounds like an interesting case."

At that point the waiter came back with their meals. Simone heartily dug into the pasta and briefly felt sorry for Danny who kept worrying about her own looks and dieting. But obviously she has a reason to worry—even with her surgically altered body, she hadn't been able to get a man attached to her yet.

Edna glanced at her soup in disgust and took a spoon to daintily sip at it. "Soup of the day. I should have asked for a menu and paid more attention."

"Is there anything else we need to know about this 'ghost'?" Simone asked bringing back the purpose of the discussion. "Was your friend the only one who saw it?"

"Well, Dargood and Mina thought they saw him," Edna admitted.

"Friends as well?" asked Adrian.

Edna made a small disgruntled sound at the back of her throat when she took another sip of the soup. "Exactly what did they put in this?" She grabbed a glass and took a swig of water before answering. "No. The butler and the maid. They were cleaning out one of the main rooms when they saw him walk down a hallway heading towards the study. Dargood went to investigate, but the ghost disappeared soon afterwards."

"They wouldn't mind if we interviewed them?" said Simone. "It'll just be some simple questions."

"Oh, no of course not."

"Your friend will also be available?" asked Adrian.

Edna shook her head. "I'm afraid Carmen is out of the country. She told me Rob's ghost gave her a revelation. Personally I thought it gave her a mild heart attack and now she's aware of her mortality. But no, she took the first plane out. She told me she was heading to Tibet of all places. Said she need the help of a couple of recluse Buddhist monks to help her soul search."

"Or perhaps she just needed a vacation," Simone remarked.

"She's retired," Edna said puzzled.

Adrian shrugged as he swallowed. "One less witness then. You will tell us if you see anything.

"Of course. And you must start right away. I want all of this cleared up as soon as possible.

"Well since we don't have any other urgent cases..." Simone said slowly.

"Wonderful then! I'm sure you need to stake out the house tonight. I have guest rooms already available. You can set up all your equipment wherever you like. I'm not particular.

Adrian and Simone exchanged looks. It seemed as if Edna had read up on stakeouts. Or watched a lot of movies. But since she was paying several times their usual rate, they could afford to overlook some strange eccentricities.

"Sure," Adrian said. "We'll look up on it tonight. Expect us around six. And as you said, we do need a little time to set up some equipment.

The rest of the meal went rather smoothly although bland. Edna Greenville monopolized the conversation with the topic of her son, Madison Greenville. Evidently he was a researcher at Biosyn, a biotechnology firm located in central Ridgefield, a larger town south of Elanne, who excelled in school and life in general. He had married some socialite's daughter down in Ridgefield and had the proverbial two point five kids: a son, a daughter, and a cat named Poodles who had recently had kittens. The whole litter was at the moment residing with Edna. Evidently Edna's grandchildren thought she would be better at giving them away than they would. At the moment, she had been dismally unsuccessful.

Afterwards, the mustached waiter came to bear the check while beaming at Adrian. Edna Greenville departed earlier and Simone was compelled to wait for her partner when he was detained briefly by their waiter. Outside, the afternoon heat hit them in slow pulsing waves. She could not wait to get back to the cooler office. She quickened her pace to keep up with Adrian's strides.

"See, I told you not to judge a client so quickly."

"Huh." She hated when he told her 'I told you so' but was loathe to voice her opinion out loud. It would only give him more fodder to tease her with. "What was the waiter wanting to know? Did we talk too loud in the restaurant?"

"Nothing so mundane."

Simone turned to see him slowly turn a charming shade of bright red. "What on earth did he say to you?" she asked fascinated.

"If you must know, he asked me out."

"Really."

He coughed. "I told him I was not that type of guy and politely turned him down."

"He must have been disappointed."

"I can't believe it."

"I can." She slanted him a sideways look. "Have you ever noticed your affect on most people? I swear you could get by on charm alone. You should have been a salesman or politician."

"I despise both of those professions. They shouldn't be even called jobs."

"Well, I guess you're right on both accounts."

"We should get ready for the assignment. We should meet at her house. I'm going back home to pack."

"Then Danny will know."

"Yeah, she'll have to know. But she'll forgive us when we tell her about the money."

"Oh yeah, the money." More money to support those doctor visits. "But she'll still be miffed. You know how Danny is."

"I'll be the first one to point out she's flaky," he said frankly. "We really don't need a secretary. All she can do is type."

"Then why on earth did you hire her in the first place?" And then mentally kicked herself. It was for the looks of course. "Never mind."

"She's our advertisement. A walking, talking advertisement."

They arrived back at the office to find that Danny was not at her desk. Instead, she was standing over a huge bouquet of long-stemmed red roses in a crystal vase, gawking.

"A delivery?" Simone inquired blandly. "Who's it from?"

Danny started at the sound of her voice and looked up at them. "Oh, hi. I see you're back from lunch. Denise brought it up. She said it was from her pathetic ex-boyfriend who's trying to win her back, but she couldn't bring herself to throw the flowers out. She figured we might like some color in the office."

"Color?" Simone looked surreptitiously around. She had to admit that the office was done in minimalist style. The only claim to color in the neutral surroundings was a framed abstract painting at the far wall. "Well, they are nice. But I'd prefer sunflowers and daisies."

"Sunflowers and daisies?" Adrian said surprised. "I had you pegged for cherry blossoms."

"Too obvious."

He picked up a small white envelope from the petals and read, "To Denise." He turned it over and broke a black seal and slid out a simple card that said, "I miss you. Please come back."

"That's supposed to be a private note," said Danny.

"We can seal it back and Denise will never know," Simone replied. She took up the envelope and examined the seal which seemed to be an intricate black blob in the form of a writhing serpent. "Or maybe not. This seal looks too complicated to duplicate." The serpent was coiled in a bed of what looked like black flowers.

Adrian and Danny looked over her shoulder.

"Yeah, you're right," said Adrian. "But since Denise doesn't want any of her boyfriend's stuff anymore, she won't miss this anyway."

Chapter 2

The house was a large squat toad at the end of the dead end road; brown with a protruding tower at the back that resembled a rocket launcher. The windows were dark closed eyes, darker than the gray that bathed the twilight sky, even with some of the

windows slightly tinted with a faint interior light.

Adrian stopped his truck at the end of the driveway about five till six, noticing that Simone's small white compact car was already halfway up the driveway. He sat in the car for a moment, watching the door open and the other half of Dubois and Sung Investigations get out. A pair of slim legs in jeans followed by a lithe body clothed in a trim black sweater emerged. Her face was obscured by a curtain of straight black hair. Finally he got out of his own truck and walked over to the back to grab some equipment.

"Want some help with that?"

At the sound of her voice, he instinctively looked down. She barely came up to his shoulder, even if she had worn heels. "This?" he drawled indicating a heavy box he had easily tucked under his arm.

She raised an eyebrow, her eyes faintly glimmering gold in the fading sunlight. "I was talking about the rest of the stuff you haven't commandeered."

"Paltry trinkets," he scoffed.

She picked up a tripod and a black bag filled with camera equipment. "Really. When we get a photo of the prowler these won't be so paltry."

"You don't think there is a ghost."

"Of course not."

"But we've been to quite a few ghost hunting expeditions."

"Which all turned out to be fruitless," she replied easily keeping up with him as they walked down the driveway. "The only evidence we ever gathered were to disprove the theory of ghosts and prove the theory that hoaxes were behind all of them."

"Pessimistic, aren't we?"

"Just realistic. Besides, our client doesn't care what the thing is, just that we get rid of it."

When they reached the porch, the door opened revealing a tall slim man lining the frame. The interior glow gave him an odd greenish-yellow halo. His hair was short brown and graying and his eyebrows were thick and bushy giving him an ape-like appearance. He was wearing a pin-striped gray suit that attempted vainly to make him blend into the woodwork. A large hand was held out in greeting, but neither Simone nor Adrian had any free hands to perform the handshake. So a moment later, the hand was withdrawn and a strange smile appeared on the man's full lips.

"You must be from Dubois and Sung."

And you must be the butler, Dargood, thought Adrian. He frowned slightly when the butler's gaze dropped to Simone and stayed.

"We are Dubois and Sung," Simone replied tersely. She brushed by the butler and entered the house.

Adrian grinned. "I'm Adrian Dubois."

Dargood's eyes snapped back to the visitor still standing at the doorstep. "I am Walter Dargood. You may just call me Dargood, Mr. Dubois. Mrs. Greenville's personal retainer."

He nodded. "And my partner, Ms. Sung. I'm sure she's impatient to set up the equipment."

"Yes I am," a voice came from the interior. Adrian stepped inside and watched as Simone stuffed a small camera into the pot of a plant near the door. "Where's the

study?”

Dargood opened his mouth to answer Simone when a large clomping sound made the three of them look up.

An apparition had entered the room. A tall woman, about Adrian's height, had entered the entrance foyer wearing a dress that consisted of a tight dark green corset that displayed a vast amount of white cleavage and vast amounts of puffy satin of the same shade of green covered her legs. A monstrous chandelier that passed for a tiara sat precariously on her curly green hair. Or it could have been a wig. Adrian could not tell exactly for sure. Her face was partially covered by a green feathered and rhinestone studded mask. Diamonds clung around her neck, wrists, and fingers. A green fan dangled from her left hand.

“Greetings,” the apparition proclaimed.

Simone was still gaping, probably still reeling from the excessive color coordination. Dargood was drooling. It took Adrian a minute to remember who possessed the familiar voice. “Good evening, Mrs. Greenville,” he replied.

His partner seemed to immediately unfreeze. She smiled widely, a devilish gleam coloring her normally serious eyes. “How do you do, Mrs. Greenville. As you see, we've got all our equipment, ready to set up.”

“Excellent. I had cook prepare dinner for both of you, as I am sure you are famished. Normally, I would show you around the house myself and join you for dinner, but as you can see I have a prior engagement. Just ask Mina for anything.”

Adrian and Simone just nodded.

“Oh, and Dargood, show them to the study as Ms. Sung requested. I am sure they have much to accomplish tonight. And afterwards, hurry up and get dressed. We will be late as it is.”

“Yes, Mrs. Greenville,” Dargood managed to reply.

“And don't expect us to be back until tomorrow,” Edna called out as she breezed by them to get to another room.

They stared after her. At the end of her dress which trailed onto the floor in a short train sat two tiny smug kittens, one black and one brown with black stripes. The animals seemed to be quite enjoying the free ride.

Simone shook her head. “The study?”

“Right this way.”

Adrian and Simone followed the butler down the foyer which was actually quite cluttered in antique wood furniture and vases of dried flowers. The walls were papered in a discrete dark beige but ended abruptly as they turned a corner into another corridor. This one lacked any sort of decoration except the varnish that coated the wood paneled walls. Small wall lamps were attached at intervals giving off small periodic pools of light. The floor was a cold brown stone that had been waxed meticulously to a shine.

The hallway wound toward the back of the house, toward the single tower that had looked so odd on the outside. At the end of the corridor were double doors of laquered heavy dark wood that clashed with the wood on the walls. The doors were crudely carved, Adrian could hardly make out the lumpy twisted forms that passed for mythological and real creatures. Besides two brass doorknobs, two identical doorknockers graced the center of each door, smooth but tarnished into a dull

gray-gold.

Dargood did not bother knocking. He took out a key and fitted it into the lock hiding under one of the doorknobs and pushed both doors open. The interior was dark and gray. It was drafty. He saw Simone discretely shiver. At the other end of the room on the right was a large window with the drapes thrown to the side. Even from the door, he could make out the back yard of the house, a large field that had a curvy swimming pool gashed into the middle and lines of trees guarding the borders.

The butler threw up the switch and the lights from the ceiling and the walls blinked on suddenly. Clearly, they could now see that the study was actually a huge library that resembled a giant Victorian sitting room. Right across from the doorway was a huge fireplace framed by two armchairs, an ottoman, and a tiny tea table. To the far left sat a heavy desk and chair, obviously the abode for the late Mr. Robert Greenville. At the corner was a tiny spiraling staircase that wound up to the second floor balcony that circled the continuing bookshelves. On the high ceiling that would have been the second floor ceiling, was an intricate painting of gods and monsters fighting in an eternal cosmic war. Greenville's library study would have been perfect, except for the fact that all of the shelves were empty.

The butler coughed discretely. "This was Mr. Greenville's..."

A sudden high shriek caught their attention. Dargood's face flushed white and he abruptly dashed out. Adrian sighed and dumped the equipment on the floor of the study. Simone waved a hand.

"Go see what's the matter," she said. "I'll set this up and catch up when I can."

He followed the butler back up the hallway and turned into a living room that was littered in brown couches in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Edna was standing in the middle of the room with her dress clutched to her knees so that she looked like a huddled, yet ridiculous, green mouse. She was stamping her platform clad feet as if she was trying to mash a scurrying poor spider. In front of her were two stunned dark furry balls. Evidently she had discovered her passengers.

"Shoo! Mrs. Greenville does not like it when you wander out of the kitchen. Get back in there!" Dargood began waving his arms like a windmill.

Instead, the kittens hissed and launched themselves on his pant legs. Dargood began hopping about like he was on fire.

"Get them off me!"

Edna shrieked again and the kittens decided they had enough fun on dancing Dargood. They rolled off him and rushed off. The striped one darted between Adrian's legs and rushed out into the hallway. The black kitten was not as coordinated. He rammed himself into Adrian's foot and began meowing piteously. Adrian sighed and picked the animal up by the nape, intending to dump it back into the hall, but instead hesitated. The kitten took the opportunity to burrow into the crook of his arm. He groaned and decided to leave the creature there.

Adrian looked back up. Edna had collapsed into one of the sofas with a hand pressed against her forehead in exaggerated stress. Dargood was too busy trying to brush off imaginary cat hairs from his suit.

"It's simply too trying," Edna finally said. "I really must get rid of those animals. I cannot possibly take care of them."

"You could take them to the humane society," Adrian suggested.

“That would simply not do. What would the grandchildren think?” She cracked open an eye. “Besides, I have no time to go down to the humane society. I have other important things to do.”

He refrained from telling her that an appointment which required dressing up in garish clothes was not important.

“Besides, it looks as if one of those animals does like you.”

“Yes it does, doesn’t it?” A calculating smile appeared on Dargood’s face. “Well, Mrs. Greenville, why don’t you give them to Mr. Dubois? He seems to know a lot about cats.”

“Why Dargood, that sounds like a fine idea. What do you say, Mr. Dubois?”

Adrian glanced down at the kitten who at that moment had the audacity to yawn at him, showing him his small sharp teeth. “Well...”

“I’ll double the current rate that I had set for you then,” Edna said dismissively. “The money is not the issue. I just want all of these distractions gone.”

That was six times their normal rate if he calculated correctly. He could already see Simone’s face light up when he tells her. “All right then. I’m sure Simone and I would be able to find a way to find homes for them.”

The kitten had managed to climb up his arm to perch on his shoulder when he arrived back in the study. Already, the tripod was set up near the desk and a few gauges had been taken out of the box. But Simone remained frozen with a camera clutched in her hand.

“Simone?”

“They’re staring at me,” she said, the words barely coming out of her clamped mouth.

“Who’s staring at you? Oh.”

On the late Mr. Greenville’s desk sat three fur balls, the striped one that had escaped earlier, a bright orange one, and a ragtag calico. The kittens actually looked rather mesmerized than malicious. The kitten on his shoulder jumped down and scrambled up the desk to join his siblings. Adrian chuckled.

“They’re not staring at you. I think they’re just stunned by your good looks.”

Simone whipped her head around and gave him a narrow eyed glare. “Ha ha. Very funny.” But her shoulders drooped downward, relaxing. “I was just surprised to find them all lined up in a row, that’s all.”

“You were expecting a ghost, weren’t you?” he grinned.

“Right,” she replied exasperated, “And a UFO is going to land in the backyard. A little green Martian will come out and ask us to take him to our leader.”

“Now you’re just playing with me.” He ambled toward the box he had put down earlier and took out a few more cameras and portable gauges to place around the room. “I wonder where all the books are.”

“This was Robert Greenville’s study. And it doesn’t look like someone like his wife would want to venture in here of her own volition.” Simone attached the camera she had been holding to the tripod and flipped a few switches. The kittens had finally broken out of their trance and were pouncing down the desk to cluster at her feet to see what she was doing. Simone ignored them, even when the active black cat tried to climb her leg. “She probably got her servants to pack them away.”

“That would have been a lot of packing,” he observed. He tucked one of the

gauges on the mantelpiece of the fireplace. "I think it was more possible that she had them all sold to some book dealer."

"Or to somebody else who wanted to build a library." She ventured to look down at her feet. The kittens looked up and mewed in unison. "I just bet they're hungry," she said blandly.

"Or maybe they just like you." He finished placing the last camera. "We're going to have to try to find homes for all of them."

"What?" She looked at him again, her cool eyes turning into fire. "You volunteered us to take care of these..."

"She'll be paying us double of what she originally offered us if we do."

"Humph." Simone crossed her arms, but she no longer looked angry. Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. "You could of at least consulted with me at first."

"Yeah, I know. But I was sort of in a tight spot and Edna Greenville didn't look to amendable to long decision making at the time. I promise I won't make any decision without letting you know if I can help it."

"I just bet." Her lips faintly curved. "So was that all the noise was about earlier? She found her two free loaders, didn't she?"

Adrian chuckled again. "All quite amusing. You should have been there."

"I would have liked to have seen her expression. Or that butler's expression when he saw his employer in dire straits." She made a face. "But now that I think of it, don't you suppose that they are..."

She did not get a chance to finish. A knock came at the open doors and they turned to see the object of her remark standing at the threshold clad in a black domino that was accentuated by black boots, black cape, black mask, and a black hat with a drooping black feather. Adrian was sure that the costume would attempt to make him blend into the night, but end up failing miserably.

"I'm afraid that Mrs. Greenville and I will have to take leave of you tonight," said Dargood. "Here's the key." With a flourish, he dropped the silver implement into Simone's open hand. "And Mina will help you with whatever you need."

He waved a hand to indicate a short and dour dark-skinned woman of indeterminable age who had been hiding behind him. She scowled. Dargood's flinging hand had nearly hit her in the face. But with the introductions done, the butler had whirled around nearly tripping the maid in the process and strode back down the hall with his voluminous cape flowing behind him.

"Evening, Mr. Dubois, Ms. Sung. I'm Mina as Dargood said earlier." She spat out the butler's name like something that tasted bad. Simone raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the reaction.

"Hello Mina," Adrian replied.

"Hi," Simone echoed.

He smiled. "We're just done rigging up the study."

"Then I should show you to the dining room. I'm sure you're famished."

"Well..." but Simone finally shrugged and shooed Adrian and the kittens out of the room as she pulled the door closed and locked it with the key. "I guess, if that's all right with you."

"Certainly. Mrs. Greenville would have insisted on it. I'll just take these little monsters from you and put them into the kitchen where they belong."

Three of the kittens huddled around Simone's legs. The black one managed to tug at Adrian's pants. He picked him up. "That's okay. We don't mind."

His partner looked down at her feet doubtfully. "Yeah. Sure. Fine."

Mina shrugged. "If you're okay about it...they do tend to be a handful." She turned around and walked down the corridor, evidently believing that they would immediately follow her.

The dining room was a large affair set nearer to the front of the house. It consisted of two crystalline chandeliers and a long table enough to hold twenty or thirty people. A black lacquered grand piano sat at one end of the room, waiting for a professional to sit down and plunk away at the keys, preferably Gershwin, Chopin, or Beethoven. The instrument looked like it despised anything else, especially anything frivolous like show tunes.

They sat down at one end of the table and urged Mina to stay with them to answer a few questions. The cook, a thin Spanish man named Carlos, came out to serve the pair a fantastic five course meal that made them want to turn away dessert but ended up eating anyway at Carlos' urging. The cook had been grinning ear to ear the whole time, all the while stroking his goatee enthusiastically. "It is such a rare thing that I get to actually do art with people who really appreciate my skills," he waxed happily. "So boring when all that the Senora wants is low fat soups and salads to keep her figure. What is it about dieting that makes people shy away from excellent food?"

Adrian did not have an answer. Simone had just answered, "Calories." And shoved another bite of the mousse that Carlos had prepared into her mouth. One of the kittens mewed from underneath the table and obligingly she gave the hungry animal a spoonful of the dessert.

"I suppose the kittens have more taste than the Senora," the cook finally sighed and he went back into the kitchen to putter around.

"I think he just needs to get out more," Mina remarked as she sipped a cup of tea. "I don't think the man has had a date in over ten years."

Simone glanced at Adrian at the sudden caustic remark. He shook his head. "Mrs. Greenville said that you once saw her husband's ghost," she began.

"Ha! That was all Dargood's idea." Mina rolled her eyes. "That man is as superstitious as those witch hunters in the Middle Ages. Of course he thinks it's Mr. Greenville's ghost. He's sleeping with Greenville's wife, for heaven's sake. What man wouldn't be nervous that his lover's husband is looking for him?"

"Ah," said Simone, her suspicions confirmed. "But the fact is, Mr. Greenville is dead."

"Ghosts can still wreak vengeance from beyond the grave," said Mina. "Even if it's all in the victim's head."

"So what exactly did you see that day?" Adrian asked.

Mina curled her fingers around the teacup. "Dargood and I were polishing up one of the rooms. I saw somebody walk down the hall towards the study. I said, 'Hey Dargood, who's that?' He looked up and went hysterical."

"What did this person look like?" he prodded.

"I think he was about Carlos' height, but fatter. The man was wearing a dark blue coat and had brown hair. Initially, I had thought it was Mr. Greenville, but he's dead. So it must have been some guy sneaking around the house."

“All right. If it was, we might be able to catch him on tape if he comes tonight,” said Simone.

“I hope you catch him,” the maid nodded. “I’ve always told Mrs. Greenville to install a security system, but she just says it isn’t necessary.”

Mina had taken them to the second floor to their rooms. The room that Adrian had been given had an odd hotel feel to it, a generic lamp, dresser, and bed. Even a mediocre watercolor hung on one wall. The drapes were pulled shut. He peeked outside, seeing that the room was facing the front of the house. The surrounding neighborhood was completely dark except for a few lights. Should get some sleep, he absently noted to himself. Instead, he opened his overnight case and laid out some clothes into the empty drawers.

Simone had taken the room next door. It was connected to his by a small door, that unlike the butler, had an excellent ability to blend in with the bland wallpaper. In fact, he did not see it at all when he first glanced around the room. An odd and disturbing thing since he rarely if ever missed any details. He wondered if Simone knew.

He left the rest of his things on the bed and walked to the door, standing for a moment, hoping that he would not scare her. He knocked softly.

No one answered.

He knocked a little more loudly and then decided to try the doorknob. It turned easily under his hand.

Simone’s room was nearly identical to his except for the color of the walls and carpet which were a dull burgundy. The lamp at the end of the room was on, leaving a small pool of light around a desk. The door to Simone’s bathroom was open, the light streaming out. Adrian started retreating back into his own room when he noticed the lumpy bed.

She was curled up on top of the sheets, her own overnight bag dumped into a neglected pile at the foot of her bed. Her shoes were lying askew on the floor. The kittens had evidently followed her. Three of them laid along her back, snoozing. The fourth black kitten was curled up on the pillow, suddenly turning his head so he could watch Adrian with unblinking yellow eyes.

“She’s asleep, isn’t she?” he mouthed.

The kitten laid his head between his paws and closed his eyes.

He shook his head amused and went over to the bed to watch his partner sleep in a bed full of kittens. He reached out a hand as if to touch her hair, but only hovered a few inches above her. Her eyes remained closed, oblivious to everything and anything. He remembered that during that morning when she had made a brief entrance before dashing into her office, she had looked weary and tired. Adrian usually tried not to pry into her personal life, but was left wondering.

He turned off the lights in the room for her and went back to his room. “Good night, Simone. Sweet dreams,” he whispered. He closed the connecting door.

Chapter 3

Mongolian body odor was a different thing altogether, pungent, tangy, and

garlicy all at the same time. He took a deep breath, feeling his mind reeling in disgust at the smell. The barbarians liked to wear their hair long and scraggly; dark beards grew out bush-like and untrimmed. Their armor was crude yet effective, the metal glinting off from the dying sun's rays like tarnished bronze. He heaved his sword and sliced through his opponents arm. Dark red blood spurted out in a geyser as the enemy body toppled over like a colossus. The man had screamed loudly, but that had only amplified the already ensuing malee that had enveloped the battlefield. One of his comrades came over to crush the man's skull with the flat of his blade as he swung his sword again to block another incoming thrust. That particular voice was silenced forever.

The commander was up ahead, still on his pale horse, hacking away at the enemy underbrush. His armor gleamed silver under his red cape. His sword was a sleek sharp thing that darted in and out, splatters of red mixing with the spit in the dirt churned air. The standard bearer was also nearby, his yellow flag with the emperor's green dragon emblem still flapping valiantly through the breeze.

The incoming Mongolian onslaught was a tidal wave, never ending, never ceasing. Over and over he swung his sword until the brown dried blood on his blade mingled with fresh blood. He saw a few of his comrades go down under the trampling feet and hooves. But he did not stop to ponder or to mourn. He had his own life to fight for.

Suddenly a flicker of gray caught the corner of his eye, but it was too late. A blade had pierced his left arm. Quickly he whirled onto his attacker, intending to do even more damage. The wound on his arm bled, rivulets of darkness stained his uniform sleeve. But even as he raised his sword arm, something hacked away at his side and in an anguished cry he fell, the bloodied grass rising up quickly to meet his face.

* * *

She awoke, breathing hard and clutching her side. The kittens that had been sleeping on top of her rolled off as she sat up. Sleepily, they meowed in protest. She pulled up her sweater and looked at her pale abdomen. No mark. No blood. She rolled up her left sleeve. No wound there either. That had been the first time that she had been injured or killed in a dream. She flopped back down onto the bed and breathed a sigh of relief. It had seemed so real, yet it was still a dream. The cat on her pillow flicked his tail to tickle her cheek.

"I'm not a very nice person to sleep with," she told the animal.

The black kitten meowed otherwise while his siblings attempted to crawl back to their original places.

"Don't you have some warm basket in the kitchen to sleep in?" she asked the kittens rhetorically. "I don't think I'm a very comfortable bed."

A small creaking noise at the nearest wall to the bed suddenly startled her. She sat up again, but the kittens resolutely clung to her. It was a door in the wall, not the entrance to the room or the door to the bathroom, but a different door altogether. A figure appeared, tall, dark, menacing. It was in the shape of a person at least. Was it a ghost? The ghost? The dead Mr. Robert Greenville?

"Simone?"

She silently breathed deeply, feeling her pounding pulse beginning to slow back

into its steady rhythm. If she had a weaker heart, she would have died from the double scare of the dream and her apparently insomniac partner. If only she had noticed that connecting door earlier.

Adrian prowled toward her. From the moonlight that managed to filter through the drapes, she could see that he was only wearing a pair of loose slacks. The dim gray light played over the muscles on his broad shoulders and chest. His silver eyes faintly glinted as he watched her. He was also barefoot. That fact caused Simone to faintly giggle hysterically. He gingerly sat down at the edge of her bed, careful not to disturb the sleeping felines.

“Simone?” he repeated. “I thought I heard you scream.”

She waved a hand. “A dream. It’s nothing.”

“Really.” She could imagine his eyebrows raising in disbelief. He wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“You’re making me feel like a child.” She leaned her forehead against his warm skin.

“Tell me anyway.”

“I’ve always been the same character, but this was the first time I died,” she said. “I was a soldier in an army. An army for an ancient Chinese emperor. We were fighting some invading Mongolians and well, you know.”

“So you dream about being a blood-thirsty warrior.” In the dim light she looked up and could see him grinning. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

“I am not blood-thirsty,” she retorted instead. “He’s violent, but not blood-thirsty.”

“Do you know what I dream of being?”

“What?”

“Promise you won’t laugh.”

Curious, she said. “I can’t make any promises.”

“Well, at least you’re truthful. I once told my brother and he laughed his head off.”

“What were you, a clown?”

“I wish. I usually dream that I am a nun.”

“A nun?” she replied wide-eyed. She clasped a hand over her mouth to prevent another chuckle from escaping her lips. “A nun?” she said again fainter.

“It’s always the same thing though. I’m walking through the abbey in the middle of the night. I’m checking all the doors to make sure that they’re properly shut. And then I start heading towards the chapel. I remember that I’m looking for something, but I always wake up before I actually find this thing.”

“I’m always dreaming of fighting. I wonder what our subconscious is trying to tell us.”

He shrugged. “I’m thinking that mine is trying to tell me that I had a previous life.”

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t be surprised. I always had this feeling that I knew this nun, that I knew her whole life. It’s just that I don’t remember most of it.”

“And I must have been some ancient Chinese warrior during the Qin dynasty,” she replied dryly. “No. I think it’s the result of either studying too much history or

watching too many graphic kung fu films when I was in college.”

“To each their own theory,” he said unconcerned. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” She laid back down when he got up to go back to his own room.

“I’m glad.” His back was turned. He had once again turned into just another shadow in her room.

The tape was playing on fast forward, the tape track creating white static streaks across the television screen. Simon sighed and pressed the play button so the tape could resume its normal speed. They were sitting in a den area, the surveillance tapes of the previous night stacked between them.

“Whoever the prowler is, he’s either very good or didn’t bother coming last night,” she mused. “Maybe he knew we were coming so didn’t show up.”

“That’s a very real possibility,” Adrian agreed. “But the simple fact that he didn’t show up last night does not negate the problem.”

“And I suppose we’re stuck here until we do catch him,” she said gloomily. “I promised to go to Caroline’s birthday this weekend.”

“Caroline?” Distinct interest lit his voice. “Your niece, right?”

“I don’t think you’re one to forget. And my mother told me to invite you.”

“I’ll be glad to come.”

“Well...” She suddenly stopped staring at the screen. “Well,” she repeated. “Maybe we can get to Caroline’s birthday party after all.”

The calico kitten had clawed her way up to the manual television controls and had randomly hit the pause button. The screen had frozen, the static lines permanently etched on the top and the bottom of the picture. The scene was from one of the cameras aimed toward the second floor of the study along a monotonous row of empty bookshelves. A dark shadow, faintly in the figure of a human being, hovered just along one side. Simone pressed the play button and the recording resumed. The dark shadow still hovered, but in two seconds, it vanished into the wall.

“Must be a ghost,” said Adrian.

Simone held up a hand. “Not so fast. I think this is our prowler.” A faint grin tugged at her lips. She loved it when they were on the verge of catching the culprit. “I don’t know how he did it, but still this is our guy.”

She rewound the tape and played the section again, narrowing her eyes in concentration. Still again she replayed it and paused at the frame when the shadow seemed to meld into the bookcase.

“A pretty good trick if you ask me.”

“Yeah,” she muttered. She finally dropped the remote control onto the floor and stood up. “I’m going to the study to check that section out.”

The orange kitten took the opportunity to pounce on the new plaything, pressing all sorts of buttons. The other kittens watched mesmerized by the television, the scene with the shadow fast forwarding then rewinding, repeatedly.

“So are you staying and watching the rest of the tapes to find anything?”

“Nah.” He swiftly rose, suddenly towering over her. She turned her back toward him and headed toward the door. She hated when he did that. “I’ll come with you. Who knows, maybe the perpetrator left a clue behind.”

As the two headed out, the kittens stopped their antics and tumbled over each other attempting to follow “their humans” to see what they were doing. They trampled

over the controls and inadvertently turned off the television and the VCR.

“Have you seen Mrs. Greenville around? Is she back yet?” Simone asked as they strolled down the hall.

“No. I haven’t seen her butler either. Perhaps they came back early and haven’t come out of their rooms yet,” Adrian replied.

They passed Mina who was dutifully polishing one of the vanity tables standing against the wall. The maid shook her head at their conversation. “I’m afraid they haven’t come back at all, Ms. Sung, Mr. Dubois. They are possibly still out at the party, or as I probably can guess, their little tryst.”

“Tryst?” said Adrian amused.

Mina tapped her feather duster on the frame of the painting above her. “Old Dargood probably convinced Mrs. Greenville to do it out of the house. I know he hates being stared at by him.”

Simone and Adrian looked up at the painting. A man, probably in his fifties or sixties, was seated on a burgundy armchair with a fire roaring in the background. He was wearing one of those comfortable fur-lined robes that the affluent wore. Only one hand was visible in the picture. It was holding a long wooden pipe that appeared to be imported from England. The man himself was not spectacular. His thin graying hair was combed back in a severer manner. Brown unassuming eyes peered from behind gold rimmed spectacles. A mustache, perfectly trimmed and curled, sat pertly on his upper lip. He wasn’t smiling or frowning. He wasn’t giving out any particular expression at all.

There was a name plate on the bottom part of the frame. It read, ‘Robert F. Greenville’.

She crossed her arms. “Actually, he doesn’t look that intimidating.”

“He wasn’t,” Mina agreed. “He mostly kept to himself. A scholarly sort who was much more into history than the social whirl like his wife. Most of his money was made even before he was born, I believe. He was one of the owners to Randall, Greenville, and Farthing, a relatively well off stock brokering company. It’s passed down to his son now. He died of a heart attack while he was visiting one of his friends all the way down in Havan about two months ago.”

Adrian nodded. “We knew about his death.”

“You know, even if Mr. Greenville knew about his wife’s affair, I do not think he would have cared much. His only pride were his books, you see. Wouldn’t let me or Dargood go into the study to tidy up unless he was watching us. But other than that...” Mina shook her head. “I think he was getting fairly paranoid about those silly books of his. About a month before he passed away, he had them all sent to his friend, the one in Havan I mentioned. And he started commuting down there.”

Simone and Adrian glanced at each other, the same idea dawning. The maid had moved away, further down the hall and turned her attention to a dusty statue.

The slight smile on her face had turned into a grin. “You don’t suppose he forgot something, did he?”

The only way anyone could get to the second floor of the library was by climbing the narrow spiraling staircase to the balcony that rimmed the upper shelves like an unsteady wooden catwalk. The very top shelves could be reached by climbing the rolling ladder that was attached to the shelves. The tract for the ladder ran through

all the shelves, completing itself into an oval. Simone climbed on the ladder, looking down from the top near the ceiling. It was a long drop to the bottom. She felt slightly dizzy and turned her head back to the shelves.

"It's a long way down," Adrian said unnecessarily. He was on the balcony examining the bottom shelves. The kittens had bravely followed them up and now they were playing in the empty shelves by pouncing in and out and chasing each others' tails.

"Tell me about it," Simone replied, clutching one of the shelves and pushing herself over. The ladder rolled onto the next empty shelf.

The black kitten who had grown quite attached to Adrian tugged on his pant leg again and was rewarded with a lift to his shoulder. He looked up at Simone with curious yellow eyes and meowed.

"You got that right," she muttered to the animal, but mostly to herself. "This is crazy. It's going to take a while."

They worked for a little while, peering into dusty empty wooden shelves. Simone was bored easily. She began humming under her breath a tuneless song. They had only turned on half of the lights in the study. The rest streamed from the window as the sun rose higher in the sky toward noon. Simone took a brief break to glance out the window. The back yard looked a little different, the trees no longer frightening sentinels but tired old men that lounged around the bean shaped pool. No one was out there, but in the sunlight, she could now make out a few yellow plastic lawn chairs and a white table. A lonely beach ball was slowly rolled into the pool by the outside wind. It bobbed on the surface like a multicolored beacon.

She looked back at the current shelf she was sweeping and for the first time noticed something peculiar. It was a white envelope. Or rather, it was yellowed, especially from age. The address was to a particular Mr. Hannibal Pynchon in Lancaster, a city nearly fifty miles away. There was no return address. The envelope flap was unsealed. Inside she found a letter dated seventy years ago. But it wasn't the content that drew her. It was the seal at the bottom where there was supposed to be a signature. It was a snake lying in a bed of black roses.

"Simone, I think I found something," Adrian called out from across the room.

She hastily stuffed the envelope into the back of her jeans pocket and scrambled down the ladder, all the while careful not to look down and get vertigo. "What is it?"

Her partner made a disgusted sound. "It's a volume of *War and Peace*. No wonder Greenville left it here. It's heavy and boring. There are a couple of other books here too. Novels, all of them. There's *Crime and Punishment*, *Tales of Chekhov*, *Anna Karenina*, most of it nineteenth century Russian literature. Hey, there's something called 'Foundations of the Path'. That's not literature. It looks like some sort of new age self help book..."

And as he tried to tug the book off the shelf, Adrian and the kitten on his shoulder vanished.

"Adrian!"

Simone ran, and stopped at the bookshelf where her partner had once stood at. She began pulling the few books that were there. Most of the books landed at her feet. The remaining kittens stopped what they were doing to watch her. The new age book went flying past the railing to land with a loud slap on the floor below.

"Adrian!"

She pounded the now empty shelf. Adrian was gone.

“Adrian.”

She clutched the shelf, white knuckled, and afraid that she would fall. Where was he? The kittens mewed confusedly and she looked down. They had nudged around the fallen books. One of them had pushed open the cover to *War and Peace*. Instead of pages and pages of dense prose, she saw that the book was hollow. Unfortunately, nothing was inside it. Crouching, she went through the rest of the books, opening and flipping the pages. The rest were actual real books. In frustration, she swept all of them down onto the first floor. Pages and covers rained down, making large clattering noises. She didn't care if they were all first editions. She didn't care if they were torn up in the process of their bruising fall.

“Simone! Simone! Can you hear me?”

She looked up abruptly at the shelf and surged to her feet, trying to cram herself into the shelf. The faint voice seemed to have come from the other side of the shelf.

“Adrian!”

“I seem to be in this small alcove. Probably where the prowler went on that tape.” He coughed. “I can't see anything. Can you find a switch of some sort?”

“I'm trying.” She moved her fingers along the shelf panel, only coming across smooth wood. “I can't find...ow!”

She snatched her hand away from the panel and glared at her index finger. A bit of wood had lodged itself into her skin, a drop of blood already welling up. With her other hand, she picked the offending object out and sucked her wounded finger.

“Simone? What happened?”

“Just a splinter. Wait, I think I found something.” She peered onto the wood panel and could faintly make out a small knob or button. With an uninjured finger, she managed to depress it. The shelf quickly slid open and a blast of air from within the revealed dark crevasse tried to suction her inside. But instead, something else pushed outward causing her to stumble and fall onto the balcony floor. The shelf immediately slid back closed, but in its wake, it left Adrian and a kitten with a large pile of dust on his head.

“I think we should go back and see what's there,” said Adrian excitedly.

“Hold on for a moment,” Simone replied, holding up a hand. The kitten who was about to shake himself suddenly froze at the sound of her voice. She managed to get herself up and reached up to brush the dust pile off the feline's head. Adrian and the kitten sneezed at the same time. “We'll have to figure out a way to leave that thing open so we can get back out.”

“I'm pretty sure there's a mechanism to open the shelf on the other side. We'll just need some light to search for it.”

“I like the idea of leaving the shelf open as a precaution.”

He shrugged. “You can if you want to.”

They went back down to the ground floor to find two flashlights among their equipment. The kittens had decided that they had enough fun following Simone and Adrian and crawled into the box that had once held the gauges and cameras fall asleep. He grabbed the books that she had carelessly thrown from the second floor and shook his head.

“Desperate, weren't we?” he teased.

“Not funny,” she responded. She picked up the new age book that he had avoided. “This doesn’t seem like the thing a history buff would touch, let alone read.”

“Well, you’d never know.”

They tramped back up and he waited until she had depressed the hidden switch to shove the heavy books into the revealing crack. The sliding shelves sprang back closed, but was stopped by the pile of books.

“It looks well oiled, as if someone had maintained it recently,” Simone said, examining the shelf to see if there was any mechanism that she had missed previously. “It’s probably operated by a strong spring.” She noticed the air again, tugging at their loose hairs. “And where is the wind coming from?”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Adrian switched on his flashlight and squeezed through the crack that they had created. Simone followed more easily as she was smaller. She switched on her own light when she was on the other side. Their twin beams illuminated a small cubicle that was probably the size of a walk-in closet. “I think there’s a vent and a fan over in this corner. It’s pretty silent, and I bet this was pretty well maintained too.”

“Look over here.” She aimed her light at a discrete panel on the wall just on the other side of the shelves. There were two switches. “One of them must operate this hidden door.” She flipped one of the switches and watched as the shelves moved again out and then inward, hitting the blocking books.

“I…”

“Don’t tell me ‘I told you so’ or I’m going to give you a concussion with this,” she warned waving her flashlight.

“You’re too short to reach my head,” he said unconcerned. “Well, what does the other switch do?”

“The only way to see is to try it.” She flipped it and a corner light near the fan turned on. “Ah. The obvious.” She switched off her flashlight.

“There doesn’t seem like there’s anything much of interest in here.”

“Unless you count the trapdoor,” Simone said pointing upward. On the ceiling, there was a faint outlined square with a rope dangling from it. “You do the honors since you’re so much taller than me,” she snickered.

Adrian just smiled, cocky. “It will be my pleasure.” He yanked on the rope and the door swung up, letting a narrow folding stair fall downward in front of them. A cloud of dust came up, making him cough almost violently. Simone just waved a hand in front of her to clear the air.

“I wonder what’s up there.”

“Well, if you look at the house from the outside, you’ll notice that the tower, where the study is located, is about three stories tall. There must be a room up there.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thank you for that brilliant deduction.”

They headed up the stairs, Adrian coughing as he went. The thin light beams from their flashlight pierced the darkness like spears through a thick dense fog. The room seemed normal, at least in height. Simone managed to find a wall and next to hit, heavy drapes which she pushed aside. It was a window, and the late morning sunlight that suddenly streamed through it caused them to blink and place a hand over their eyes until their vision adjusted.

The room’s roof sloped upward into a conical point, but the room itself was

hexagonal, three of the walls having windows that were narrow and slit-like, much like windows from a medieval castle. In the natural light, the room was a dusty brown and mostly wooden paneling. A pile of cardboard boxes were stacked in one corner. There was also a simple desk with no drawers and a severe high backed chair. A carving of some sort hung above the desk. The desk itself was blanketed in blank sheets of paper. There was also a small pot that contained black crayons and wax pastels.

Simone went through the papers, stacking them as she went. Adrian went through the boxes. There was nothing of interest on the desk, but in a fit of something unidentifiable, she picked up a sheet of paper and a crayon. She placed the sheet over the hanging carving and began rubbing, making an imprint of it. When she was finished, she stared at it. The replica gave more detail than the dim natural light spilling over the carving. It had been an emblem, or more of a crest that looked like it belonged to a family. There was a shield and on the borders of the two sides stood a stylized lion and unicorn, glaring at each other. The shield itself had a picture. It was some sort of pedestal impaled on the ground. At the top of the pedestal was a griffin with outspread wings. On the top of the pedestal was engraved some sort of four legged monster. There was also a banner at the bottom with a long motto in Latin.

Limine quod caeco obscura et caliginine monstrum gnosiaticis clausit Daedalus in latebris.

Simone had absolutely no idea what it meant. She had never studied Latin.

“All of these boxes are empty,” said Adrian disappointed. “But look what I found on the floor.”

It was a card of some sort. It pictured a woman standing in the middle of the field, blindfolded. Around her, evidently at each of the compass points were swords standing upright, their points plunging into the ground. The back of the card was crisscrossed in generic white and red stripes.

“What is it?”

“A tarot card, I think,” Adrian replied. “The four of swords. It usually means truce, peace, calm. But it can also mean solitude, exile, and resting before a large ordeal or event.”

“Tarot,” Simone mused. “Isn’t that the name of a deck of cards that are used in Western divination?”

He nodded. “Nowadays, people buy them and just fiddle with them for fun. You know, those crazy card readings for nine ninety-nine a minute? Scams and commercialism. A long time ago, when people were more superstitious, they used to take it more seriously.”

“How do you know so much about it? I mean, you know the meaning of this card and everything.”

He glanced up sheepishly. “Well, it just goes to show what having a black sheep grandmother will teach you.”

“A black sheep grandmother?”

“Yeah. She was into all sorts of weird things. She converted to Wicca at the ripe old age of sixty-eight. The rest of my relatives were embarrassed to be around her after that.”

“Too bad. She sounds like someone I’d like to meet.”

“You might meet her someday,” he said mysteriously. “What have you got there?”

“Oh this?” She brought up the sheet with her rubbing. “I thought it was interesting so I just got a crude copy made. Do you know what this says at the bottom?”

“*Limine quod caeco obscura et caligine monstrum. Gnosiacis clausit Daedalus in latebris,*” he muttered to himself as he took hold of the sheet. His eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “It’s been a while since I’ve taken Latin. Only three years of it in high school.”

“Well, you’re a smart boy. I’m sure you can figure it out eventually.”

“Wait. I think it says, ‘In the dark lairs of Cnossus with their hidden threshold and thick darkness, Daedalus shut up the monster.’ That’s a strange motto.”

“Impressive translation,” Simone remarked. “Guess your high school Latin paid off.”

He shrugged. “Maybe it’s not all that strange. Maybe it’s from some piece of literature like Ovid.”

“Maybe.” Simone took one last look around the small attic room. “There doesn’t seem to be much else in here. Perhaps the prowler already took what he needed.”

“If that’s the case, he wouldn’t be coming back any more. Our job will be finished.”

Chapter 4

As Adrian kicked the books out from their hindering position between the shelf and the wall, the shelf itself slammed shut, leaving no evidence that there was a hidden alcove. He picked up the books as Simone dusted herself off.

“I wonder what used to be in that room,” Simone mused. “I mean, the stuff that our ‘ghost’ took with him last night. It’s obvious that no one has been there often. And no one here knows about it.”

“Actually, it would be much more of a task to catch him if indeed everything of importance has been transported out of the room,” said Adrian. “Assuming that we didn’t overlook anything. For all we know, those empty boxes could have great import.”

“Yeah.” But she looked skeptical.

A knock on the study door below broke their conversation. Mina the maid opened the door slightly and stuck her head in. “Mr. Dubois? There is a phone call for you. From somebody named Ms. Edwards?”

“Ah. Ms. Edwards is our secretary,” he explained.

“Right.” Mina did not look that interested. “She said something about an emergency.”

“Emergency?” Adrian hastily dumped the books into Simone’s arms. His partner scowled at him, but he rushed down the stairs, two steps at a time.

“What emergency?” Simone called out after him. “Danny probably called to say she broke a nail attempting to type up a memo.”

“You’re really funny, you know that?” he said, briefly turning to give her a mischievous smile. “I’m betting she just discovered a run in her hose.”

Behind him, he heard her give a sharp bark of laughter.

Down a turn in the hallway, Mina indicated a white lacquered phone with

golden trim sitting on an equally gaudy table. He picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mr. Dubois? Is that you?" came Danny's shrill voice over the buzzing white noise. "I'm glad I got you. There's some emergency. A family crisis you could say."

"What family crisis?" asked Adrian, his voice suddenly sharp.

"Well, your brother just called a minute ago saying he was heading for a visit and his car broke down at the intersection between Rosemead and Dunkirk. He got his car towed, but he needs a ride."

He breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Okay. So where's Gavin now?"

"He's in some coffee shop near there. I don't remember what he said. Truman's Coffee? The Coffeehouse of Truman? Java Truman? Trudy Drinks? Or how about..."

"Don't worry, Danny. If it's around Rosemead and Dunkirk, I'm sure I can find him. Did he also leave a phone number so I could call him?"

"Yeah. I had it scribbled down here somewhere...oh, wait, there's somebody coming into the office."

He heard her put down the receiver, but could still faintly hear her voice as she addressed the apparently new customers.

"Good day, sirs. How may I help you?"

There was some incoherent mumbling in the background.

"I'm sorry, but you can't do that...hey! What do you think you're doing? Those are..."

The phone suddenly went dead. He could only hear the dial tone.

"Danny? Danny?!" He shook the phone but it refused to respond. He slammed the phone back onto its cradle and stormed back into the study.

Simone looked up as she was adjusting a few cameras to point back toward the balcony. "So what did Danny...oh." Her voice trailed off as he grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the study. "What on earth happened?"

"Danny was talking to me and suddenly the phone went dead. I think there's somebody in the office with her."

"What? What type of people?"

"I don't know, but I have a strong feeling they're up to no good."

"What about Danny?"

"I hope we don't find her hurt or worse."

Simone tugged her arm out of his grasp and quickly kept pace with him. "Could they possibly be someone from our previous case?"

"At least I don't think so. They're all either in jail. Or dead."

"Right."

"She called to say that Gavin broke down."

"That's too bad," she said automatically.

They rounded a corner, nearly bumping into Mina who was busy mopping up the floor. "Hello Ms. Sung. Mr. Dubois. Gone to the emergency eh?"

"An understatement," Simone said quickly.

"Mrs. Greenville also just got back, but she's resting in her room."

"Tell her we're really close to finding out the intruder. We just need one more night to stake out the study. We'll be back as soon as possible," Adrian called out as they rushed through the front door.

"Why did you tell her that?" his partner said, disgruntled.

“Something to keep the client happy,” he replied. He grabbed her arm and steered her toward his truck when she was drifting to her own car. “We’ll both take mine. We’ll get there faster.”

“You drive like a maniac,” she said, but she followed him and climbed into the passenger seat as he slid into the driver seat and slammed the door shut.

“I do not drive like a maniac.” But instead of giving a reason in the argument, he turned the key in the ignition and stepped on the gas pedal. The engine roared and they zoomed several hundred yards down the road before Simone could even get her safety belt buckled.

* * *

From the outside, the office looked as if nothing untoward had happened earlier. But as Adrian screeched into a parallel parking space, nearly hitting the car in front, both of them burst out of the truck and rushed inside, not heeding the strange startled looks from people on the first floor office. He took two steps at a time, but Simone managed to keep up, her pattering feet running up the stairs rather than leaping past them. They burst into Dubois and Sung, ready to confront anyone and anything.

But the office looked like nothing had happened. Except for the shattered vase of red roses near the waiting area and Danny who was sitting wide eyed and duct taped to her chair.

Simone quickly maneuvered past Adrian and ripped off the duct tape from their secretary’s mouth. Danny screeched. She quickly began working on the rest of the duct tape that was gluing her arms to the back of her seat with a pair of scissors she found in a desk drawer.

“Who came in here, Danny? What did they want?” Adrian demanded.

Danny blubbered for a few seconds, nearly hyperventilating from the numerous ‘oh my gods’ that she kept repeating. Simone finally cut away the remaining strips of tape and the secretary suddenly surged from her seat and lunged toward Adrian, latching herself onto him. Awkwardly, he tried patting her back even though she was restricting his arms with her bear hug. Simone rolled her eyes at the excessive emotional display as she crossed her arms, scissors dangling from her fingers.

“I told them they couldn’t just march into here,” the secretary said, her sobs quickly subsiding when her employers showed no signs of going into sudden hysterical panic mode. “They were more interested in the vase of flowers, really. They looked into your offices briefly but it didn’t seem like anything they found was of interest. They stole that little card that Danielle’s boyfriend was supposed to give to her.”

“Did they say anything? What did they look like?” asked Simone.

“Nothing much. They just said something about staying away from Harvey Randall, you know, Denise’s ex-boyfriend. I kept telling them that I wasn’t Denise, but they didn’t listen to me. They were wearing all black, you know and dark sunglasses like government agents. And they tied me up. As a warning, they said.”

“This Harvey Randall must be in some deep trouble,” Adrian remarked as he tried to extract himself from Danny’s embrace. “We’ll probably have to report this

incident to the police, but I doubt they'll do anything. There's just no evidence."

Simone walked over to the shattered vase. Trampled rose petals laid among the glass shards like some tragic bloody symbol. Simone wasn't big on sentimental symbols, but she was keen on evidence, no matter how circumstantial. "We'll have to clean this up then."

"Uh huh," he said, concentrating on pulling himself out although Danny was reluctant to give up her human teddy bear.

* * *

"But you know, Adrian, something about this just doesn't make sense."

If Adrian looked casual in his brown slacks and white business shirt which unfortunately at the moment had a few buttons undone at the collar and the sleeves rolled up, his brother Gavin was at the other extreme, completely done up in a gray three piece business suit. Gavin was a few years younger than his brother, his short dark hair was slicked back and his shoulders were slightly less wider than Adrian's but other than that, he could have been Adrian's twin. When Adrian and Simone arrived at Trudy's Coffee Bar on the corner of Rosemead and Dunkirk, they found him precariously perched on a stool at the counter, nursing a cup of dark coffee. Some of the patrons were staring at him. The waitress was hovering nearby ogling him.

"This doesn't look like a joint that I'll ever see you frequent."

Gavin looked up at his brother's voice, suddenly grinning. "Yeah. I had it all planned. BMW stalled just as the warranty runs out. Catch lunch at a roadside restaurant that's obviously less than five star."

"I thought you would be coming down next week."

"Well, the case wrapped up earlier than usual," he said, obliquely referring to his job as a prosecuting attorney in the district of downtown Ridgefield. He glanced at the petite woman standing beside Adrian, and a wide smile crossed his face. "Well. Hello Simone."

"Hi yourself." But she smiled back.

Adrian suddenly found himself irritated. "You could have called a cab to take you back to my place instead of dragging us all the way down here."

"Hey, this is just on our way back," Simone interrupted flippantly. She sat beside Gavin and looked up at both men innocently. "And that's no way to talk to your brother. Lunch sounds good."

"Simone's right. Show some brotherly concern, will you?" Gavin teased.

Adrian sighed. "Oh, all right. But some of us have jobs too you know." He sat down on the other side of Simone, giving his brother a warning look.

Gavin ignored him. "In fact, I was about to order lunch myself." He casually draped an arm over Simone. She scooted an inch closer to him. "Are you brave enough to try their special?" he asked, pointing to the menu etched in bright pink chalk on the blackboards that were mounted just above the counter.

She wrinkled her nose. "I think not. I'll just order a sandwich I think."

At that moment, the waitress, an early twenty something who was obviously just fresh out of college, sauntered over, gawking. "So are you ready to order?"

"Yeah. I'll try the special," Gavin drawled, giving the waitress a wink.

Simone stifled a giggle. "A grilled cheese sandwich and a milkshake will be fine."
"Soup," said Adrian resolutely.
The waitress scribbled on her pad. "What type of soup? Soup of the day? Mushroom? Tomato? Cream of asparagus? Noodle? Al..."
"Mushroom," he said cutting her off.
"Great." She scribbled some more and looked up. "Your orders will be up shortly. And uh, mind if I ask if you guys are twins?"
Something mischievous twinkled in Gavin's eyes, but Adrian stalled him with a curt, "No."
"Spoilsport," Gavin replied when the waitress moved away.
"You're incomprehensible." He stared at his brother's arm wrapped around his partner. "Don't you need two hands to feed yourself?"
"Nope. Dear Simone will feed me herself."
"Ha. Then get off me, you oaf," Simone said jokingly as she shoved Gavin's arm off.
"You wound me," Gavin moaned in exaggeration. "What was it, not sending you roses on your birthday?"
"My birthday is six months away."
"Ah, then I must get a head start."
When the food arrived, Adrian tried to ignore Gavin and Simone's playful banter, only answering in a clipped voice when asked a direct question. When they finished, the brothers trailed a little behind Simone as she headed for the truck.
"Are you serious about her?" Adrian asked.
"What do you mean?" Gavin said, feigning ignorance.
"You know exactly what I mean."
"Aw. I'm just playing with her..."
"Damn it Gavin, you could hurt her."
"But she knows I'm just playing with her. And she's playing with me. I can just see the green-eyed monster taking you over. Jealous huh?"
Adrian was thin lipped. "She's my partner."
"Some partner. Look, I don't think of her that way. I just like getting your hair up whenever both of you are in the same room."
"You're a sadistic bastard."
"Hey, don't call me names, you know what that leads to," Gavin grinned. "And you're too old to get your butt pounded into the ground."
"Care to take a bet on it?"
Gavin glanced at his brother who could probably still ground his face into the dirt despite their similar height. "No thanks. I'll rather still be alive to call you brother."
"What are you guys doing, dawdling around?" Simone called out as she stood next to the truck.
"Male bonding," Gavin replied.
"Ew. Save the locker room stories for a more private place, okay?"
"I like your brother."
Adrian inwardly groaned. He had already made sure that Gavin was safely ensconced back in his apartment. Maybe too safely. His brother had taken to the couch and the television like a duck took to water. "What do you mean you like my brother?"

He's a pig."

"A very nice looking pig, if you ask me." Simone checked her revolver to see that it was loaded and snapped the loading cartridge shut. She shoved the gun into a shoulder holster that wrapped under her arms and around her back. They were back at the Greenville mansion in the study. She had changed into a black t-shirt and shorts. Even her boots were black.

He had also changed into similar gear, but he wore a pair of black jeans instead. His own revolver was already ready and within reaching distance. "Gavin changes women like some people change clothes."

She gave him a measuring look. "I know." She went over to the gauges for a final check. "So you think the perp will show up tonight, huh?"

"Undoubtedly if there's still something up on the third floor that he plans on taking tonight. He didn't seem to have minded the cameras if he even noticed them at all."

"He's pretty stupid if he doesn't notice," she scoffed. "Our cars are parked in plain view in the driveway. He'll know that somebody who isn't supposed to be here is here."

"Maybe he thinks we're just really stupid guests."

Simone snorted at the idea. "Okay, so we're stupid. What a comforting thought." She walked over to the window in the study and looked out giving him only her profile. He could only see any hint of her expression by the reflection on the window.

He walked over to her to also look outside, attempting to see what she was seeing. The trees were dark and the lawn chairs only faint black dots. Moonlight glittered down into the water like tiny bobbing pearls. He glanced back down at her, at the top of her head. Her face was almost touching the window pane, but no moisture gathered on the glass. "We're going to catch him," he said.

"Him? It could be a her," Simone replied. "Tell me, what do you think of the people who live here?"

"You suspect them?" he said.

She gave a faint shrug. "Well? We can't overlook any possibility that comes our way."

"I don't think the servants would know anything about it. What the maid said was probably true. They probably didn't have much of a chance to examine the study if Greenville hardly ever let them in here in the first place."

"What about the butler? Dargood doesn't come across to me as a sterling character. He's having an affair with Greenville's wife, for Christ's sake. And he had a key."

"Well, there's that. But there was no indication that Greenville knew about his wife and butler's indiscretion. And Edna Greenville seems to much of a flake to even instigate something so ridiculous. She'd want to sell this house faster, not permanently put it on the unsellable list because of a ghost rumor."

"Hmm. There's that." Simone crossed her arms and looked up at him. "You really think he'll come tonight, don't you?"

"The more I think about it, it seems right."

"Maybe we should look at those tapes again. It could be a defect in the film."

"We've played it over and over. When the prowler came back out again, it didn't

look like he had anything with him.”

“He could have hidden whatever it was under his clothes.”

The study was cloaked in black. Only faint shades of lighter or darker black distinguished any part of the study from any other part. The drapes that hung along the window was partially drawn, a thin beam of moonlight slithered through the window pane and out through a slice of the stone floor, illuminating a thin gray path that trailed from the end of the window to some point at the middle of the room where the trail was swallowed up by the darkness.

The shelves that lined the walls up to the second floor were simply darker horizontal and vertical lines that crisscrossed in teeth-like grids. The fireplace was a hungry empty maw standing at the end of the room waiting for an unsuspecting traveler to come by and be nabbed by some imaginary monster. The late Greenville’s desk was transformed into a dark altar in the night. Perhaps in some frenzied nightmare or hallucination some hapless victim would be sacrificed to it for the appeasement or gratification of some dark and carnal pagan god. Despite the stillness of the air, there was some sort of anticipation, clinging like an unforgettable bloody odor. The whole library masquerading as a dead man’s study was an entire tomb of frozen violence.

A small sound permeated the study. It came from the double doors. Previously they were shut tight, but now, a crack appeared letting an inky darkness spill into the study. A brief shadow moved and oozed across the room, the silence punctuated by periodic tapping sounds as the thing moved. It never hesitated as it headed directly towards the spiraling stairwell and drifted upwards. It purposefully drifted across the balcony, heading to the hidden alcove and simply disappeared through the shelves. Only a faint scraping sound indicated the shelf opening mechanism.

The window drapes moved slightly and two dark human figures emerged. They quickly scrambled up the stairs and took positions on either side of the shelf. They stood still and practiced, patiently waiting for their unknowing prey. Minutes trickled by, but they did not waver from their pose. But finally, a faint clicking could be heard on the other side of the panel. The two figures seemed to stop breathing.

In what seemed like less than a second, the shelf whooshed aside, heavy sucking air attempting to pull everything inside. The two figures stood firm as the dark shadow which had invaded the study earlier emerged from the alcove.

“Freeze!” The shorter figure whipped out a revolver, the thin glimmering moonlight highlighting the deadly barrel.

The phantom uttered a high pitched squeal that suspiciously sounded like “Eep!” and instinctively turned around and ran straight into the larger dark figure who quickly grabbed the phantom’s arms to immobilize him. Something large and heavy dropped with a thunk to the floor.

“Simone. Light.”

“Right.” She flicked on her flashlight, aiming it directly into the intruder’s face. A black ski mask hid his features. “So what pathetic villain have we nabbed this time?” She brutally grasped the bottom of the mask and peeled upwards. She gasped. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

Robert Greenville’s brown eyes wearily regarded her. “And I presume both of you are the investigators that Edna hired? Bravo. I had thought I would be able to move

the things I had forgotten before without anyone noticing, but well, we know how that is.” He tried to bend down, but Adrian resolutely held him. Greenville sighed and slumped back in defeat.

Simone grabbed the object that had fallen over and flipped it over in her hands. “The carving above the desk.” She looked pointedly at Greenville. “So this is yours?”

He nodded. “I can explain everything if…”

At that moment, a clamoring could be heard on the first floor as the study doors burst open in a bang. Light flooded the room.

“Put my mask back on!” Greenville hissed.

Adrian and Simone glanced at each other and in a quick communication, Simone pulled the mask back down. Evidently, it would complicate matters if Edna Greenville and the servants found out that the master of the house was alive and not dead.

“You caught him!” declared Edna as she marched into the study. She was wearing a sparkly pink wrapper and her feet were clad in delicate yellow slippers. A bit of yellow silk nightgown peeked from underneath. Her graying hair was done up in multicolored hair rollers. She wasn’t wearing any make-up which made her look several years older than they had originally taken her as. Adrian thought she looked like a glorified version of trailer-trash stay home wives who sat on the couch to watch television all day, sort of like what his brother was doing at the moment.

“Is it a ghost?” Dargood the butler had trailed behind. He was wearing a set of pajamas in glaring stripes, beige, dark green, and maroon, and on top of his head was a cap made of the same material. All he was missing was a stuffed animal. He had his hands on his hips and his lips were quivering as he looked up at the man Adrian was restraining. “Who is it?”

“Not a ghost,” said Simone. “Just some prowler who probably wants to rid the house of goods.”

Mina the maid had arrived a moment later, rubbing her eyes. She looked satisfied at the results. “I told you Dargood. It’s just some intruder or would-be robber. It’s not Robert Greenville’s ghost for heaven’s sake. You have an overactive imagination.”

“I do not,” the butler whined.

“Just somebody call the police for us,” Adrian said. “This is where we hand it off to them. It is their jurisdiction after all.”

“I’ll go do that,” Mina volunteered. She shuffled off to find the phone.

“Excellent job,” Edna gushed. “Rest assured that your payment will be delivered on time. I’m just glad that this whole thing is over with. I can sleep easier knowing that the house is free of pests.”

The masked man started laughing.

“What’s wrong with him?” Dargood asked curiously.

“Oh, nothing that a little R and R in the local sanitarium couldn’t cure,” Simone replied.

Chapter 5

Detective Antonio Martinez was one of those cops that were like bulldogs. Once

they got a hold of something, they never let go until the whole thing was chewed up. But that didn't mean that Martinez had to look like one too. He was tallish, maybe around five seven or five eight and lanky. However, more than one bad guy had incorrectly pegged him as a wimp and had paid for it by more than just a couple of bruises. The luckier ones got away with black eyes and maybe a sprained ankle. He had a rakish look about him, his dark hair slicked back with gel and a bad boy snarl permanently etched on his lips. Unlike the green lieutenants or donut-laden sergeant, he despised the uniform and instead regularly donned tough brown trousers and work shirt. His coat seemed to be made of a thicker material.

He watched impassively as the occupants of the Greenville mansion stood gawk-eyed on the stoop, staring at the masked perp who was being shoved into the back seat of his unmarked police car by the private investigative team Dubois and Sung.

"I'm not even going to ask this time," Martinez drawled.

"And good to see you too, Tony," Adrian remarked. "Good timing."

Simone gave a short chuckle. "This is a special case."

"Aren't they all," the cop replied uninterested.

"Sure he is," Simone persisted. She lowered her voice. "We might not end up arresting him at all."

"Huh. Gathered as much." Martinez slammed the door on the supposed perp who was sitting docily in the back seat. He headed to the driver's side. "Are you guys going to hitch a ride too or do you have your own wheels?"

"We're taking my car," Simone replied.

As the cop got behind the wheel, Adrian turned to her. "I can drive."

"No way. You drove last time and even your brother said you needed a lesson on speed limits. The passenger seat for you." She gently shoved him toward the direction of her small car.

"Have you thought of getting something a little bigger?" he complained. "Like a truck or SUV. Or even a station wagon?"

Simone climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door. She gave him an amused glance, trying not to laugh. Her partner had managed to scrunch himself beside her, his legs filling up most of the room. His head nearly touched the ceiling of the car. "I hate those gas consuming monsters," she said. She turned the key in the ignition and began backing out of the driveway.

When they arrived at the police station, Martinez had wandered off to get a styrofoam cup filled with the sludge that was called coffee. Greenville sat slightly slumped on a waiting room chair flipping through a six month old copy of Reader's Digest.

"Drivel," he told the detective succinctly as Martinez made himself comfortable by leaning against a nearby doorway.

"What do you expect?" The detective smiled a little, his eyes glittering as he saw Simone and Adrian just entering the station. "It's for little old ladies who have nothing to do but sit on their fannies and knit cute sweaters for non-existent grandkids."

Greenville snorted. "Ha ha."

"So," Martinez turned to examine the two investigators. Simone was a petite woman whose figure wasn't enough to knock a man out but her swagger did make a man look twice. She was smiling, a cold hard predatory curve that went well with her

occasional sharp remarks that made him wonder. But he hoped he didn't have too many stray thoughts. He had a wife back at home and well, Adrian didn't look to amendable to nearby slaving males. "What happened this time?"

"He's supposed to be dead," Simone said.

"Ah. Did you forget to pull the trigger?"

"Very funny, Tony," she said crossing her arms. "I want to know why he's alive while his wife thinks he's dead."

Martinez chuckled. "Oh. I'll like to hear this."

Greenville tossed the magazine into a nearby pile of newspapers. "I suppose I'll start from the beginning. Everyone was becoming a distraction."

"Even your wife?"

"Edna, if you would excuse the slang term, is an airhead. Dargood had her occupied. I'm not that much of a dunce to not notice that my wife was having an affair. But that is not the point."

"So what is?" Adrian asked dryly.

"I am onto a very promising line of research," Greenville said, his eyes brightening. "I had to get rid of everyone, so I came up with a brilliant plan. Make sure that the people nearest to me thought I was dead. So a few months before my supposed death, I had all my things sent to my 'friend' Mr. Marcus Thomson in Havan. It was just that I remembered that there were some things that I had left behind. No one knew about the hidden rooms so I had to get them myself."

"Likely story," Martinez replied automatically. But the outlandish story did sound interesting. It beat the crap out of routine surveys on hit and run cases, domestic violence disputes, and gang-related instances.

"Actually, I think there's a bit of truth in there," Simone said.

"See?" Greenville announced triumphant.

"But faking one's death does seem a bit extreme," she added.

"It was necessary. There are others after the same piece of elusive research that I am pursuing. A few weeks before, I had hired a book dealer to help track down a trail I was on, but so far, he hasn't reported anything yet." Greenville frowned. "In fact, I haven't heard anything from him at all. It seems as if he completely disappeared from the face of the earth."

Martinez pounced at that bit of news. "Missing person?" He grinned. "Why haven't you reported this earlier to the authorities?"

Greenville looked confused. "I didn't think it was necessary. I mean, I didn't think anything of it for a couple of days since I was busy with my own work, and after that, I just thought he bailed out on me. It was only yesterday after a couple of calls that I realized that he disappeared."

"Perhaps he skipped the country with the money you gave him," Adrian suggested.

"I don't think so," Greenville said. "This was a rather routine job. The book dealer had a good reputation and the fee I gave wasn't that extravagant. There's no reason from me that he would skip the country."

"Do you have any solid evidence of him, then?" Martinez asked hopefully.

Greenville shook his head. "Sorry. I actually only dealt with him once in person. The rest of the time it was on the phone or via e-mail."

Simone shrugged. "This seems pretty straight-forward. I guess we'll just call it a night." Adrian nodded and they turned to go back out.

"Do you need a ride back home?" Martinez asked Greenville.

"No. Wait."

They turned to look back at the older man.

"I have a job for both of you."

"To look for the missing book dealer?" Adrian asked.

"No. I don't care where he went. He probably decided to go on vacation without telling me. I've heard that you also work with the paranormal. That's probably what Edna hired you to look for in the first place."

Simone groaned out loud. "Not again."

Greenville ignored her comment. "I'm quite willing to pay whatever fee you have. You see, this job may involve some element of, let's say, risk. But I'm not willing to explain in such an open environment." He looked pointedly at Martinez.

"Hey." The detective held out his arms in surrender. "I'm not going to tell anyone if Dubois and Sung are going out to do a little ghost-busting."

The next afternoon, Simone found herself standing in front of Adrian's apartment door, impatiently tapping her sneaker clad foot. She was wearing a dark brown tank top and jeans, clothes that she was sure that her mother would look down upon. Too common, she could already hear her mother jabbering. A business woman should be wearing business suits.

From the corner of her eye, she saw someone peek out from the apartment across the hallway. It must be Mrs. Leadbetter, she mused. The old biddy was a seventy-year old prune with the near sightedness of a shrew. She wore ponderous bifocals and walked with a rapping cane that scared most small children. She was a spinster and an inevitable busybody who wanted to pry into everyone else's business. She wondered how Adrian could tolerate her.

Simone knocked again and the door opened revealing her partner in equally casual attire, a gray sweatshirt and jeans. In his hands was a large cubical package dressed in teddy bear wrapping paper and pink ribbons. At his feet, a black kitten peeked out to yowl a greeting at her.

"I gave away all the kittens yesterday," he announced.

She nodded. "And what do you call that?" she said indicating the feline at his feet.

"Fiz."

"Fiz? As in champagne?"

"As in soda. I decided to keep him. I was lucky. Mrs. Burnette from upstairs had her brother visiting. Turns out that he's a farmer out in rural Havan who has a mice infestation. Very kindly offered to take the cats."

"Uh huh. But now Fiz is separated from his brothers and sisters."

"Didn't know you cared. But he doesn't seem too traumatized by their absence. Gavin's still around. He's still sleeping at this time of day. Right Fiz?"

Fiz meowed.

Simone shook her head. "Your brother must of had a hard night of partying. And speaking of Havan, Mr. Thomson a.k.a. Mr. Greenville called this morning. He wants us to meet him tonight. Not on Sunday."

“Did he say why?”
“No. But he sounded a little excited. Or maybe edgy is a better word. At any rate, he offered to increase the fee.”
“Figures. Whenever a client wants something desperately, money is the first thing they try.”
“Well, in our case, it works.” She eyed the package. “What’s in there?”
“I’m not going to tell you, it’s a surprise,” he grinned. “Caroline’s birthday present.”
“Now look who’s going all mushy.” But she stepped back a little to let him come out of his apartment.
“Sorry Fiz. You have to stay home.” Adrian shut the door on the feline who meowed angrily. “And I’m not being mushy. It’s Caroline’s fourth birthday.”
“Sure. Sure. Use a little girl for all your excuses.”
Adrian glanced past Simone’s shoulder. “Good day Mrs. Leadbetter.” He winked. The old lady yelped and slammed her door closed.
“Really, Adrian. That was not nice scaring the old woman like that. Even if she’s fantasizing about you in your underwear.”
“Hey, it’s fun scaring Mrs. Leadbetter. She never has any fun.”
Simone snorted.
“So you fantasize about me in my underwear.”
“Ha. You wish.” She jangled her keys. “I call it first. My car.”
“Aw, Simone...”
“No buts. I’m not going to risk my neck because of you.”

* * *

When they arrived at Evelyne’s two story upper middle class house in the center of Elanne modern suburbia, there were already several cars parked in the driveway. Simone maneuvered her little vehicle to the curb.
“All it’s missing is the white picket fence,” she remarked.
“Fence?” Adrian was busy unfolding his body from the cramped car and getting two birthday presents from the back seat, his own, and Simone’s which had been wrapped in shiny pink foil and silver bow. “The wrapping paper you used is giving me a headache with the glare it’s causing.”
“Whatever you say.” She helped him close the car door. “Can’t you tell that I’m into gaudy?”
He glanced at her dark wardrobe. “Could of fooled me.”
Before they could press the doorbell, the door was flung open, revealing a petite Asian woman, about two or three inches taller than Simone and a few years older. Her hair was bobbed and curled in the latest fashion. She was wearing a tasteful yellow blouse and brown slacks. She smiled, although Simone could detect a little weariness around the eyes.
“Simone! I’m glad you made it. And Adrian, so nice to see you again. Please come in. You can put those on the table in the parlor.”
“Hi Evelyne. We wouldn’t forget Caroline’s birthday.”
“I know that.” When Adrian moved out of earshot she said in a lower voice,

“Mom called this morning.”

“Oh?”

“She said she and Dad couldn’t make it because of some important reunion. It was a little disappointing having to tell Caroline that grandma couldn’t make it, but honestly, I don’t give a damn.”

Simone raised an eyebrow. Evelyne was always their parents’ favorite.

“She can just go to hell on her ego-status trip to all her old friends about how successful her children are.”

“But you are successful.”

“Don’t you give me that B.S., Simone. She’s always pestered us on how we could be better. She’s always lecturing Will to work harder on funding his research. She’s always despised your private investigative business. She always tells me that I’m a bad mother, that I should have given birth to boys by now. I already have Caroline and Jennifer. It pains me to think that she thinks nothing of her granddaughters.”

“I…” Simone decided not to voice her surprised comments on the outburst. “You must have had a hard day, Evelyne. Maybe you should just lie down for a little bit.”

Her older sister sighed. “Maybe you’re right. It’s just that I’ve been planning Caroline’s party and, well, Mom did place such a large expectation on it. And she had the audacity to invite all these extra people. Especially those successful men she wanted you to meet.”

Simone groaned. “Damn.”

Evelyne chuckled. “Ah. Look on the bright side. At least Will and I don’t think any of them are worth your time.”

“Will, our nerdy oblivious brother, finally has an opinion on all those guys Mom is throwing at me?”

“Yeah. Well, he’s grumbling about something. He’s out in the backyard trying to explain addition to the kids. I’ll be right out.”

“What was that about?” Adrian asked as he met Simone heading toward the back of the house. He briefly glanced at her sister who headed up the stairs.

“Personal mini-crisis,” Simone stated briefly, not wanting to elaborate.

The backyard was a small plot of very green lawn that was fenced in by some thick growing bushes. Two picnic tables were set up at one end with party favors strewn on their tops: conical party hats, whistles, balloons, crepe paper, party plates and cups. At the other end, a stoic red grill stood on a small platform as Evelyne’s husband Henry was wearing a white apron, a baseball cap and holding a spatula as he attempted to grill hot dogs and hamburgers. He waved at Simone and Adrian and went back to concentrating on not burning anything.

Will, in his customary nerdy slacks and shirt complete with plastic pocket protector and round framed glasses was expounding on some figures that he had written on a piece of paper. The girls, Jennifer who was five and Caroline the birthday girl, were sitting beside their uncle, squirming in their seats. Evidently, they did not find mathematics as fascinating as he. A few of Simone’s cousins and aunts and uncles loitered around the picnic tables talking.

But the people who immediately drew Simone’s attention were the people who were not family members, either by blood or marriage. Two men and a woman clustered near the backdoor surreptitiously watching everyone. The taller one, who

could have rivaled Adrian in height, was slim and austere in his black business suit and greased mustache. Gold cuff links glittered in the sunlight. The slightly shorter man was clean shaven but wore a gray suit. His face slightly twitched as he pretended to talk to his two companions. The woman was also tall and slim like the first man. She was most likely his sister. Her hair was twisted into a French braid and she wore stilettos that probably added four inches to her height. She looked bored as she tapped her finger repetitively on her elbow.

Adrian had already moved away, heading towards Will and the girls. Simone watched briefly as the girls squealed in excitement as he approached. And he thought children hated him, she thought amused. She shook her head in wonderment and walked toward the grill, the smoke laden with meat smells wafting toward her, reminding her that she had forgotten breakfast that morning.

“Hey Henry.”

“Afternoon, Simone. Glad you made it.”

“Thanks. I told Evelyne to take a small break. She doesn’t seem to be herself today.”

“I’ve noticed,” he replied seriously as he flipped a burger. “I think it was just the combination of so many things at once. Usually she could just brush off your mother’s comments like a pesky fly.”

“Hmm.” Simone glanced again at the unknown guests. “Who are they?”

Henry apologetically shrugged. “Some associates in my company. Your mother convinced me to invite them so you could possibly hook up with one of the guys. They don’t look very comfortable here, do they?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Henry flipped another burger. “You should meet my mother. She’s still bemoaning the fact that I haven’t given her a grandson yet.”

“And why should you?” Simone replied. “Jennifer and Caroline are perfectly acceptable. I think they’re precocious for their ages.”

“Aunt Simone!”

She looked down towards the voice and found Caroline running over to her, her young tiny face smiling in delight. Jennifer was trailing behind. Or rather she was riding on Adrian’s shoulders. Jennifer was giggling.

“I can see the whole yard from here!” she exclaimed.

“That’s great. Hi Caroline.” Simone ruffled her niece’s hair and crouched so she was at eye level to her. “How are you? It looks like your Mom and Dad pulled out the whole shebang for you.”

She giggled. “There’s so many people! So many aunts and uncles, I can’t remember them all. But Aunt Chung smells a little funny.”

“Is that so.” She managed to lift Caroline and walk over to one of the picnic table benches. “Let’s sit down. Old Aunt Simone is not as strong as she used to be.”

“So now you’re old?” Adrian grinned as he ambled over and deposited Jennifer beside her sister.

Caroline whispered into Jennifer’s ear. The older sister nodded. “Will you tell us a story, Aunt Simone?” Jennifer asked.

“What sort of story? Cinderella? Puss in Boots?”

“No fairy tales. We want to hear one with a bad guy.”

“A bad guy?”

“Yeah. One where both of you catch the bad guy and throw him in jail.”

Simone sighed. “Well. All right. So one day, this old lady who’s had too much plastic surgery came to us for help.”

“What’s plastic surgery?” Caroline asked.

Adrian gave a cheeky grin.

“It’s where somebody asks a doctor to make them look like Barbie,” Jennifer answered.

“Ohh,” her younger sister replied wide-eyed.

Simone coughed. “Well, this old lady was a widow, you see. Her husband was dead. But she had a friend who claimed that she saw her husband’s ghost running around her house.”

“A ghost?” Caroline looked disappointed. “I thought there was a bad guy.”

“I’m getting to that point.” At that moment, the three strangers wandered over to curiously listen to Simone’s simplified accounts of the past two days. “Well, it just turned out that the old lady’s friend was crazy. Everybody knows there’s no such thing as a ghost. So it must have been some bad guy who was breaking into her house trying to steal stuff.”

“A burglar!” Jennifer declared.

Simone nodded, all the while shooting annoyed looks at Adrian for muffling his laughter. “Yeah. A burglar. So Adrian and I set up cameras all over the house to see if we could catch him on tape. And the next day, we did see him!”

“Did you catch him?” Caroline asked.

“Yeah. So we stayed up on a stake out the next night. And we caught the burglar red handed. After that we turned him over to the police.”

“Did he put up a fight?” Caroline asked again.

“Of course he did,” Jennifer told her. “But Adrian beat him up. See? He’s so much bigger than everybody.”

“Ohh.”

“Adrian did not beat anybody up,” Simone muttered. “He’s too much of a wimp.”

“Hey, who’re you calling a wimp?” he challenged.

“I take it that this was all based on fact?” Simone looked up, noticing that it was the taller of the male strangers who spoke.

“Our latest case, in fact.”

“How interesting. Henry did tell me that his sister-in-law did some investigative work.”

“Adrian and I are private investigators.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Terrance Huang. This is my sister, Candace Huang-O’Brian and Xiaoping Wan. We’re associates of Henry.”

“My brother-in-law did say as much,” she replied. “I’m Simone Sung, as you’ve probably heard. And this is my business partner, Adrian Dubois.”

“Ah. Then you must be the famous Dubois and Sung. Paranormal experts.”

“It does seem our reputation does get around,” Adrian said.

Simone glared at her partner.

Terrance Huang waved his hand in dismissal. A bright signet ring on his finger

caught Simone's eye. It's design was intriguing. The setting stone was a deep onyx black, but the ring itself looked like tiny interlocking rings that had been meticulously crafted. The style of his gold cufflinks upon closer inspection were also of similar design. "Yes. Your credits are quite impressive. It's a wonder both of you are still small time businessmen. With the backing of a willing venture capitalist, I'm sure you'll have your business flourishing."

She grinned deceptively. "Exactly what are you saying?"

"Well, you know that our whole firm, why we're all venture capitalists in a way. We could help you."

"We'll think about it."

"And you Mr. Dubois?" Huang turned his oily charm towards the other partner.

"We'll think about it," Adrian echoed.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a call from Henry that lunch was ready. Everyone immediately lined up to get their serving. Evelyne also appeared, waving to Simone to signal that she was okay. Everything seemed to go smoothly as Simone chatted with relatives she hadn't seen in months and with her brother Will who seemed content to go off on a tangent on his latest physics research which involved traveling to Switzerland to look at the particle accelerator for some measurements. He also waxed enthusiastic about experimenting the unique European culture even though he knew no French and could only speak German passably. But all the while, Simone was secretly amused as the strangers vainly tried to blend in. However, the combination of hot dogs and starched suits did not go well with the comfortable casualness and familiarity that went with the majority of Simone's family.

She did not even try to socialize with them. If that had been her mother's goal, she had failed miserably. But as Simone reflected, even if her mother was here, she would have failed miserably anyway and would have only succeeded in being a suitable hostess for guests she had helped to crash her granddaughter's birthday party.

The arrival of the birthday cake went even better than planned. The girls squealed in delight when they discovered it was an ice cream cake, not just a plain cake. Four white candles graced the four corners and a pretty doll clad in pink stood in the middle. The design uncanningly seemed familiar to Simone, but she only shook it away when she abruptly noticed the woman in the group of strangers pull something from her purse. It was just a camera, she realized as a flash went off. The woman placed it back into her purse, but not before she noticed that the camera strap was gold and linked like her brother's ring.

"And now the presents!" Henry exclaimed as he hulled an armful of gift wrapped boxes to the picnic tables. "Now, Caroline. Say thank you to everyone."

"Thank you," she dutifully replied as she dug into the first present, letting the ribbons fall to the grass.

In the end, Simone had groaned. Adrian had given a large brown teddy bear. She had picked out a similar bear for her niece although it was slightly smaller and pink. But Caroline didn't seem to care.

"They match perfectly," the little girl declared. "See?" She made the brown bear give the pink bear a kiss. "They should get married."

"I can help you plan!" her sister said excitedly. Both girls grabbed the rest of the toys and plopped themselves in the middle of the yard, busy rearranging the dolls and

stuffed toys into a ragtag congregation.

“If I didn’t know better,” Evelyne told Simone and Adrian, “I’d have thought both of you did it on purpose.”

* * *

The road heading north toward Havan passed through some gently sloping countryside before delving head first into more chaotic terrain that was peppered with pine trees and stark hilly bedrock that had been cut away to make way for the road. There was hardly anyone else on the road, so Simone stepped on the gas pedal, zooming through several unnoticeable exits.

“Now look who’s driving fast,” Adrian remarked. He was staring at a copy of the map of Havan.

“I may be driving fast, but I don’t drive like you.”

“How wounding.”

“Ha.” She signaled to get on the right lane. The exit for Havan was coming up.

Havan was a quiet, rural town, the buildings all spaced widely apart as if the architects wanted to leave plenty of room for improvement. Downtown looked like it had been completely transported from the early nineteen-twenties. A small family owned grocery store stood on the corner. There was a quaintly decorated boutique that proclaimed its wares next door. There was “Mabel’s Cafe”, a small dinner that seemed to be getting a steady stream of customers in the late afternoon. The street lamps were iron-laced cups atop an equally and intricately decorated pole. The street was cobblestone which caused the ride to be a little more than bumpy. There was even a barber shop with the swirling red, white, and blue pole that was its beacon.

A bit past downtown, trees began popping up along the roadside as residential areas merged into the main street. The trees were small at first, more like bushes really, until a few blocks away, there were full grown trees that towered several stories above the houses, sort of like giant sentinels that watched for any detriment for small town life. The houses were all pre-fifties style. They weren’t cookie cutter, but there was a distinct Art Deco or post-Victorian feel about the houses. They were done in more somber colors, aging property that was content to wither away the years, each house, a plodding reminder of a simpler and possibly more puritanical times.

Adrian gave the directions, telling Simone to turn right or left. But all of it began to blur into Simone’s mind and she automatically drove according to his voice. She wondered belatedly if she should have kept track of the streets so that when they were done with the visit, they would easily drive out of the tangled maze and get back home before it was too late.

Finally, she stopped at the curb in front of an innocuous Art Deco style house that blended in with the rest of the white trimmed maroon houses on the rest of the street. There was a small front yard dominated by a fastidious oak with a thick diameter. The windows of the house peeked shyly from behind the vegetated sentinel’s curtain of distinct leaves. From either side of the house, there was evidence of a much more vast back yard. Adrian ended up pressing the doorbell. They stared at an unmarked door that was graced with a shiny brass door knocker. The bell echoed in electric buzzes from the inside. Despite the ponderous surroundings, this house was

nothing like Greenville's previous house when he was supposedly still alive.

The door was opened by a dour woman whose stocky figure drooped in her unrevealing gray dress. Gray brown hair was restricted in a severe bun. She watched the two visitors with disinterest. "Yes?" she said.

"We're here to see Marcus Thomson," Simone replied.

"What for?"

"We had an appointment with him. Dubois and Sung. We're here for some consulting..."

"This way," the housekeeper interrupted curtly. She turned around and motioned them inside before closing the door. "Mr. Thomson has been expecting you." She plodded down an unfurnished hallway in a faint limp and indicated a room that stood near the back of the house. The housekeeper knocked. "Mr. Thomson?"

"What is it, Mrs. Kinsey?"

"The investigators are here to see you."

"Send them in then."

They entered a cluttered little room that bore a faint resemblance to Greenville's former grand study. There were shelves lined on every wall and stacked to the brim with books. A single desk sat at the center, stacked head high with loose sheets of paper typed with notes, footnotes, and research. Some of the books and papers had spilled out onto the floor of the study. Greenville sat among the mess, grumbling at the current paper that he was reading.

Simone crossed her arms, regarding the room with a mixture of awe and disgust. "Should we address you as Mr. Greenville or Mr. Thomson?"

"Thomson," Greenville muttered as he flipped a paper. "It doesn't do to bring up someone who is supposedly dead, isn't it?" He finally looked up and adjusted his glasses as he peered up at them. "Well, it was about time you two got here. There's a lot to do."

Adrian raised his eyebrows. "To do?"

"Yes, yes." Greenville, now Thomson, got up from his seat and strode past them to open the door. "Mrs. Kinsey? Could you bring in some refreshment for our guests?"

There was some indistinct grumbling on the other side of the door, but Thomson seemed satisfied and rubbed his hands as he began to pace the room.

"Yes. A lot to do. In fact, so much so that I don't really know where to begin. The book dealer I hired before was small change compared to what I have found out since then." He stopped for a moment and rubbed his chin. "Well, it would be a nice addition if he did turn up with the book in tow..." He shrugged and resumed pacing, "But it doesn't matter since it isn't likely that he will show up. There's much more important fish to fry, so to speak."

At that moment, the housekeeper with her permanent scowl entered the library with a tray of tea and sandwiches. She managed to clear a small space on the desk without actually touching anything to place the food there.

"Anything else, Mr. Thomson?"

"No, no. That's perfect."

She shuffled back outside, her limp making a distinct thumping sound on the wooden floor. Thomson hurried over to lock the door. He rubbed his hands.

"Well then, everything's set. All we need is a sound proof room." He walked over the back wall and pulled out a book. The shelf moved slightly revealing a dark space.

There were steps leading directly downward. The older man picked up the tray and nodded toward the opening. "Watch your step. I haven't installed lights on this thing yet."

"Why am I not surprised?" Adrian asked rhetorically. Simone just sighed.

Chapter 6

The stairwell was dark, a little musty and claustrophobic. Adrian could barely walk upright and forward. Occasionally, his shoulders brushed the sides of the wall or his head would come in contact with the ceiling. Behind him, back where the first floor study was supposed to be was complete blackness. The shelf had been successful in blocking out all light. Up ahead, he saw Simone's dark form following the more distant form of Thomson who was in turn following some very distant source of light. He wondered what would happen if he tripped. A horribly mangled neck and crushed bodies, he mentally summarized.

A door from up ahead suddenly opened spilling out a war orange light. It was a much larger room filled with even more books—the ones that couldn't fit in the above study, he speculated. The walls were the stark foundation, hard dark gray granite paved with slightly lighter mortar. The shelves were aged slabs of wood, varnish peeling, and suspiciously resembling wine racks. The books weren't piling the floor in this room, but there were cardboard boxes filled with odd and mysterious objects. The strange carving that Simone had discovered earlier in the hidden third story room of the Greenville mansion was stashed visibly in a box near the door.

With a flourish, Thomson placed down the tray on another desk which seemed remarkably clear. Only an old fashioned ink well and a tiny desk lamp stood in the way. "Come sit!" he said motioning them toward the desk. "Have some refreshment." He went over to the corner to dump some books that had been sitting on two rickety wooden chairs. He hauled them over and again motioned with his hands.

Adrian sat, wondering if the chair would give out from underneath his weight. It held. Simone grabbed a cup of tea, eyeing the sandwiches but made no move to touch them.

"So I suppose I should come out, in the open." Thomson chuckled nervously, taking off his glasses and carefully wiped them. "I'm a historian, you know. History fascinates me." He placed his glasses back on his nose. "I don't expect you to be excited about it, but I'm paying you so..."

"Get to the point, Mr. Thomson," Adrian cut him off, in part because he was afraid that if he had to sit any longer, the chair really would give way. It creaked dangerously whenever he shifted his weight.

"Ten years ago, I came across a manuscript in the Elanne public library which gave a reference to a local club of some sort that was in existence approximately three centuries ago. At the time, I didn't think much of it so I let it go. I had taken some notes, but they had lain buried in a forgotten drawer for about five years."

"So five years ago was sort of a turning point in my career. I had been working on a paper about post-depression Elanne and it just wasn't working. So in fit of

frustration one weekend, I decided to clean out my study. You probably know that I wouldn't let the staff get near anything in the study. They wouldn't know how to file my notes. I have a very peculiar filing system, you see. At any rate, I came across my notes again and I was instantly intrigued. I wondered if such a club was still in existence about seventy years ago. At least today the club or society is probably defunct. I have never heard of it my whole life in Elanne."

"It was called 'The Dark Viper' or 'Il Viper Scuro' in Italian. So I figured, it must be some sort of organization founded by some Italian immigrants that came in the beginning. But there was just one thing that was wrong with this whole scenario. Three hundred years ago, this land was populated by Native Americans. What group of The Dark Viper would be here at the time? The only European visitors at the time were Portuguese, French, or Spanish explorers. But wait, just because an organization had an Italian name didn't mean that all its members were Italians."

"I went back to the book in the Elanne public library, but it was just my luck that someone else had checked it out. In fact it was never returned. It just disappeared. But I had my notes, and a few weeks later, I was able to check out some manuscripts that happened to be housed in the local history section of the Ridgefield University's vast Osborne Humanities Library."

"It turns out that The Dark Viper was some sort of secret underground organization that extended through Europe and possibly beyond that. Some from that group had rebelled against the ones in Europe and had decided to set up camp in the New World when it was generally known that there was vast land for the taking. The Dark Viper was originally an esoteric organization, very similar to the Masonic Order, yet even more secret. Any mention to them in texts were oblique and rare. I really had to dig for any sort of clue."

"The rebel group in Elanne were disillusioned of their European brethren since they had seeped themselves into the 'sin' that constituted of the occult and hypocrisy. Remember the witch trials in Europe? In Salem, Massachusetts? All the accusers were supposedly high ranking members of various secret orders, The Dark Viper among them."

"But I think they were mostly just well-off extortionists, scaring their potential victims with threats of injury, death or worse. And of course when superstition wore off as the years passed, the Dark Vipers just disappeared. I bet they couldn't keep up appearances. I mean, who believes in boogymen and ghosts nowadays?"

At that Simone took a large gulp of tea and replied. "It seems plenty of people. That's how we make our living."

Thomson waved his hand in dismissal. "No, I don't mean that. You make your living debunking hoaxes and catching the unscrupulous criminal behind them. No, I did not hire you to fight real ghosts. I hired you because I think you will not back down if what you're up against is trying to convince you that it is a ghost."

"Even though they resorted to tricks," he continued, "the members of this society weren't totally immune to visions of grandeur and superstition either. They thought they had the power to conjure up spirits to help them control the physical world. As you can see from all the objects that I have gathered in my numerous cardboard boxes, these are all related to my last five years of research. What you see are what the Dark Vipers considered essential tools, totems as you will, to aid them in

spirit summoning. God awful trinkets, but of much historical value.”

“But I am in search of a much greater thing. Something that will make my paper complete, will give me the boost. I’m not above sensationalism, you know, and it would be even better if the whole thing was true. So what I’m looking for is an artifact that has been vaguely referred to as ‘The Rose.’ It was supposedly very important in the Dark Vipers’ annual mass summonings. I am not quite sure what it is. It might be a book or an actual tool. It could be some sort of compass. It might even refer to a stone or gem of some sort. But I do have some information of where it might be found.”

“If you already have the information, what sort of use do you have of us? You could easily go and get it yourself,” said Adrian.

“Believe me, I have tried, as Greenville. The particular person told me that he did not have it, that he didn’t know what I was talking about. But that was when weird incidents started happening, swerving cars, strangers accosting me. Silent phone calls. Letters that were addressed to me but had no return address nor any content on the inside. I was afraid and so changed my name. I thought it was over. And then yesterday, I got this in the mail.” He pulled out a drawer from the desk and handed an envelope over to Adrian. The envelope looked like it could have come from any nearby office supply store. The address to Mr. Thomson was typed. The stamp was generic and the postmark was from the local post office. There was no return address. The envelope was sealed, but as he held it up to the light, he realized that it was empty.

“Did you tell anyone of your deception besides us?” Simone said.

He shook his head. “No one. Not my wife. Not my son. The housekeeper I have now only knows me as Mr. Thomson. Well, perhaps my lawyer, but he’s held in strict confidentiality.”

“So who was this guy who’s supposedly in possession of this historical object you’re trying to find?” Simone questioned further. “He lives in the area, does he not?”

“Sherman Johnson is an eccentric. I wouldn’t be surprised if he one to send threatening blackmail and thugs. He lives up in the northern district of Elanne. I’m sure you could find his address with your connections.”

“Nevertheless, we would like to have the address that you have on file,” Adrian said.

“Very well.” Thomson pulled out another sheaf of paper and jotted down an address and handed it to him. “Johnson is strange. I wouldn’t put it past him if he had moved.”

“And so we are to track Johnson for you.”

“And get ‘The Rose’.”

“What if Johnson doesn’t have it?” Simone cut in.

“Just get it no matter what. I can pay your fees. If Johnson doesn’t have it, then maybe some Dark Viper imposters have their hands on it. It’s simply a matter of extracting it from them.”

“What if the real Dark Vipers still exist?”

“They don’t,” replied Thomson succinctly. “I do my research.”

Afterward, when they emerged from the underground cross base posing as a basement room, the historian called for Mrs. Kinsey the housekeeper to show them out. She limped ahead of them, seemingly indifferent of their departure as she was of their arrival. But Adrian had the strange feeling that they were being watched as they

walked all the way down to the car parked on the curb.

“I don’t like this,” said Adrian.

“Thomson or Greenville or whatever his name is, is a harmless eccentric,” said Simone as she climbed into the drivers side. She revved up the engine. “If he has money to throw away on a fruitless history research project, let him do it.”

He just nodded and let his partner drive.

“I suppose our first course of action is to find this Sherman Johnson.” She winced as she braked at the red light. “God, my head hurts.” When the light turned green and she pressed on the gas pedal she continued, “It must be the lack of sleep finally getting to me. I never have mi...”

But she never finished the sentence. She had slumped over the driver’s wheel.

All the nurses at triage swooned when a mirage, or more accurately a scene from one of their torridly sappy romantic fantasies, strolled through the emergency doors.

Despite speeding down Havan main street with an unconscious driver, Adrian had managed to steer Simone’s car to the side and pull the emergency break without crashing into telephone poles or other people like a bumper car rally gone wrong. He had then cursed and pulled her body out, only to replace her in the passenger seat and drive like a mad man, more crazy than his usual maniacal self he was sure Simone would berate him when she awoke, to the hospital himself. Her body had been so limp and small in his arms and he had felt so helpless as he headed to the emergency room. At least she was still breathing.

The nurse at the counter was too busy ogling his muscled arms when he spoke.

“I need to see a doctor.”

“Why, would...oh.” She suddenly snapped out of her daydream and motioned toward the interior. “This way sir.” She got up and hustled to a room where a fresh bed was made. “Put her down here and I’ll get Dr. Stevens.”

When the nurse left, Adrian gently placed his partner on the white linens. She looked so pale. So dead, except for the slight movement of her chest that indicated breathing.

“Simone.”

She didn’t answer. He stood over her, trying desperately to tell her telepathically to open her eyes. But of course, he remembered to himself bitterly. There was no such thing as telepathy.

“Good evening.” The doctor strolled in, a portly older man, possibly in his mid-fifties. He had graying hair that was also on the wane. There was already a shiny bald spot showing. He wore square glasses that magnified his eyes two fold and a white coat that was singularly decorated by a stethoscope. “What happened?”

“We were driving. Or rather Simone was driving and she suddenly blacked out.”

“Was this sudden or were there anything that happened before?”

“She complained of a headache right before she went.”

“Is this common?”

“No. She never has blacked out in her whole life. At least not that I can tell.”

“Very well. Did she have anything to eat before?”

“Just tea.”

“Then we might need her stomach pumped. Mary!”

The same nurse who had summoned the doctor had hovered nearby and had heard the command. She quickly disappeared to fetch the equipment.

“Is she pregnant?” the doctor continued, “sometimes this happens to women when their body suddenly makes an adjustment. A very trying time.”

“I don’t think so.” Adrian frowned thinking that if she was indeed pregnant, she would of at least told him. He wondered who the father was if this were true.

“We’ll order some blood work done immediately in any case.”

By that time, the first nurse arrived back with the stomach pumping equipment and both she and the doctor got to work right away. A second nurse also came in to quickly get a blood sample and a third nurse came to question Adrian on paperwork and information regarding Simone. His mind wondered confused when he saw the nurse’s eyes light up when he said that Simone wasn’t married.

Eventually, some of the hospital staff pushed him out of the emergency room and steered him to the waiting room. The coffee there was awful, a mixture of sludge and toxic chemicals. He ended up throwing the whole cup out and had begun flipping through the innocuous magazines in the waiting room, the ones for parents and kids and old people ranting about the health care system. There were only a few other people in the waiting room, a young nervous man who kept shaking his leg and slugging down the horrible beverage they called coffee and an older woman, perhaps in her sixties calmly knitting a sweater that she had brought with her in a large colorful duffel bag. Adrian could not stand the near silence. He threw the magazine he was currently leafing through mindlessly onto the nearest table and paced to the window to stare outside into the night.

“So what are you doing here?” he heard the woman finally ask the man. “Family member? Friend?”

“My wife’s having a baby.” The man’s voice shook like nervous leaves in a blustery wind. “Her water broke while we were on our way to visit her parents. I called them. Hopefully they’ll be here in an hour or so.”

“You should be with your wife. It would be a great comfort to her.”

“No. No. She was screaming at me.”

“That’s just a woman in labor, dearie. She’s entitled to her screams. She’ll appreciate your presence afterward.”

“But...”

“Come on.” He heard the woman put away her knitting. “You must go in there and face it. You have to be there to welcome your new son or daughter into the world.”

The man grumbled. “How about you then, ma’am? Why are you here?”

“My grandson is just getting some stitches taken out.”

The man replied with something, but Adrian could no longer hear. The two were well on their way to another wing of the hospital, most likely the maternity ward.

Adrian’s eyes wandered back outside, seeing cars parked. No ambulances. They were probably patrolling the streets. The dark glass reflected some of the light in the waiting room so that he could see the reflection of the chairs and stands with magazines, the counter where the nurse with the night shift was staring at him. He didn’t care if everyone stared at him. He felt himself withdraw into some numb place until about half an hour later, Dr. Stevens waddled out and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Mr. Dubois. I need to speak with you.”

Adrian turned around slowly, not knowing what to expect, hoping it was not the worst. The doctor sat down on the nearest waiting room seat and patted the seat next to him as if he was expecting Adrian to be a child.

“How is she?” Adrian took the seat, and found his voice to be lacking of any inflection. The way the doctor looked at him with those lucid eyes sent chills down his spine.

“Ms. Sung is fine. You can take her home, but she needs a lot of rest. Tell me, has Ms. Sung had any history of depression?”

Adrian shook his head. “No doctor. I’ve never noticed her depressed. What are you suggesting? That she was trying to commit suicide?”

“Well.” The doctor’s hesitation made him fidgety, but he tamped down on the urge to pace or twiddle his fingers. “The blood work tests came back negative for pregnancy.”

He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“It also came back negative for any diseases or drugs except for a depressant. A sedative if you will. A tranquilizer.”

“What is it?”

“She had an overdose of Valium.”

“What?”

“We also made a quick analysis of the contents in her stomach,” the doctor added. “Whatever she ate recently in the past two or three hours also was laden with Valium.”

“Simone didn’t eat anything at all,” said Adrian. “I was with her the whole time. Even when we went to meet...” His eyes suddenly sharpened. “She had tea. The bastard had offered us refreshments and she drank the damned tea.”

“If that’s the case,” said the doctor. “Then I suggest you file a police report if you suspect her of poisoning.”

But none of it made sense, he thought furiously as he followed the doctor back to Simone’s room. If Thomson had tried to poison her, why would he do it? He needed them to do his “dirty work” researching for his history paper. But that left Thomson’s dubious housekeeper. But again, why would she want to poison them? She had only met them today.

Simone looked the same as before, inert. Adrian mentally gave himself a good cursing before he gently cradled her back into his arms and headed out to the car to drive her home.

When he left, the nurses immediately began to gossip since they had nothing left to do. Chivalry was not dead, they had concluded, but it was way too hard to find some in this day and age.

The first thing that Simone noticed when she surfaced to consciousness were the voices. There was something warm lying on her stomach, but her throat felt like she had thrown up a few times before passing out. She cracked an eye open.

Adrian and his brother Gavin were standing nearby, talking in hushed worried tones. She was in his apartment. She suddenly sat up, sending the kitten that had been napping on top of her sprawling to the side.

“Sorry Fiz,” she croaked as the kitten meowed in surprise.

Her partner’s eyes suddenly whipped around at the sound of her voice.

“Simone.” “I’m feeling as if the entire Great Wall fell on top of my head. How did I get here?” She briefly looked around her, her head aching as she moved around to sit on the couch. “How long have I been out?”

“You collapsed in the middle of driving,” Adrian explained. “I managed to get us to a hospital and a doctor checked you out. You got an overdose of Valium.”

“An overdose of what?”

“Valium. From the tea you were drinking at Thomson’s I’m afraid.”

“Bastard,” she muttered vehemently. She winced. “How could I have been so stupid?”

“It’s not your fault,” said Gavin. “This Thomson guy might not be at fault either. He needs you to find his watchamacallit for his boring paper.”

“Well, he’s still a bastard for offering me poison even if he didn’t know.” Fiz managed to crawl back into her lap, fully intending to go back to sleep. “Do you have some water?”

“I’ll get it,” Adrian said quickly, disappearing into the depths of his apartment and into the kitchen.

“How are you feeling?” Gavin asked softly.

“Not that great, but I’ll survive,” she said. “The thing though is that we’ll have to file some sort of report. We’ve never had an employer of ours turn against us like this. And so soon too. But we haven’t found anything. Not really. So what sort of motive does Thomson have on us?”

Adrian came back with a glass of water and handed it to her. She took a long gulp. “You can stay here tonight.”

“Nice of you to offer.” She smiled a little. “But I’ll rather go back to my place.”

“The doctor instructed for rest. And I won’t let you to drive.”

She laughed weakly. “Strange turn of events, huh?”

* * *

When she came into the office, he was angrily speaking on the phone, threatening to cut a job. The secretary was nearby sitting slack jawed as Adrian ranted. Simone stopped to watch him slam the receiver into the cradle. She had seen him angry only occasionally and it surprised her when he turned tail and stomped into his office, slamming the door.

“What was that about?”

Danny shrugged. “I have no idea, Ms. Sung. Some guy called this morning wanting to talk to Mr. Dubois. So I gave the phone to him since he had just come in. And I guess it just blew up.”

“Well I need to talk to him, temper tantrum or no.”

“You’re very brave, Ms. Sung. In the stir he’s in right now, everyone’s better hiding under the bed, if you ask me.”

Simone was surprised. “I thought you were close friends with him. Surely you shouldn’t be afraid of him.”

The perky blonde secretary grinned cheekily. “I assure you, Ms. Sung, I’m nothing but a professional. I know I’ve worked with both of you for over two years, but I still don’t know either of you very well.”

“Your concept of knowing people very well probably is different than mine then,” Simone said dryly.

As Danny gave her a confused look and then turned back to the computer to her menial tasks, she knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” he barked.

She quickly turned the knob and poked her head into the room. He was standing near the window, his sleeves rolled up and his tie undone. He was staring outside as if there was some great puzzle or mystery that he had to solve. Or maybe something interesting was happening across the street at the accounting office. “It’s me.”

“Come in then.” He glanced briefly at her and the tight set of his shoulders slightly relaxed. “Did you just get here?”

“I saw the last bit of your phone conversation.”

“Ah that.” He turned back to the window. “It was Thomson.”

“What did he want?”

“His housekeeper disappeared. He was getting paranoid and wanted us to keep track of her too.”

“Then she must have...”

“Yes.” He passed a hand over his eyes for a moment before turning to stroll back to his desk, to sit down. “I think she was the one who doped the tea. But he called this morning, several hours after he realized that she disappeared. I told him that there was only two of us, that we couldn’t do everything.”

“And what did he say?”

“He decided to report it to the police. But I doubt they’ll do anything. It’ll look like the housekeeper just filed her resignation.”

“Too bad. So I guess we’re only going to look at this Johnson guy this afternoon.” Simone sat on one of the chairs that was facing across Adrian’s desk. “I remembered something when Thomson mentioned the Dark Vipers. But I didn’t want to bring it up right then. It was something that I found in the old Greenville study.”

He raised an eyebrow. “But why didn’t you tell me then? I thought we had agreed to consult each other on everything if possible.”

“If possible,” she reminded him with a faint grin. “But recall at the time you were temporarily trapped in that little alcove that led to the third floor. But here it is.” She took out the old envelope from her pocket and placed it on his desk.

Adrian examined the envelope. “Doesn’t look to peculiar.” He opened the envelope and looked at the mundane contents and the singular sigil at the bottom. “It looks identical to the seal on the note to Denise.”

“Yes, but it looks sort of like a snake doesn’t it?”

“A snake on a bed of roses. I think you’re onto something, Simone.”

“That’s what I thought. But this letter is nearly a century old. The man who this is addressed to is no longer alive.”

“But the people behind this maybe,” he said, tapping at the sigil.

Detective Martinez had double checked the address that Thomson had scribbled down for them. “Yep,” he said over the phone. “The house on Yared Drive is still owned by one Sherman Johnson. He’s probably still living there if he hasn’t just bought another house in the next town just for the heck of it and moved down there.”

Adrian ended up driving there, but there were no wisecracks about his driving

skills from Simone. Not one word. He kept glancing at his partner, expecting any moment that she would keel over, passed out like an overdosed junkie, but she sat there beside him, lucid eyed and calmly watching the scenery that probably whizzed by a little too fast.

The sky was on the edge of late afternoon, verging on the darkness of night. But it was also a bit cloudy so there was no romantic sunset to watch going down in a neon salmon sighted glory. The clouds themselves were pale gray blue threads that crisscrossed the sky in a gossamer web. Everything was tinged in a slightly gray color like those old sixties home footage that people's grandparents were fond of showing over and over again in family reunions. Except, of course, those static lines and blobs that occasionally marred the picture.

Yared Drive was in one of the places in northern Elanne where everything seemed out of the way, out in the middle of nowhere. Besides the squat two story houses that seemed to have come straight out of a seventies retro magazine, there were vast open spaces, most of it the greenish-yellow of summer dried grass, although in the distance, one could spot the black shadows of thin woodland. But these vast open spaces echoed of farmland. On the other side of the road, a metal railing was erected. From there, the land cut off vertically a ways, sort of like a mini cliff before plunging into a Stygian blue of lake water.

It was called Willow Lake even though all the trees surrounding its parameter were either oaks, maples, or pines. There was a small bit of land in the middle though which were populated by a few scraggly willows, but it was deserted. No one went out there unless they had a boat and decided to go for a picnic with some unwelcome fire ants. How the fire ants got on the island, nobody knew.

The road ran straight forward, following the curves of the lake until a more hilly area loomed up and the road split into two. The road that ran up the hill and disappeared into a hedge of trees had changed its name to Westwood Road whereas Yared Drive still circled the lake. From there, the road ran in a continuous circle, never ending. Sherman Johnson's house was a mile from the intersection of Westwood Road, sitting between two other unremarkable houses and itself, offering no other distinction besides its ugly grim trim and the mailbox that attempted a poor parody of a chicken.

Adrian parked his truck behind a battered blue station wagon and the both of them got out. Simone got to ring the door.

An older black man answered, his hair a brilliant white, scattered every which way like a wild wig. The creases on his forehead and his droopy sad eyes made him look like Einstein's twin. He wore a gray sweater. Before they could even say hello, he said, "I don't want any magazines. And I already go to church regularly, thank you very much. I don't want to be converted to Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons or whatnot. And I don't want a vacuum cleaner. Already got one."

Adrian cleared his throat. "We're not traveling salesmen. We should have called, but we thought it would be better to come here straight away."

The old man narrowed his eyes. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"We're Dubois and Sung," said Simone digging out a business card to hand to him. "We're looking for Sherman Johnson who may help us on a case."

He examined the card briefly and handed it back to her. "Private investigators, eh? Well, well. I knew people of your sort would be coming by sooner or later. What's

next, the police?”

“This is not some sort of prank,” said Adrian.

“Of course not.” The old man raised a hand, indicating that they go inside. “I’m Sherman Johnson. Take a seat in the living room. I’ll answer whatever questions I can, just to get you out of my hair.”

The living room itself looked like it went through several time warps as well as one or two trans-dimensional cataclysms. The room was painted in a drab beige. Several masks hung on the far wall, all strangely carved grotesque things that could have been African or voodoo in origin. A triangular cabinet graced a corner, itself battered and etched with words, some English, some foreign. The floor was paved with random sized pine planks, but the throw rug on top was anything but the requisite oriental. It was clashing green and gray plaid. The couches were straight from some overwrought Victorian drama. An ottoman stood in the center of the room, but was slightly offset by a bright white ultra modern coffee table. But the doorway was a canister holding medieval weaponry and beside it stood a fake gold statue of a Buddha.

“This goes beyond no taste,” Simone muttered under her breath as she gingerly sat on one of the couches.

“I’d say.”

Johnson arrived back, a tray of food in his hands. He placed it on the table. Simone eyed it suspiciously and kept her hands resolutely in her lap. Behind Johnson, a large man trailed behind. He was a bit overweight and bald. But his origins could not be determined. His skin was a mottled coffee color, but his lips thin. His eyebrows were also shaved. But then again, it looked like he lacked the ability to grow any hair. He was wearing a long dark blue gown covered in small silver stars and he carried a cane in front of him. He looked a bit odd, until they realized that the man had no eyes.

“This is Donald, my cousin,” Johnson explained. “I hope you don’t mind him being here for it all. We hardly have company and well, I think it’ll be nice for him to listen to other people besides me.”

“Hello Donald,” said Adrian.

But Johnson’s cousin didn’t reply. He just turned his head toward the new voice and grinned.

Adrian felt Simone shiver beside him.

Donald’s mouth was filled with sharp silver teeth.

Chapter 7

“Our client believes that you may have some of the information that he seeks,” said Simone.

“Just who exactly is your client?” asked Johnson. “I don’t know anything.”

“We’ll be the judge of that.” Simone glanced at the corner of her eye and saw that Johnson’s cousin Donald had reached into what was probably a pocket in his gown and pulled out a deck of cards, the backs which were crisscrossed in red and white. Somehow they looked familiar. Adrian gave her a brief glance that told her to keep silent on the matter until they were done with the interview.

“Very well. Ask away. But I warn you, if I find a question which I don’t like, I

might not answer it.”

“Have you any knowledge of a group, an organization.”

“A religious organization you mean? Like those pesky Mormons who keep on knocking on my door every Saturday attempting to convert me?”

Adrian shook his head. “Not that type of religious if they were at all religious. The Dark Vipers. Ever heard of them?”

Johnson’s face was curiously blank. But Simone caught the quick flicker of his eyes to his cousin. Donald kept shuffling the card. And he kept grinning his horrible grin as if once he had stretched his lips it was impossible to relax them. Maybe they had jammed, like an elevator between the tenth and eleventh floors.

“Yeah I heard of them,” said Johnson. “When I was a boy. They were a strange lot, always trying to seek enlightenment. If they were still around, I would have gladly given them up to the Mormons if that would have gotten them to stop from visiting this house.”

“They sought enlightenment? They were a spiritual organization?” said Simone.

“Well, not exactly. They were into the odd things, you know. Witchcraft and such. Neo-pagans, although they despised that title. Some of them might still be around, but they may be pretty old. Like me no doubt.” At that, he cackled at his lame joke. “Old like those Egyptian mummies they keep on blathering about.”

“Do you know the names of any of them?” Adrian asked as Simone got out a pad of paper and a pen to start taking notes.

“There was this one guy, Hannibal Pynchon who was my daddy’s landlord back when we were living in Lancaster but that was a long time ago. Pynchon is probably safely buried in his grave by now. Unless he’s a zombie.”

Simone nodded. “That all then?”

“Also some young upstart at the time who was trying to start some sort of company. Randall something or other I think. Don’t think he’s around either.”

“So have you had any dealings with the Dark Vipers then?” asked Adrian. “Ever been part of their group.”

“Oh God, no. Never in a million years.” Johnson crossed himself like a devout Catholic. “Those crazies were into those fads you know. Going to visit frauds like mediums and oracles and the like. They were into voodoo and Native American magic which as far as I knew was more about smoking pot rather than communing with the Great Spirit. But you’ve got to understand, during those times, the wealthy were a rather bored lot. They were always seeking new thrills.”

“Unlike today?” Simone remarked dryly. “Bungee jumping and other extreme sports are the fad these days.”

“Extreme sports eh?” Johnson barked in laughter. “Nothing compared to a bit of drugs and sex, I’d say. And maybe a little of illegal activities. But who am I kidding. These days are a bit tame.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Simone said. “But we’ll look into the names you gave us.”

“Glad to be of help.”

“We have one more question though,” Simone added. “Do you know anything about ‘The Rose’?”

Johnson’s body suddenly froze. His cousin continued shuffling the cards but

began wheezing, strange colored spittle coming out of his mouth and splattering on the otherwise spotless carpet.

“Mr. Johnson?” Adrian prompted. “The Rose?”

“Well.” The old man slowly relaxed, but his eyes gleamed with an inner light. “Well,” he repeated. “I believe you’d like a reading from Donald. He’s quite good you know.”

“Mr. Johnson, we’ve asked you a question,” said Simone exasperated despite the fact that Johnson’s cousin was beginning to shudder in a convulsive fashion. “We expect some sort of answer.”

“Donald would really, really want to give the both of you a reading,” Johnson emphasized.

Simone opened her mouth again to protest, but Adrian touched her arm warningly. Perhaps it was better to wait the answer out, she finally amended to herself.

“Good,” said Johnson. “Donald’s almost ready now.”

His cousin shuddered once more, his metal teeth clattering like a train on tracks before he slumped forward, looking like he was staring at the coffee table despite his lack of eyes. He held the deck of cards before him, face down. He slid one card out of the pile and placed it face down on the table. He did it again for a second, a third, and a fourth until they were spread in a compass-like fashion.

He flipped the card to his left. The card showed a boy in a room lying out seven sticks. “Seven of Wands.” Donald’s voice was a low hiss that seemed to reverberate throughout the gaudy room. It snaked out through the corners and sent an ominous chill down her spine.

“How can he see the card?” Adrian asked.

“He’s a visionary,” said Johnson simply.

Donald’s head swiveled sharply at the voices. “Quiet!” His silver teeth gleamed with dripping saliva. “Seven of Wands. It is just the beginning of your struggle. You fought a battle but you haven’t won the war yet. You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

The card closest to Simone and Adrian was flipped over. A woman with long blonde hair was standing between two pillars, one black and one white. She wore a tiara and held a staff in one hand and a book in the other. “The High Priestess. You already know much, but you seek more knowledge. But the lack of knowledge, your purity, your innocence, and most importantly your ignorance if you choose to ignore what is around you may be your downfall with the situation at hand.”

The card to his right was flipped. They held their breath and his hand paused slightly above the card, his breath coming in and out in harsh hisses. On the card a figure cloaked in black and holding a scythe was depicted. “Death.” He hissed the word out in something that sounded like pain. “This endeavor will lead you to ruin.”

“But the card also means transformation,” Adrian cut in. “And enlightenment. Especially when the card is upside down which is what it is right now.”

“Silence!” Donald roared. Furiously, he turned over the last card. It was a dark scene with a light blue disk featuring prominently on the top half of the card. A turbulent body of water was on the lower half. “The Moon. Your path will be rocky at best. Treachery and deceit lie on either side. Beware.” His last word was a hush. Donald dropped the cards to the floor and slumped back into his chair, seemingly spent from

this supernatural effort for fortune telling.

The rest of them sat stunned for a moment before Johnson finally stood up. “We do not have The Rose,” he said. “It seems that you’ve exhausted my cousin. You’re welcome back if he ever recovers.”

Evidently, that was the end of their visit.

“That was enlightening.” Simone frowned and stared at the lake water as Adrian unlocked the truck doors. “Not very helpful considering what we got was what we already knew.”

“And even the confirmation doesn’t help us.” Adrian got into the driver’s seat and waited for his partner to buckle up before turning on the engine. “They’re already long gone.”

“Ha. Wouldn’t it be so great if we had the medium equivalent of Donald to summon their ghosts in for questioning.”

In the evening, the road was a slim and pale ribbon that wound around the darkly glittering Willow Lake. It faded into darkness where the head lights failed to penetrate. The night seemed to press around the truck, enveloping it, making the interior of the truck itself a small and possibly diminishing haven. Simone had leaned her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes. The car’s engine purred monotonously.

The dark car came from nowhere, trailing them like a shadow with no sign of light. Adrian would not have caught it if he had not taken a double take at the rear view mirror and noticing that the road behind him did not seem as pale and ribbon-like as before. When he occasionally braked around turns, his red break light reflected off a black hood and dark windows with just a faint shadow for a driver.

But when he turned off at a bigger road to head to south Elanne, the car suddenly disappeared.

Perhaps it was just some illusion, he mused as he deftly maneuvered the roads and the evening traffic. During night time, it was too easy to have the eyes play tricks on you. Perhaps he should have his eyes checked the next time he had the opportunity to go to the eye doctor.

They arrived at Simone’s apartment building, a complex among complexes. “Thanks,” she said as she opened the door when he stopped the truck.

“I’ll come with you.”

She didn’t say anything, but only gave him an odd look. Adrian trailed after her, taking the elevator up to the third floor and walking her to the door. She kept her face down, her hair sweeping over her chin and covering part of her face so he could not see her expression. And as she opened her door, he turned to leave.

“Oh God.”

At the sound of her voice, he turned to see that his partner was completely still, her eyes glued to the interior of her apartment. The door was wide open. He looked in and saw nothing out of the ordinary, a sofa, a coffee table, an entertainment center, a lamp, a throw rug, a painting of some sort—all in her living room.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something,” she said. “This doesn’t feel right. Maybe it’s...I don’t know.” She flipped on the light, bathing everything in brighter, cheerier colors. He still did not see anything wrong. But he followed her nonetheless when she cautiously stepped inside to

survey whatever if anything was disturbed.

They systematically scoured each of the rooms, the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedrooms. Simone kept shaking her head and frowning, seemingly on the look out for something that only in her mind could she see. They headed back to the living room only to have her halt and turn back to the kitchen. On the counter was a phone and a blue mug. There was a small pot of violets that seemed to grow cheerfully and obliviously to Simone's strange whims. There was also a pen and an envelope that had no address on it.

"I don't think this was here before," Simone said, gingerly picking it up. The envelope flap was open and she pulled out a folded sheet of paper which had a message typed on it. Or it could have been printed. It was hard to tell unless they took the letter to an expert.

It did not have a date. It wasn't even addressed to anyone in particular. It only contained the words, "Don't pursue this." It wasn't signed. Nothing else made it distinguishable.

"Someone came into my apartment." There was a tight clip to Simone's voice. Adrian recognized it as fury. "How could it be possible? The door was locked."

Adrian surveyed the kitchen, small but neat, all the cupboards were closed, the dining table clear. At the end of the kitchen was a window with drawn drapes. He pulled them aside and assessed the pane, noticing that the latch was undone.

"Did you lock your windows too?" he asked.

She scowled then, her eyes gleaming militantly. "I don't remember. Probably not. Foolish of me, I know."

"Do me a favor, will you?"

She stared back at the message, her fingers tightening, threatening to ball it up into a pathetic wad. Instead, she carefully tucked the letter back into the envelope and put it back on the counter. "Who knows about this case?"

"Let me check everything to make sure that it's locked before I head back."

"Sure." She absentmindedly wandered away to the living room as he began locking the kitchen window. "Who knows about this case besides us?" she wondered out loud.

"There's Thomson and Danny."

"Don't forget Johnson and his cousin," said Adrian as he wandered to the bathroom and bedroom windows. They appeared locked already. "They at least have an inkling."

"And possibly Thomson's housekeeper if she eavesdropped," said Simone. "If she was connected to this thing, it might explain why she disappeared."

"It would be nice if we knew her whereabouts," he replied coming back to the living room.

Simone was sitting on the couch, curled up and arms crossed. She looked up at him. "Yes." A faint smile came to her lips. "You're too bloody tall."

"No, you're just too short."

"Ha."

"Even those ridiculous heels that add about six inches of height doesn't work for you."

"You may be right there. That's probably why I decided on low heels, since it's

hopeless to overcome my lack of height, might as well go for comfort.”

He laughed a little and sat next to her. “Simone, if you’re ever not comfortable here, you can always stay at my place.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But I’m not going to let some pathetic lurker get in the way. I mean, what else is a revolver used for?”

* * *

Martinez had grumbled when Simone requested a check on Pynchon and Randall to see if any of their descendants were still around. “What am I?” he had demanded. “Some free genealogy service?”

“Aw, Tony, we just want to keep you on your toes,” she had replied. “You can’t fault us for asking for a little help.”

“Huh. Thanks for making me feel loved.”

“Any time.”

The day at the office wasn’t extremely interesting or even tiring. At the moment, she and Adrian were going over old newspapers from seventy years ago, checking for any sign that may mention the group, the Dark Vipers. There were quack advertisements and articles on the latest psychic freak shows, but so far nothing. Simone decided to take a quick break from scanning text and walked outside her office, perhaps intending to talk to Danny even though the secretary rarely had anything profound to contribute.

Danny, as usual was seated at her desk, clicking away on the computer. Today, she had bound her hair up in some semblance of a bun at the nape of her neck. She was also wearing another one of her low-necked blouses, this one blue. Simone had no doubt that Adrian had taken the opportunity for a quick peek before secluding himself in his own office for research.

The secretary looked up and gave her a wide smile. “Afternoon Ms. Sung. Anything I can do?”

“Not at the moment. Just taking a brief break.” Simone retrieved a little water from the water cooler and held the paper cup in her hand, thinking. “Anything of interest happening lately?”

“You mean personally?” Danny gave a shrill laugh. “Not much, I guess. Denise set me up on a blind date two nights ago. The man was a total bore, I can tell you that. No style, no wit. But I ended up staying over his place anyway.” She wiggled her eyebrows, her intention clear.

“I didn’t think you were into one-night stands,” said Simone. More like into rich boyfriends, she silently thought.

“I’m not,” said Danny. “I just said he was boring. In conversation, I mean. He talked nothing but stock quotes and the latest Wall Street fiascoes. But that’s fine with me. I think he just needed someone to listen to him. He’s taking me out again this evening.”

“Wonderful.”

“But,” and Danny lowered her voice to conspiratory level, “There’s always the online world.”

Simone raised an eyebrow. “Online world? What do you mean? Like chatting?”

“Yeah.” The secretary seemed pleased with herself. “I’ve been hopping around the first year or so, testing the waters, so to speak. But this past month, I’ve found the perfect cyber cafe. It’s called Dominoes.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be a pizza place?”

Danny shrugged. “Most of it is populated by nerds you know, the kind who thing programming is the chic thing to do. But there are a couple of interesting people there.” “I don’t know, it’s sort of hard for me imagining such people who frequent ‘cyber cafes’ as having any sort of life.”

“Maybe they do or maybe they don’t. Like there’s this really interesting guy who calls himself Pullman. He has the wittiest things to say. And he’s a published author! I always try to get him to tell me his real name so I could get his books, but he refuses saying he’s afraid of criticism.”

“He’s probably lying then.”

“Well maybe. And then there’s this professor type. Or at least I think it may be a professor type. He always sounds like he’s wanting to get laid. Calls himself Therion and telling all the girls in the chat room that once he finds ‘The Rose’ that it’ll be perfect for her, whoever the her is at the present time.”

“A rose, huh?”

“The Rose,” said Danny, emphasizing it so that it sounded capitalized. “He makes it sound as if it wasn’t a flower.”

“How odd,” said Simone. She mentally filed the small fact away for future reference. “But don’t people have profiles on the thing? You could easily find out the real person’s name.”

“Yeah, I guess you could,” Danny admitted. “But you know, I always like the mystery of the thing, the supposed anonymity. You could be anyone you wanted in such chat rooms.”

It was not paranoia, Simone told herself as she checked the locks to the windows and door for the third time. Sometimes, especially now when she was thinking a little bit too hard, things seemed to take on a sinister tone in the night, as if the shadows were living and had will. So she left several lights on as she relaxed in the living room in her practical white pajamas and blue bathrobe. Tucking her feet beneath her on the couch, she wondered if it was better if she had someone with her, anyone, anything. Perhaps Adrian would be amendable for letting her borrow his cat for a couple of day, maybe weeks.

The laptop made a small hum and began vibrating as she turned it on, waiting for the computer go through its routines until it came up on the desktop, a picture of a quiet forest landscape in the sunset which was underscored by a majestic temple that loomed in the background. A few scattered icons were littered across the picture and almost lazily, she clicked on some things to check her mail. There was nothing of interest. But as she remembered her earlier conversation with Danny, she went to search for a chat group called Dominoes. About four matches came up and perplexed, she wondered which one was the right one. It was relatively easy though, to check who had logged on. She recognized one screen name immediately, RenaQ which was Danny’s handle that was taken from her middle name. Smiling to herself, she logged on as Anonymous23 and began to lurk in the conversation.

Whiney: I've never had rose wine before.
Cat54: Consider yourself lucky.
Whiney: Why?
Cat54: In some circles, it's considered terribly gauche to even look at it.
Whiney: Gauche?! What on earth does that mean? I mean, it's not beer.
Cat54: Not beer, but it is cheap. It's supposed to be glugged like beer.
Whiney: Then it should be called beer.
Cat54: But it isn't you see. I think back in the time when tacky things were in vogue.
Whiney: The 70s you mean?
Cat54: Yeah, about that time. God, I still shiver about the 70s.
Whiney: The polyester suits and John Travolta?
Cat54: Gah! Those two make me break out in hives.
Whiney: So rose wine is the equivalent of polyester.
Cat54: No. People served it during "classy" dinners and such.
Whiney: The ones with the drunks?
Cat54: Yeah, the drunks. And then it just all died away.
Whiney: When Grossman and Oliver popped onto the scene.
Cat54: Exactly! But now that I think of it, why did they not like it?
Whiney: Principle of the thing I suppose.
Cat54: Such as rose wine being associated with polyester.
RenaQ: I've tried rose wine before. And I didn't think it was gauche.
Whiney: Really? Now where is this?
RenaQ: So I went on a date with this guy.
Cat54: Did he wear a polyester suit? (smirk)
RenaQ: No he didn't. I thought he was classy anyway.
Whiney: So is the wine any good?
RenaQ: A light taste, a little sweet. And it looked good in a glass.
Whiney: I want to get some.
Cat54: And drink yourself into a stupor.
Whiney: Ha ha. Very funny.
Cat54: Hey, if you want the grocery people to look at you funny, be my guest.
Therion: Rose wine is not all that gauche.
Cat54: Didn't know you were a wine connoisseur, Ther.
Therion: I'm a connoisseur in many things.
Whiney: Liar.
RenaQ: You shouldn't dignify that with a response, Ther.
Therion: Thank you.
Whiney: Hey, I was just kidding.
Cat54: So why do you think rose wine isn't gauche?
Therion: It's a perfect complement for summer foods.
RenaQ: We were eating outside under the sunset.
Therion: That's exactly what I mean.
Cat54: How romantic. Exactly who is this guy you're dating, Rena?
RenaQ: I'd rather not say. (blush)
Cat54: That good huh?
Therion: Not as good as me, I bet once I get The Rose.
Whiney: Oh, no. Here we go again.
Cat54: It was your fault, Whiney. You mentioned the rose wine first.
Therion: The Rose is a perfectly good topic.
Whiney: When you're going on and on about it.
Therion: It's rumored to bring power, to help you get what you want.
Cat54: All superstition.
Whiney: You should get your head checked.
Therion: It really can.

Whiney: Now you're sounding like some petulant kid.

A sound from the back of the apartment suddenly startled Simone from the conversation on her laptop. She quickly put it down and trotted to the nearby closet to take out her revolver. The cold black metal slightly warmed in her hands and she felt a little comfort. Slowly, she crept toward the back, to the kitchen where the lights were off. Ever so slowly, she edged toward the window and suddenly flung the drapes away and pointed her gun to the pane.

But the window was closed and outside, the fire escape was empty. Outside, the moon was a waning crescent faded by a few oily gray clouds that drifted over it like a veil. There were other buildings across the way, but the windows were all dark, the occupants already snug in their beds. Simone looked down toward the ground and also saw nothing, only the blackness of the pavement as it stared upward. The window latch was still on lock position.

She sighed a bit to herself, perhaps it was all in her imagination, that she was far too jumpy. And all the talk of wine in the chat room made her long for a cold draft of something alcoholic. Her hand reached for the refrigerator door when her front door was buzzed, quickly followed by knocking. She shuffled toward the door, looking in the peep hole, hoping it wasn't some dark phantom.

It was Adrian, with a thin leather coat over a white short sleeved shirt and jeans. His long dark hair was not in its customary hold. Instead it cascaded past his shoulders like a midnight waterfall, glistening a bit since he just got out of the shower. In one hand he was holding a square bag and he was looking rather impatient, frowning, his gray eyes darker than usual.

Simone tightened her robe and opened the door. "What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?"

"And why are you holding that, half-cocked?" he replied, an eyebrow raised. He pushed the door inward and strolled in. "I found something."

"Well, great." She closed the door again and dropped the revolver onto the table. "So what is it?"

"I was just looking at some recent news that was posted online. I've got a few printouts."

Simone sat back on the couch and took up her laptop and scanned the conversation. The topic had inexplicably turned to coffee beverages. She logged out and looked up to find that he had unceremoniously taken a seat next to her and was rummaging in his bag. "You could have e-mailed attachments to me."

"Well, I'm old-fashioned and I like wasting paper." He finally pulled out a couple sheets with news articles printed. "They're from the Ridgefield Herald."

"Winchell Randall the third," she read from the first highlighted section, "member of the Coleman Association and Green Committee donated an unprecedented amount to the Ridgefield University's humanities department." She shook her head. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"I think Winchell Randall the third may be who we're looking for."

"You think he's related to the Randall that Johnson was talking about? Really. Randall is a common last name."

Adrian's face fell. "I thought..."

“Don’t worry about it, you didn’t come here for nothing.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve been looking into some chat rooms.”

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those online geeks.”

“Well, what if I am?” she smirked. “Anyway, Danny mentioned some online persona that evidently knows something about The Rose.”

“Seems too easy.”

“Could be,” she agreed, “but we should follow up any leads we can get, at least until Martinez gets back to us on those name searches. It’s some guy who calls himself Therion.”

“Therion, eh? Isn’t that what Alister Crowley called himself?”

“Crowley, that early twentieth century wacko, self styled occult master, you mean?”

“Yeah, the same one.”

“Geez. Okay, so I was about to look up the guy’s profile when you came and barged in.”

“What’s stopping you now?” he grinned.

“An unholy need to get drunk,” she retorted. “Okay, I guess it’s pretty simple.” A dialogue box popped up on her computer when she clicked on Therion. “Therion. Real name, Randy Sykes. Age, twenty-five. Occupation, student at Ridgefield University. Hmm. He’s making it really easy for us to find him.”

“I’d say. But we’re going somewhere, aren’t we?”

She nodded. “Although I’m not quite sure how much a mere twenty-five year old would know about an underground organization that’s hundreds of years old.”

Simone scrolled through the information she dug up on one Randy Sykes by searching in Ridgefield University’s personal directory. As she read the screen, she became aware that Adrian was not just looking over her shoulder to see the same information. She felt her cheeks warm and instinctively bent her head so her hair covered the incriminating blush.

“What are you doing?” Her voice sounded a little harsh in her ears.

“Reading about this Sykes character. Seems like he’s a student at the University.”

“Uh huh,” she replied not convinced. “What exactly are you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“About what?”

“You probably don’t want to know.”

She finally looked up and found his face dangerously close to hers. The pupils in his gray eyes seemed larger than usual. “Why?”

He only gave her a lazy smile.

“Never mind,” she muttered. “I need a drink.” She put her laptop down and made to get up.

“Why don’t you get me one too?”

“Didn’t you just drive over here?”

“Right. Water then.”

She shuffled back toward the darkness of the kitchen constantly telling herself to not look back, no matter what. As she was busy muttering this litany to herself, she

decided not to turn on the light as she knew her way around. The kitchen itself seemed a little chillier than usual, but she did not pay this any mind as she opened the fridge and rummaged the bottom shelf for champagne and bottled water.

But before her fingers could touch the bottles, she felt someone in the room with her. She wanted to tell Adrian to go away, but before she could get up, something cold hard and persistent pressed itself to the back of her head.

“Slowly stand up and close the fridge,” a man’s voice told her quietly, menacingly. “And don’t try to make any other moves or I’ll blow a hole through that pretty head of yours.”

She did as the man commanded and stared out the kitchen doorway to the lighter living area, wishing that she could call out to Adrian to warn him of the mad man.

“Although you’re nowhere near, you’re still too near for our comfort,” the man hissed, pressing the butt of the gun a little closer. “Getting far too near. They haven’t said so yet, but I figured if I finished the job here, now, it’ll be ahead of schedule and everyone would thank me for it.”

Simone paid little attention to his ranting. She thought about grabbing for the phone, but it was too far away. She thought about her revolver and cursed herself for not bringing it with her.

“I knew he would be here tonight to see you. Two for the price of one is always better, I’d say. I’ll just shoot both of you and make it look like a lover’s spat. Things like that do happen.”

“But I’m not his lover...”

He jabbed the gun harder at the back of her head. “Don’t you dare lie to me, bitch. I see how he looks at you.”

Her mind suddenly whirled at the comment. The man had seen them before. Was it possible that they already knew the identity of the mad man? Then why couldn’t she put the voice to the face? It was possible that the adrenaline coursing through her veins was impairing her thinking. She tried to force herself to breathe deeper, to calm herself. The voice did sound a little familiar.

“Although I don’t see what you see in him. Arrogant bastard. I’m better than he is, do you hear?”

She heard, but she refused to say anything in reply.

“You know,” his voice sounded close to her right ear. She could feel his breath rustling her hair. “You could have had it much better at the beginning.” She felt her robe belt loosening. A hand inched across her pajama top before tearing at a button. “I could have had you. I can have you. Right here without him knowing.”

She closed her eyes tightly, wishing she could do something as she felt a cold hand touch her breast. If only she could call out. She heard a faint click coming from behind. “Drop the gun.” Adrian’s voice was steel. “And step away from her.”

The cold hand and the pressure from the gun butt disappeared. She heard the clattering of the pistol as it hit the floor. She finally let out a small suppressed sob as she tucked her robe back on and lunged toward the phone to call the police.

“Lie on the floor and put your hands behind your head,” Adrian ordered. “Simone, turn on the light so I can get a good look at this bastard.”

She complied and suddenly felt weak, glad that she had already placed the call.

It was Dargood, his brown hair mussed over his eyes and lips snarling. With one foot, Adrian applied a little pressure to his back, making the man gag. Simone's revolver stayed aimed at his head, unwavering.

"How did you get in here?" she finally managed to say.

"I had a suspicion that something was going on. So I went downstairs and came around to the fire escape. I saw that the window had been cut open. Looks like he came prepared for some mischief."

"It looks like more than just a little mischief," said Simone.

"How right."

"Why you damned..."

Adrian moved his foot to his neck, silencing him. "The police are coming, aren't they?"

"As fast as they can, I hope."

A few minutes later, the cops came and hulled the errant butler away and took their brief statements. When everyone was gone, Simone flopped back down on the couch after turning off her computer. She did not at all feel tired. In fact she felt a little jittery. Adrian was still around, packing up his things.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

He stopped, tucking the bag under his arm. "You don't look all right to me. You're shaking."

"So what?"

"So what?" he repeated in disbelief. "Are you hurt?"

"No. But he..." She sighed then, reluctant to say anything else out loud.

"It's not safe for you here. Not at the moment anyway with that broken kitchen window. You can stay with me until you have all your windows fixed. You should have found some place without a fire escape."

"No fire escape, are you kidding? That's like against the city fire code or something."

A faint smile crossed his lips. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"But your brother."

"He went back to Ridgefield this morning. He has his own house. The guest room's free."

"You're not going to let me get out of it are you?" She tried giving him a grin, but failed miserably.

"Nope. Come on, I'll help you pack. And I'll give you the solemn oath that I'll drive the speed limit to get there."

Chapter 8

The coldness of the stone floor bit through her cloth slippers as she traversed the courtyard. November frost was sprinkled liberally along Sister Hermione's herb garden, making the whole thing appear like some silver enchantment from the moon. Except there was no moon out. She hugged her cloak closer to her, still feeling the biting air. Only a few more paces to a warmer sanctuary.

There was an iron gate before the small door that led through the kitchens. She sighed as a faint blast of warmer air engulfed her. The hearths at the kitchen were still roaring away although the nightly attendant was currently nowhere to be found. A black pot bubbled away on one of the hearths, an odor of garlic and meat assaulted her nose. But she was not hungry. Instead, she passed the kitchen and entered a narrow corridor that leaked into the chapel.

The chapel itself was a vast monstrosity. Columns erupted from either side, arching into almost impossibly high ceilings. The dim lighting from either side provided little relief from the darkness, instead, the walls appeared to be glowing a pale green that faded as the eye traveled upward to the ceiling. There were colored glass windows on either side, depicting images from the Bible. A few round windows littered the area nearer to the front done in a rose-like design. At that thought, she pulled out a rosary from her pocket and began silently chanting 'Hail Marys' as she made her way down the center of the chapel. There were low wooden benches every few feet. She stopped at one of the closer ones near the alter and walked to the middle before sitting down.

The alter was gold, but in the night it was only a glimmer of faint bronze. It was a giant cross with the crucified Christ, his head graced with iron thorns but bowed in supplication. His body naked and pale except for a white loincloth at his waste. And surrounding this whole scene were symbols and angels, his mourning disciples, the weeping Marys. She bowed her own head and sought to submerge herself into the nightly ritual of prayer.

But before her mind could form the first words, she heard the tapping of feet against stone, traveling lightly yet steadily towards her. She remained still until the footsteps sounded just behind her and stopped. There was a faint scuffling as the person sat on the bench directly behind her. A few moments of silence passed.

"Abbess. I hope I have not disturbed you." The man's voice was low and hurried, yet there was a note of urgency in them.

"No. Not at all."

"I have a confession to make."

"Father Lamury is more equipped to handle confessions. He will be here tomorrow morning about eight at the earliest."

"No. Please Abbess. I feel that perhaps it is better for me to tell you."

"Very well."

"You will not tell anyone else of this."

"Of course not. It is a fundamental understanding that this is between you and God."

He sighed. "Thank you. I have been wanting to tell someone for days, but it can't be just anyone. I'm afraid that I might be tried as a heretic or words if the officials knew."

"Is it that serious? Then I must refer you to Father Lamury."

"No! It is not that serious. Pardon me, but thank God for that. I had managed to extricate myself from the whole affair before it went too deep. A fortnight ago, I had been drinking at one of the local taverns. One of my reoccurring sins, I'm afraid. Marguerite is always telling me to stop but somehow I never heed her sensible words. I met this odd man there who I am positive is a cheater but he won the card game

anyway. He offered me a way to get my money back, though.”

“I see.”

“Yes Abbess. It was a foolhardy thing to do. I know that now. He showed me entrance to a group of learned men. Learned men! Nothing but demon worshipers, I grant you that. They wanted to practice magic and enslave weaker men. They told me any sort of money would be mine if I joined the Dark Vipers. But thank God again I came to my senses afterward. You see, I had to tell someone that dark forces are about in this city. I was afraid if I told the authorities, they might arrest me for being one of them!”

“However briefly tempted, you did break away,” she said. “Because you realized this evil, God will be more than forgiving. It was not your fault that you were persuaded by the devil.”

“Thank you, Abbess.”

Suddenly the doors to the chapel thundered as someone knocked or rather slammed on the door. The man behind her yelped.

“That man is coming to find me!” he cried, panicked. “The odd man, the one I told you about. He has one eye patched over and most of his teeth are missing. I must go. Please do not tell him that I was here. Oh, if only I had not gone to the tavern that night!”

“If what you say is true, then you must leave here immediately. Make no delays then.” She rose and for the first time saw the man, a pathetic huddling thing that scuttled behind her as she beckoned. She went toward the alter where there was some wood paneling behind the sculpture of Christ. She pressed a hidden crack and a door slid open into a dark abyss. “You must not be afraid.”

The man peered into the darkness with rheumy eyes. “What’s that?”

She took out one of the candles from the numerous ones lighting the alter and handed it to him. “This leads into the catacombs beneath the church. Go down and take the path to your left. It will soon bring you to a gate just outside the church.”

The pounding came insistently again.

“Thank you Abbess. I am more grateful than I can say.”

“God be with you.”

The man disappeared into the darkness, the candle he held a solitary beacon. She closed the door back up and slowly made her way to the door.

On the other side, she found one of the novices, Sister Geraldine staring wide-eyed and frightened at her. “I am sorry Abbess, I do not have the key to the chapel.”

“That is all right.” She looked up at the visitor beside her, a tall, lanky, and malicious character with stringy hair stuffed under a cap. He was as the frightened man had described him, one-eyed and toothless. But he did not seem old.

“Abbess, I’ll be looking for a ruffian, short, scraggly clothes with the stench of drink on him. Last reports say that he was heading over to the church.”

“I’m sorry sir, but I haven’t seen such a man.”

“Humph.” The suspicious character scanned the chapel and surreptitiously sniffed. He sneezed as if he was allergic to piety. “Well, he doesn’t seem like a man to venture into the House of God.” With that, he whirled around, intent on finding his way out.

* * *

Adrian awoke from the dream puzzled and his feet still tingling from the coldness of the abbey floor. He pushed aside his bed covers and briefly stood looking out the bedroom window, arms crossed against his bare chest. Theoretically, his hunch should be right. Other historians besides Thomson should have some information on the elusive Dark Vipers.

Feeling restless, he prowled out of his room and unconsciously headed toward the guest bedroom, only to stop at the door. He heard nothing. He sighed and thought about retreating back to his own room when the door suddenly opened and he heard a frightened gasp. He looked down, finding Simone staring back up at him, frozen. Fiz, his black kitten lazily wandered to the doorway to see who it was. Only seeing Adrian, he wandered back inside to go back to sleep.

“It’s me.”

He could see her immediately frowning. “Don’t scare me like that.” She stalked past him. “I was feeling a little thirsty.”

“Maybe I should go to the kitchen with you this time.”

“If you want. What are you doing up? And in front of my door of all places? I don’t need a guard dog when your cat is already conveniently camped out at the foot of the bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I had a dream.”

“A nightmare?”

He blinked as he turned on the kitchen light and quickly grabbed some bottled water from the fridge and a glass from a cupboard. “No. Just an odd dream because somebody in my dream mentioned the Black Vipers.”

“Well, you know all about dreams. About digesting all the information you learned during the day.”

“That’s mostly right,” he said watching her take a gulp of water. “But sometimes, just sometimes, they try to tell you something.”

“Right.”

“When we go see Sykes, I want to see a history professor too, just to see if he knows anything about the Black Vipers that Thomson hasn’t figured out yet.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He nodded. “I’m curious though.”

“Curious?”

“Yeah. Why are you up?”

She scowled. “Too much adrenaline. But I’m feeling a little better. Never hurts for a change of scenery, I guess.”

He grinned. “Good.”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” she replied as she took another draught of water, “if you think that you’ve gained some entertainment with me as a roommate, you’d better think again.”

* * *

“Thomson can’t be the only one who’s the expert on the Black Vipers, let alone the only one who’s ever heard of them,” reiterated Adrian as he parked his truck in the overcrowded parking structure in Ridgefield University. “Someone else might have some information, say, another historian or social scientist.”

“Now don’t go all antsy on me. We’ll go see a professor as soon as possible,” Simone told him in a soothing voice reserved for little children about to throw a tantrum. “They aren’t that impossible to find. Besides, we have to find the student.”

“Oh right, Randy Sykes, a.k.a. Therion. If we’re lucky, he’ll turn out to be one of those smart geeky kids.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause smart equals knowledge. More chance that we’ll find something of interest.”

“Uh huh.”

They strolled out of the parking structure and down a tree-lined walkway that meandered around several buildings that appeared to house lecture halls. The buildings on campus were predominantly white and Greek-like, obviously a sign of a Classical loving architect.

“You do know where we’re going, don’t you?”

“I’ve been here once,” he admitted. “For some seminar. But they had signs decked out all over the place, it was hard to miss it. Perhaps we should consult a campus map to find the dormitories?”

“Like that one up there?” She pointed to the glassed bulletin board that stood in front of a building entitled with the wordy, Sherman Media Information Center. An oversimplified map with pastel boxes and circled numbers stared them in the face with the red dot pointing at one particularly dark purple box saying “You are here.”

“Looks like the dormitories are on the north side of campus, just a little ways from the library.”

“Let’s just hope that we come across a student who knows who Sykes is.” Simone remarked.

“And what’s the probability of that considering how large the student population is?”

“Well, we’re bound to find someone. We can’t just go to the Housing Residence Office or something to ask, can we? They’ll think we’re stalkers or worse.”

“It’s just that type of optimistic attitude that keeps me going.”

She rolled her eyes. “All right then. You lead the way.”

They took the path heading north, passing the Media Center and a small auditorium before walking past a circular food court that boasted many amenities, among them a cafe sporting black and white umbrellas, slick neo-modern metal benches and tables and a plethora of students with books, backpacks and the occasional laptop. A few curmudgeonly professors with coke-bottle glasses and contemptible sneers clustered at the far end of the court, sipping their mochas and muttering about more scholarly and lofty things.

Past this, they finally found themselves along a walkway that zigzagged through a couple three and four story buildings that seemed a little tarnished from excessive wear and tear from living students. Strangely cut trees littered here and there in odd bobs that resembled more like alien fauna than any earth tree.

“There must be some registry of where all the students are living,” said Adrian. “We could go into each house and ask.”

Simone nodded. “Let’s start with that one. Wheeler House. As I recall, there were about ten student dormitories listed on the map.”

The inside of Wheeler House appeared to be ripped off of a modern apartment complex with shiny window panes and matching tiles the color an intermediate between mauve and the sickly pink that hospital candy strippers wore. The foyer was empty except for a lonely pay phone and a few chairs next to the stairs leading to the rooms above. It eventually spilled over to a common room on the right where two coke machines stood like sentinels over a collection of rag tag couches and a battered coffee table. Several students were clustered together, evidently goggling at a photograph that they were passing around.

“So you got this how?” asked a young man with a goatee, mustache, and mussed up hair. He squinted at the photograph. “Boy, Brenner looks totally fried.”

The young black man with a towering Afro grinned widely, holding up a Polaroid camera. “Took that with this little baby. I think I’m gonna submit it to the yearbook committee.”

A blonde girl in glasses, baggy overalls, and laptop glanced from behind the shoulder of goatee boy. “Hey Chris, what’s Brenner got in his hand?”

“An electrophoresis gel box,” Chris the photographer explained. “In the Hardy Lab at ten a.m. this morning. Guess he didn’t get much sleep cause he got the wires crossed. See? The black wire is at the red outlet and vice-versa. Got quite a shock. And I got a picture in before he noticed.”

“Hey, let me see that.” A dark hair girl that had been lying on the couch sat up, dropping the hefty tomb of “War and Peace” on the floor. “Whoa. I think Brenner might win an Einstein look alike contest.”

Adrian coughed discretely.

The dark haired girl did not even look up. “The MacroSquare Seminar is actually a bit south of here. Just head on the walkway and it’s on your right in the Madison Auditorium. Can’t miss it.”

“I’ll like to put my two cents in,” declared the blonde haired girl. “Tell the CEO of MacroSquare to shove his programs up the you know where. It’s awful.” She pointed to the laptop. “Crashed four times this week.”

Goatee boy rolled his eyes. “Amy, I told you to reformat your hard drive and partition it. That way it won’t crash so often. And stop loading it up with memory grubbing software like paintshop pro and files like mp3’s.”

“Shove it, Drew,” she replied. “It’s MacroSqaure’s fault.”

Simone laughed. “We’re not here for the MacroSquare Seminar. We’re looking for a student.”

“You are?” The dark haired girl perked up as she retrieved her copy of “War and Peace” from the floor. “Are you undercover cops or something? There’s going to be a drug sting isn’t there?” She snickered. “I just knew those weirdos in Racker House were up to no good.”

“And let me guess, Gina, and the frat boys in Eberton House?” asked Chris rather sarcastically.

Gina nodded. “Especially those frat boys in Eberton House. Have you ever

wondered why they always looked so stoned on Monday? It's not just the vodka, I grant you that."

"We're actually private investigators," said Simone.

"Like Columbo on TV?" asked Drew. "What case are you working on?"

She just smiled. "We're looking for a student who may have some information that may be of use to us. His name is Randy Sykes. Heard of him?"

"Randy Sykes?" the students repeated nearly simultaneously. They glanced at each other.

"I suppose he has a reputation around here?" said Adrian dryly.

"Yeah," said Gina slowly. "He's a graduate student in the history department."

"I can look him up for you," said Drew helpfully as he hauled up a battered copy of the student directory from the coffee table. "I think he has an apartment nearby."

"He's real slick," added Amy. "Gets up real close and personal, you know? Especially green freshmen."

"I remember," said Chris sitting back. "I was taking History 101 for an elective first year. Unlucky draw I guess that I was having a bit of a problem on one of the homeworks and decided to go to a teaching assistant's office hours. Went to his, and well, practically got slobbered on if you know what I mean."

"He...you..." said Gina surprised.

"No way," said Chris, disgusted. "I'm not that type of guy. Betty Jo and Granger were there with me. He slobbered over them too. Figured that he was into that kinky orgy stuff."

"Ew." Amy wrinkled her nose. "I'm glad I'm a computer science nerd."

"There's nothing wrong with kinky orgy stuff," said Drew. Amy scooted a few inches away from him. "Unless it's with Sykes," he added.

"I wear my special invisible glasses," declared Gina. She whipped out a pair of sunglasses that had built in windshield wipers. "No slobber on me when I'm taking early eighteenth century European history."

"He's a TA in that class too?" said Chris. "Boy, that guy really does try to get around."

"It also helps to sit in the back," replied Gina. "And hide a little behind the seats. Sykes likes to sit up front where all the studious girls and boys are you know? And he likes staring at Professor Fitzgerald while she's up there. You know how she starts bouncing when she gets all worked up about a lecture topic."

"Who's Fitzgerald?" asked Amy.

"A history professor who's really into old European culture, especially those male oriented clubs, you know? I think she's a radical feminist except she had a serious lapse in judgment when she got the surgery."

"So you think they're fake?" said Chris.

"I think so anyway. Why else would they bounce like that while she's just standing there?"

"This Professor Fitzgerald, she's an expert on European cults, then?" asked Adrian.

"Well, I guess you could say that."

"And we'll find Randy Sykes there," added Simone.

"He's there most of the time," Gina nodded. She looked at her watch. "Lecture

for that class starts in about half an hour. I could take you there if you'd like."

The lecture hall that Gina led them to was a steep auditorium where all of the chairs were plastered against the sheer drop of steps that plunged more than thirty feet down into the pit where the podium and the chalk boards sat. She beckoned Simone and Adrian to follow her to the back seats which also were the highest seats.

"If you don't mind, it's nap time for me," Gina told them as she put on her unusual sunglasses. She leaned back and propped her legs up on the seat in front of her and apparently promptly went to sleep.

Simone raised an eyebrow. "Is this an indication that we're going to listen to a very boring lecture?"

"Boring or no, which one of those people do you suppose is the kid we're looking for?"

"He always wears black," Gina mumbled. "With a bright silver buckle the size of Greenland. Can't miss him. Always manages to have someone on his arm."

Simone peered down to the first row of lecture seats. All she saw were the top of heads and maybe a glimpse of notebooks and pencils. "Can't see anybody in this. Do you think we might be able to catch him right after the class?"

"We could also try to snag the professor," Adrian said, nodding to a woman just entering the room.

She narrowed her eyes. The woman, Fitzgerald, was a brunette who had managed to confine her curly locks into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore horn-rimmed glasses and a very conservative beige suit. But that did not hide the fact that she was extremely well endowed. "I see." She looked suspiciously up at Adrian who only shrugged.

"I guess the kids weren't kidding."

"Ha. I know exactly what's going through your dirty mind," she said crossing her arms.

"Dirty mind or no, I still remember that she might have more information on what we're looking for."

Simone was about to say something, when Fitzgerald shot the class, which by now had filled up to capacity, with a sharp look.

"Some brief announcements," she began unceremoniously, "Concerning the previous homework set. Evidently the last problem was incorrectly graded. Go to see one of the teaching assistants after class to get points back. And a reminder that the final paper is due next week. The final exam is two weeks from now. I am hoping that there will be an improvement from midterms."

There were a few discrete dismayed groans from the audience.

"Very well. Today we're going to discuss the philosophy that developed during eighteenth century Europe. A sort of enlightenment, shall we say, about the thinking processes that permeated the continent during this time. Can anyone tell me, intuitively, why this was so?"

No one raised their hand.

A slight frown creased her face. "People were beginning to realize that the barbarism of the previous ages, particularly the Middle Ages and their fanatical witch burnings were not the way to go in obtaining a civilized society. And as all of you should know, the nineteenth century was rife with the Industrial Revolution which

exploded in England and permeated throughout the rest of the continent as well as to the Americas. Therefore the thinking processes of say Aristotle where pure thought and mathematics were valued, turned toward the more practical, more mechanical aspects that dealt more with hard science, innovation, and emerging technology.”

The professor said a few more words before turning off the light and turning on the overhead projector where she put in a transparency with an outline of the day’s lecture. Simone sighed and sat back, thinking that Gina’s carefree attitude on the whole affair was probably best, especially if the book the student was carrying was any indication. The textbook on European history was authored by none other than the professor herself, Olivia Fitzgerald, PhD.

“Do you have the feeling,” Adrian whispered in her ear, “that she has no idea what she’s talking about?”

Simone told herself not to laugh. “Yeah. Maybe that’s why none of the students want to ask a question. It might bring down her entirely too flimsy pyramid of arguments.”

“Needless to say, despite the emergence of Newtonian physics and other classical ideas of thoughts on the universe and life in general,” Fitzgerald droned as she began pacing across the floor, various parts of her anatomy wiggling as if they had life of their own, “The politics of the time were not as ideal. In fact they were inherently corrupt. Votes were paid for, bought for, cheated, swindled, blackmailed, murdered, so on and so forth. As power increased, so did the corruption and sooner than later, the heads of state began proclaiming their own intentions, doing whatever they wanted to do with no one else in the way. It was only with very difficult struggle and anyone else broke through it all. But there were things during this period of corruption that many historians overlooked simply because studying the discontent of unwashed masses was more interesting.”

She changed the transparency to one that showed a picture of a crest that remarkably resembled the carving that Thomson possessed, down to the guarding lion and unicorn and the shield that held the pedestal, griffin and some unidentifiable beast. Simone was almost positive that the words on the bottom were identical to the ones carved on Thomson’s monstrosity.

“This is a crest of an unknown elitist cult during the time. An example of a more well known one were the Free Masons. I hope you’ve heard of them. The corruption in politics did not just confine itself in the secular world. Oh no, it also seeped into the religious world, particularly the Church at the time who turned a blind eye on any such dealings. They even turned a blind eye on such groups like the Free Masons.” Fitzgerald frowned again. “Although much of the Church I think were duped into thinking that such groups were mere political factions, they were indeed heretics in hiding if you will who had their own brand of perverted worship, specializing more famously in occult and arcane studies.”

“But the important thing was their influence. You can see the decay of the heads of state correlating with the unseen rise in power of these background groups. It wasn’t until the leaders of these groups were routed were things put back so to speak. But I think, that was just a blip to most of the people living in those times. An example of the erroneous ways which human beings could fall into. For remember, it was the beginning of Enlightenment. Philosophy was paramount in that people believed that

human beings were meant to seek perfection in mechanical innovation, society, and other things at large.”

Perfection indeed, Simone thought sourly as she jabbed her partner in the ribs to keep him awake. Her lecturing style was far from engaging despite the visual acrobatics that was keeping all the males in the room except Adrian awake.

“Ow,” he whispered. “What did you do that for?”

“You were beginning to snore. I don’t understand why you’re falling asleep.”

“She’s boring.”

“Aren’t you even looking at her?”

“Been there, done that.”

“Excuse me?” said Simone not believing her ears.

“Had a professor just like her once,” said Adrian. “Except he was a man of course. Droned on and on about the Enlightenment and how it was good for you and so forth. Never got anywhere during that term.”

“Well...”

“I can tell you’ve never been to a history lecture.”

“I was a business and economics major.”

“Figures. See the transparencies? Classic hallmark of a lecture dud. Good lecturers don’t need props.”

“So is that why all the lectures I’ve attended had profs mumbling to the blackboard?”

“Could be.”

The lights finally came on and the students rustled, getting out of their seat. Beside them Gina yawned and took off her glasses to rub her eyes. “Another hour down,” the student mumbled.

Adrian tapped Simone’s shoulder. “Come on, if we hurry, maybe we’ll be able to catch her.”

She nodded, following him as he easily cut through the onslaught of exiting undergraduates.

Down in the lecture pit, Professor Fitzgerald was gathering her transparencies when Simone spotted a lanky dark character with a shiny silver buckle leave through a nearby doorway with several students in tow.

She nudged Adrian. “I think I see Sykes. I think I should go after him before I lose him.”

“I’m going to stick around to ask the prof some questions.”

She looked back over her shoulder as she headed out. “You’d better behave.”

Mockingly, he placed a hand over his heart. “I promise,” he grinned.

Simone only shook her head and disappeared through the doorway.

As the remaining students scurried out of the lecture hall, Adrian strolled over to where the woman was busily buckling her suitcase.

“Professor Fitzgerald?”

She looked up. “Yes?” Her glance lingered, traveling down his body. Suddenly the room seemed a bit warmer than usual.

“I’m Adrian Dubois, investigator.” He held out his hand.

She seemed to examine his hand for a moment before shaking it. Her fingernails grazed over his skin. He hastily retrieved his hand. “Olivia Fitzgerald. You’re not a

student then.” The edge of her mouth tilted upward, revealing white teeth.

“I’m doing some research for a case and was told that you may have some information on cults.”

The woman laughed. “Cults? I don’t know anything about them.”

“Well the ones you were talking about, the Free Masons or Templars or whatever.”

“Those, you mean. Well, if you come with me to my office, I might just be able to scrounge up some reference materials for you.”

He decided to ignore her suggestive tone. “That sounds great. Actually I was looking for information about one particular group.” He followed her out of the lecture hall and out of the building, heading to the next building over which looked more like an office building. A sign just outside the main doors proclaimed that it was the Greenville Humanities Complex. He wondered if it had been Robert Greenville, now Marcus Thomson, who had donated the money to have it built.

“And which group would this be?” she said, heading briskly to one of the rooms in the first floor. She opened the door that had the plaque, Olivia Fitzgerald, PhD, emblazoned beside it. She motioned for him to enter first. “If you’re looking for the Templars or the Free Masons, there’s plenty of information on them in the university humanities libraries. They’re really not that secret of a society since they’re no longer really operational, at least not around here.”

“No, I’m not looking for the Templars or the Free Masons.”

“The Order of Rhodes, then?” She took off her suit jacket and draped it over a nearby chair, revealing a blouse with a plunging vee line. Against his will, he discretely stared at the exposed cleavage. “The Knights of the Golden Fleece? The Carbonari? The Illuminati?”

He shook his head.

“The Sons of Temperance? The Knights of Pythias?”

“No.”

“Well, what is it? I don’t like playing guessing games.”

“The Black Vipers.”

“The Black Vipers?” She grinned and shook her head. “Never heard of them.” She took a step toward him. “I noticed you when I walked into the lecture hall. You were sitting in the back.”

“So then you’ve never seen their seal?” he asked, desperately trying to bring the conversation back. He took a step backward. “A snake in a bed of black roses.”

Her eyes briefly flashed with something. Recognition? Fear? Determination? “Nope,” she finally said taking another quick step toward him. “Would have remembered if I saw it. Sounds unique.”

“You’re a history professor. You must know where I could find the information for myself then.” He backed up again.

“The library,” she said resolutely. “If they don’t have it, then I don’t know what to tell you.”

She suddenly pushed him and he found himself landing hard in the chair. He caught a glimpse of the sleeve of her jacket, a dull thing except for gleaming cuff links that interwove in a familiar design before she landed on top of him, tearing at the hair holder at his hair and kissing him, hard.

He managed to wrench his lips away and shove her away from him. "No."
She gave him a feigned pout. "Isn't that what you wanted? It's what I've wanted when I first saw you. I couldn't wait until class was over."

"No," he repeated when she made to grab him again. He swiftly got back on his feet, dumping her back into the chair. "I only wanted information."

"Too bad." She smiled again, revealing teeth. She undid a button on her blouse. "Well, you know where to find me. I usually work late in my office."

He moved quickly toward the door. "Good day, professor."

Making a hasty retreat, he made his way out of the building, finally breathing a sigh of relief mixed with guilt that he had been aroused by her blatant ploys.

* * *

Simone lingered in the background while Sykes looked over the students' papers to correct a misgraded homework problem. As the last student packed up, ready to leave, Sykes made some comment, evidently a come on as she made a disgusted face and ignored him, brushing past Simone as she made her way out.

"You are Randy Sykes?"

He seemed to notice her for the first time. He immediately leered as he surveyed her. "Yeah?"

"You have some information regarding the Black Vipers, particularly The Rose?"

A shadow passed over his face. "Who are you. A cop?"

"Private investigator," she replied. "I was told that you may know something regarding the Black Vipers, especially since you're a history student."

"Oh? What does my having to study history have anything to do with it?"

"The Black Vipers is a group founded several hundred years ago in Europe."

"Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean I know anything about it." He sat down at his desk to shuffle a couple papers. "You should ask Professor Fitzgerald. She's the expert."

"What do you know about the Rose?"

"Direct, aren't you?" He crossed his arms, apparently thinking. "Fitzgerald tells me that the Black Vipers were originally a group of artists. As time went by, their teachings got perverted by a bunch of wannabe cultists. The Rose was supposed to be a painting about three by three feet of what else, a rose."

"Then the painting must be in some museum or private collection somewhere."

"Ha ha. That's very funny. No, I don't think it's a painting anyway. I think it may be a sculpture. Still, as you've said, it could be in a museum or private collection. But I've been too busy lately to check up on any of my hunches you know. I have a thesis to work on. I have a social life. I need sleep. But if you're really trying to look for it, you could probably ask a curator nicely and they'll probably give you an inventory."

"I didn't know curators did that sort of thing."

"Well, they don't do it just for your average Joe, that's for sure." He leaned back. "And if you find it, give me a call. I have this girl in mind I'm planning to woo."

"Why on earth do you want a sculpture to woo a woman?" asked Simone momentarily perplexed by his audacity.

"The principle of the thing. Girls are suckers for art. Hey, you wouldn't happen

to be free Friday night huh? We could catch..."

"No thanks," Simone said firmly. "I'm not available."

"Hey, can't say I tried. But if you're talking about that guy you were with, I'll have to tell you, Fitzgerald will make short work of him in no time."

Disgruntled, Simone left his office, pondering the new information she was given. She looked up to see that Adrian was standing outside one of the humanities buildings, raking a hand through his hair that had somehow gotten free from its usual que in frustration. She started to wave and call out his name to get his attention when from the corner of her eye, she saw two large black figures lunging toward her partner.

Chapter 9

Arms flew in a dizzying whirl that rivaled powerful hurricanes, but it was strangely quiet punctuated by random grunts and squeals as he rammed his fists into whatever opening he saw. He never saw the glint of steel as it slashed upward, only felt a faint stinging on his arm. But soon afterward, he witnessed his attackers turning tail and fleeing. All he could think about was their audacity to attack during the day. But as he thought, the silence was only indication that despite the presence of the sun, there was no human presence. He stumbled and slumped against a nearby wall, sliding to the ground. Only now did he feel his hurts, the burning that penetrated his arm, the tenderness of his jaw, the dull aching of his abdomen where one of them had managed to kick him in the stomach.

He heard the pounding of feet and then her cool hand resting briefly on his forehead.

"Oh God." Her whispered voice was low and hoarse. "I was too far away to have seen who they were, to help you."

He looked up to meet her lucid eyes. "You couldn't have helped. Too many of them."

"Only two." A very faint smile tinted her lips. "But you scared them off. Are you all right?"

"I..." he groaned and saw her turn white when she saw his arm.

"Don't you dare move. Take off your shirt." Her fingers went to the buttons, nearly ripping them off as she struggled to take it off his arms. His white undershirt was already sporadically stained red.

"Eager aren't we? Under other circumstances I would let you unzip my pants too."

"This is no time to make jokes."

But he saw the faint blush that crept up her cheeks as she tore the shirt into strips to bind his arm, to staunch the flow of blood. "Of course it's time to make jokes. Takes the mind off of...ow. Watch how tightly you bind that thing."

"It's never too tight. We should get you to the nearest emergency room as soon as possible."

"No. It's going to be impossible to report those muggers anyway. I know someone nearby who's a medic. You drive. I'll give the directions."

"How autocratic of you." But she helped him up anyway, staggering a little from

his height and weight.

“Hey, I’m letting you drive.”

“That’s not the same thing.” She held his arm around her shoulder even though he wasn’t limping.

He grinned a little but did not try to pull away. “All right, I’ll admit that.” They walked across campus, only encounter three or four passing students who did not give them a second glance. Reluctantly, he released her shoulders to dig in his pocket for his keys. “So what did you find out?”

“Sykes wasn’t that useful. I’ve only found out that The Rose is a sculpture.” She opened the door of his truck and watched him get in before getting in the driver’s seat herself. “Didn’t even say what it looked like.” She adjusted the chair so her feet could touch the pedals.

They backed out of the university parking lot without further incident and sped down the main road, Adrian making occasional remarks to turn right or left. They soon left the main center of Ridgefield and entered the eastern suburbs.

“So what did you find out from the professor?” asked Simone finally. She glanced beside her and watched her partner’s cheek turn an embarrassed ruddy color.

“She was more interested in flirting than answering my questions,” he replied reluctantly. “She said that she didn’t know anything, but I have this feeling that she was hiding something.”

“This is your intuition that’s talking to you?”

“And those cuff links I saw on her jacket. They looked a lot like the ones that guy had.”

“What guy?”

“The guy who crashed Caroline’s birthday party.”

“Maybe they just have the same tailor.”

“Maybe.”

Simone turned into a driveway that lead into a quaint house built with warm sienna brick and dark forest green shutters. It was a one story house that seemed to sprawl lazily across its land, quite sure of its possessiveness. A wooden fence circled the front yard but disappeared as it attempted to penetrate the wooded back yard. A happy yellow windmill stuck out in the middle of the front yard just outside of a circular garden ringed by flat gray stones. Gardenias and marigolds bloomed vibrantly among tulips, irises, and daisies. It was a brief oasis of chaotic color.

She hurried over to the other side to open the door for Adrian, but he had beaten her to it. “I’m not that much of an invalid,” he said smirking.

“Just tell that to the doctors when we find out you need stitching.”

At that moment, a golden retriever bounded out from nowhere, barking merrily and running straight at Adrian. It was a miracle that he was not trampled over. The dog ended up pawing on his legs, trying to get attention.

“No.” Simone commanded.

The retriever sat down, his tongue hanging out and eyed her with wide eyes. She barked once.

“Good dog.” She patted his head and rang the doorbell.

“How did you do that?” Adrian asked amazed. “Lollie never responds to anyone except her owner.”

“You have to be firm, I guess. Learned that with your silly cat who tried to sleep on my pillow.”

“Huh.”

The door opened wide, revealing a trim older woman with snow white hair. She was fairly tall, only a few inches shorter than Adrian. She wore a pastel blue dress with small white flowers. Around her waist was tied a white apron with faint splotches that looked like they were recently made. She smiled at Simone first since she was mostly in the doorway. Crinkles came easily around her clear eyes which were the same shade of gray as Adrian’s.

“Hello,” she said with a faint accent. “Are you selling something?”

“Actually...”

The woman looked up, finally spotting Adrian. Her mouth fell open in shock. “Adrian! What happened to you?”

“Hello Grandmere.”

She said some choice words in French about her grandson’s intelligence. “Come on in.” She waved an arm toward the interior. “Let’s come to the living room and see how it is.” She hurried off, leaving the two of them on the doorstep.

Adrian stepped inside first with Simone trailing, confused. “She’s your grandmother?”

“Yep.”

“Father’s side?”

“Nope. Mother’s side, Landeau.”

She whirled back into the living room carrying bandages, gauze, and various bottles that probably contained antiseptic. “You should have gotten to the hospital. You are a pathetic boy to come running to your grandmere.”

“Actually Simone tried to convince me to go to the emergency room but I made her come here.”

“Oh?” She turned briefly to survey his partner. “Simone is a very pretty traditional French name. Your mother must have been wise.”

“Actually she thought it would look good on my resume when I became a world famous artisan.”

“Humph. Let’s see what we’ve got here. This make-shift bandage is tied excellently.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled. “Is the wound bad?”

His grandmother clucked as she examined the flesh wound. Adrian craned his neck to see what was happening. “Looks like only a surface wound. No stitches.” She poured some antiseptic onto a swab. “This is going to hurt a little.”

Adrian gritted his teeth when the cotton touched his flesh. “A little?”

“Now stop complaining,” she replied. “You’ve got a pretty girlfriend to look over you.”

“He’s my business partner,” Simone clarified.

“Same difference.” She began tying the gauze and bandage. “There. Just don’t exert yourself and you’ll be good as new in a few days.” She turned to Simone to pat her shoulder. “Don’t worry, he’s a strong boy. And while you’re here, you might as well try the cake I baked today.”

“Er...thanks, Mrs. Landeau,” Simone replied, feeling awkward. “But...”

“No buts. Business partner you say? In Adrian’s investigation business.”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Makes sense. You probably spend entirely too much time trying to get my grandson out of trouble.”

Now that her partner was safely wrapped up in bandages and gauze, she realized that the surroundings did not indicate the typical old ladies home. The living room was a collection couches and throw rugs designed in the middle eastern style. The paintings that hung on the walls were an eclectic mix of renaissance prints and new age abstract art in soothing greens and blues. A quiet watery pond sat in the corner bubbling away among gray pebbles as the water was recycled.

The entrance to the kitchen was curtained off by a spray of wooden beads that varied from white, light brown, to ebony black. The kitchen itself looked conventional with the stove, microwave, and refrigerator across from a sink and cupboards, but the rest of the room was hung tiny little brass bells and festive red ribbons like some gypsy fair. On the center of the table lay a golden brown cake in the shape of a giant horseshoe on top of a cooling rack. Adrian’s grandmother was busy rummaging her cupboards for dishes and cups.

“Mrs. Landeau...”

“Call me Julienne. Mrs. Landeau sounds so old fashioned.”

Simone glanced at Adrian but he didn’t seem perturbed that his grandmother was giving out her first name to strangers she just met at her front door.

“We were just stopping by,” said Adrian.

“Stopping by?” His grandmother shook her head. “Sit down, the both of you. I am sure both of you need a break, hm? How’s Gavin?”

“I think he’s working on a case.”

“Gavin works too much.” She cut the cake and gave them each slices and poured the coffee before she sat down herself. She smiled. “Have you met Gavin, Simone?”

She nodded. “He’s very nice.”

Adrian scowled into his cup, wincing as he moved his arm at a slightly oblique angle. “Gavin doesn’t have an attention span.”

“Now, now.” His grandmother took a meditative sip. “I assume you got stabbed because of a case?”

“We’re not sure,” said Adrian.

“Of course it’s because of the case,” Simone contradicted. “What else could explain the odd things that have been happening lately?”

“You call getting attacked in your own home odd?” he shot back.

“Oh my,” said his grandmother, shocked. “So what did you do?”

“Well, Adrian was around at the time, so he attacked the attacker, so to speak,” Simone said, a mischievous glint lighting up her eyes.

“You take too many risks.”

Adrian gave a lopsided shrug at his grandmother’s accusation. “I couldn’t leave her at the mercy of some criminal or any other potential criminals.”

“I should hope not.”

“But that brings up an important question,” Simone said. “Why on earth did the Greenville butler break into my apartment as compared to a random thief?”

“Perhaps he is connected to this whole case,” Adrian replied. “After all, his

former employer was Greenville who had been studying this cult for years. Despite being banned from his study, the butler could have at any time his employer was away could have snuck into the study to look for whatever Greenville was researching.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why he came to my apartment.”

“Perhaps the butler is attached to the research. Maybe Greenville has a rival that he did not tell us about. Perhaps he was afraid that we might have found some information that might have put the other behind.”

“Could be.” She tapped a finger against her cup. “Then we’ll have to question him on any former employers. Or current employers for that matter. He doesn’t have to be solely employed to Greenville. Greenville could have been foolish enough in not checking his background.”

“I could help you with a reading,” Adrian’s grandmother spoke up. “I find that such things clear up a murky matter fairly well.”

Adrian groaned. “No thanks, grandmere. We’ve had a tarot reading recently and it didn’t look like we had a very good chance at figuring all this out quickly. In fact, chances looked bleak.”

“Don’t tell me you subscribe to Johnson’s cousin’s nonsense,” sighed Simone.

“Who said anything about a tarot reading?” said his grandmother.

“But you’ve always done readings.”

“Ah, you two wait right here and you’ll see what I have this time. I have been studying up on this method for a couple of months now and have done several readings. Perhaps this could shed light on a different angle?”

When she left, Adrian grumbled, “Perhaps she got a new deck and wants to break them in so to speak.”

When his grandmother came back, she held in her hands a polished wooden box that was a flat thin rectangular prism, unmarked except for small brass hinges. She placed it on the table and opened it, revealing a dark blue silk interior. She lifted up the folds of the cloth and took out a bundle of thin wooden sticks, resembling the children’s toy of pick up sticks, that were tied together with a dark blue ribbon. She untied it, letting the sticks lay in an inert pile on the table.

“Yarrow sticks,” she explained. “A form of stoichiometry. Divining with sticks. One of the basic forms for divining the I Ching.”

“I’ve read a little about it,” Simone gave a small grin. “My brother dabbled in some I Ching before really focusing on particle physics.”

She chuckled. “A good profession. Particle physics is actually a lot like divination, but it is more scientifically accepted.”

Simone raised an eyebrow, but did not decide to comment on the particularly odd remark.

“This will take only a couple of minutes.” She shifted the yarrow sticks in a seemingly haphazard pattern, subtracting sticks here, adding sticks there. In the end, she retrieved a piece of paper and a pencil from a drawer and drew a hexagram consisting of a series of six broken and unbroken lines.

“The top three is the first trigram,” she said, pointing to the top three broken lines. “This is called K’un or Earth because of the three broken lines. It is receptive. Attributes that can be brought to it is docility and receptivity. It also represents the ox, the abdomen, the mother, and the direction southwest. The bottom three is the second

trigram. It is called the flame. It is clinging. See the broken line flanked by two unbroken ones? Unsurprisingly, its attribute is brightness. It also represents the pheasant, the eye, the second daughter, and the direction south.”

“Together, this makes one of the sixty-four hexagrams in the I Ching. This one is called Ming I, or Darkening of the Light.” She stared at the hexagram for a moment, lost in thought. “This is a very ominous sign, I’m afraid.”

“Literally, this sign means the wounding of the light.” She glanced up at Adrian, her eyes flickering to his bandages. “Sounds like this one has already come true.”

“Tell us something that we don’t know,” Adrian remarked.

“Don’t be such an obtuse boy,” his grandmother retorted. “Let’s see here.” Her fingers traced the lines. “All these lines, especially the broken ones constantly refer to wounding. Perhaps there will be much blood spilled. Much violence. I don’t like this at all. There will be adversity, many unfavorable events. But on a more favorable note, you must keep up a perseverance, a will, to face upcoming difficulties. Veil yourselves so that the opposing forces can not see you.”

“Sounds rather metaphysical to me,” said Simone.

“No, this is applied to the physical world. Trust me. The image that this hexagram portrays is one of darkness. Some darkness, some authority figure in this whole scheme will rise up soon. But if you think fast and act on the opportune moment, you may overcome it. But don’t try to seize it in a direct way. That will only backfire. However, there will be a rescue from this darkness. It’s a possibility, especially if you realize what is happening around you. I suggest at that moment, you leave the imminent scene of disaster before the storm breaks.”

“You’re going to stay right here. Don’t attempt to do anything,” Simone said as she took the keys from his hand. “You’re not in any shape for any exertion.”

“I’m still going to the office,” Adrian protested.

She opened up the apartment door and turned around to glare at him. “No. Not even that. This is your chance to become a couch potato.”

“That does not make a very appealing scene.” Nevertheless, he headed toward the couch and sat down. Fuz who had been sleeping on the arm of the couch opened one eye and made his way toward his lap.

“Well, if you want to be useful, you can use the phone and call up some local art museums to see if they have the Rose,” Simone replied. She retrieved the cordless phone from a nearby table and dropped it beside him. “This should be a relatively safe job.”

“You want me to contact stuffy museum curators?” he asked in disbelief.

“I knew you could do it,” she replied breezily. She headed back toward the front door. “Fuz, make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble, okay?”

The small black kitten meowed and closed his eyes to go back to sleep.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m heading back to the office to get some equipment. I’m going to check out Professor Olivia Fitzgerald’s office.”

“You’re going back to the university?” he said surprised. “That’s dangerous.”

“Checking out a professor’s office is dangerous? Don’t worry, I’ll be in and out of there in no time.”

“But...”

Simone had already walked out and closed the door.

He sighed and laid his head at the back of the couch. "I should have known she would have turned this back to her advantage."

Fuz ignored him and just stretched his paws to get into a more comfortable position.

He began to flip through the phone book for the listings of local art museums and silently groaned at the long list that was presented. He wondered if it would be possible to foist the chore back to the secretary, but then realized that Danny was rather an air head and would possibly screw up the job one way or another by not asking the right questions or arousing suspicion too soon. Besides, Simone would disapprove of the tactic.

He made a couple calls, inquiring about a sculpture named The Rose, possibly by an anonymous artist and got negative answers. He looked at the next listing. Hermione's Elanne Antiquities. It sounded familiar. It also sounded more like a boutique shop than a museum. He dialed the number.

"Hermione's, how may I help you?" The voice sounded faintly like that of a woman.

"Hello. I'm calling to inquire about whether or not you have a particular piece in your collection."

"We have several collections. Exactly what is this piece?"

"I believe it is a sculpture entitled 'The Rose'. I am not quite sure if it was carved by an established artist or an anonymous one. It's supposed to be fairly old. Three hundred years, possibly."

"Ah. Indeed we do have a piece like that, on auction, I'm afraid. At the moment, there's already one bidder on it."

"Why haven't you just sold it?"

"We're actually waiting for a month to see if there are any other bidders."

"I have a client who may be interested in bidding for it."

"Very good. Would you like to come by to see the piece then?"

"Yes."

"Great."

* * *

Hermione's Elanne Antiquities was more like a small shop huddled between a few others on a little street in the southern district of Elanne. Adrian was sure that Simone would have objected to him coming out to see the museum although his cat Fuz didn't utter a peep. The lazy feline just kept on sleeping. You're taking a grave risk, he could hear her telling him. And in a way, she would be right, but he didn't see any muggers lurking around the more classier places in town, particularly a museum, no matter how small it was.

The proprietor, a dull mousey woman well into middle age who called herself Ms. Hermione Phelps, did not seem as excited as he would have expected with a potential bidder for one of the pieces in her museum. But then, he reasoned, if she had the piece for a while, she might have grown attached to it, very much like a child to his first teddy bear. But he didn't say so out loud and he glanced at the outer displays

first—some rather insipid water color landscapes and metal sculptures of indeterminate origin.

When Ms. Phelps caught him glancing at these pieces, she explained that the paintings were from a local artist approximately a hundred years ago who fancied himself a naturalist although his talent was less than mediocre. The paintings were not even worth compared to greats like Rembrandt or Raphael or Monet, but they did have a historical value, especially since they were painted during a time when art in Elanne was scarce. The sculptures were by a variety of artists even longer ago, two hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago, who were part of a local metal working movement that had been termed the Smelting School. The artists were all anonymous, but during the time, the sculptures were in high demand in the area, a sign of great status—although today they looked more like lumps of dejected iron ready to be thrown into the scrap yard.

But finally after the lecturing that he patiently endured, the proprietress led him to a back room that he noticed that someone had taken great pains to carefully illuminate. The room was painted black and there were pedestals placed every so often in the room so that it still created the illusion of space. Individual lights spotlighted the artifacts that were on display on each pedestal. Hermione Phelps pointed to near the back. All of items on display in the room were for auction.

The artifact that she pointed out was apparently made entirely of black marble. It was cubical and on the top was carved the picture of a rose. The sculpture itself was not impressive, something that looked to be easily mass reproduced in the modern age. There was nothing distinctive, no marking of who may have carved the thing.

It was The Rose, the proprietress explained, made three hundred years ago, most likely even longer. The stone, the black marble, actually came from a quarry in central Europe that was now completely exhausted. The artist was unknown for he did not make a mark anywhere, even on the bottom of the sculpture. It was not impressive, she agreed, but it did have some significance since it was supposedly associated with a cult that died out perhaps one or two hundred years ago. From that, Adrian pounced, asking if she knew anything about this cult, but she had shook her head saying that it was all she got from the solicitor who had delivered the sculpture to her. As for The Rose's previous owner, she could only say that it had been some old eccentric by the name of Randall who wanted to get rid of it. She doubted if he was still alive.

After reassuring her that she would get back to her on his client's bid, Adrian exited the museum feeling a little at a loss despite his astonishing success at locating the artifact. Somewhere, he believed that there was something that he was missing.

Standing on the sidewalk, pondering, he nearly missed the flash of gold at his feet. He picked the object up and observed the design. It was a cuff link composed of interlocking gold chains.

Simone arrived at the office just as Danny was turning off her computer and getting her things ready to leave.

"Ms. Sung! I thought you and Mr. Dubois were at Ridgefield University doing some research for your current case."

"It fizzled out prematurely," she replied. "Some complications arose and well, I'm just back to get some equipment to go back to the university."

"So did you make any headway?"

“Yeah. You could say. Hard to tell for sure at the moment though.”

Danny shook her head. “I got a call from Detective Martinez about an hour ago and thought I would let you know tomorrow, but since you’re here...”

“Well, what did the detective want?”

“Well, he rambled on first about how the results on his search on some guys that you requested hadn’t come in yet and that you should expect to have it sometime next week by the earliest.”

She rolled her eyes. “Figured. Those pencil pushers in the police department are notorious for their procrastination.”

“Well, here’s the important part. It didn’t mean much to me, but Detective Martinez said it was important for you guys. Early this morning he said he got called up to case a homicide site up in northern Elanne, Yared Drive I think. Found some old guy dead in his home. The old guy was living with his blind cousin who was all blabbering and crazy and sent immediately to the city sanitarium to be checked out. Probably to be transferred to some old people’s home since he doesn’t have anyone to care for him now.”

“So what was this old guy’s name?” Simone asked, already knowing the answer.

“Johnson something or other. No. It was Sherman Johnson I think.”

“Did Martinez say anything else about the crime? How did Johnson get murdered? Do the police have any leads? Any clues around the scene of the crime?”

Danny shook her head. “The detective didn’t have much to say after that. He said if you wanted the specifics, you should go call on him sometime. But he did say that the Johnson fellow got stabbed.”

“Hmm. That doesn’t say much. I guess we’ll have to pay the good detective a visit soon. Maybe tomorrow.”

“So Ms. Sung you know this guy?”

“Actually Adrian and I had an interview with him and his cousin the other day. He didn’t give out much information though.”

“So it has something to do with the case?” Danny whistled. “Gosh. Do you think this is going to get dangerous?”

“Yeah,” Simone mused. “And it seems as if time is running short.”

* * *

She arrived on the campus of Ridgefield University just after dusk. Surely, she made her way quickly to the humanities building where Professor Olivia Fitzgerald held her office. Simone had changed to black before arriving to her destination. Campus security was nowhere in sight as she crept to the window that led to the professor’s window and thanked the powers that be that the office was on the first floor.

Light poured out from the panes. She laid just beneath the window for a moment, listening to any sounds. Nothing. She peeked above the window ledge and saw the back of the woman’s head. She was leaning against a padded chair, behind a desk and surrounded by books. She was on the phone.

“No, I don’t know how he knew.” Fitzgerald sounded irritated. “I’m not sure who told him. What? Someone within? I don’t know. Could be.” For a moment she listened to the voice on the other side and tapped her fingers on the desk. “Ferret out the man

inside? You expect me to sleep with all of them? God, are you perverted?"

Simone slunk back down, crouching on her knees. It looked like the professor was working late tonight.

She heard Fitzgerald sigh. "I sincerely don't know. How on earth could the board be convinced that the department needs more funding? I don't know, talk to someone more influential like Biegbeder for instance. He's the head of the department, not me." There was another moment's pause. "Yeah. Already did that. But you know what? I have no time for any of your other dirty work. Get someone else with more brawn than brains." She slammed the receiver down. "Damn it."

She tried sneaking another peek, but the professor had gotten out of her chair. "Damn it. This jacket lost a button. And I don't have a replacement."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

The door made an audible squeak. "Ready to go?" The voice sounded familiar. Simone sneaked a peek and saw that it was the greasy graduate student she had spoken to earlier, Randy Sykes.

"God, I have a terrible headache. I talked to him just a second ago."

"He gives everyone terrible headaches," Sykes commiserated. "He thinks he's God. Or close to it."

Fitzgerald laughed. "You're right, Randy. You know, I was thinking of staying late today, you know, thinking that the private investigator might drop by for some after hours entertainment."

"Well, he didn't show up."

"No he didn't. I'm disappointed, but not surprised. He ran like a frightened rabbit when I jumped him."

"Jumped him? Not your usual style, Olivia."

"Well, I don't know. I just took one look at him and wanted him. Ever had those times Randy?"

"Many."

"Yeah. He's one to get a girl's libido up and running. But he's not here."

"Figures," said Sykes. "I had a talk with his partner who wanted to know something about the Rose. Told her maybe it was in a museum."

Fitzgerald laughed. "Museum? That's a good one Randy. You just didn't give away..."

"Well."

"You did didn't you?" There was a momentary silence. "Well no matter. There's no way they can get it. A slip of the tongue like that again, Randy, could cost you."

"But she was..."

"It doesn't matter what she was. You should have kept your head out of your pants. It's bad enough that you're always drooling around those undergraduates."

"Well, how about you? You jumped him."

"That's another matter entirely."

"It isn't. You could have given something away and not have known it."

"Could I?" She began sounding worried. "Well. What's done is done. I'm famished. I know this place a couple blocks over. Serves great Thai food."

Sykes groaned. "More spicy food? It gives me indigestion."

“There’s a donut shop next door,” she pointed out. “You can go gorge yourself on greasy baked goods instead. Come on or we’ll be late.”

When Simone finally heard the door close, she looked back up through the window and found the light off. Carefully, she opened the window without a sound and climbed in and turned on a pencil flashlight. Quickly, she rummaged in Fitzgerald’s desk drawers and found only innocuous looking academic papers. The top of her desk turned up similarly looking items.

She soon turned her attention to the bookshelf lining one wall of the office and scanned the titles, all rather dry looking toms that might have needed more airing than reading. The binding of one book caught her eye. It looked older than the others beside it, the cover peeling a little. She took it out and saw no title. But as she flipped to the title page, she saw the letters spelling out, “A History on the Black Vipers.” Taking out a camera and positioning the flashlight at an appropriate angle, she took pictures of all the pages that had illustrations.

After placing the book back on the shelf, she scanned the books again, finding nothing that struck her. But at the end, acting as a bookend was a hefty volume of ‘War and Peace’. Intrigued since it seemed out of place that a history professor should have a piece of literature, she grabbed the copy with one hand and held the other books in place with another hand. Opening it, she found that the book was hollow and inside was a small pamphlet printed in a foreign language and an envelope bearing a broken seal. The title was “L'operazione del Sorto” and a small illustration of a rose was printed beneath it. Putting the false book back in place, she photographed the pages of the pamphlet that numbered a total of ten pages, the envelope, and the letter inside which was in English.

The doorknob to the office suddenly rattled.

Simone shoved the items back into ‘War and Peace’ and leaped out the window, landing on the concrete outside, scraping her hands. She crouched as the light turned on and she heard voices. It was the professor and her graduate student acolyte. Why were they doing back so early?

“Damn. I forgot my coat. You know, I have to get another button to replace this. The tailor won’t be too happy to make it again,” said Fitzgerald.

“Why worry about it? He shouldn’t complain since he gets paid double for it all.”

“That’s true.”

After a few more comments, the duo departed for the second time. Simone let out a breath, glad that she wasn’t caught. If she had been, Adrian would have gloated over her and her incompetence. She gritted her teeth at the thought. Well, at least she had something to show for the risk.

Chapter 10

Mrs. Leadbetter, the neighborhood spinster and gossip extraordinaire was evidently waiting in ambush at the landing to the floor where his apartment was on.

“I see your business partner has moved in with you,” she cackled.

“It’s just temporary,” Adrian replied coolly, attempting to get past her despite his broad shouldered frame. “Simone’s getting her apartment renovated and I

suggested she come crash over at my place in the mean time.”

“Well, you’d better be careful.”

“Careful?”

“You’d better not take advantage of her. She’s a nice girl.”

“Me?” He replied astonished. “But she’s my partner.”

“Yes you. You’re a good looking boy, but make sure you keep your mind in your head and not elsewhere.”

“Er...yes ma’am.”

Evidently satisfied, the old woman stepped back allowing him to pass.

A bit confused, he opened his apartment door to find Simone sitting on the couch, legs and arms crossed. His cat was sitting on the arm of the couch. Both of them were glaring at him.

“You won’t believe who I just saw. Mrs. Leadbetter. Just when did you get chummy with her, Simone?”

She frowned. “I talked to her when I got back. She’s a nice old lady who’s just a little lonely. But that’s beside the point. Where exactly were you?”

“Are you trying to act the suspicious housewife with me?” he asked in an amused tone as he headed toward the kitchen to grab a drink. “So you care if I was having a torrid affair with the secretary?”

“You know that’s not what I’m asking about.” She had gotten up and followed him, blocking the exit to the kitchen. “You weren’t supposed to be wandering around in your condition.”

“It’s just a scratch.”

“Just a scratch?” she said in disbelief. “I saw how much blood was spurting out of the wound. Don’t tell me a stab wound is just a damn scratch.”

He grinned and poured the water in a glass and took a gulp. “Didn’t know you cared.”

Her brows furrowed. “You’re too stubborn.”

“Look, I didn’t get myself killed while you were away,” he said as he trailed her back to the living room. She took back her customary seat and glared up at him. The cat followed suit. “Aw, Simone that should count for something. And Fiz why are you looking at me like that. It wasn’t as if you objected when I left. You just slept.”

“Oh, and now you’re talking to a cat?” said Simone amused. “Are you sure you didn’t catch a secondary infection that is just now making it to your brain?”

“All right. If you want me to explain myself. I found out where the Rose was being housed. Some museum boutique shop on the other side of town. Called Hermione’s Elanne Antiquities.”

“How quaint,” Simone replied. “But I’m afraid it might all be a lost cause. I overheard Professor Olivia Fitzgerald say that it would be impossible to obtain the artifact.”

“Not so fast,” he said smugly. “I talked to the proprietress of the museum and it happens that the Rose is on auction. We just tell Thomson about it, he bids on it, and our job is done.”

“That sounds so easy. I also took some photographs of some interesting things in Fitzgerald’s office. I dropped them off to be developed on my way back. They should be done tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess we could look at the pictures,” he said reluctantly, “although I don’t see how it would affect this any. I also found this.” He held up the golden cuff link he had picked up.

Simone squinted. “That looks like what that guy at Caroline’s party had on his sleeve. But then again, the most likely culprit might be the professor herself. Her jacket lost a button.”

“Well, I’ll say she might be on our list of ‘suspects’ or rather Thomson’s rival. All of this is history related stuff, she might be trying to obtain the Rose for her own research.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Simone finally leaned back. “It’s sort of making sense now, but this doesn’t tell us how the murder fits into this.”

“What murder?” Adrian asked sharply.

“Johnson’s murder. Danny got a call from Martinez about it.”

* * *

Martinez downed the rest of the morning coffee before eyeing the two private investigators with a dark gaze. “Figured you two would come prancing in here sooner or later. Well, what do you want?”

“Information on Sherman Johnson’s murder,” Simone replied.

“I don’t have the specifics on me. And you can’t see the report at the moment, it’s classified for some reason or other.”

“Classified as in the government is in this?” asked Adrian surprised.

“No, no. Just that the commissioner wants the fewest number of people to know about it. It was a really bizarre case if I ever heard and he’s not going to let anyone, not the media, not the neighbors to question anything until he finds out who’s behind it.” Martinez motioned toward his office. “Let’s talk in here. Less chance of being overheard, eh?”

Simone looked around her, noting the absence of other officers. “So where’s everyone?”

“Back at the scene of the crime, I’d say,” the detective replied, “Probably scouring the site for clues although any sort of clue should have been picked up by now.”

They entered the office with Martinez closing the door behind them.

“Well.” The detective took a seat behind his desk and motioned them to sit in the visitor chairs. “I’m afraid I’m not working on the case personally and I haven’t been up there—the commissioner has me working on a different case that for the moment requires me to be a pencil pusher.” He smiled wryly. “In any case, I thought this would be of interest to you since you met the deceased a few days ago. I took the liberty of asking some questions here and there to some of the guys working on it. Seems like Johnson was stabbed. Once in the chest which immediately killed him.”

“That seems rather cut and dry,” said Adrian.

“Wait. There’s more. Johnson’s body was also carved on the stomach. With the initials I, V, S. We don’t know what it stands for. The murderer’s initials? Some sort of secret organization? Something else altogether different?”

Simone tapped a finger to her chin. “I don’t know. Those initials sound awfully

familiar. But I can't see how. I don't know anyone with those initials."

"Me either," said Adrian.

Martinez leaned back in his chair. "Anyway, they didn't find anything else around except Johnson's strange blind cousin. At first, they wanted to arrest the man for murder, but it was obvious that he was incapable of doing it. I mean a blind man?"

Simone and Adrian glanced at each other. "Sometimes blindness is not a deterrent," she said.

"Well, he seemed mentally not there, you know. Wasn't very responsive to people around him, even when they questioned him, he didn't seem to know his cousin was around, thought he was at a grocery store. So they took him to a state institute since obviously he can't take care of himself now that Johnson's gone."

"Was there anything odd at the house then?" Adrian asked. "Did it look like it had been searched?"

Martinez shook his head. "Nope. Nothing really odd was lying around the victim's body. No sign of the murder weapon. Nothing really seemed out of place. The victim himself didn't even appear to have struggled. I'd say that the victim knew his murderer and willingly let him in the house. The murderer then probably took the guy by surprise."

Simone watched, impressed, as Adrian carried the huge package that contained her new window up the flights of stairs to her apartment without showing any signs of exertion.

"Are you sure you're not a superhero in disguise?" she asked.

"Nah. I'm not much for saving damsels in distress."

"From personal experience, I'd say you're being too modest."

"Modest? Really. Hurry up with the door. I can't hold this much longer."

She gave him a long look. It looked like he was just carrying a light bag of groceries instead of a hefty window. "If you say so," she replied doubtfully slipping her key into her door.

Back in the apartment, Adrian strolled to the kitchen to place the new window down. He frowned as he examined the old broken window. "Anyone could have gotten into here while you were away."

"Yeah. But I don't have anything worth stealing except maybe the VCR and the television, but that's still here, so I doubt anyone got in here the last couple of days."

"So you need help installing the window?" he asked.

"Not really. I called up some local maintenance workers. Windows are their specialty." She leaned against a counter, seemingly lost in thought. "I'll make sure that they'll reinforce it or whatever so that chances of breaking in would be reduced."

Adrian shrugged. "If you want to."

"Are you suggesting that you are a window expert?" she said amused. "Somehow, I find it hard to picture."

"Well," he said changing gears. "I called Thomson earlier. He said he would get on to bidding and that our job is done. According to him anyway. He's sending the payment directly to our business account."

She sighed. "It's done then. But I can't help feeling as if we're missing something important."

"What do you mean?"

“Johnson’s murder for one thing. I keep thinking of those letters that were carved onto his body. Isn’t that the initials for the Italian translation of *The Dark Vipers*?”

“Yeah.” He hesitated for a moment. “You mean ‘*Il Viper Scuro*’.”

“Exactly. It’s the work of the Dark Vipers. They’re still alive and well despite what Thomson thinks.”

“So history hasn’t totally obliterated them. I see. But why would the Dark Vipers want Johnson dead? He doesn’t have the Rose.”

“But perhaps he knew too much. And the strange things that have been happening are too patterned to be coincidental. There’s a large chance that many of the people we’ve met are related to all of this. But why all of this just for a block of marble that has a rose carved on it?”

“Don’t be so naive, Simone. People have killed for less. There’s always trouble brewing around anything of value like jewels or artifacts or important documents.”

“If so, they must be more than a little cracked if they expect some relic to bring them fortune or fame.”

“Isn’t that a given since it’s some sort of cult?” Adrian said grinning. “They always attract wackos.”

“It’s not just that,” she trailed off. She looked back at the window. “I guess I’ll be waiting for the repairmen and checking on stuff here, to see if anything is missing despite the fact that my most expensive equipment is still here.”

“Mind if I stick around?”

“It’s going to be boring,” she replied. “Besides, I haven’t picked up those pictures of Professor Olivia Fitzgerald’s office yet. You could do it.”

He gave a halfhearted groan. “Really. You’re treating me like a slave today, making me haul that window for you up several flights of stairs, and now sending me to fetch pictures.”

“Well, you don’t look exhausted to me.”

He laughed. “Is that your goal? To work me to exhaustion?”

Her lips tilted upward. “You don’t have to do whatever I say.” She reached out to tuck a strand of hair that had fallen over his face behind his ear. When she realized what she was doing, she suddenly jerked her hand away, embarrassed that she had momentarily stepped out of the imaginary boundary of business partners to something else.

He caught her hand before she could tuck it into a pocket and brought it back up to his face so that it touched his jaw. He gazed at her surprised face for a moment.

“Don’t be afraid.” He brushed his lips briefly against her lower palm.

Simone forcibly pulled her hand away from his grasp and scowled. “Is that what you think? I’m not afraid of you.”

“I’m not saying that you’re afraid of me. You’re afraid of what we could be.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she replied. But her face appeared flushed and her hands were slightly trembling. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” He turned to go out the door. “I’ll get the pictures. I’ll be back soon.”

* * *

Simone sank back on her couch, both deflated and numb. She supposed she was in a sort of shock after hearing Adrian voice what she had thought had been kept locked tightly away. She rubbed her hands, wishing she would stop shivering, wishing that the window would be changed soon, wishing that she could move back into her own apartment and huddle under blankets, a lot like the cowardly ostrich who stuck his head in the sand when trouble was coming.

The doorbell rang, bringing her out of her thoughts. Two scruffy looking men, their faces obscured by their cap that said “Wells Brothers Repairs”, scuttled in. Each carried a battered wooden tool box as well as a couple other tools hooked onto their belts. They were like two moles in gray overalls.

“Ms. Sung?” one of them asked, taking out a crumpled sheet of paper. “You wanted a window repaired?”

“Yes.” She pointed to the kitchen. “I just got a new window so all it needs is to be reinstalled. Thanks for coming by.”

“No problem, miss,” the other rasped. “This will take no time.”

Both of them shuffled to the kitchen. One of them, she noticed, limped a little causing an odd thumping gait that she brushed off. A lot of people limped. Soon she heard much pounding and banging. She wasn’t sure that replacing a window caused that much noise, but she went to her bedroom anyway to check her closet.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she found that her documents, as well as some equipment that she had stashed away was still intact. Abruptly, the noises from the kitchen stopped. She strained her ears, but could hear nothing. She grasped for a small hand-held pistol and stuffed it in her waist band before carefully opening her bedroom door. No one was around.

She crept out, straining her ears again. Nothing.

Something squeaked.

Simone turned her head rapidly, only to feel something coming around her throat. She screamed and it tightened, threatening to cut off her air. She reached up to pull it off and kicked behind her. Someone groaned. Using new found leverage at the loosening arm at her neck, she twisted, attempting to slash at her attacker’s head with an arm. She and her attacker crashed into a nearby wall and she saw something fall out of the man’s pocket.

Lashing out again, she finally got herself free and saw that it was one of the repairmen who had attacked her. She kicked out, intending to hit his head, but he moved at the last moment and she only slashed at thin air. The man grabbed her leg and pulled her to the floor.

“Hurry!” he cried.

Simone tried to sit up, but the other repairman who she had temporarily forgotten, slammed something hard against her head. Sharp pain shot up her temples and she winced. A piece of cloth was jammed into her face and she could smell something cloying and over-sweet. The pain in her head throbbed a few more times. She tried moving her arms, but it was like moving in molasses. Her vision dimmed as she fell limply to the floor.

* * *

Out of curiosity, Adrian sat in his truck flipping through the photographs that Simone had taken of the professor's office. There were a couple of odd illustrations that seemed to be engravings from several hundred years ago that depicted demons and monsters and spirits under the command of a robed figure who evidently was either the witch or wizard who commanded the summoned creatures. There was the picture of a broken seal that he could make out as one of them, a snake among a bed of black roses.

The letter from the envelope was marginally more interesting. It appeared to be an invitation of some sort to come to a celebration and summoning that promised that all its members would reap the benefits of the fame and fortune that would come from obtaining the mysterious Rose.

But what caught his eye was the pictures of the pamphlet written in Italian. "L'operazione del Sorto" which from his knowledge of French and Latin, he supposed it translated roughly to "The Operation of the Rose." The first few pages appeared to be directions for the set up of the Rose and building some sort of circle where the summoned spirit was supposed to be contained as well as some sort of sacrifice that was supposed to be offered—part of controlling the spirit or demon apparently. The last couple of pages seemed to be some sort of philosophical rant about the whole meaning and purpose of the ritual.

Adrian shoved the pictures back into their envelope and drove back to Simone's apartment, confident that the information he gleaned would be of some use. Briefly, his thoughts roamed back to her expression when he had last left her. He knew his remark had been terribly unsubtle, but had he said it too soon? Had he truly scared her? His fingers involuntarily tightened on the steering wheel. More than anything, he wanted to know what she thought.

He stopped at Simone's apartment building, noticing that a gray truck with the words "Wells Brothers Repairs" painted in red on the side. He strolled to the building and took the stairs, two at a time, only to arrive at the landing to see that two older men in their underwear had been tied together and gagged. He ripped the gags off.

"What happened?"

"Some goons stole our clothes, that's what," spluttered one of the men angrily. "We were just here on a routine job to restore a window, you know?"

"Yes, I know. Who were these men?"

The other man shrugged. "Don't know. Didn't get a good look at them since they covered their faces with our hats. But they got into the apartment of a Ms. Sung. Haven't seen them come out yet, though."

"Simone's in there with them?" Adrian stormed to the apartment door. "Simone!"

"Hey, would you mind untying us?"

"I'll call the police for you," he said without looking back. He knocked on the door and tried the doorbell. No one answered. He turned the doorknob and to his surprise, the door opened soundlessly.

The lights were still on, but it was obvious that there had been some struggle. Papers were scattered on the floor, a lamp had been kicked over. In the kitchen, tool boxes were scattered about, but there was no indication that the window repairs had

even been attempted. He noticed that on the broken window, a shred of gray fabric was clinging to a shard. So the culprits had gotten away through the window. He looked outside, but the fire escape was empty.

“Simone!” he called again.

No one answered.

Frustrated, he slammed a fist against the kitchen counter, no caring if it hurt. Where was she? He wandered back into the living room, intending to find the phone, to call the police although he doubted any of them would do anything since most of the force was occupied with scouring for clues on Johnson’s murder. He passed a hand over his eyes, wishing he had stayed with her instead when he almost tripped on something.

Looking down at his feet, he saw a man’s wallet. He picked it up seeing that it was relatively new. There was no identification in it, but there were a few bills and a receipt for a local restaurant. There was also a business card that said “Hermione’s Elanne Antiquities.”

Sensing a little renewed hope and hesitant to let it slip through his fingers, he dialed the number to the museum on Simone’s phone. On the other end, he heard ringing. He waited and it continued ringing until he heard a click and an answering machine.

“Hermione’s Elanne Antiquities. The museum is currently closed. Our hours are from nine to five. If you are calling about an auctioned item, please leave your name and telephone number as well as which item you are inquiring about. We will get back to you as soon as possible.”

He slammed the receiver back into its cradle before he heard the final beep of the answering machine. There was no one there. But that didn’t mean that the kidnapers weren’t there either. He took a few breaths to calm himself and picked up the phone again to dial the number to Martinez’s office.

“Hello?” The detective drawled on the other end.

“It’s me, Martinez.”

“Ah, Dubois. Nice to hear your voice again. What is it?”

“Simone’s gone.”

“What do you mean? You asked her out and she fled? Can’t blame her.”

“No, that’s no what I mean. She’s gone. Somebody...kidnapped her.”

“How do you know?”

“The repairmen that were supposed to come to her house? Someone ambushed them and got into her apartment.”

“Geez. You’re sure about this, aren’t you? Look. I’m afraid you’ll have to handle this yourself.”

“What? There’s this whole cult of crazies out there and you’re saying that I’m to handle this myself? I’m not one of them. I’m not crazy.”

“I’m not saying that,” Martinez said through the phone. “It’s just that you called just as I was to leave to investigate the Johnson crime scene. The commissioner had me switched cases. I’m not happy about it, but you know what the boss says, goes.”

“And the repairmen that were ambushed?”

“That doesn’t sound like top priority for the department at the moment,” said the detective. “Just tell them to go to the office and file a complaint with our pencil pushers. We’ll get to it as soon as possible.”

After Martinez hung up on him, he had an urge to fling the offending phone out the window. Instead, he stormed back outside and ripped the cords off the Wells brothers, furiously trying to think of a way out of the predicament.

“Hey, thanks man. So when are the police getting here?”

Adrian shook his head. “They told me they were too busy. You’re to go to the police department yourselves and file a complaint.”

“Well, what is this world coming too?”

He did not stay to hear the other man respond. He quickly ran down the stairs back to his truck. A sense of urgency propelled him to go faster. The kidnappers had not issued a ransom, but that did not mean that they even planned to. Time seemed to be critical.

The late afternoon sun was slowly descending as he slammed the door of his truck and shoved the key in. It would only be about an hour or two before twilight fell.

Adrian stopped his truck about a block away from the small museum. In the darkening light, the street became all shadows and dark lines. It was difficult to tell where anything was. Swiftly, he got out of the truck and walked toward Hermione’s Elanne Antiquities, glancing in at the windows. The shop looked dark and closed. An iron grate came over the door and a sign proclaiming its closed status and hours hung haphazardly in the front. He stuck a hand to knock on the door. When no one answered, he stuck his hand through the grate to try the doorknob. It didn’t budge.

For a moment, he stood in the building’s shadow wondering if he had made a mistake, if Simone was at that moment somewhere else, helpless in the face of several attackers. He thought about breaking the glass to get in, but then remembered that museums of any caliber had alarm and security systems.

A moving shadow he saw from the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned, thinking he saw something disappearing into a nearby alley way. Unconsciously, his right hand rested against his jacket, in the place where he had at the last moment stashed a revolver. The police may have deemed a kidnapping not worthy of their attention, but that didn’t mean that he would go into any situation unprepared. Quickly, he followed where he thought the shadow went and discovered himself in a dark alley way with two sheer brick walls on either side. As he walked through the alley, he noticed that the other side was getting darker instead of lighter. It was another brick wall. A dead end.

He let out a frustrated breath. Was he going to spend all night futilely chasing imaginary shadows? He leaned against one of the walls attempting to slow down his harsh breathing, trying to clear his mind to think logically. That was when he heard a scraping behind him. Hastily, he turned around, initially not seeing anything. He took out a pocket flashlight and shined it against the wall, examining each brick. One of them, about shoulder height, seemed to be slightly indented inward into the building. Curiously, he put his hand on it and pushed. The brick moved further inward, scraping softly until he heard a faint click.

An entire portion of the wall seemed to roll away, revealing a dark hole that was illuminated faintly by red pulsing light. He stepped forward and suddenly felt a whoosh of air behind him. When he looked back, he saw that the wall had closed up. Ahead the passageway sloped downward. The light came from periodic light fixtures on the ceiling and the walls and floor were made of stern concrete. He turned off his flashlight

and followed the path, listening for any abnormal sound, but only hearing his own footsteps and breathing.

After a minute, the passageway widened out into a small antechamber that in itself looked like a dead end. The chamber was circular and also lit in red. It was empty except for a few boxes stashed at one end and a complicated network of pipes that lined the walls. Looking into one box, he found only yards of cloth. As he stood there, he heard footsteps.

There was a little space between the piping and the wall, so he slid into this cramped hyperspace to watch who arrived. It appeared to be a man and woman. "Hurry," one of them said, "We're almost late." The other nodded, and they went to the boxes, pulling out the dark fabric. They turned out to be long robes which the two quickly loped over their heads. Once they were dressed, they stood in the middle of the room. One of them crouched over and touched something on the floor. A whirring noise could be heard and the section of the floor depressed and the two were taken to a lower level like an elevator.

When the floor returned back to normal without the two people, Adrian squeezed out of his hiding place and hastily donned a robe. At the last moment, he took another and stashed it inside his jacket. Like the ones before, he stood in the center of the chamber and knelt down, searching for whatever mechanism that they had activated. There was a slight depression on one section of the floor. When he moved his finger over it, he heard the elevator mechanism start and the floor beneath him move.

For a moment, there was total darkness until the floor stopped. In front of him, he saw another tunnel, this one suffused with cooler blue light. Hastily, he got off the transport mechanism and traversed the tunnel, and in a few moments, he found himself facing three portals, ones on either side and another directly in front. Since the ones before him had already passed, he was temporarily at a loss to which door he was to choose. He turned the knob to the door in front of him and it came way easily.

There was noise in the room and it was lit with regular white light abet poorly. Cages lined the walls. Some of the cages were smaller and held animals like dogs and cats and goats. Further in the room were larger cages. Some were empty. Some held people, but they were obviously dead considering the knives stuck in their chests. A soft groan from nearby caught his attention. In one of the cages near the end, a small woman huddled in the corner. Adrian practically ran, and seeing that the cages could be open from the outside but not the inside, he flung the door open.

"Simone!"

She slowly turned her face toward his voice and opened her mouth. Nothing came out. Her face was pale, ashen. He lifted her out of the cage, hugging her, calling out her name.

"Adrian, where am I?" Her voice was faint as she clutched his arms, her face buried against the folds of his cloak. "All I remembered was the chloroform they used to drug me. Oh god, my head. I have the most horrible headache."

"Are you all right?"

"Just hold on a moment." She breathed in deeply. "In a couple of moments, I'll have my head cleared. Where are we?" she repeated.

"I don't know. We're in some underground compound beneath Hermione's Elanne Antiquities. I don't know what this place is, but we have to get out of here."

“Wait a minute.” Something flashed in her eyes. Simone was nearly back to her normal self. “Perhaps we could see what this place is first. Where did you get that cloak?”

He sighed. “Why am I not surprised that you’re still this headstrong after being kidnapped? Here.” He withdrew the extra cloak he took with him. “I followed others down to this place, but got lost around here. Come on, I’ll show you.”

She tugged the cloak over her head and followed him out of the room. “Is this some sort of slaughter house?” she remarked as she passed the cages with the dead victims. “Do the police know? Did you bring back up?”

“Martinez said no. The commissioner is diverting all manpower to working on the Johnson murder case.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as odd, though?” she remarked.

“Yeah. And I don’t like it one bit.”

They came back out into the tunnel with the blue light, only to encounter another cloaked figure coming from the opposite direction. The other did not seem at all fazed at their appearance. Instead, it just nodded to Adrian and Simone and opened one of the other doors and walked through. They followed.

“Checking on the blood sacrifices?” the man ahead of them said.

“Yes,” Adrian replied curtly. “They’re all in order.”

“Good. I think we’re almost late though. Greenville doesn’t tolerate much tardiness, especially for something like this.”

“Greenville?” Simone hissed.

Adrian squeezed her arm in warning.

The passageway emptied out into a large hall lit with torches and candles at the corners. But most of the room was unlit. People in cloaks littered the outer perimeter around a large circle that had been painted on the dark floor. A platform stood on the opposite end. One of the black cloaked figures stood up there, his only distinguishing feature a golden chain linked about his neck in the same pattern that characterized the cuff link that Adrian had found earlier. There was also a pedestal on the platform and a cubical object stood on top of it. The Rose.

Adrian and Simone made themselves to the back of the crowd, yet staying near the entrance. The figure with the necklace spoke. It was Thomson, or rather Greenville. He spoke in a bastardized form of Latin, droning in a monotonous litany. The rest of the congregation bowed their heads and they followed suit as not to be discovered.

A cold biting breeze began at their feet, blowing inward, toward the enclosed circular area. The wind moved upward and noticeably people’s cloaks began to rustle. Greenville continued chanting. A harsh noise, not dissimilar to breathing, came from the center of the room and suddenly all of the lights went out, plunging the room into a Stygian darkness. There were gasps around them from surprised, and possibly frightened, Dark Viper members. Something faintly glowed from the center of their engraved circle. A dark thin, slithering shadow.

Someone screamed. The shadow hissed, whipping backward and the scream was silenced. There was a moment when everything seemed to freeze. A few people had lit torches and in the center of the room, they saw a huge serpentine thing with a large mouth full of dark teeth. Its eyes were red with yellow slitted pupils. It hissed softly and blinked. Its eyelids opened and closed horizontally instead of vertically. Greenville

started chanting again, but was hushed when the creature whipped its head about and swallowed the man whole.

People started screaming again and Adrian grasped Simone's elbow. "We have to get out of here!" he yelled.

They and about twenty other people crammed into the tunnel leading outside. They heard a loud hiss and the lights went out again. Wherever they stepped, there seemed to be water trickling along the ground. Resolutely, they plunged forward clasping each others hand as to not lose each other. When they reached the intersection, the blue light was flickering, in danger of going out. Adrian turned on his flashlight. Blood was draining out of the tunnel.

A cloaked figure was following them. The hood was thrown back, revealing the face of Professor Olivia Fitzgerald, her face white with fear. "Oh god," she panted as she steadied herself at the edge. "What the hell was that thing?"

Suddenly a long tentacled thing latched onto her foot and she toppled to the ground screaming. The thing dragged her back toward where they had previously been.

"Come on!" Adrian cried, tugging at Simone.

They ran down the blue tunnel and jumped on the elevator mechanism. He bent over, feeling the floor for the button that would take them up. Simone glanced up to see a large trunk-like thing with writhing vines off shooting from it rise toward them. The vines looked like tiny snakes attacked to the trunk by their tails. They whipped themselves about, their mouths sharp and hungry. She took out her pistol and fired. The things shrieked.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" Adrian shouted.

"I'm trying to buy us some time." She fired again.

Finally his fingers brushed against the button and the elevator moved. As they came in sight of the red illuminated chamber, the elevator halted.

"Oh my god," Simone muttered as he immediately hoisted her above the edge. He grabbed the edge and climbed over just as the elevator crumbled beneath his feet.

They ran again, only to be stopped by the wall that Adrian had passed through earlier. Simone found a lever and pulled it. The brick door slid open. Adrian stepped outside, only to hear a scream. Looking back, Simone had fallen to the floor, desperately trying to clutch the concrete sides. Something had caught at her feet. He picked up Simone's dropped pistol and fired once into the darkness. There was an enraged hiss as she gasped, struggling to right herself. Instead of waiting, he scooped her up and pounded out of the alley, down one block to where his truck was parked.

The twisting snake-like tentacles oozed out of the building, crawling along the street until one of the tentacles knocked over a nearby fire hydrant. A geyser of water spewed out, showering the entire area with a thick blanket of water. They heard a frightening screech and where the thing used to be, a plume of steam rose, coating the dark air with a thick cloud of gray smoke.

Epilogue

Fiz meowed and watched curiously as Adrian spread salve over Simone's ankle and wrapped a bandage over it.

“Next time, be more careful.”

“Ha,” she replied crossing her arms. But her face did not show a resentful expression. “Thanks, though.”

“Don’t mention it. That’s what partners are for, right?” he grinned.

“It wasn’t a joke, Adrian.”

“I know.” He finished tying up the bandage and sat beside her, nudging the black kitten away. Miffed, Fiz turned his tale and trotted to the opposite side of the couch. “I should have been more careful; I should have stayed with you when you were having your windows fixed.”

“It’s not your fault.” She sighed. “And at this rate, I’ll never have my windows fixed. I mean, who would come if they knew they were going to be ambushed?”

“I’ll fix it for you.”

“Right.”

“Hey, I’m not as handyman impaired as you might think.”

“I just know you’ll make a hash of it. I’ll hire some guy from out of town if I have to.” Simone was silent for a moment. “But it’s gone. They’re all gone.”

“Yeah. The commissioner will have to call off Johnson’s murder investigation once they find out that the murderer or murderers are also gone.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, ignoring the small twinge of pain that came from his previous wound. He let out a relieved breath when she laid her head against his chest instead of moving away. “The case is definitely closed.”

“Hmm. I wonder what that thing was.”

“The creature that was after us?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the pictures that you took might help us.”

“I didn’t take any pictures while we were down there. I didn’t even have a camera.”

“That wasn’t what I was talking about.”

With his free hand, he grasped the package that the photographs that she had taken of the books in Professor Fitzgerald’s office. He handed them to her and she flipped through them, stopping at one of the illustrations. The picture was crude, but it was of a giant snake with one main head. Smaller heads and tentacles sprouted out from the main body.

“Il Sorto il Serpente,” she read, squinting. “That’s Italian, isn’t it?”

“Yes. The Rose Snake. And evidently it’s gone. Destroyed by water.”

“That seems like a little fact that we should keep in mind.” She sighed. “Think of all the paper work we have to do on this.”

“What paper work? Everyone who really needs to know this are dead.”

He felt her faintly shiver and he hugged her reassuringly. “You’re right,” she finally said.

“But just think of what Martinez would say when we tell him about it.”

She suddenly turned on him. “You wouldn’t dare. He’ll tell us that we were crazy. That we went ghost-busting again. Just...just forget the whole thing happened.”

“Well,” he slowly drawled enjoying her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “I may just do that. If you let me fix your window.”

THE END