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Still lives

His eyes rested on his collection of nudes. Miraculous, how art and pornography could fuse together in a painting. Not the countless variations on Venus with Amor, all pretending to be special but in fact adhering to mainstream style. Not the modern works either, all downgraded to a few abstract lines. The best were ancient Greek ones. Rare, rarer than their statues, but equally vibrant. His favorite was not an ancient but an unknown Renaissance portrait of a woman who was undressing in front of two mirrors, so you could look at her from three sides. Two of them, the reflections, looked back, as if they were conscious of being watched. As if they suggested a ménage a quatre. The phone disturbed his contemplations by ringing.

"Hello?"

"Perez, is that you?"

"Perez de Aquilin, in person."

"It is Reni. I have considered your offer. I will pay 400,000."

"Too much. 340,000."

"380,000."

"Done. I know that you do not like intermediaries. I will deliver it myself."

"Good. Come over ... on Tuesday. The money will be ready, and maybe some white snow?"

"You know I never indulge in that stuff. Money will do fine."

"As you wish." He hang up.

De Aquilin congratulated himself. Two weeks of negotiation wrapped up in half a minute. The painting was not worth 380,000 francs, but Reni did not have an eye for art. So few people could appreciate real beauty. More money to add to his already solid fortune. What to do with it?

The next Tuesday he drove to Reni's residence in his Lamborghini. The painting was carefully wrapped in paper, sealed in a wooden box and hidden under the rear seat. He drove fast but relaxed, winding his way over twisting country roads.

He arrived at his destination. Reni was rich too. He had purchased a neo-medieval castle, a gaudy jumble of turrets, high windows and bright colors, completely over the top. On of these days he had to start educating the man, to raise his tastes to an acceptable level.

When he approached he saw that the gate was open and there was no guard present. No guard, at Reni's house? Strange. He stopped, alighted and peered around. There was shouting further into the estate, and barking. Three men came running around the castle, their raincoats flapping around them, in great haste. They ran straight towards the gate, making unclear gestures and noises. Then de Aquilin saw a small pack of dogs rounding the corner too, giving excellent chase.

Finally the words became intelligible. "Run! The beasts have gone mad!"

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De Aquilin was an avid hunter and knew a thing or two about dogs. Also, he knew these particular brutes from previous visits. While the three escapees thundered past him, shouting and waving their arms, he stood his ground. "Alec! Megan! Tisispher! Arretez, tout de suite!"

The three Neapolitan Mastiffs ran up to him, but then stopped abruptly. He spoke soothing words and patted their heads.

Cautiously, still panting from their flight, the three men returned. "Is, is it safe? What did you do with them?"

"Calm them. My name is Perez de Aquilin. And you are?"

"The baron? Eh, we are Entenner, Nezé and Tâton. DGOC. They flashed their identity cards.

"Thank you for your help with those monsters," Entenner said. "Nonetheless I am afraid I must ask you to leave. This is a crime scene and we are investigating it."

"But could you keep those dogs out of the way?" Tâton asked.

Driving off with the hot painting still undetected in his car would be the safest thing to do. But de Aquilin's curiosity had been aroused. Had something happened to Reni? What of their deal? He improvised quickly. "I am afraid not. These dogs are born and raised on this estate, trained to defend it. They will not leave, if even commanded. But if you want I can escort you while you conduct your investigation and keep them calm." The three detectives debated the matter briefly. "All right," Entenner said. "Though this is most unusual. Please let us do our work and don't touch anything."

"Of course."

They walked back in, heading for the castle, while the dogs playfully hovered around them.

"What brings you to this place, lord?" Nezé asked.

De Aquilin lied with casual ease. "Reni Gunga is not a man of taste, but he does throw extravagant parties that attract interesting crowds. I was coming to talk about the guest list of the next one. What brings *you* here?"

There was some hesitation. Nezé spoke. "We, eh, are investigating some shady business deals of mr. Gunga. It is part of the DGOC portfolio. You are aware that he is awfully rich for a common dealer in Turkish carpets and silk?"

"Isn't that the work of Tracfin?" de Aquilin asked. "I am an art dealer. I know that some people are willing to pay large amounts for some types of paintings. Maybe it is the same with carpets?"

Meanwhile they had reached the entrance. Here the doors were open too. They peered into the entry hall, which was lined with suits of plate armor, post-medieval like the castle itself. The suits stood silent and waiting, grasping their weapons as if ready to move, but no call to arms came. Instinctively all four became silent, almost tiptoed inside and peered into the antechamber, which was modeled after a Roman vestibulum, but got all the details wrong. In the center was a kitschy Chinese fountain that spurted red water. Over the edge of the basin lay the body of one Reni's goons, limp. Some meters to the right lay another, his limbs askew in unnatural positions, blood from his mouth, already coagulated.

The sight shocked de Aquilin, yet fascinated him too. Clearly death had swept his scythe through here, but he was already gone.

They investigated further. It proved to be not just a murder scene, but a veritable bloodbath. In half an hour time they discovered 18 people: bodyguards, associates, whores and Reni himself, all dead. They were scattered through the castle. Many had been killed in their beds, some in rooms or corridors. Several had automatic pistols lying next to them, though few had bullet holes. Most had had their throats sliced or

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had been stabbed in the back. Clearly this was knife work, but how had knives prevailed against so many guns? A few bodies were horribly mutilated, their torsos wrecked and their hearts torn out. Blood was everywhere and the stench of death was already rising from the corpses. Entenner and Nezé threw up and de Aquilin had to keep the dogs from licking the blood off the corpses.

The formalities forgotten, the officers openly discussed the possibilities. A drug deal gone bad? That would be very, very bad, then. Whoever had done this did not seem to want to leave any witnesses behind. Perhaps the neighbors had heard something? But the nearest neighboring house was half a kilometer away. Maybe that was for the best, looking at the massacre.

It was the passer-by who had to wake them up. "Gentlemen, I think that this is not a job for the DGOC, but for the homicide detectives."

"Yes, of course! Let's go back to the car and call them. Would you mind staying with us for a while, lord? I'm sure the police will have questions."

Three hours later the place was swarming with policemen, forensic detectives, flashing lights and striped ribbons. The four discoverers had been asked the obvious questions, several times, and answered them as best as they could. Finally, worn out, they were released, though required to be available for follow-ups.

"Well, I have had enough of crime scenes for today," de Aquilin said. "I am going to have lunch in La Panière. Would you like to join? Drinks are on me!"

Who could refuse an offer like that? Especially as the restaurant was first class and de Aquilin ensured that the wine was even better. They talked about impossible crimes on television and the normally dull crimes of reality, about the evils of money, the beauty of art, the value of Modernism, the difference between a Disneyland castle and a real castle, the fate of Disneyland Paris, ... and so on and on. The wine loosened tongues and the party became quite merry, despite the horrors of the morning.

"So why *were* you at Gunga's place?" de Aquilin asked, when the mood was completely relaxed.

Entenner looked knowingly at his companions. He sank his head lower and closer. "We investigate money laundering, no? We suspected he was deep into that. Investing drug dollars in real estate, restaurants, possibly even art!" He smiled at the baron.

"As if that castle is worth anything, haha!"

"No, he was quite rich," Nezé said. "Stinking rich! And untouchable. His wealth spread over dozens of shady firms and accomplices, several layers of shadow accounting, superb lawyers. His physical castle could not keep him safe from harm, but the maze that shielded his money was impregnable."

"So you decided to visit him, physically? Your timing was off ... though maybe that was for the best."

The hesitation of the morning was back. The three looked at each other, apparently somewhat sobered up. Now it was Tâton who answered. "We were executing a surprise raid ... on his administration."

De Aquilin raises his eyebrows high. "But you never took a look at any account books, not even after the police had finally let us go."

"Ehm, that is right! We forgot about it after all the shock and the fuss. You now how it was. Gentlemen, I think we must go back and resume our work. Lord, we thank you cordially for the lunch. Maybe we will meet again in the future!" They rose and left, leaving de Aquilin to pay the entire bill, not just the drinks.

When de Aquilin came home he was not tired, but energized. He did not mourn Reni,

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who had been a rather coarse criminal. But the mystery of the grand slaughter filled his mind. He went to his study, brushed aside his letters and portfolios and switched on his personal computer. Then he fired up his latest plaything, a browser. De Aquilin was one of the first people who had discovered the World Wide Web and to realize its potential. But his machine had been connected to the internet much earlier than that and he knew that it was bigger and more diverse than just a couple of hyperlinked web pages. He quickly navigated away from them and plunged into the depths of the darknets.

There was a wealth of information there, though it was hard to find and many things were locked away, accessible only to initiates. This was where de Aquilin found most of his buyers and sellers. This was where some of the world's most wanted paintings circulated. And it was not only art. There were communications of political radicals, drug deals where the likes of Reni hooked into, secret services exchanging information and much more. And there was news that did not appear in the papers: what really happened at the Westray Mine and the Podsojenka train disaster; the medical condition of François Mitterrand; the performance of the YF-23.

De Aquilin worked into the evening and then deep into the night, absentmindedly consuming a light supper along the way. In the early morning, the sun still below the horizon, he had discovered many other recent knife murders. After filtering out the ones that were common assaults, crimes passionnels and the like and those of whom the killer had been arrested, only a handful were left over. These appeared to be criminal reckonings, political murders and several that could not be classified, spread all over Europe. In most only a single person had been killed, but sometimes more. Several reports noted backstabbing and also the strange 'body explosions' that the baron had witnessed at Reni's castle.

He retired to bed to sleep well into the morning, his dreams filled with grim ghosts that reaped death by the score.

Betrayed, again. I thought I was finally getting out of the muck, away from this prison. Finally a soulmate, a window to another life. But they all want the same. Must I remain here, shackled to one of them, my body a slave and my mind dulled until I meet my grave? No. I must find some other way, something overlooked by all. Something dark, maybe.

The backlash

The next day de Aquilin spent more time investigating the murders, but information, even on the darknets, was scarce. Other matters demanded his attention: the sale of the Etruscan bust; a hunt at Barjols; a fight among the staff of his house; a visit from his cousin Albert. Soon the mystery had retreated into the shadows of the background.

Until he received a phone call a week later. "Hello? Lord de Aquilin? It is Entenner, remember? We met at the ... house. We would like to speak with you. Could you come over to us? Go to the Gare de Marseille. You will be approached by a man who will identify himself as Guidome. Please follow him, he will bring you to us."

Usually when a government service wants to speak with a civilian, the tone is commanding, but Entenner's voice did not sound firm at all. De Aquilin had his secretary postpone his visit to the Gallerie d'Estogne and did as requested. He drove to the station and was immediately approached by a small furtive man in a somewhat shabby suit, who called himself Guidome. He loaded the baron into a car and drove him, with a large detour, to a gray building in the 6th arrondissement. Inside he was escorted to the

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3rd floor, which was filled with offices. There were few people at work; it seemed like a holiday.

He was met by Entenner and Tâton, who looked agitated. "Welcome, lord. It is good that you could come at such short notice."

"Why-" de Aquilin started, but then his eye caught the sight of bloodstains on a wall in a side office and a body bag in another. "Not ..."

"Yes."

Suddenly a cold hand gripped his heart. "Am I a target too?"

Tâton's faint smile expressed both grief and assurance. "No. But apparently we are."

"How bad is it?"

"Almost half our local staff have been assassinated, including the director and all senior officers."

They have been beheaded; they are out of control, de Aquilin thought, who knew how hierarchical French bureaucracy was.

"The assault was executed last night," Entenner said. "All the people that you see here were absent at the time. We fear for our lives."

De Aquilin noted the absence of police uniforms. "So why did you call me? Shouldn't the detectives of the Marseille Police look into this?"

"This is, and must, remain an internal matter," Tâton said. "You were most helpful last Tuesday and you are well connected. We, eh, request your assistance to investigate this matter. As an outsider, you will not attract attention and can be very effective."

"You want to recruit me? I thought that the DGOC required a rigorous inquiry into antecedents, long training and sharp exams."

"You understand that things have moved beyond normal here. This is a crisis, needs must."

Investigate a string of murders that might be still ongoing, joining an organization that was in the thick of it? 'Risky' seemed to be an extreme understatement. Yet if he was a target too, working with government authority and resources might prove to be a life saver. "Fine, I will stand by France when she needs me. You will employ me as a freelancer, with full authority but without oaths of allegiance. After all, I will be putting my neck on the line for you."

Entenner look relieved. "That is acceptable. Come with me, we will make an identity card for you that can open doors. We'll need a passport photograph. And some personal data, though not all of that has to be true. Now I must find out how to operate the card printer. Our secretary has been killed too. She was the only one who knew how to operate that infernal machine."

After a long struggle the printer did produce a usable identity card. The two investigators went on to brief him on organizational procedures and the organization itself, skipping half because it was no longer relevant. He was issued a Manurhin MR 73 and shown how to shoot with it, and especially how to toggle the safety.

Finally another officer showed up with a stack of files and a tired look on his face.

"Did you filter them?" Entenner asked.

"Yes. As you can see, there is enough left over." He plopped the pile on the desk and left.

"These are all the relevant files on the case," Entenner said. "You will have to go through them to get a full understanding."

De Aquilin stared at the heap of paper. "Gentlemen, I am an art dealer, not a literary critic. It's late. I will go home, take these files with me and peruse them with the help of my own equipment, at a time of my own choosing." Entenner started to protest, but the baron cut him short. "You hired a freelancer, not an office boy. Patience; I will get back

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to you."

Entenner, who also showed signs of fatigue and stress, consented. "Fine. Do keep those files in your safe. Let's keep in contact over the encrypted line that we talked about."

At home, de Aquilin took a bath, ate dinner and handled his art business. Only the next day did he dive into the files. God, what a number of them! If only his computer would be able to read them and extract summaries from them. Well, a new millennium was coming up, maybe that would happen in the near future. For now, he had to learn to become a speed reader, picking the relevant details out of a sea of official drivel.

It took several days, but gradually a picture of the situation arose in his mind. The DGOC knew more about Reni Gunga's business than the three officers had revealed at La Panière. It looked like they had mapped the tentacles of his shady organization quite completely and had been making ready to arrest him. De Aquilin found several references to himself, though it appeared that the service had not yet identified him as one of the art dealers that Reni did business with.

One document that probably should have been 'filtered' revealed much more. The drug lord had felt the hot breath of the DGOC, tracked some of their VIPs down, threatened them and their families. In response, an officer who was only identified by his codename Colubra XIII had ordered somebody named Athanasia to be contacted to "turn the tables on him". He had authorized the sum of 200,000 francs to be withdrawn from the 'CAI reserve'.

De Aquilin phoned the Marseille office and arranged a meeting with Entenner at a quiet bar in the 3th arrondissement. This time there was no wine, just coffee, bitter and stale.

"I am making progress on the Gunga case. Aside, your assessment of his art collection is overrated. I estimate its total worth at some 7,500,000 francs, not 12,000,000. Not that it matters much. His list of enemies is more interesting, though extensive. Who is Colubra XIII?"

Entenner did not answer right away. "You must have misread something. He was not one of Gunga's enemies."

"I think that he is. Arrows in a network graph that I'm drawing all point in his direction. I need to speak to him."

"That is not possible. He is dead."

De Aquilin flung the document on the table. Entenner browsed through it, obviously an accomplished speed reader. "I did not know about this," he said. "It might explain a lot." De Aquilin leaned forward. "Who was Colubra XIII?"

"One of our directors, reporting directly to Ma-, Bufo IV. He was one of the people killed in the attack on the office."

"And one of the people threatened by Re-, by Gunga?"

"Yes."

"If word gets out that the DGOC is ordering assassinations on criminals, then -"

"He paid the penalty!" Entenner snapped. He is *dead*. And so are many of us. Those who remain did not know about this. Are you with us or not?"

Now it was de Aquilin who waited before answering. "I am with you. I will investigate this matter further. But I will need the Guêpe access that you have denied me so far."

"It seems that you are becoming quite a DGOC insider," Entenner said. "You will get it."

I needed that money, badly. But of course he wanted something in return. The thing they all want. This time I was fiercer. He is dead now. Buried deep in the black soil. And I

don't even feel bad about it. When I told the others, they went pale. They talk so much about it, but when they face it, they shrink back. That's when I realized that I am beyond them. Not in strength, but in lethality.

Donning the glove

Back home de Aquilin switched on his computer and found that he had indeed been granted Guêpe access. It opened up a wealth of new sources. He did some research on Colubra XIII. There was not much to find, but that did not bother him. His real target was the person named Athanasia. While he was tracing her, the realization finally hit him. The murders had been committed not by a group of assassins, but a single person. Again his sweat went cold.

There was not much information on her either, except for a single gem: a contact channel. So the killer had to be approached directly. De Aquilin knew that he had to bring something to the table. He used his new powers to search for something suitable and found it. It appeared that this had not been the first time that the DGOC had employed a hit man to 'remove' an enemy. Actually, there were a few such requests still pending. It was like an auction, only the bids were not for artworks, but for affordable yet effective hit men.

De Aquilin contacted Entenner and explained what he had found. He proposed to offer one of the contracts to Athanasia.

"Are you mad?" the agent replied. "After what she did?"

"I must get into contact with her to learn more of her. She does not know me. It is the only way."

"Maybe ..." Entenner mused. "I must get approval from Col-, no wait, he is, they are ... I guess I'm the one authorized to make the decision now."

"Then make it," de Aquilin said.

"Approved," was the answer, spoken with a shaky voice.

Late in the evening he sent out a contact message through an internet channel to the mysterious Athanasia: "I have an offer for an assignment on the Riviera Ligure. FF 25,000. Samuel." After an hour there was still no response, so he went to bed. But near to 2 AM he was woken by an alarm: a callback!

"Am available. Need details. Anouk."

A different name? De Aquilin quickly typed a reply. "You have been recommended, but the assignment is sensitive. I need confirmation of your credentials. You have been active in France recently?"

The screen did not offer any facial expression, tone of voice or other non-verbal signals. "Irrelevant. If you want a job done, provide the necessary information."

"I only work with Athanasia. Are you her?"

"I'm hanging up."

Frantically the baron typed another reply. "The target is a Saudi sheikh. It must look like an accident."

There was no reaction.

"He is wealthy and spends his money on booze and whores, engaging them in sadistic sex games. This has offended the sponsors. They are willing to pay at least 25,000 francs!"

For a few agonizing seconds nothing happened. Then a reply appeared. "Send me his file. If I'm interested, I will contact you again tomorrow."

If I'm interested? As if assassins picked their employers instead of the other way around. But as he thought of it, he realized that in this case it might be true. He

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transmitted the file.

The next night the computer beeped again.

"Tentatively accepted. I need more details. Send me your file."

Behind his screen, de Aquilin frowned. "You received it yesterday."

"Not **his** file, but **yours**. The name Samuel is new."

"You keep yourself in the shadows. Why should I reveal myself? Like you, I value my privacy."

"Some fake employers try to double-cross their employees. Do not try this with me; my vengeance is swift and lethal."

It is really her! de Aquilin thought. His heart was beating fast, from two causes. "So I should just blindly trust you?"

"If your money is good, then your safety is assured. I am not your enemy; I am your enemies' nemesis. Send the file. If I am content, I will contact you again. Next you send the money and tell me where I can find the man. Then I will apply my trade."

De Aquilin almost bailed out at that moment. But then the élan of his class asserted itself. He decided to boldly press on. "I do not have a personal file ready. Give me a day to prepare one. Samuel out."

He could not sleep anymore and worked all night and day on his 'personal file'. What was relevant, what not? What should be put in, what left out? What should be told truthfully, what could be lied about? In the end he prepared a fairly sincere document, mentioning his true name, outlining his ancestry, describing his art business without the illegal details. He made very sure not to mention the DGOC or his visit to Reni Gunga's castle after the killing. He did devise a motive: the Arab was supposed to have cheated him in an art deal. Minding the original request from the DGOC he also stressed once more that the murder had to be dressed as an accident.

It was already evening again when the work was ready. He sent the file over, helped himself to some brandy and waited.

Apparently he had fallen asleep, because he was woken by another set of beeps by the computer, again deep in the night.

"My price is 28,000 francs."

De Aquilin thought that the DGOC would not balk at a few extra thousand francs. "26,000."

"27,000, final offer."

"Deal."

"Deposit the sum on account BBAN 00762015626762923. Notify me of your target's location through this channel. Your target will be eliminated according to your wishes."

A week later the newspapers reported that jet setter sheikh Jamal Nukal'ar, apparently drunk as a skunk, had fallen off the balcony of his luxurious villa in Castagnabuona and broken his neck on the marble floor around his swimming pool. De Aquilin had heard the news earlier, a few hours before dawn via another darknet channel, and before that from Anouk herself: "Mission accomplished. Do not contact me again, ever, unless for another assignment."

Guns are clumsy. They miss and they are loud, like the brutes that use them. You need to get up close, silent and hidden, strike true the first time. So I learn and practise, the old ways. Lying, luring, stalking, climbing, knifing. Stay hidden at all times, except for the moment of the kill. And always keep a cold heart. I am getting better at it, though it

remains dangerous. I need an extra edge. Maybe something darker.

Zooming in

A part of the baron's mind coolly remarked that he now was an accomplice to murder. Yet another countered that the sheikh probably deserved his fate. His file had confirmed that he had been a sexist, sadist, corrupt swindler who had cheated both the French and his own family.

Meanwhile, though he had been in contact with her several times, de Aquilin knew little more about Anouk / Athanasia than he had before. He brooded on a plan to get more information about her. He needed a location, her true name, a voice, a face. The darknet route was a twisting maze trail that no doubt zigzagged several times across the world, guarded by system administrators who shut out intruders at the first sign of trouble. If the assassin felt safe behind the network, she was right. Despite thinking and browsing, he could not think of an idea how to break the wall of obscurity. So out of habit he devoted himself to his art business again. Then, during a visit to the le Musée Granet, the solution was laid at his feet, or rather at his head.

"See those?" the director exclaimed. "State of the art! They use multiplexing, combining analog and digital signals and have motion detection built in. Now the security staff don't need to watch hours and hours of nothing, but can zoom right in on the interesting stuff. It works really well. We tested it last week and have located the hole where the mice crawl out to attack our restaurant cupboards."

"Interesting indeed!" agreed de Aquilin, pensively staring up at the unblinking eye of the camera.

In the afternoon he scanned the DGOC files again. There were more people that the service wanted removed, though only a handful. The most promising was Mourad Nader, an Algerian political activist who had connections with Ansar Dine and had been implied in several terrorist attacks on French soil. De Aquilin phoned the agent involved, one Saladarry, who was based in Paris. The baron, calmly identifying himself as a DGOC officer, offered to operate as an intermediary.

"That will not be necessary," Saladarry said. "Just give me the name and contact details of the operative."

By now de Aquilin knew how jealously the detectives guarded their contacts. "No, the contract must go through me."

The man played it hard. "Suit yourself then."

"You must let me handle this! It is the same, eh, operative who struck our office. We have been hit hard here. Surely you cannot allow these criminals to get away with such acts of barbarism against French officers like you and me?"

"You are from the Marseille branch?" Saladarry gasped. "You should have said so right away! But you want to employ her again, what madness is that?"

"It is a trap. Here is the plan: catch her on CCTV, identify her through good old fashioned detective work and then give her a dose of her own medicine. I will need help from your technical people with setting up the cameras in Nader's house, secretly of course."

"Why not simply ambush her with a unit from the GIGN?" Saladarry asked.

"No, I have read about her exploits. She is too cautious. First we must watch; strike later. Also, the contact must run through me and through me alone. She does not know I'm with the DGOC and we must keep it that way; we cannot afford the other half to be slain too."

Saladarry still was not convinced. "You think we can just sneak into Nader's house and

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install cameras everywhere? His place is under constant guard. Such an operation is impossible."

"But I must have the assassin on video! How else am I, are we, going to trace her?" Saladarry chuckled. "I did not say that videotaping was impossible, just installing cameras. That is not necessary, because the house is already stacked with them! He is living in the former British embassy, which has been bugged by the Russians. Their equipment is still there, still functional and hidden too! It is perfect for your purpose. I will set you up with a technician who can show you how to hack into the house's LAN. Before you know it, you will be a omniscient voyeur."

The technician proved to be a friendly man named Otho. He provided de Aquilin with a second, specialized computer that he could use to spy on the Algerian. "It runs Linux," he said. "Brand new operating system by a Finnish guy named Thorvalds. It can multitask, something that your rickety Windows cannot. By the way, I have installed a stateful firewall on both machines. You want to hack the enemy, not to be hacked back, no?"

The baron had a lot of trouble getting used to what seemed like an archaic command-line interface on the spy machine. Otho handled it like it was the most natural thing in the world. He thought, spoke and typed so quickly that the whole setup seemed like magic. De Aquilin said so to him.

"Clarke's Third Law: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," he replied. "Though if you ask me, it is still just technology."

To the baron, observing the lines of code scrolling over the screen in gentle amber, it looked more like art.

When the installation was complete and de Aquilin sufficiently familiar with the software, he contacted Anouk again. Once more the negotiations took place over the darknet, in terse, matter of fact phrases. Anouk did not ask why he wanted Nader killed, though this time he had to raise 30,000 francs.

When the thing had been set in motion, he watched the footage from the cameras. Over the course of several days, he became quite familiar with Nader's household. It was not interesting stuff: people walking through corridors, eating, reading, repairing a damaged wall and talking on the telephone. De Aquilin was no lip-reader; he could estimate the mood of the talkers from their ample Mediterranean gesticulations, but no real content. He guessed that the number of people, the rhythm of guard shifts and such would be valuable information for the assassin, but of course he could not reveal anything to her.

Though the software stored all the footage that was hauled in on hard-disks, the baron spent much of his time watching the life feeds. Again he skipped too much sleep and became something of a TV zombie, pale and glued to his screens.

That is why he almost missed the attack. Of course it was at night. Actually what he saw had happened some time ago, because the download was slow. But for his senses that did not matter; it was like he was watching it in real time.

One of the cameras switched on. Not because the guard outside the door shifted his stance again, but because he slumped to the floor, slowly, blood gushing from a deep stab wound in his throat. A small figure, clad in a black suit like a proper ninja, lowered him softly down. She - it had to be her - glanced left and right and waited for a few seconds, motionless. De Aquilin was struck by her superb figure, clearly outlined by the tight-fitting suit. When she turned he briefly caught a glimpse of her fine chiseled face, causing his breath to stop. Mesmerized he watched how she tested the lock and

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checked the hinges. She took some tools out of her pocket and worked the lock. While she was doing that her image seemed slowly to fade, as if the camera started to malfunction, though the rest of the image remained sharp. Then she walked to the start of the corridor. His breathing stopped again when she switched off the light.

Merde! He fumed at the darkness, deprived of the thrill of his own hunt. But there was nothing he could do but watch a blank image.

Then another camera switched on, in Nader's bedroom. There was very little light, but something moved in the dark, triggering the motion sensor. De Aquilin reacted with lightning speed, turning up the brightness and contrast.

The room, like the rest of the building, was a magnificent sight, exuberantly decorated in Moorish revival style. But the baron had eyes only for its occupants. The man was lying on his back. The knife had stabbed him through his throat, straight into his skull, and had been retracted. His death throws, if any, were already over. The attacker quickly walked around the bed, to the other side where Nader's wife lay still asleep, curled up on her side.

He saw the killer briefly assessing the situation, then stabbing into her neck sideways, and yanking the blade back to cut some major artery, because again blood spurted out heavily.

When both were dead, she licked the knife clean! With relish, like the blood was some kind of sweet sauce. Then she sheathed the knife again. She walked to the window, opened the shutters and climbed out. A third camera, mounted outside, caught her nimbly climbing down the wall, like some kind of four-legged black spider. Again her image faded faster than the light should have allowed, until she was gone in the darkness. The camera, its image lost, switched off.

De Aquilin reclined in his chair. He was engulfed in a torrent of conflicting emotions: thrill from the success in catching her, an aching desire for her beauty, disgust from her bestiality and fascination towards her mysterious appearances and disappearances. He spent the rest of the night viewing the footage again and again, analyzing and philosophizing. Morning found him with his head on his keyboard, snoring softly.

The world is moving so fast now, scores of new gadgets per year. People forget about the Old Ones. Yet they are still here. All you have to do is dig them up. Which is what I did. The key is mine now. So hear me! I call upon you, through the mists of time, through the veils of ignorance, through the dark of forgetfulness. My breath will kindle your flickering flame, re-awaken your powers of old. I call upon your wisdom, your magic and your might. I seek revenge, payback for all who have wronged me and for all who are yet to do so. In return I offer you my blood, which I have kept pure through all these years. Listen to me, and answer my call.

Roots

Before noon de Aquilin was awake and active again. He canceled all his regular appointments and dived back into the mystery of the assassin. Where previously there were only a few fake names, now there was a face. Though black & white and blurry, because the CCTV was not very advanced.

Now the baron's own expertise came into play. He ran Fraudix, a piece of sophisticated image enhancement software designed to analyze paintings. Normally it was used to detect tiny flaws in reproductions and thus expose them for the fakes that they were. But it could also be applied to the different shots he had of Anouk's face. Combined, he could build two pictures of her that had decent quality: a frontal view and a side

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view. It took him all day, during which he worked non-stop. When the job was done, he was even more entranced by her comeliness. It haunted his dreams at night.

The next day he sent the pictures to Saladarry with a request to look them up in the criminal records, something even his DGOC-freelancer status did not allow him to do himself. Then he had to wait, and wait, and wait some more, because the search software was not fast and the official procedures even slower.

After five days there was a reply. "I am sorry, we could not find a good match," Saladarry said. "I guess this is a dead end. But I know how hard the times are for you people in the south. I am sending you a batch of photographs that the computer thought came close. Maybe you can do something with it."

De Aquilin was disappointed, but perused the images nonetheless. In some he thought to recognize features of Anouk, but like the Paris branch he was not certain of any. Maybe Fraudix could help again? He tried it, with little success. Desperate, he contacted the manufacturer of the software.

The reply was swift. "Facial recognition? Try the Moonface plug-in, that's designed to pick faces from the pictures. You can correct for shade, age, skin color and several other things. If you have a pro license, you can get a compact disc for free. Alternatively, if you have a reliable internet connection, you can download and install it directly. 56 kbit/s recommended."

That proved to be a masterstroke. The plug-in morphed and twisted the faces and mercilessly zoomed in on a single match: the mug shot of a Greek teenage girl, recorded eleven years ago in Thessaloniki. Supported by the modifications of the software, de Aquilin's human eyes saw the analogy too. It was her, possibly a decade younger.

For reasons he could not phrase himself de Aquilin did not report his success back to the DGOC. Instead he used his powers to contact the Hellenic Police. He claimed to be hunting a young woman who was active in money laundering and told them that he had a picture match. Could they help out?

The person on the other end of the line was a friendly woman who explained the difficulties. "You have to print the pictures, include them with an investigation request and send them via secure post. The office will process it as soon as possible."

"When will that be?"

"Oh, I guess somewhere between one or two months."

"I cannot wait that long!"

"I am sorry mister, but we are busy enough with national matters. Maybe you can take it up with the local police."

So de Aquilin tried to contact the police in Thessaloniki. They proved busy too and did not seem to have anybody who spoke proper French or English. After several hours of futile phone calls he decided to travel to Greece in person. Some outside air would do him good!

De Aquilin did not bother to get approval for travel expenses from the DGOC, he simply paid for the flight ticket himself. A day later he arrived at Thessaloniki Airport. Greece was basking in the summer sun; it was even warmer than in the Provence. He took a room in a good hotel, did some sightseeing and dined in a good restaurant in the Ladadika.

The next day he descended on the main police station. His elegant suit, smooth manner and DGOC badge opened doors infinitely faster than phone calls did. Within an hour he had an officer, who spoke French, dig up the file on the girl from the photograph. "There she is. Aikaterini Tragell, arrested for the assault on and mutilation of Aporis

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Agenis, 14 March 1982. Both residents of Lagyna, north of here."

He read the report to de Aquilin. "I, Geórgios Pavlákis, on 14 March 1982, 10:05 PM received a call to the Dimitiko Scholio Laginon in Lagyna, where an assault had taken place. Officer Trofos and myself drove to the scene and arrived at 10:15 PM. My investigation revealed the following information.

There was a crowd of some fifty people gathered at the schoolyard. They were divided into two camps, one around the suspect and another around the victim. Both were throwing insults and threats at each other. I set out to calm the people, while officer Trofos called in assistance. He then proceeded to assist me. We were successful in restoring order.

Thereafter we interrogated the suspect and the victim. The suspect was identified as Aikaterini Tragell, born 5 March 1965 in Lagyna. She is an attractive teenager. She stated that she had been making out with the victim, but that he had proceeded to try to undress and rape her against her will. The suspect then had fought back and managed to liberate herself. She admitted wounding the victim in the process.

The victim was identified as Aporis Agenis, born 17 February 1963 in Lagyna. The victim was suffering from severe trauma to the head and therefore could not be interrogated. We proceeded to take the suspect to the police station in Thessaloniki. The victim was taken to the hospital by an ambulance.

During further interrogation the suspect confirmed her earlier statements. It was decided to release her pending further investigation when the victim would be communicative again."

That was all. There was no report on the 'further investigation' or a conviction of either. De Aquilin inquired after Pavlákis and Trofos, but learned that the former was dead and the latter resigned from the service and emigrated to Thailand.

It seemed like a dead end, but the baron did not give up straight away. He browsed through the telephone directory, looking for the surname Tragell. There were none left in Lagyna, neither in Thessaloniki or the area around it. He drove to the village with a vague hope of finding more information. It was a dull settlement of a few thousand inhabitants, glued to the A12 motorway. There was not much to see.

The school was in the center. Children were playing in the schoolyard, running and yelling, oblivious to what had happened there eleven years earlier. De Aquilin wandered around a bit, which attracted the attention of an elderly school teacher. "Boró na sas voithiso, kýrie?" she asked and when he stammered "Deh mielyo eleenika" switched to English. "Can I help you, sir?"

"My name is de Aquilin. I am researching for a documentary about genetics, specifically the lineage of modern Greeks to their ancient ancestors. I am looking for a woman named Atha-, Aikaterini Tragell."

"Aikaterini! I remember her well."

The baron could hardly hide his excitement. "What can you tell me about her?"

"She was one of my pupils many years ago. She had a good set of brains but did not do much with them. You know how teenagers are. Pretty as Aphrodite herself, always teasing the boys."

He feigned ignorance. "What did she do after graduation?"

"She never finished school! One day she pushed it too far and made young Aporis Agenis' head boil. It seems that he tried to assault her. But she fought like a hellcat and kicked him senseless. He was very badly hurt, absent from school for half a year, though he never pressed charges. Probably he was too ashamed to have been beaten up by a girl. When he was back the two avoided each other like they had the plague."

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"So why did she not finish school?"

"After the incident her grades deteriorated. She began to play truant and eventually dropped out of school and disappeared. The Agenis boy vanished too some months later. Evil tongues say that she had returned and murdered him, but no body was ever found, so I think he probably ran off too. He was the wild type."

"How unfortunate," de Aquilin said with trembling voice. "She could have possessed important genes. But maybe her parents have them too. Where do they live?"

"Alas, I must disappoint you again. She was an orphan and has no family that we know of."

De Aquilin investigated some more, but could not find new information. Half satisfied he flew back to France.

Such a request must be honored. But the blood of one will not suffice for such power. The life water of many will. So be it. You will grant them their doom and they will pay for it with their own blood. However, you yourself will pay a different price. You will taste blood and having tasted it, never lose it, your entire life. You will drink it and relish it, but it will be all you will ever drink. You will become what you do until you are no longer you, though you will love it.

Light in the dark

Aikaterini operated like all assassins do: appear out of nowhere, strike with surprise and disappear again. To catch her, de Aquilin needed to set a real trap. Saladarry's GIGN plan came back to mind. But he knew she was cautious and suspicious; the negotiations over the darknets had proven that. The DGOC had already tried the attack strategy and he knew very well what the result had been. How to catch that furtive woman?

He contacted Entenner again and reported his progress to that moment. At first the officer was enthusiastic, then he started thinking and sobered. "So you know her identity, but she has already shed it, so it is of little value. You need to know where she lives *now*. That is, if she has a fixed base at all."

"That was what I was thinking," de Aquilin said. "I am going to take another risk. I will lure her with another assignment, be present in person - but without revealing myself - and then track her. The problem is that I am not a trained detective who can trail a suspect undetected."

"Ha, so you will become something of an underworld citizen yourself, skulking in the dark? Don't worry, I can help you here. We have a technique for marking counterfeit material and trace it over long distances. I think that it can be applied to a roaming assassin too." He explained the details.

The matter of the lure was more difficult. The DGOC had no more 'removal' assignments. So de Aquilin bent the rules a little. He contacted Aikaterini over the darknet channel. "Would you be interested in a theft, rather than a murder? The pay is just as good."

"I might be."

"You need to retrieve La Sortie de Pesage, a sketch by Degas. It was stolen three years ago and I happen to know who has bought it. If you get it without damaging it and stash it somewhere safe where I can pick it up, I will pay you 25,000 francs. The owner will go on alert if he finds the sketch missing, so you have to put a forgery in place, which I have had made. With a little luck he will not detect the switch in weeks, if not months. There is one condition: the theft must be done within three days, because

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I have an impatient buyer."

After a few moments, Aikaterini reacted. "Send over the information. If this is a straightforward job, then price agreed. Otherwise my fee will go up."

The sketch was real. De Aquilin had located it over a year ago through his art investigations on the darknets. He estimated it to be worth at least 100,000 francs. He had purchased a decent replica several years earlier for 6,000 francs. So the deal would gain him a profit of 69,000 francs, but of course the real value would be a trace of the assassin. He sent over the location, the villa of Carmen Seta, a wealthy dealer in fashionable Milanese underwear.

The reply came two days later. "Deal accepted. You will have the thing in three days from now. Put the replica in the hollow in the single black poplar in the Parco Repubblica. I will leave the original there too once retrieved."

"That leaves me only one day! I will pay more if you act more quickly."

"No haste, no price increase either. Accept it or not. Convince your buyer to wait a few days longer."

Visible only in the faint reflection on his screen, de Aquilin smiled. He had guessed correctly that the assassin would not be rushed. His little ruse might take away some suspicion. He looked up the location, which was only a few hundred meters from Seta's villa. "Fine, agreed. The forgery will be at the drop point tomorrow morning."

He grabbed his things, jumped into his Lamborghini and drove east, exchanging the warmth of the Provence for the cool of the Alps. Then he crossed the border and descended again into the warmth of Italy. The destination was Corbetta, close to Milan. He found the park and the tree, which was old and worn and had a partially open trunk. Feeling excited like a child in a mystery game, he stashed the forgery in the hole. Maybe Aikaterini was hidden somewhere near at the very moment, watching him to make sure there was no double crossing!

There was double crossing, but not right there. He drove off to a small hotel, where his room had been paid in advance. The Lamborghini was hidden in a shed, his own person in the hotel. He set up his equipment and waited.

The hotel staff had been informed that he wanted a short period of absolute peace and solitude, so they did not send a cleaning lady in the morning. De Aquilin did not visit the small restaurant either, instead he munched on rations he had brought with him. Maybe they regarded him as a strange bird, but he had paid the room for a week in advance, and well too, so they did not ask any questions.

At 5:34 AM in the second night, while he was dozing in his chair, the alarm of the Geiger counter beeped softly. He awoke immediately, with a stiff neck from the awkward sleeping position, but ignored that. He rushed to the window, which looked down on the street and a few houses sideways across it, to Seta's villa. The street was completely empty. Yet the alarm was real; the display showed around 2 μSv per hour, significantly above the normal background radiation level. Had she already entered the house? His gaze frantically switched back and forth between the display and the street view.

The radiation level dropped somewhat and then seemed to level off. He put on his shoes and coat, but did not dare to go outside, afraid of running into her. His heart raced, the uncertainty ate his calm.

Then there was a second spike, which also trailed off after a few moments. Still nobody was visible. What was happening? He could not stand the tension anymore and went outside. He used his Geiger counter to sniff the radiation like a dog would trace a scent, meanwhile glancing in all directions for visual clues like a nervous bird. There

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was a trail going past the villa, though he did not know which end was coming and which was going. Guessing, he took the path that went north.

It was hard to follow the trail of radioactivity. It was no clear visual line and he was no dog born to the work. Slowly, with a lot of swervings left and right, he tracked his prey to the Piazza Pietro Beretta. There she was! She looked like an ordinary worker, but de Aquiline recognized her instantly. No ninja outfit this time, just jeans and jacket. Her hair was hidden by a gray headscarf and she carried a medium sized leather bag. She was sitting next to two early commuters, waiting for the first bus. It was due in only a couple of minutes. He waited on the other side of the parking lot.

When the bus came and the three mounted, he emerged from the shadows and joined them. Not sure where to have to exit, he simply bought a ticket to the endpoint of the line, in central Milan. He made sure to sit in the back, watching everybody. He had switched off the sound of the Geiger counter and hidden it. Fortunately assassins were not in the habit of checking paintings for radioactive markings. Entenner had ensured him that the radiation levels were low and harmless. If they were not, he did not mind; he was sure that Aikaterini was far more dangerous.

The bus drove towards the city. More people embarked and disembarked; Aikaterini remained sitting, apparently at ease. At a switch-point she got out and started walking. De Aquilin disembarked too and followed, trying to keep enough distance yet keep her in view. It was a lot harder than he had hoped. Entenner had explained to him how he could change his appearance quickly to avoid being noticed, though his clothing only allowed him three 'looks'. When Aikaterini was waiting at a busy crossing he made his first switch, turning his coat inside out and donning a cap. When he was done, he had lost sight of her. Merde!

Desperate he used the Geiger counter again, half hidden under his coat. He was afraid that it would draw attention, but the thoughts of the morning crowd were elsewhere. There was a slight spike in radioactivity at a mailbox, which puzzled him. To his relief, a hundred meters further down the street, he spotted her again.

Now he stuck a little closer. She walked towards the central station, the megalomaniac building by Mussolini. There she bought a train ticket. De Aquilin waited briefly and then approached the ticket office too. "A ticket to the same location as that lady, please."

The woman behind the counter was intrigued. "Wow, is this a spy movie?"

"Actually, it is for a TV show," de Aquilin improvised. He showed a glimpse of his Geiger counter. "Be sure to watch La Caccia when it is released; you may be on it!"

The woman was all too happy to believe and with a smile furnished him with two tickets, one for Milan to Rome and another from Rome to Viterbo.

The baron mounted the platform, taking care to keep to the inner edge, in the shadows. He spotted Aikaterini but did not approach. When the train arrived, he climbed aboard in another carriage than her.

It took three hours to get to the capital. At each station he checked if Aikaterini was leaving, but did not see her. By the time they had to switch trains in Rome, he had gone over to his third disguise, without hat or coat. He felt great relief when he saw Aikaterini taking the train to Viterbo as if she was unaware of being shadowed. By the time they arrived in the city it was already past noon. To de Aquilin's surprise Aikaterini retrieved a bicycle from storage and drove off faster than he could follow. Despite the location, there were no taxis in sight. He told himself not to panic and followed more slowly on foot, tracing a trail of radioactivity that was very faint. After two hours, hungry and tired, he found the bicycle chained to a lamppost next to an old house.

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You will need weapons. This is the first. Like the chains of the north wolf, it is not forged of metal. It is made from shadows, and to shadows it is drawn. Wear it as often as you like. It will hide you from your foes. Spill blood, and your performance will appear on stage. Be calm, and you will fade once more. And this is the second. It looks lifeless, yet yearns for life. Blood and warmth will awaken it, and it will seek out the heart, eating it like you drink the red. Place it from the shadows, let it strike unerringly. Then retrieve it and bring it back into the dark. The third is not a tool to wield. It is the touch of silk, sensual and sensitive, so that you will always find the weak spot. Armed such, you are properly fitted for everything.

Groping

At that point de Aquilin should have contacted the DGOC, but he did not. *He* had risked himself, *he* had done the hard work, this was going to be *his* reward. First he found himself a hotel to stay in and ate lunch. Then he returned to the house and surveyed the neighborhood. It was in the historical center of the town, well preserved through the turmoil of the centuries. As an art dealer, he could appreciate the warm red brick and the abundance of profferli, the lush decorations, the asymmetry of the street layout. There was no suitable place across the street from which to keep an eye on the house. For three days he circled around it, each time wearing a different disguise. Each day the sun scraped the walls with fierce light, keeping the temperature up and and the fervor of the people down. Life seemed quite ordinary, ambling along. Housewives were drying clothes and chatting, children were going back and forth to school and playing, animals were scurrying about for scraps of food.

The assassin did not seem to go out much. Occasionally he saw here busy with mundane tasks like shopping or putting out the trash, but mostly she was hidden inside. Apparently she did not eat out, visit friends or engage in other social activities. No other people called at the house either.

While he was scouting, he was suddenly confronted by her walking down the street towards him. She was wearing a simple dress now, carrying a small Gucci bag and looking as lovely as the spring. His heart racing, he averted his face and passed her by; again she did not seem to notice him. Like a seasoned spy, he trailed her, keeping a large distance. She walked east and entered the Tuscia University. Fascinating! Was her alter ego a student, a teacher?

Then it occurred to him that this was his chance. She had left her home, probably for a while. Now was the time to become a burglar himself. He rushed back to the house and approached the back door.

Though he had never been in want for money, he had acquired some skill in lock-picking in his youth, when he had ganged up with some young delinquents, just for the thrill of sneaking and stealing. Now that experience proved useful. The lock was open in less than a minute.

Quickly he stepped inside. The coolness and dim of the inside wrapped around him, a contrast with the warm sunny weather outside. He explored the place, a delightful maze of building and rebuilding with four different kinds of walls, old worn out wooden stairs, narrow windows like arrow slits and the smell of ages. The interior was a bit messy, littered with tools, pots, clothing, maps and small figurines. All in all it was a cozy place.

Unlike in most Italian houses, there was not a single crucifix to be found. Instead he stumbled on a large statue of Hekate, the three-faced Greek goddess. The statue was not bare and worn like most, but painted in lifelike colors, so that it appeared she

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watched the place, gazing in three directions at once. The thing made de Aquilin feel uncomfortable, though another part of his mind was assessing a price for it. Apparently the goddess was actively revered here. Two candles were burning nearby, a fire hazard in the old house, and there was a fresh offering of red mullet at her feet.

Puzzled, de Aquilin explored further. He reached Aikaterini's bedroom. The bed was not made up and smelled of sleep and woman. It roused his desire again and he sank his nose into the sheets.

Then he heard a noise. He froze and listened anxiously. It sounded like someone was calling, but with a faint resonance, as if from inside the house. He followed it to the cool and dark cellar, where food was stored. There was a door; the sound was coming from behind it. He opened it and entered.

There was a stairs going down through a narrow corridor, lined with rough stone edges, not cozy at all anymore. A flashlight was dangling from a spike. He took it, switched it on and descended. The sounds, a mix of moaning and cries, grew louder. At the bottom was a room, filled with an awful stench of stale sweat and piss.

When he swung his light into the room he was suddenly startled by a figure that leapt into view. For a moment he thought that a demon was attacking him: a gaunt figure with pale skin, a wild explosion of grey-black hair and a beard that reached below his waist, clad in rags that were beyond mere tatters. It stumbled towards him, with the sound of chains being dragged over stone. He froze on the spot like a rabbit caught in headlights.

Then the figure recoiled and exclaimed: "Den eísai ekeíni! Aawrgh!"

"Who ... Who are you?" de Aquilin managed to say.

"Kyría! Óchi kyría." The man-ghost slumped to the floor.

De Aquilin forced himself to recover. He had spoken in French. "English? Italiano?"

"Ópou kyría ..." the other mumbled.

Then the baron's mind gathered its wits again. "Elliniká?"

"Férno kyría, glykýs kyría." The man dragged himself forward again, but was stopped by the chains that reached their maximum extend.

De Aquilin forced himself a little closer, pinching his nose against the stench, and peered into the haggard white face of the man. He thought he recognized it from a photograph. "Aporis? Aporis Agenis?"

"Thélo to kyría ..."

Without realizing it he fell back to French, speaking as much to himself as to the other.

"Gods, man! What has she done to you? You have been here for ... ten years? Let me free you!"

Despite his revulsion, he examined the locks on the chains. Maybe he could pick them like the backdoor lock. The prisoner remained sitting on the floor, ignoring him.

Then there was a clunking sound from above. Aporis heard it too. "Kyría!"

Such gifts must be honored. I accept your weapons and will keep them as keen as my skills. With them, I will reap death among them, like a weapon myself. I accept your pact. I will cease to be her. I will have revenge, and become it. I will retreat into the dark and come out only to drink.

Touch

De Aquilin had expected Aikaterini to remain at the university for some time and he had not been in the house for more than half an hour. But he reacted swiftly, mounting the

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stairs rapidly, switching off the flashlight, putting it back and closing the door softly behind him. Above him he could hear footsteps, though they were light.

The prisoner below started to make noise again, wailing and yammering. Shortly after the sound of the footsteps descended into the cellar. De Aquilin hid himself in the shadows, between a large round barrel and some sausages that were dangling from the ceiling.

Aikaterini descended the stairs into the cellar, moving as softly as a cat, holding a dagger in her hand. In the dim light he could see that she was wearing only her underwear. The play of shadows over her lithe body accentuated her raven hair and her soft breasts. It drove him mad with lust.

She started to open the door to the dungeon. Accidentally de Aquilin made a slight noise and she froze. Discovered!

But he remembered the Manurhin that de DGOC had given him. He stepped forward and pressed it against her back. "One false move and you are dead! Drop the dagger."

She did as ordered, slowly. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I ask the questions. I know who you are, Athanasia, or should I say Anouk, or Aikaterini?!"

She did not reply, but breathed deep.

He enjoyed his power over this vampiric woman. Below he grew a boner. "I know how many people you have killed, appearing and disappearing like a ghost. I know where you came from, I know who your tormented prisoner is. I know how you lick your blade after a kill! But you don't have a blade now, don't you? It is I who are pressing a gun at your back."

"So you hold the power," she said meekly. "What are you going to do with it?"

Ratio, emotion and instinct were battling inside his head. "Strip," he said with trembling voice. "Take off your slip and bra."

She seemed to tighten, but obeyed.

He opened his zipper, cast aside his gun and fiercely grabbed her, relying on his male strength. The rhythm of his thrusts quickened, his blood ran hot. The woman groaned a little and slumped, bending over. Good, she was yielding to him like a proper bitch.

Suddenly something sliced through his calf muscles. Before he could react his other leg was cut too. One push and he fell backwards on a sack of potatoes.

Aikaterini turned around, her muscles tense. Her eyes seemed to shoot fire. She dashed forward and rammed the hilt of the dagger against his temple, almost knocking him out. Only pain kept him awake. Vaguely he felt himself being cut in multiple places. Surprisingly, it did not hurt as much as the other attacks. He tried to struggle against her, but found that he could not. Suddenly his rising consciousness realized what was happening: his tendons were being slashed. He was helpless like a puppet without strings.

The assassin stood before him. "The pampered aristocratic prick! I should have known! Who are you working with?"

De Aquilin wanted to stop the bleeding with his hands, but could not. "I work alone."

She moved forward, stimulating his senses once more with her nearness. But before he knew it she grabbed his left hand and cut off the little finger. "One down, ten to go. Who are you working with?"

The pain tore through him, making it hard to think. Ten? "I am, I am not ..."

His ring finger was cut too.

"Aaagh! Please stop, I will speak!" The proud part of his soul protested in the bottom of his mind while the rest sold his brethren out. "I am with the DGOC, as a freelancer.

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They ... they want to talk. About what you did in Marseille."

"I sent them a message. I do my work; I get paid. No double-crossings, ever. It was a message, not an invitation to chat. Now, who else knows about me, about this place?"

"Only DGOC officers, nobody else."

He lost his middle finger.

"Nobody, I swear!"

"I guess I have to drive that lesson home once more. Pity that nobody will be left to get it. Before the week is over, there will be no more DGOC. Like the service never existed." She turned her gaze back on him. "I would have relished to torture you like I made Aporis suffer. But this house is no longer safe and I cannot drag you across the streets. So rejoice, asshole, your death will be swift."

She opened the dungeon door, took the flashlight and went down the stairs. From below came joyful cries, which suddenly stopped.

De Aquilin's sweat was cold on his back. He did not hear her walk back up, she just appeared again. "Now you will learn my secrets, petty voyeur. First a little farewell present." She dropped a small Egyptian scarab on him. It did not look valuable; just an ordinary little amulet. Then she put a ring on her finger and stood there in terrible naked beauty like a living vengeance goddess, smiling a wicked smile down on him.

While he was watching her image seemed to fade. It was not his vision that was failing; like on the CCTV footage the rest of the cellar remained sharp, though dark. In the back of his head the name Gyges surfaced, but he did not get time to think more on that. He felt movement on his belly and to his astonishment saw the scarab come alive, extending legs and mandibles. Then it dug them into his skin, tearing it apart and burrowing into the stomach, and de Aquilin screamed with the voice of a hundred devils. While Aikaterini faded from view, the pain in his torso increased, as the stone beetle carved itself a path towards his heart. His death, though agonizing, was indeed swift.