

### Chapter Thirty-Five

Ivano cautiously lowered his body onto the brocade couch that sat alongside Kerberos' desk and waited. He was a patient man, having been born into a lower class Turkish family, where subservience was the rule. He adjusted his robe, trying to achieve an unobtainable level of comfort on the overstuffed cushions and gazed about. It was clear from the surroundings that Kerberos reveled in opulence. The drapes behind his shiny inlaid desk were made from threads of gold and silver and that, together with the gilt treated domed ceiling and soft lighting, gave the effect of something quite ethereal.

"I trust you have been comfortable in my absence?" Kerberos asked, as he strode purposefully through the door.

"Yes," Ivano stuttered, while recuperating from his reverie.

Kerberos took his place behind the desk and stubbed out the thin, dark colored cigarette that had been hanging from the corner of his mouth. "So," he said, "tell me about the boy."

"He is working as you have requested."

"You have kept him away from the others?"

"Yes, he works in a small room and eats alone."

"And his task?"

"The task is meaningless but it will keep him occupied until we have decided," he responded, while running his hand over his dagger's hilt, as if contemplating its withdrawal.

"Yes, and decide we must, timing is critical. The ceremony is just days away and I must know his intentions before then."

"It is understood."

Kerberos leaned to one side, opened an antique wooden box and withdrew another cigarette. "Does the smoke still bother you?" he asked, more out of curiosity than any real concern.

"It brings back memories of the fire."

"Ah yes, the fire, most unfortunate. It was not my intention for you to be burned ... that was purely accidental."

"I understood that the fire was part of the ceremony."

"Yes, quite true and an important part at that but still, it was not meant to scar you."

"My face now bears the mark of our master, I am honored."

Ignoring his subordinate's obvious discomfort, Kerberos took a long contemplative drag and, aiming directly at Ivano,

expelled a voluminous cloud of smoke. "Now," he said, "let us get back to the business at hand."

"Yes?" Ivano replied, fanning the smoke from his face.

"Who is guarding the boy's room?"

"No one. I didn't think it necessary, the room is locked from the outside."

"But he is crafty, this Michael fellow, there should be a guard."

"I will see to it," Ivano said, while covering his mouth and coughing.

"If there is no guard," Kerberos commented, as smoke spewed from his lips, "how are we dealing with his bodily needs?"

"Someone checks from time to time and is available to escort him to the bathroom if necessary."

"But the first floor facility is communal, we must avoid any unscheduled contact with the others," he remarked, this time, aiming a steady stream of smoke skyward, "our methods of memory erasure, as you know, were less effective during his tenure. Who knows how much he remembers."

"I could place him under again, question him ..."

"No," Kerberos exclaimed. "We have already committed enough bodies to the bay of San Francisco. Soon, they will begin to surface and when they do, there will be questions."

"What do you suggest?"

"A more subtle approach," Kerberos replied, with a crooked smile.

Ivano launched himself from the couch and stood before the ornate desk, rhythmically sliding his dagger back in forth within its sheath, while silently staring at his superior.

Kerberos stubbed out the cigarette and pushed the ashtray to one side while rubbing his short beard. "You are speechless, my friend," he said with a chuckle, "it is not like you."

"I am not a subtle man, what do you propose?"

"Chose one female disciple, one who has proven herself. She will deliver his food and befriend him. Instruct her as to our needs and make certain to explain that failure to obtain the desired information will be met with consequences."

"And if she asks how she is to accomplish her task?"

"Ah yes, my friend, you are unfamiliar with the ways of a woman. I knew your sexual proclivities would prove to be an obstacle one day but, no matter, she will do whatever is necessary. Our master demands no less."

"And the punishment for failure?"

"Should it become necessary, I will decide before the Black Mass."