

THE ART OF THE DEAL

by Christopher Golden

Craig met the negotiator away from the office like it was some clandestine afternoon fuck, the really dirty kind when you can't even meet the eyes of people on the street because you think they'll be able to tell. There would be no torrid sex during his rendezvous, but someone was certainly going to get screwed. Eighty-seven someones, actually.

The Hotel Atheneum was a grand old dame, as they used to say in an age when the common man still understood what it meant to venerate beauty and high achievement. It stood a block from the Boston Public Library, just at the edge of Copley Square, some of the trendiest real estate in the city. To Craig it was nothing more than neutral territory. The negotiator from IllumiNet had wanted the meet to take place at their lawyers' office at One International Place. Craig's own attorney had suggested Illuminet send their people out to Cambridge, thinking that they would benefit from home field advantage.

But that was impossible. Craig hadn't told his employees about the buyout yet. New England Electrical Safety Systems had been in his family for forty-two years. Half a dozen of his staff were second generation at NEESS and others had been there almost as long as Craig had been alive. His father had brought him into the offices as a kid and these folks had been his extended family.

So much for loyalty, he thought as he pushed through the revolving door and stepped into the hotel. He glanced around, taking it all in. The chandeliers, the polished wood and brass, the strategically placed plants. At the grand piano in the corner an attractive brunette woman played an old Billy Joel song.

He froze a moment. His face flushed warmly and bile rose in the back of his throat. *Turn around, Craig. Just turn around and walk out. You don't have to do this.*

But he did. NEESS had suffered its worst year ever. The industry was consolidating and he either had to let the company be merged into one of the bigger players or shut the doors completely. Craig had done everything he could, but they'd been hemorrhaging money for years. He had made a

promise, once upon a time, that as CEO he would not take a salary higher than the best paid of his employees and he had kept that promise, no matter how much it had cost him.

His marriage, for instance.

Guilt and humiliation pinned him to the spot, there in the lobby of the Atheneum. The comparison to the covert assignations of a cheating spouse rose up in his mind again and nausea roiled in his gut. Hannah had been the one to cheat on him, not the other way around. She was the one engaging in sweaty hotel sex. Craig's reward for fidelity was obscenely high alimony.

Your honor, the amount in question is fully three quarters of Mr. Spencer's annual after-tax earnings. Are you penalizing the one person in this marriage who respected the vows they both made?

Craig had just sat there with his mouth agape. The numbers were burned into his brain but he had been thinking he had misheard right up until the judge had fixed him with as disdainful a glance as Craig had ever witnessed.

Mrs. Spencer's counsel has made a convincing argument that as the owner and chief executive officer of his company, he is entitled to a far greater salary than he currently draws. Perhaps this is some outmoded sense of equity, but I'm inclined to believe the assertion that it is an attempt to elicit from this court an alimony payment far lower than Mrs. Spencer should rightfully be able to expect.

That had done him in. Craig had kept the company afloat during very dark times, had somehow managed to make it all work. In the wake of Hannah's betrayal, he had given all his love to the job and used NEESS as his lifeline, putting all of his energies there. All his life he had tried to be a fair man, to provide for his family and his employees. Then the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had decreed that he was a sap. A sucker. Loyalty and equity were *outmoded*.

Craig Spencer had inherited some integrity and principal from his father, some sense of people's dignity. Somehow in the morass of cynicism the

world had become, he'd held on to it. And they crucified him for it.

Enough was enough. He had done all he could. At least this way, some of his employees would retain their jobs after the merger. He had no choice. It was the right thing to do.

So what are you doing standing in the lobby looking like a fool, ready to puke on your shoes?

"Mr. Spencer?"

Somehow, in the buzz of voices and dinging of elevators that filled the lobby, the negotiator had managed to walk up on him unheard. The man had a name, but Craig never liked to use it, for it ascribed to him a humanity that he had clearly abandoned a very long time ago. He was a crusher of hope. A killer of dreams. All wrapped up in a mask of kindly concern and rationality.

"Hello," Craig said, voice sounding hollow even to himself. His hand felt numb as he held it out to shake. "Thank you for agreeing to meet here."

"Whatever you need to make you feel as comfortable as possible," said the negotiator. He showed his too-white teeth in a shark smile, eyes sparkling with amusement disguised as genuine sympathy. His hair had a scatter of silver in amongst the dark and was cut short. Very now. Yet his face was young and cut and handsome, so much so that if Craig didn't know any better—and really, he didn't, did he?—he would have suspected the negotiator of adding those little flecks of silver to his hair to earn some of the respect that came with age.

The man took him by the arm and propelled him toward the hotel bar. Like a somnambulist, Craig shuffled along. There were only a handful of people in the bar and for that he was grateful. Glasses clinked as the bartender racked clean ones behind the counter. The lights were low and the sunlight seemed disinclined to come very far into the bar, as though it hesitated to disrupt the gloom. The negotiator chose well, leading Craig to a corner table at the far end of the bar, the very spot he would have picked himself, hiding in shame.

What he had not expected was that they would not be alone. Already at the

table was a woman in a red dress. She stood as they approached and Craig did his best to hide the instant reaction he had to her. It was all he could do not to mutter 'whoa' under his breath. Tall and thin, she had Asian features and shoulder-length, stylish black hair that shone like silk in the dim glow of the bar. Her smile was knowingly sultry and suddenly his cock had a pulse. All the fucking luck. He'd barely had any interest in sex since Hannah had emasculated him in court. Now wasn't the time.

"Craig, let me introduce you to my wife, Anita. Honey, Craig's the gentleman I was telling you about, from NEESS."

So interested, Anita nodded and held out a hand to shake. "Right. The family business. My husband's told me a lot about the deal you two have going on. What you've been able to do for your employees is pretty amazing, Craig. They don't make men like you anymore."

California girl, from the way she spoke. He ought to have been appalled by her presumptuousness. What was she doing talking about the deal anyway. As far as Craig knew she didn't even work for IllumiNet. The negotiator shouldn't even have been discussing the situation with her until the deal was done. That was how whispers started. And Craig didn't want any whispers. Not until it was over and then he would face the anger and disappointment from his people all on his own.

Sure, he *ought* to have been appalled. It was just the sort of bullshit sucking up that the negotiator always dropped into their conversations and that Craig despised. But Anita's eyes were so kind and her expression so genuine that he felt a swelling of righteous pride in his heart. His father had been a good man. The kind of man you just didn't find in the world anymore. An outmoded man. And Craig was happy to think even for a moment that he might measure up.

Whatever it had cost him.

After all, they didn't make men like him anymore. Ask Anita. He smiled at her.

"That's very kind of you, Anita," he said. "I've always tried to follow my father's example. To do my best for the people who work for me."

As the three of them sat down, the negotiator signaled to the waiter. Meanwhile, Anita's attention was on Craig. She gazed at him with those brown eyes, so filled with understanding.

"But the world is changing," she said, nodding sadly. "The way we do business is changing. No one man can do it all these days. It's all about alliances."

"That's it exactly, sweetheart," the negotiator said. He focused his shark smile on Craig. "She has a way of getting right to the heart of things, doesn't she? It's her magic."

Craig nodded out of courtesy but the moment the bastard had spoken up he felt uneasy again. Where was the small talk? Where was the polite, happy bullshit they were supposed to start with? Nothing about this meeting was turning out the way he had expected. He didn't want to be here. Not at all. Circumstances were forcing his hand. He had held fate off for as long as he could, and the negotiator and his employers knew that. But the least the fucking guy could do was let him work up to it slowly.

"Listen," Craig began.

But his train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter, asking what they would like to drink.

"I don't think I—"

"Go on, Craig. One won't kill you. Sometimes it helps to have a glass in your hand when you're hashing out the final details." The negotiator glanced at his wife.

"Well, while you boys decide, I'm going to have a Manhattan," Anita said, flashing a radiant smile at the waiter and tucking a lock of that silken hair behind her ear. "It's an old-fashioned drink, I know, but I'm an old-fashioned girl."

"Craig?" the negotiator prodded him, waiting to see what he would order.

"Seven and Seven," Craig said at last.

Anita gave him an approving smile. “There you go. You won’t be sorry.”

And that was the beginning. The negotiator took the departure of the waiter as his opening and the business began. No more preamble than that. Craig figured his idea of foreplay with Anita was a slap on the ass. The cosmic wrongness of it all was not lost on him. As the negotiator went over the points that still needed to be addressed—mainly having to do with how many NEESS employees would lose their jobs and how many shares of IllumiNet stock Craig would take away from the deal—he marveled at how a woman of such obvious intelligence and integrity could be married to such a shark. The negotiator must have made her a hell of a pitch.

The waiter came with a second round and as Craig sipped his Seven and Seven, Anita seemed more and more to lure the two men off into conversational tangents that had nothing to do with business. NEESS was in Cambridge, and she wanted to talk about Harvard Square, and a quaint little restaurant she’d been to there. Somehow the talk shifted to art, and then she really came alive.

The negotiator kept pulling them back to business, but Craig would much rather listen to Anita talk about art. Her eyes lit up and she spoke with such fire that she made the subject fascinating, though his own interest in art was only a fraction of hers. The passion in her made her even more beautiful. He was aware during the conversation that Anita was another man’s wife and so he tried to keep up a façade of detached curiosity. But more and more he watched her lips as she spoke and admired the curve of her neck, where he wanted desperately to kiss her.

“Look,” he said, standing suddenly even as the waiter delivered his third drink, unasked. “I’ve got to go. I’m . . . I need a night to sleep on all of this. You’re talking about less than a quarter of my employees keeping their jobs. I was led to believe the number would be much higher than that. These people are depending on me and . . . I just . . . I’ll call you in the morning. I’ll come to you.”

The negotiator was startled and a flash of annoyance swept his face, revealing too-sharp teeth, completing the shark-allusion. “Hey, hey, Craig. What’s the problem? You knew all of these deal points before you got here. We went over everything with your lawyer this morning. It’s really a formality, now. I sent a messenger over to your lawyer’s office with the

paperwork. You're going to meet with him later, right?"

Craig understood the question. The meeting really had been just a formality, an opportunity for him to ask last minute questions. He was supposed to go straight to his lawyer's office from here and sign the papers.

"I'll . . . look, I'll call you in the morning."

He turned to Anita. "I'm sorry to leave so abruptly. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"And you," she said, her eyes full of concern. "Don't worry. My husband has a job to do, but you have to do things in your own time."

The negotiator seared her with a look. Craig smiled at Anita, pleased that she had annoyed her husband on his behalf.

"Thank you."

* * *

That night as the clock ticked toward eight p.m., Craig sat at his desk staring out the window at the lights of Cambridge dotting the darkness. He could not bring himself to go home. The truth was that since his divorce, and perhaps even before it, this was home. This chair, this desk, this *place*. This company had raised him, in its way. In these halls he had grown from boy to man, with dozens of aunts and uncles to help guide him, from Sam Small in the mailroom to Debbie Tyll in the typing pool.

So strange to think of Debbie, dead now over a dozen years. What was truly bizarre was not her mortality, but the idea that he was old enough to remember when a company needed a typing pool . . . that such an antiquated occupation was not a relic from the twenties and thirties but as recent as 1990. Then again, the whole place was antiquated now, wasn't it? Even the occupation of CEO. Outmoded.

His father had kept a bottle of Wild Turkey in the desk and taken a single drink on Christmas Eve and one on his birthday. That was another tradition that Craig had kept up. He did not believe in drinking on the job. In his life outside of this office, what little of it there was, he rarely drank

alcohol of any kind. But every year on Christmas Eve and on his birthday—dad’s, not his own—he had one drink.

Tonight that was yet another bit of his integrity that he had thrown away. The glass on his desk was half empty, but he had topped it off twice already. He had not bothered to turn on additional lights in the office as the night had fallen and so aside from a small lamp in one far corner of the room the only light was the glow of his computer screen. Open on the screen was Sam Small’s human resources file. The others were all there as well, just a click away. Before him on the desk was a yellow legal pad and a pen. He had made a list of all of his employees, trying to figure out which would lose their jobs and which would remain, and whether or not he could save one or two more, making their positions seem more vital to IllumiNet than they probably were.

He wasn’t having much luck, not because these weren’t valuable people, but because IllumiNet didn’t value much.

Also on his desk, in a thick manila folder, were all the documents for the finalization of the deal with IllumiNet. He’d had his lawyer send them over but so far had not been able to bring himself to look at them. Craig took another sip of Wild Turkey and the whiskey seared his throat, opening up his sinuses. He ran his tongue over his teeth, licking away the slick sugary film that covered them.

“Alcohol won’t do it.”

The voice was enough to startle him nearly out of his chair. He half-turned abruptly, his hand barely missing the chance to knock whiskey all over his computer keyboard. Anita stood in the open doorway, leaning against the jamb in that breathtaking red dress. For all that she had been stunning before, she was more so now that he saw her entirely. Her body was petite, though she was taller than he had imagined, and her legs were strikingly sculpted below the hem of the short dress.

“What’s that?” he asked, confused by her arrival.

“Alcohol. If you’re trying to distract yourself or soothe your soul, alcohol isn’t the answer.”

Through a slight whiskey haze it took him a moment to evaluate his reaction. She was a charming woman and as lovely as he had ever seen. But she was not supposed to be here.

“Anita.” He frowned. “I don’t mean to be rude, but how did you get in here?”

Her smile was almost shy. She shrugged her shoulders as much as her posture, leaning there in the doorway, would allow. “I can be pretty persuasive.”

Craig could not help laughing at that. He had no idea what she had said to the security guards downstairs, but the mischief in her eyes was infectious. “I have no doubt of that.”

Then his humor was gone. He reached out for his whiskey but hesitated with his fingers an inch from the glass as he glanced up at her.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she said. “Every man has his poison.”

His throat was dry. He licked his teeth again and settled back into the chair without touching the whiskey glass. The bottle of Wild Turkey seemed an ominous presence there on his desk, out in the open, but he ignored it.

“What brings you here? Does . . . does your husband know where you are?”

Her gaze shifted away from him for a moment that was filled with doubt, and then she tried on a mask of a smile. “Of course he does.”

A lie. Craig sat up a bit straighter in his chair, the whiskey haze clearing away now just enough for his interest to stir. What was she doing here late at night without her husband’s knowledge?

“You still haven’t said why you’re here. What is it you want?”

Her eyes narrowed. No trace of a smile remained on her face. “To make a deal.”

“I’m afraid I’m not following you.”

“Oh, but I think you are.”

Stunned as he was—this was, after all, the sort of lurid thing he would never have imagined himself involved in—Craig was not a stupid man. Anita had been kind to him at lunch, nothing more. A sweet, intelligent woman who apparently had a bit more in common with her negotiator-husband than it had seemed at first glance. Craig was relieved that she was managing to avoid falling into the role of some Humphrey Bogart movie femme fatale. Along with the mischief there was eagerness and desperation in her eyes, and more than a little sorrow as well.

But she wasn't going to bullshit him.

Anita entered the office at last, stepping away from the threshold and taking up a stance before him reminiscent of some errant schoolgirl called down to the headmaster's office. She had her hands behind her back and though her breasts were small this made them more prominent. Her back arched slightly.

Her eyes never left his. Those mischievous eyes. Awkward though she might seem, something about her was amused by the scenario they were playing out.

“You know this deal is going to happen,” Anita assured him. “IllumiNet is acquiring your company.”

“Then why are you here?” The question was purposely blunt. No games.

“At lunch I got the distinct impression that you might turn your regret into the need to do something to make it difficult. To impede the process. My husband . . . has had enough impediments in his work lately. He's had a couple of big deals go sour. He needs this one to close smoothly. And, frankly, I think you do, too. From everything he's told me about your financial situation most of these people would lose their jobs even if you didn't sell. You can help some of them or none of them. I just wanted to talk to you . . . to make sure you do what's best for everyone. This thing should be easy, not ugly. But you could make it ugly.”

A bitterness rose like bile in the back of his throat. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and the dress seemed to caress her body. He had

been becoming increasingly aroused by her presence, but now his cock went rigid.

“And you . . .” he said in a rasping voice, “you could make it beautiful.”

At last her smile returned. “Something like that.”

“No build-up to it, then?” he asked, amazed and entranced by her. “No talk about how you were attracted to me at lunch, no more bullshit about my integrity.”

Her brow knitted and she winced as if hurt. A new boldness arose in her. “All right. If you want frankness, I don’t find you especially attractive. But I wasn’t playing you at lunch. I do admire your integrity, the way you’ve tried to take care of people here. There should be . . . there should be more of that in the world. And I could see how painful this all is for you. I’m not going to lie. I’m here selfishly. My husband needs this deal to keep his career afloat, and I can’t afford for him to mess it up. But I thought you might benefit as well. I thought with all that’s been happening in your life, you could use a . . . distraction.”

Craig’s chest rose and fell too quickly. He stared at her in disbelief. This place, this company that had been his home since his boyhood, seemed to hold its breath, wondering what he would do. It was on its deathbed, and his poor management had put it there. Yet it was still all he had in the world, and this woman’s husband was the one orchestrating its removal from his hands. He was reminded of a book his father’s secretary, Janine Wylie, had given him for his seventh birthday. *The Giving Tree*, it was called. It concerned a boy who loved to climb a particular tree, to swing from it and eat its fruit, and the way it offered him everything it had only to try to make him happy, no matter what, and in the end can only give a very old man a stump upon which to sit and rest. And yet at the man’s advanced age, the stump is all he needs to be content, and both he and the tree are happy.

Craig had envisioned himself and NEESS as the boy and the tree. Growing old together. Himself knowing that wherever he went in the world and whatever he did, the company awaited him back home. But the IllumiNet was taking that contentment from him, and the negotiator was the one making absolutely certain there wasn’t even a crumb left behind for him, or

the employees he had watched over for so long.

In his long silence, Anita had shifted anxiously several times and now her face flushed with embarrassment and she turned away from him.

“Obviously it was a mistake even coming here. Forgive me for making such a fool of myself.”

She was so damned beautiful, so delicate and perfect. He was even more aroused now at the sight of her vulnerability.

“Wait!”

With one hand on the doorframe she paused, head hung low, her hair a silken black curtain sweeping downward, but she did not turn to face him.

“It wasn’t . . . it wasn’t a mistake.” His whole body trembled, his skin tingling. It seemed like eons since he had made love to a woman and if he was honest with himself he had never made love to a woman as fine as Anita.

“What . . .” he licked his lips now, but it wasn’t from the whiskey. He felt embarrassed by the eagerness that rose in him now, but his cock was so hard in his pants that it hurt. “What did you have in mind?”

“We talked about art,” she whispered. Then she stood straighter and turned to face him, the mischief back in her eyes and her chest rising and falling in quick rhythm. “I thought I might show you my collection.”

What are you doing, Craig? he thought, almost giddy. You’re complicating everything. You’re going to make this whole thing even messier than it already is.

But deep inside, a part of him he had sublimated for most of his life was waking up. He was through doing everything for others and not watching out for himself. This was where that had gotten him. A whoring wife, a failing company, and the public humiliation of losing both of them.

Yeah, he thought, grinning. Yeah, I am.

“Where?” he asked, surrendering to temptation. In the roiling chaos of his

bitterness and resentment, he did not have the strength to overcome it, and that deep down part of him was glad about it. “Where do we go to see your collection?”

Anita warmed to the role of seductress now. Her thin smile was knowing and sweet all at once. Here he was, this shattered man, and she was going to ease his pain. She seemed to like that idea, and he was not about to disabuse her of it.

“We don’t have to go anywhere,” she said. “You can see it all right here.”

She moved toward his desk again, came around the side to stand only a few feet away. Her fingers came up and slipped the straps of her dress aside and she let it glide down her body, sliding to the floor to pool around her red heels.

Craig could not breathe. His chest hurt. She wore nothing beneath the dress. His heart beat like a hummingbird’s wings and it was like the very first time he had seen a girl nude all over again. That had been Sara Dobler, two years older and two years wiser, after the freshman dance in the fall of his first year of high school. Sara had let him touch her all over. And back then, touching had been more than enough. He had stammered and held his breath and marveled at the soft smoothness of her, at the hardness of her nipples and the way in which her body responded to his hands.

This was that awe of discovery all over again.

Anita’s body was perfect, her skin a bronze Asian hue, her small breasts tipped with long nipples. Her belly was taut and her hips were round. Her legs were supple and between them, her pussy was completely shaved, the lips tucked away like the petals of a flower just about to blossom. He had heard that this was the style now, the trend, but had never been with a woman before who shaved.

And yet in spite of all of that perfection before him, all of that raw sensuality so powerful that it nearly stopped his heart, his eyes lingered only briefly on her breasts and her sex. There was so much else for him to look at, to admire.

There was her art.

Her skin was the canvas. From just above her breasts to her upper thighs she was nearly covered in illustration, tattoos in gold and black and red, in jade green and sky blue, the richest colors he had ever seen. The images ran together as though her torso was a Ming vase, and yet there were enormous stylistic differences, and some of the tattoos seemed fresher, more vibrant. Some of the illustrations on her flesh were beautiful and some terribly disturbing. Her left nipple was the eye of some Raven god in whose talons there were human beings, gored and bleeding and screaming. Her right nipple was the eye of a coyote that stood upright, a sly grin stretching his snout.

There were dozens of other figures on her skin, all of them imposing. Some were sensual creatures, exposing themselves, while others wielded axes and bloody daggers and weapons of war. Some were wreathed in fire while others emerged from the ocean onto stony shore. He saw Egyptian influence and what he thought was Greek. There were oil-black gods in African headdress and a thing with many arms and shrunken heads dangling from its belt that he thought was some Indian deity, Kali or Shiva. There were simply too many for him to take them all in.

“My God,” he whispered.

“That’s almost funny,” Anita replied.

Craig gazed up at her, eyes wide in astonishment, and he saw doubt in her eyes.

“Are you repulsed?” she asked.

“No,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “No, it’s . . . it’s the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen. What made you do it? All of this?”

Her fingers caressed her stomach, showing off the figures there, presenting them to him as her pride and joy. “Ancient cultures from around the world all have their own gods. I’ve been fascinated by it all since I was a little girl. I started with the conventional ones. Roman. Norse. Egyptian. But the more I researched the more I wanted to know about others. Inca. Mayan. Etruscan. The gods of Sumeria and ancient Babylon. African.

Mesopotamia. And from each culture I chose at least one god to keep with me permanently. It was what I studied in college, where I met my husband. He always encouraged my passion. Later, I received my Master's in myth and folklore. I wanted to know them all."

"I don't recognize most of them," he confessed, hypnotized by the gentle motion of her fingers moving across her own flesh. There was a scent coming off of her now, a strange combination of musk and damp copper and summer rainstorms. It was a rich, earthen odor and it quickened his pulse. He had to shift in his seat and pluck at his pants to relieve the ache of the hardness of his cock.

"The further I searched the more I wanted to find. The old gods. The forgotten ones. Every single tattoo has a story of its own, a myth. Its own history."

"And this one?" Craig asked, bending close to point to a small figure just above her navel. "This doesn't look like an ancient god. It looks . . . modern."

The moment his eyes had been able to focus, to pick apart the images and examine them for themselves, he had noticed that one illustration. The tattoo was finely detailed, much more so than most of the others. The god wore a black top hat with a bright red band that was dotted with tiny gleaming blades. His teeth were like two rows of shiny needles and he had knives for fingers. His clothes were leather and upon his feet were a pair of human heads.

"What is it? Aztec? But what about the hat?"

"Modern?" Anita asked, and when she laughed it was a hollow, rasping sound like the dry rattle of a smoker on his death bed. "Oh, no. It's one of the oldest of them all. There have been names for it in many cultures, but none of the scholars know where it originated or what its true name was."

Craig gazed up at her eyes at last, awed by her. "You're exquisite. Truly. I've never met a woman like you. Never imagined anyone like you existed. I always thought of tattoos as . . . as low . . . crass. But this—"

Anita beamed with pleasure, flattered by his words. She ran her hands over

her breasts, over Raven and Coyote, and touched her nipples with just the tips of her fingers. “Thank you,” she whispered. “They’re meant to be seen. That way they won’t be forgotten forever. Usually they’re only for me . . . my husband doesn’t really see them anymore. Doesn’t even notice when I’ve added a new one.”

“He’s a fool, then. It really is art.”

His hands hesitated, hovering in the air. He wanted to touch her, to have his hands follow the paths trailblazed by her own fingers, but he did not know where or how to begin. He was long out of practice and would have been awkward even with an ordinary woman. But Anita was far from ordinary.

There was magic here. Magic that tingled his skin and stole his breath and made him feel thirteen years old again. She was another’s man wife and this moment was not born of genuine emotion but of need and desperation and surrender. And yet the magic swept such concerns away. He thought he would come just from the touch of his fingers upon her skin.

She took his hand and led his fingers between her legs. He felt the smoothness there, that unblossomed flower, and as she pressed his fingers into her he found her warm and glistening wet, and she sighed and leaned down to put her weight on him, sliding her red heels apart so that he could explore her properly.

Anita reached for his belt and hurriedly unbuckled him. She reached inside his pants and gripped him firmly in her hand and he groaned, a noise that came from so far down inside him that he did not recognize the sound as his own. He bent to her, tongue thrusting out, licking the Eye of the Raven, then taking it into his mouth. His free hand slid over her back and cupped the rounded flesh of her ass and he knew he had to trace every line of her art, to study her, to consume her.

He slid from the chair to the ground and pulled her down after him.

* * *

Craig had never been with a woman like Anita before. Not with anyone so beautiful, nor with anyone so debauched. She loved it all and he gave it to

her willingly. Anything he could conceive of, she was eager to indulge him. And while he took her from behind, or lay her across the desk, or knelt in front of this exotic woman while she sat in his chair, he studied her illustrations, every single line. Every forgotten god.

Yet when at last he was completely spent and all the lust had been drained from him, guilt seeped in to replace it. It didn't bother him that he had just fucked another man's wife, though he felt that it should have. No, it was the company that shot tendrils of guilt through him, sent it racing through his veins. He lay there on the floor with his cheek resting on Anita's stomach and a sickly twist roiled in his gut. Yes, Anita was beautiful and her tattoos were exotic. She was alluring, unlike any woman he had ever made love to before.

But now it was over. His reason had been overwhelmed by lust, such a foolish, man thing. His principles were in the toilet. His loyalty to his employees was out the window. When his cock had gotten hard and she'd moved in close to him, nothing else had mattered.

"God," he whispered with a grimace, fighting despair.

Craig wondered if Anita felt any guilt but he did not want to look into her eyes, now, did not want to see her face. He knew he ought to just get up and dress, but felt as much a captive as if he'd put his foot in a bear trap. What to say to her now that his lust was gone and the rational Craig had returned? How to get her out of there as quickly as possible? And if he should try, now to fight any further for the jobs of his employees, what might Anita's husband bring into the conversation? What might his employees and his clients—former employees and former clients—what might they learn about this evening?

The more he thought about it the more paralyzed he felt. Anita touched his hair, gently caressing the back of his neck, as though she cared for him. As though there was something more than business going on here. But Craig knew better. Her belly felt warm beneath his cheek and the softness seemed all a part of the lie he had told himself to make it all right to do this . . . that it would be worth it . . . that there was no more room for negotiation anyway and this was just a bonus. He closed his eyes tightly and breathed in the scent of her.

It had been extraordinary. But worth it? He didn't think so. Not now. He'd compromised everything he had ever believed in, all of the values his father had instilled within him. He trembled to think of it. What was left of him now? Craig had thought IllumiNet and their negotiator had taken everything away from him but now he realized there had been that one last little bit. His conscience. And that hadn't been taken away. No. He had thrown it in the gutter himself.

His face twisted up again and he felt the despair overtaking him.

No one can know, he thought. *No one*. And on the heels of that thought came anger. Pure, undiluted anger, at himself, for all of the bad choices he had made over the years, at the negotiator for being so fucking smug, and at Anita, for seeing his weakness and exploiting it, even as she pretended to admire him. For long minutes he lay there with his eyes closed and his pulse sped up, his breath came more slowly, more deliberately, and his jaw clenched. It was wrong. All of it, so completely wrong. All he had tried to do was take care of people and run an honest business, and it had all turned into a cosmic joke. And *he* was the punchline.

It was too late to save the company. Too late to stop the inevitable. It was far too late for him to save any jobs. The negotiator was full of shit. Craig was certain that only a handful of his people would keep their jobs.

His eyes opened to a splash of rich colors, his cheek pressed against the soft flesh of Anita's belly, laying upon the pantheon of ancient gods that were tattooed there. *What the hell have I done?*

Yet even as the question was posed, it left his mind. He blinked, studying Anita's belly. The flesh remained still and yet, on her skin, something moved. It was the figure with the top hat, the illustration of the ancient god with needle teeth and knives for fingers.

And it was moving.

The motion was barely perceptible, but Craig was sure the tattoo had turned toward him and it was inching closer to where his flesh touched Anita's. He held his breath. It was impossible, of course. But he had not had enough to drink to hallucinate. He stared at the forgotten god with the razor fingers and the top hat, and it stared back at him. It grinned, but the

result was terrifying, up close like that. He could see so many details that he had missed before.

Then it spoke to him. Softly.

It wanted to negotiate.

Morning had never taken so long to arrive for Sam Morelli, a.k.a. Salvatore, a.k.a. The Negotiator. When midnight had come and gone with no sign of Anita returning home he had been unable to pretend to himself any longer. He knew where she had gone and what she had done. Self-loathing had taken root in him years earlier and now it blossomed fully. And yet there was gratitude mixed in there with it, a fact that repulsed him, though there was no escaping it. This was not the first time Anita had put herself on the line for the sake of Sam's career. Maybe if he had made a bigger deal out of it the first time, protested louder . . . but even that first time, when the truth of it had shocked him, he had been thankful.

That's how low you can go, Sam thought, standing at the window in his office at IllumiNet, looking out at the Boston skyline toward the harbor.

But that was bullshit. He could go lower, get dirtier. The true depths of his iniquity had yet to be explored. Other than Anita, Sam loved nothing but success. Victory. And victory, in business, meant money. The cash-out.

Where are you, baby?

The thought had echoed through his mind again and again since last night. Anita had never come home. Sam was sure he knew the reason. The deal wasn't sealed yet. His wife would do whatever she had to do to close the deal. He was a good negotiator, but she was the best. Absolutely tenacious. Whatever she was up to this morning—or whatever she had done to need to sleep so late—Sam knew it had been all for him, for them. So though *Where are you, baby?* kept coming back into his head over and over, he didn't really want to know the answer. She would call.

She would call.

She'd better. Sam winced at the coldness of the thought, but there it was. As stylish as he looked in his brown tailored suit and red tie, as immaculate

as his grooming was, he might as well be working in the mailroom for all the pull he'd have at IllumiNet if he couldn't close this one smoothly. It was damned likely he'd lose his job. So if Anita wanted to continue living the lifestyle she had, she would have to come through for him.

His gaze shifted to the clock on the wall and he shifted anxiously. Going on nine thirty a.m. Time was running out. His boss had expected a final report on his desk by ten o'clock.

Hands shoved down into the pockets of his trousers, Sam stared at the phone on his desk. Miraculously, it rang.

He hurried to the desk and slipped on his headset even as he punched the button to pick up the line. "Sam Morelli."

"Good morning again, Sam." It was Martha at the front desk. He ought to have checked his caller I.D. "You didn't want to be interrupted, but there's a delivery for you out here. Also a manila envelope from NEESS."

Contracts? he thought, a hesitant relief awaiting confirmation in the back of his mind.

"Can you send them back with it?"

"Sure. Have a great day."

Sam smiled to himself, hopeful. "You too."

Half a minute later there was a rap on the door to his office. Sam hadn't even bothered to sit down at his desk and was instead staring out at the cityscape when the knock came.

"Come in," he said, turning around.

A pair of delivery men were carrying a large package whose size and shape—beneath brown paper wrapping and string—suggested a framed canvas. Some kind of art, Sam assumed. What interested him far more was the manila envelope one of the deliverymen clutched in his right hand, pinned against the brown paper-wrapped gift.

Yes, he thought. *Here we go.*

“I’ll take that,” he said, snatching the envelope from the man’s hands, nearly causing him to drop the big frame. He tore the envelope open and slid out a sheaf of documents—all the closing materials on IllumiNet’s takeover of NEESS—then flipped a few pages to find the line where Craig should have signed them. And the signature was there.

Sam Morelli smiled. He riffled pages, rejoicing at the fact that there were no marginal changes stuck in by Craig’s attorney. On the last page, however, there was a note on yellow sticky paper. Two words. DONE DEAL.

He let out a long sigh of relief. His job was safe.

So focused had he been on the documents that he had barely heard the delivery men tearing the paper and string from the large portrait. He could see the top of the frame and it was lovely, gilt with gold.

Anita, baby, you must have done something right, he thought, grinning at the gift Craig had sent. The delivery men tore the paper away from the front of the frame in one long rip.

The smile left him. The art was familiar. Each individual illustration was known to him. And why not. He had paid for them.

That large frame was filled with Anita’s tattoos . . . with her skin, stretched tautly over the canvas. The delivery men were staring at it, trying to understand what it was they were seeing. Sam’s mouth hung open and he tried to scream but no sound would come out. He only shook his head in denial and stared, staggering toward the frame against his will, unable to stop himself.

For despite the chaos in his mind, he had noticed something. Grief tore at him, gutted him. He whimpered something, but moved even nearer, and now he saw for certain. There was a clear place just above her navel . . . a place where her beautiful coffee skin was unmarred by ink or tattoo needle. He could make out the shape of the missing tattoo, a hole in the tableau, a vacancy in the pantheon of forgotten gods.

And at last he could scream.

Done deal.

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