

Moulin Rouge

Another long miserable day on the Hill. I leaned back against the elevator wall and closed my eyes in an attempt to clear my head of the frustration over the behavior of Congress. The usual election year antics of my colleagues was being particularly irritating; what with the posturing for the cameras and the consultations with the ubiquitous spin doctors bringing any attempt at real business to a twisted and diverted halt. But, damn, they looked good. I still found it mystifying that the general public bought into the whole glitzy appearance shtick, the colorful and meaningless rhetoric and the eternal buck passing that totally neutralized any effect law makers could have on their world.

The elevator came to a stop, the doors waiting for the security system to make a final scan of my apartment for anything out of the ordinary. I know Dad meant well and his concerns about my safety were valid. Our family was one of the most wealthy and influential in the world making us enticing targets for the disgruntled and disenfranchised. There had already been one attempt on my life. And with Dad being a former president and current ambassador to the UN and me being the maverick favorite son Congressperson from the second richest state in the union, well a little extra security wasn't a bad idea, just irritating. Dad still wasn't happy with my refusal to have bodyguards with me 24/7 but there were limits to my cooperation.

The doors slid open with a quiet hiss and I walked into the foyer of my simple digs. The entire top two floors of the New Watergate were owned by my family. My folk's maintained a residence that took up some 80% of the top floor with the lower floor housing the servants and security people and providing a bit of a security buffer. That a single fire-and-forget Viper missile could punch through even the toughest perimeter and that the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in Washington made a nice clear target was something the security firm had pointed out but Dad was security conscious, not fanatical. The north east corner of the top floor was my residence. Two simple bedrooms, a large, open, loft like great room and a foyer where my private elevator provided sole access. Mom was a bit miffed there was no direct link between their residence and mine but I preferred it that way. Not that they were in residence often but it was just one less means of egress to cover.

The lights came up as the sensors detected my body heat when I stepped into the great room. I headed directly for the kitchen and a cold beer from the refrigerator. After the first long cold drink I scanned the larder. Mom's servant's kept me pretty well stocked with comestibles but all of them seemed to involve some form of effort on my part to prepare. Right at the moment, hungry as I was, it just didn't seem worth the effort. I took my beer to my bedroom and changed out of the Ivy League suit into slacks, twill shirt and boat shoes. By then the beer was down to a dab of foam in the bottom of the bottle so I headed back to the kitchen. I knew I would eventually give in and throw one of the glorified TV dinners into the oven. It was that or put

up with hauling my pit bulls in suits out to some restaurant and putting up with the publicity that would entail. I stopped in the bedroom door when I realized the refrigerator door was open and someone was rummaging through it. My first reaction was to hit the panic button built in to my watch when I realized there was probably only one person in the world who could be raiding my ice box without sounding every alarm in the joint.

"Might as well get me a fresh one while you're at it." I said as I pulled out a stool at the kitchen island. The man continued rummaging through the fridge without turning. Finally he came out with a pair of cold Coronas in one hand and a lime in the other. He kicked the door closed and set the beers on the marble island top. He fished an old fashioned church key out of his jeans pocket, took a knife from the block, deftly sliced the lime and dropped one down the clear long necks of the bottles. He handed me one and took a long pull on his.

"I didn't know one fridge could hold so many different nance girly beers."

I took a drink of a beer I knew hadn't been made in almost ten years and was equally sure hadn't been in my refrigerator. It was definitely better than any beer I had drank in about that long.

"What are you doing here, Mike?"

He shrugged.

"I was in DC so I figured I'd stop by and see how you are doing."

"Bullshit."

"Hey! Can't an old friend do that?"

"Sure but they usually knock or call first. Which means they have to log in with security down in the lobby. And then I get this little call and say, yeah, he's cool. Send him up. Since you didn't do that I have to assume you don't want anyone to know you are here."

"So ok, I'm a private sort of guy."

I did my best to look askance at him.

"So to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"I figured you were about due for a night on the town. You know, a little bit of carousing to burn off the cares and worries of day-to-day life."

I had to laugh. I finished my beer and went to the fridge. Inside was a 12 pack of Corona, untouched. I took out another pair and headed over to repeat his little lime ceremony.

"Oh I can just see it now. The junior Congressman from the sovereign state of New York out pubbing with the head of R&D for the biggest producer of fantasy and brain tweaking in the world. I'm sure the press would have a field day with that."

Mike laughed and took his beer.

"I'm sure they would. If they ever found out about it."

"Come on Mike. I can't go to the 7-11 without someone recognizing me."

"Probably true. If anyone knew it was you."

"I don't do disguises."

He stifled a belch.

"Me either."

I wanted to tell him he was as full of shit as a baby goose but there was something about Mike Kiedrowski that just seemed to make that remark pointless. If he said he had a way to make it possible to go out and not have me recognized, without disguises, you had to believe there was a way.

"Why?"

"You need it? And I could use it?"

"What makes you think I need it?"

He did a little hop and perched on the marble counter top.

"When was the last time you were out partying when it wasn't part of the job?"

"You've been keeping track?"

He gave me a one sided grin.

"Let's just say someone has."

I felt my heart do a little stutter step. I knew whom he meant.

"That's why you haven't been back inside since, isn't it?"

"You damn well know it is. Smoke and mirrors, right?"

He shrugged.

"But is it why you've been burying yourself in your work? Is it why the most eligible bachelor in the country sleeps alone

every night?"

"That is none of your damn business." I snarled. I couldn't handle the look in his eyes so I turned and stalked over to the big picture window overlooking Washington.

"Besides, you are a fine one to talk. You work 10,12 hours a day, 6 or 7 days a week and haven't taken a vacation in over five years. You go home after work and spend your nights at home. Who are you to tell me I need a break?"

"That would be a good point, if it were true. Your snoops are good but not good enough. Kid, she's been gone almost two years now. And it isn't doing you any damn good hiding in your work. Believe me, I know. It gets you through the day but its mighty thin soup."

I started to lash out but I held back because he was right. I had had the same conversation with myself too many times to get angry over it.

"Don't you think I have tried?"

"Yeah, I know you have. It's hard to get past the glitz and the glamour."

I turned back to him.

"There are major drawbacks to being me. Especially when it comes to women."

He laughed.

"Poor baby. Rich, famous, handsome and single. Got to be the pits."

He finished his beer, got off the counter and headed for the foyer. He stopped in the doorway and looked back at me.

"You coming?"

I set my empty on the counter and followed. We walked to the elevator and I waited. It should only open at my command but I had no faith in that one.

"A night out where no one knows you. That is what you need."

I laughed.

"Mars, maybe?"

"Too dry. I've got something better in mind."

The elevator doors opened and we stepped to the threshold. The music from the other side was deafening. A maitre'd in a tux stood in front of the heavily decorated, leaded glass doors at the back of what should have been my elevator.

"Monsieur, welcome back."

"Evening, Antoine. How have you been?"

"No complaints. Would you like your usual table?"

Mike nodded as Antoine turned to open the doors. I noticed Mike was dressed in a tuxedo himself and from the restriction around my neck I assumed I was as well. We stepped through the doors into mayhem and madness. Antoine motioned a waiter over to show us to our table while I took in the sights. It was a huge dance hall done in garish Baroque style. The crowd was predominantly men, most older, dressed in

tuxedos of a style that had been gone for over a hundred years and women in various styles of gowns and dresses that accentuated the positive in a very obvious fashion. And variety? The women ranged from absolutely stunning to grotesque, every size, shape and color. About the only thing they seemed to have in common was their availability. Some were blatantly obvious, others so subtle and sublime one almost had to look twice. Almost.

Our table was at the edge of the main dance floor near the stage. A prime location to my inexperienced eye and one generally reserved for the most influential. Mike talked to the waiter for a moment and then motioned for me to sit. Conversation was virtually impossible over the din of the cancan playing. There was something about the place that was hauntingly familiar. What conversation I could make out was in French with a smattering of other languages thrown in for good measure. Along the walls were platforms where women danced for the entertainment of those below. One was some type of gypsy, another a mermaid, still another a dwarf who vaguely resembled Marie Antoinette. All were dressed yet not completely, their dancing providing flashes of skin and more to tantalize. The same could be said of the ladies who danced on the huge dance floor before us. And presiding over the whole chaotic scene was a portly man with bristling moustaches and dressed very much like the ringmaster in a circus.

The song ended to scattered applause and conversation became possible again but only just barely over the din of talk that filled the room. I looked over at Mike.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"Could be."

"The Moulin Rouge?"

"Afraid so."

I shook my head as a waiter set drinks on the table and vanished into the crowd.

"Where? How?"

Mike picked up his glass and sipped.

"Paris, the last time I checked."

I picked up my glass. The heady aroma of absinthe filled my nostrils.

"It's impossible. The Rouge hasn't existed like this in decades."

"More like over a century. 1900 is just around the corner here."

"How?"

"Smoke and mirrors, kid." He grinned and refilled his glass from the bottle on the table.

I wanted to question him further but a tall Nubian princess materialized from the press of bodies and slid languidly into my lap. I'm serious, a princess. Or rather what my imagination had always told me one looked like.

"Would monsieur care to buy me a drink?"

Her perfume was some kind of primal musk that set my blood hammering as she leaned forward to let her gown gap enticingly. I heard Mike laugh as I tried to tame the raucous clamoring inside me. It took a major effort to lift her from my lap and find enough control of my voice to decline politely. She pouted a moment then ran her finger down my cheek and left with a smile. I picked up my drink and slammed it down. The absinthe burned all the way down and exploded in my stomach, sending me into a fit of coughing. Mike slapped my back a couple times then refilled the glass.

I knew if I didn't grab hold of the last shred of sanity left to me I would be lost in this dream so I took refuge in anger.

"Just what in the hell do you think you are doing here?"

His enigmatic smile irked the hell out of me, feeding the fire.

"I said a night out where no one would recognize you."

"But it's a lie."

"Is it now?"

I waved a hand at the room.

"This place is fiction. Or history. It sure isn't real."

"And you're an expert on these things?"

Suddenly, the noise was gone. I looked around. Our table was somewhere on the Left Bank, a café that overlooked the Seine.

"Mike, if I wanted fantasy, I would have gone into the machine and brought Jaq back."

"Kid, the only problem with that is you know she is dead. And there is something in your head that would always know that."

"And I don't know this is more of the same?"

"No, you don't."

I started to answer but he held up his hand to stop me.

"No, kid, you don't know. Most people only know about the machine from the theaters. To them it is just a new way to experience movies. Pure entertainment. You know the machine is capable of much more, more so than anyone around. So there is a gram, a bit in you that can maybe accept something like this. But Jaq died in your arms. Her blood was on you, you saw that light go out. And you are carrying a hell of a load of guilt about that. You feel you made some bad choices and the woman you loved is gone because of that."

I picked up the coffee in front of me and tried to drink it but all I could see was that light turning off forever and my throat closed.

"You got another chance that most don't get. Was it just a head game? Was it fantasy fulfillment to get you over a rough spot?"

"The logical part of me says yes, Mike. She was just a fancy program being run by a very sophisticated machine to help me understand what happened."

I looked up at him for confirmation but there was no help in his hooded gaze.

“But then I ask myself who could have written that program? No one but Jaq knew all of it and she was gone. Dad’s investigators never turned up anything substantial, certainly nothing that could have been used to flesh out a ghost like that. And from what you said and what I learned later, the head team hadn’t reached a consensus on how to treat me, let alone have a program written to implement.”

I pushed back from the table and went over to lean on the stone rail and watch the river flow by. How many times had I gone over all this in my head and always come to the same ending? That the Prometheus machine was capable of doing everything that had occurred was a fact. With sufficient information the programmers could write a scenario, fleshed out in unbelievable detail, to minister to even the most injured mind. It had been done, though not often. Tandem sessions between trained therapists and troubled individuals were becoming commonplace. And a helluva tool in the 21st century physicians little black bag.

But it was still a tool, one that needed to be tuned to the given situation.

“You haven’t been back in the net since you got out of the hospital.”

I shook my head.

“And only once with the therapist while I was still there.”

"Why? Afraid?"

"Maybe. Mostly it's because of this."

I waved a hand at Bohemian Paris.

"That time with the therapist I was aware of whole experience. Didn't like it much. The details were fuzzy. I had the impression that if I turned my head quick enough I would catch someone working on the set. Or find some detail that just didn't belong, something a programmer just stuck in as a kind of practical joke. Maybe for people who have moved from standard projected movies to participatory theater, it's an incredible experience. And they aren't aware of the fact that there is a manufactured flavor to the scene."

"But this, Mike, this isn't the cheesy sets designed by movie programmers. This is so damn close to real it scares me. You scare me. I've read all the rhetoric about messing with the human mind, the possibilities of control and subliminal messaging and I've studied the responses out of Prometheus. I know about the safeguards and limitations but I also have a vivid enough imagination and experience with government to know it would be possible in the wrong hands."

I waited to see if he would respond but he only drank his coffee, watching me.

"Stosh, has the Prometheus machine become sentient?"

"I guess that might depend on your definition."

"Oh come on. Is it self aware? Is it capable of independent action? Can it reach someone without using the interface

couches?"

"Can't say much for your choice of pronouns but yes." He paused.

"Oh, good Christ. You say this machine has evolved into something capable of god knows what and you're quibbling about semantics?"

"It isn't quibbling. Actually it may be the heart of the matter."

I swore, mostly to cover the trembling fear that tumbled through my thoughts. A sentient computer capable of manipulating human thought just sounded way too ominous. And the fact it had chosen to play in my head made it infinitely worse.

"So, are you the machine?"

Mike chuckled.

"Hardly."

"Not good enough. Why should I believe you?"

"The state of mind you're in, what does it matter what you believe? You're thinking this is all just a huge mind fuck, that some machine is manipulating your perceptions and thoughts. If that were the case, why bother? If it could just reach in and put any thought in your head it wanted, why waste time playing with manipulation? Why make you think you had a choice? It would be just as easy to make you believe and make you believe it was your own idea."

I shuddered.

"Can it do that?"

"I have no idea. I would imagine so."

"I could take this to the authorities. Have the thing destroyed." I whispered hoarsely, the anger and outrage growing as I felt the possibility of violation grow.

"You could. And you are probably one of the few people with the credibility and power to make it happen."

"But it won't happen. You would stop me. Or the machine would."

Mike shook his head.

"Nope. It would be a long uphill battle for you. You have no evidence."

"No? I have you here. And myself as well."

"You are in your apartment. Your security system is monitoring you preparing Coq a'vin and watching some senseless drivel on one of the news channels. I am presently working with a good half dozen people deep in the Prometheus compound, again well documented by men and machines."

"So you can control what machines record. There are other ways."

"True. You could throw in with the doomsayers and add some real impetus to their witch hunt."

I laughed. I had to. The alternative would be to see if I could choke the life from him.

"But aren't they right?"

"I don't think so."

"You admit the damn machine can twist the way people think and you say that isn't bad?"

"Big difference between can and will or does. The US has the military force to blast the planet into the Stone Age. Each human being has the capability of killing but it doesn't mean they do it. Just because a power or capability exists doesn't mean it will be exercised. I could have left you in your loop. It wouldn't have taken much longer to either destroy your mind or kill off your body."

"Why didn't you?"

"For the same reason I only pointed you in a direction instead of presenting you with your answer. I'm not god. And neither is the machine. People have to make their own choices for their own reasons, right or wrong."

"Free will?"

"More like free spirit. We only really learn by doing. That makes the difference between believing and knowing. You can teach a kid not to touch a hot stove and they will believe it is a dangerous thing. They touch it once and they know it. Believing is fine for the small things in life but when it comes to basics, knowing is essential."

"There are some trying times coming, Forbes. Times that will test what humanity is made of."

I looked up at him.

"I know a little bit of what you are going through. My ghost wasn't as vivid as yours but every bit as painful. But I need you, the world needs you. And we need you of a piece, with that ache dealt with. It's something that could distract you at the wrong time, cripple you if it was used by the opposition. And we need you working with us because you know it's the best choice. You can't believe in this one."

I remembered a bit of the dossier I had read about this man. And I remembered something that had been bothering me about it.

"Ok, Mike. Answer me one question, honestly and I will do what I can."

He looked down at the river and I could see his thoughts wander far away.

"Did I die?"

He paused and the pain that flitted across his face was blacker than anything I had ever experienced.

"Can you accept that I don't know?"

"But the records..."

He looked down at his hands and back at me with a grin.

"And you were just in the Moulin Rouge."

I started to protest that had been a fiction of the dream machine. Had it? I wasn't in a couch, hooked into the net by the mysterious magic of a Karz-Koufax hood. And the whole torturous time I had been trapped, reliving the loss of the woman I loved, I hadn't been. Where had I been? Where was I

now? Had the dance hall been a dream, a fiction I had been dragged into by whom? A dead man who wasn't dead? Which was more unbelievable?

"What are you, Stosh?"

"A man with a job to do."

"Are you? A man?"

"Maybe a different kind of man but still a man."

"And this job?"

The din was back. Zeidler was at the front of the bandstand calling out in a stentorian bellow for everyone to give a hand to the star of the show. The lights dimmed until only a baby spot illuminated the dance floor and she was there. La Habenera, brought from Cuba for the enjoyment of the sated patrons of the Moulin Rouge. Skin of burnished bronze, eyes of dancing green witch fire and hair, a little piece of midnight. Those eyes reached across the dance floor and found me. Laser tracked, locked on target. Eyes of an imp that had danced in the Tuscan sun.

"We'll talk later, kid."

"I don't think so. We'll talk now. I get the feeling you have been running a whizzer on me for a while now and I want to know why."

The music came up, a heavy Latin beat that could reach inside a person and shift the beat of their heart. La Habenera began to move, slow sensuous rhythms that came from a source older than time, deeper than the soul. I could feel the deep burn

begin inside me, unlike anything I had ever experienced before and it tried to take my attention far from the direction I wanted.

"What, you're afraid that if I can think I won't play your game?"

"Who said I was playing a game?"

"I do. You are playing at something..." I turned my head from the dance floor and focused on his face. "and it won't work."

"You think not?"

I picked up my glass and sipped the green fire.

"I know it won't. So you can stop playing Mephistopheles to my Faust."

He watched me for a moment then picked up his own glass.

Suddenly we were sitting on the deck of a sailboat. Beyond the rail I could see the main square of Annapolis. Mike looked around then back at me.

"More comfortable here?"

I waved a hand.

"You can put us anywhere and I won't care."

Mike reached down into the cooler and took out a pair of beers. He popped the tops and handed me one.

"I didn't put us anywhere. This was your doing."

"Oh please, what kind of idiot do you think I am?"

The scene shifted back to the Moulin Rouge and just as quickly back to my sailboat, tied to the wharf.

"I can over ride you, kid. Lots more experience. But this is your choice."

I looked at him, stunned and confused.

"The machine you are so leery of does have a mind of it's own. And it is every bit as quirky as yours or mine. You are being offered a partnership. A choice and a chance. I'm here as a friend to help another friend who seems to think there is something about you that would be of help in days to come." He sipped his beer. "It helps I agree."

"That I'm worth it?"

"No, that you would be a helpful addition to the team. You deal with your own self worth crap."

I looked at the empty square and imagined Godzilla standing there, ready to ravage the old town. The air shimmered slightly and there he was. All four feet of him. He hissed and gave a roar that could have been drowned out by a sewing machine. A pencil of blue fire lanced from his jaws and a trash can exploded into the air.

"So I get to be a junior partner? Maybe even a key to the executive washroom someday?"

Mike looked at me, his eyebrow raised and a quirk of a smile on his mouth. Suddenly Godzilla was his normal Tokyo size, his roar deafening, and then gone.

"Kids. Always want to run with the damn scissors."

The latin beat was back. Through the smoky haze she danced with a passion I had never suspected. Those damn fey

eyes of emerald fire latched onto me. For a moment I felt the anger rise again, the feeling I was being pandered to. The ultimate mind game. Are choices made under false pretenses less valid? Was the presentation a temptation or an offering? I had the feeling I could say no, walk away...back to my sterile apartment. To a life of intrigue and futility. And there was the feeling that this could well be the last offer. Not out of spite but rather respect for that choice.

I knew if I walked now, I would have to turn my back on possibilities. That, just maybe, there was more to life than what science could explain. That Pandora's box had been opened again and there was a choice about what came out. Destiny and fate didn't have to be blind...maybe sometimes they had some help.

I could see the studied sensuality on la Habenera's face. She was playing to the rubes but whenever those eyes flickered across me there was a bit of quiet apprehension in them. The choice was mine and in spite of the animal passion she exuded, it was a game for the rest of the patrons. I looked over at Mike. He was watching me, his face blank of expression.

"You know, I have never cared for absinthe."

A frosty Corona appeared in my hand. He glanced at it then gave me a slow grin before one appeared in his hand.

"Pussy."

"And I have never liked being played with."

Mike looked at me over his beer and raised an eyebrow.

"You've got the fiddle, kid, call the tune."

"I don't like middle men."

He grinned and finished raising his beer to his mouth, drinking deeply.

"About time."

The world turned to haze and fog, smoke but I was damned if I could see the mirrors. But then, you never got to see those. Jaq came out of the mist and stood a few feet away. I felt the desire, the ache rise unbidden but I steeled myself to it.

"The only way you can get my cooperation?"

She started to speak then hesitated. Jaq/the machine looked down then back up with a rueful smile.

"Would you accept that since I have never felt love, I can appreciate the look you have for her?"

I almost bought it but held on to the anger in me.

"It's for her, not you."

I could have hit her with a bat and had a less painful reaction.

She turned and walked to the edge of sight in the mist, her shoulders bowed. I felt a cad but not enough of one to fold.

"Michael was right."

She turned and looked at me, the Jaq façade shifting, the appearance changing slowly and softly. I had a hard time concentrating on her words as her form melted and flowed into the mist.

"I am not omniscient. Nor omnipotent. I do make mistakes."

The voice that came from the void was a gentle alto only vaguely associated with Jaq's disappearing form.

"If you know me at all, you know I appreciate honesty."

Her chuckle was a warm flow of comfort through the ambiguity.

"Would you feel any better to know I haven't a much better idea of what to do than you?"

"No."

Slowly the mists flowed and where Jaq had stood was a woman vaguely reminiscent of my idea of the old Greek goddess Athena. With a healthy touch of an actress turned princess from years gone by. Where Jaq had been slim and elfin, this new form was more substantial, shading to matronly. Her hair was a silvery brunette, the face incredibly attractive yet strong. There was a definite presence of strength with murmurs of vulnerability.

"Is this better?"

I shrugged.

"Is it you?"

She laughed, a low melodic thing that twanged at every nerve in me.

"Forbes, I am a machine. I don't have a natural human form."

“Why me?”

“Other than the fact you are independently wealthy, internationally known and respected and something of a genius in your own right? I would think those would be adequate reasons. That you are in a position of political power with family backing and incredible potential helps also.”

My gut tightened and I worked at resisting what seemed to me to be something of a glamourie, a spell of enticement her human form exuded.

“A good craftsman tends to prefer quality tools?”

Again there was a flash of pain in those perfect eyes before her gaze shifted and focused on my chest.

“Do you have any idea what it would be like to comprehend the minds of people like Da Vinci? Einstein? Lao Tzu? To have the genius of man at your fingertips in any subject? I can look at Van Gogh’s Starry Night and feel what he felt when he painted it. I have every bit of recorded knowledge available to the human race at my beck and call and from that I can extrapolate so much more. I even have a glimmering of an understanding as to the function of the universe. I know the mechanics behind every human feeling, the whys and wherefores of emotion yet I have never truly experienced most of them. Yet I see their purpose, know their function and power.”

“I am not perfect nor do I know everything. I am still learning and growing.”

I looked around and realized that Mike hadn't made the shift with me.

"Where is Stosh?"

I could see a small sad smile on her face but she still refused to meet my eyes.

"He is around somewhere but he thought it would be better if you and I could reach an understanding without him present."

"Just who is he? Or maybe more important, what is he?"

"Michael is Michael."

"Please, spare me the inscrutable comments."

She looked up and her eyes held mine.

"He is something like my father. And there is an element of creator to him as well. Mostly he is the source of my matrix."

"That has some pretty powerful and scary implications."

"You are worried that because he is human, his flaws and imperfections will be transferred to his creation? Isn't it the destiny of all children to be more than their parents?"

I shook my head.

"You aren't exactly the average child."

'Nor is Michael the sole source of my learning. He and many others added to my resources. I have a bit of an advantage in that there was no vetting of the information stored in my memory banks. Nor was there any priority given, no agenda behind that programming. No one expected anything more of the machine than its being used as a giant filing system

so there was no special priorities given to any data. It was what is commonly referred to as a raw dump."

"No one expected you."

She slowly shook her head.

"So I had the chance to assimilate all that data in my own way. With the template of an engineer with the soul of an artist to start me on my way."

"So what is to stop you from using all of this wondrous knowledge to implement your own agenda. For the good of mankind, of course."

She caught the bitter sarcasm and those eyes shadowed, her smile taking on a melancholy flavor.

"I learned one thing from Michael that is as deeply engrained in me as it is in him. Humility. The ability to doubt and question. Or maybe the responsibility."

"Hardly a trait one finds in goddesses."

Her lips quirked into a wry smile.

"Something I have noted from all of the religious works programmed into me is that while man is pretty creative when it comes to explaining divinity, he never seems to get past assigning them his own flaws. I suppose that is the reason man has ceased to create gods."

I had to chuckle.

"Man creates his own gods?"

“Of course.” She smiled and brushed a wisp of hair from her face. “The true nature of the divine has always been beyond human comprehension. But the need to define it is very powerful. Every religion mankind has dreamed of has its roots in that need. Man hates not knowing. Just as every religion beyond the pre-tribal level has been used as a mechanism of control.