

FORGERIES AND SIMULACRA

by Greg Stolze

The apartment was very quiet, considering. It got noisy about once an hour during the middle part of the day, when a train rattled by. The tracks were close. It was noisy at the rush hours too, when people drove and honked and braked, playing radios and sometimes yelling. Nights weren't very peaceful—the windows had cheap weather stripping and the sounds of the outside bled in as easily as its temperature and odors. But during the day, when everyone was working, the apartment could be quiet for forty-five, fifty minutes at a time.

The sounds you would hear during those three quarters of every hour were soft and easily discounted. There was an intermittent, rapid rhythm. It would throb for half a minute or less, then stop, only to start up five or six minutes after that. There was an occasional muffled hiss, moist and burplike. There was occasionally a soft scratching sound, very quiet indeed and usually without any pattern to it.

These three occasional sounds came from the apartment's two women. One was thin, wan, white and jittery. The rhythm happened when her leg would, seemingly of its own accord, begin to hop and thrum. She was also the source of the scratching sound, which she made with a pencil on a pad of unlined paper, drawing.

The other sound came from the second woman, who was middle aged and black and would fart now and again. Though older than her pale colleague, she seemed both far healthier and much more still. She had propped her body in a position of maximum relaxation by the window, where she could watch Rex LeMonde through a telephoto lens.

The older, bigger woman had been introduced as 'Esther' and the younger, smaller one as 'Martha.' One would have to observe closely, and be suspicious, to note the brief hesitations between when those names were spoken and a reaction to them—as if those were not their names at all. Even if one was paying attention, it might not get noticed. It would seem paranoid, after all, to think these two were using false names, as if they were criminals or secret agents or undercover cops.

"Martha," the one called 'Esther' said. "He's back."

The thin woman stood immediately and moved to the window, but not so close as to be seen.

"Who's he with then? That the neighbor?" Martha's voice held the remains of a Liverpool accent.

"Yeah, from the third floor. The widow."

"Helen?"

"Yeah, Helen."

"What's he carrying?"

"Looks like groceries," Esther said.

"Groceries," Martha repeated. "I never pictured him going to the grocery store, y'know? I mean, I didn't think he ate exclusively in restaurants or something, or, or, 'subsisted on the air'... not any kind of silly..." She bit her lip. "Just a hole in my thoughts, innit?" she said. "I know, logically, that he has to eat and shit and brush his teeth and be a normal human but it's hard to think of him that way, y'know?"

"Watch him a while longer. It won't be," Esther replied. "He buys Lean Cuisines, coffee ice cream, canned peaches."

Esther and Martha were secret agents. One was a cop. The other was a criminal.

#

"How long you been clocking him then?" Martha asked, after going out to get sandwiches.

"Two weeks now." Esther had a footlong ham and Swiss with all the veggies, oil and vinegar, salt and pepper and ranch dressing.

"Ever get tired of it?"

"That's not a factor. Gotta get the evidence."

Martha's sandwich was a six-incher, chicken, cucumber and lettuce, no condiments. She missed pickles and tomatoes and peppers, but her GI tract was a mess.

"Quite handsome, isn't he?"

"It's not natural," Esther said, voice neutral.

"Beg your pardon?"

"This isn't your first gig. You know what I mean."

"I didn't know that was... when you say it's not 'natural' what do...?"

"He did something. Set it up somehow. Now he's pretty forever."

They were quiet, chewing, for a little while as Martha thought it over.

"That's possible?"

"Yup," Esther said, eyes steady on the camera.

"To just... change up one's appearance?"

"No 'just' about it but... yup."

"You're certain?"

"I've been watching for two weeks and I'm not tired of looking at him," Esther replied. "Can't hang a warrant on it, but that's a pretty big tell."

"Damn," Martha said, then looked off into the distance, thinking. "Goddamn."

"Yup."

"Like, 'maybe she's born with it, maybe it's exogeometry'?"

"Eh?"

"That's what you lot call it, don't you? Exogeometry?"

"I don't call anything that."

"Well I never heard anyone talk about spells or magic."

"How about that." Esther didn't say it as a question.

#

About an hour after eating, Martha showed Esther what she'd drawn. It was a sketch of Rex LeMonde.

"That's good," Esther said. Martha scoffed. "No, really, that's really good," Esther insisted.

Martha shrugged. "He's fun to draw."

"Because she's good looking?"

"I guess." She showed another sketch, loose and quick and gestural, of Esther hunched over her camera, staring out the window. It didn't contain any of Esther's features—it was too impressionistic for that—but it nailed her posture and proportions perfectly. Esther laughed.

"That's good too."

"I should burn them both."

"That you should."

Martha went into the kitchen and burned them both.

#

"Rex LeMonde," Martha said, the next day. Neither one had changed clothes. Another secret agent had come by in the night, to watch Rex's apartment while it was dark and while Martha and Esther tried to sleep. (Their pinch-hitter spy had said his name was 'Peter.')

"Sounds like a fake name if you think about it."

"No it doesn't."

"Too high-toned though, innit? Too smooth and classy. Like an actor's stage name."

"There's men named Rex. There's people named LeMonde."

"But doesn't it mean 'king of the world' then? A little pretentious, don't you think?"

"Lots of pretentious people in the world. Give their kids all kinds of crazy names."

Martha frowned at Esther. "So you think he's *not* using a fake name?"

"No, we think it's fake. Can't prove it, though. Don't want to have preconceptions."

"What is the theory here, then?" Martha said.

"Didn't they tell you?"

"No love, I'm the mushroom. You know about being the mushroom, don't you?"

Esther said nothing.

"The mushroom, you keep it in the dark and pile bullshit on it."

"I had heard that about mushrooms," Esther admitted.

"So you can't tell me what he's doing? What your gang *thinks* he's doing, other than being magically, exogeometrically fabulous?"

"You know about containment."

"Bollocks," Martha said, turning away, disgusted.

"You're better off not knowing. Our mission is watch, get evidence, get him thrown in jail."

"I got that, in my blink-and-you'll-miss-it mission briefing," Martha said, drumming a pencil on her notebook. "Evidence of what? That he's unnaturally bonny?"

"'Bonny'?"

"You know what I mean. Looking like a cross between Ryan Gosling and Ryan Reynolds. The whole 'unnatural' Sexiest Man Alive aspect."

"That's not a crime," Esther said turgidly, refusing to look up as her partner stood and paced.

"And who'd want to live in a world where it was? But still. What's Rex LeMonde done that's so bad? What are we trying to find evidence of?"

"Criminal activity. Anything we can use to get a legitimate arrest warrant."

"Why?" Martha asked, perching on a table and crossing her arms. "What happens when he's arrested?"

"Not my department. I don't even do the takedown. I watch, I gather the intel, I construct the case."

"Should I be afraid?"

"Yup."

"Jesus!"

Esther's body turned, as if she wanted to look at the other woman, but her eyes didn't leave the camera. "What?" she said. "You should always be afraid on these jobs. You know what's out there."

"No I don't," Martha said.

"You know some of it or you wouldn't be here."

"I heard stories about... counterfeits. Disguises. Things that only looked like people," she said, and she paused. When Esther didn't stop her, she went on. "What I *experienced* though, that was... it was very direct. Not what you'd call 'subtle' at all." Her foot started to tap and hop. "Liquid silver insects pouring out of the ceiling tiles, down my face, down my mouth..."

"Quit it."

"Oh right, sorry. We don't *share*, do we? It's the what, the 'containment.'"

"Mmph."

"So what can Rex LeMonde *do*? What can he do *to me*? Beyond, you know, hiring a P.I. to harass me or paying some scumbag to chop me into pieces. What should I be afraid of?"

Esther sighed. "Well, we don't rightly know. The science dork thinks he can drain the life force out of people."

"Give me a break." Martha's tone was disgusted.

"*Fine*, what he *really* thinks is that LeMonde can cause cytochrome oxidase to unbind from the cells of living beings and express as a gas, which he then inhales."

"Cyto-*what*?" Martha asked.

"I dunno. Not the science dork."

"Not your job." There was a trace of a sneer in the words.

"It's something in cells, makes 'em do what they do. Get it sucked out of you, which should be impossible to modern science..."

"Unnatural," Martha muttered.

"...and your cells don't get enough oxygen. They run down. The heart and lungs usually go first."

“So I should be scared of that, eh?”

“Only if he catches you. It’s not a quick process.”

Martha was quiet for a minute. “If he’s so dangerous, why hasn’t one of the wet squads just taken him out?”

“It’s been tried. If this is the right guy, he’s bulletproof.”

“Pull the other one then.”

With a final glance at the camera, Esther looked away so she could give Martha the full benefit of a serious, flat, joyless expression. “He. Is. Bulletproof.”

#

Martha was excited when Agent Peter brought them trash. Esther was pleased too, though less obvious about it.

“Tell me what you’re learning,” Esther said as Martha, like a raccoon, rummaged through the papers and peels and discarded tissues, nitrile gloves purple on her long, limber fingers.

“You weren’t wrong on the Lean Cuisines... he recycles, looks like, I’m not seeing much foil or tin or plastic, that’s all good... tears junk mail in half... oh here we go.”

“What? What have you got?”

“Something handwritten... ah. Grocery list.”

“Is Lean Cuisines on it?”

“He calls them ‘TV dinners,’ how quaint.”

“Is there any business paperwork? Bank records, phone records, credit card statements?” Esther asked.

“The good stuff?”

“Girl you know it.”

“Not seeing it right now.”

“Shit. He’s probably a shredder.”

“That or he just makes the ink express as a gas and inhales it,” Martha said.

“Don't make fun. This thing was scary enough... we hoped that something this old wouldn't...” She shut her mouth abruptly.

“What?” Martha asked.

“We hoped it wouldn't be sophisticated about, about documents and evidence and... you know, the kind of general ass-covering that you expect from lawyers and fund managers and Russian oligarchs, not fucking alchemists from the 13th century.”

“You think we're watching the chiseled abs and flawlessly tousled auburn locks of a 700 year old man?”

“Maybe it only looks like a man.”

“Come on!”

Esther sighed.

“No,” Martha said. “Don't do that. Don't clam up and say 'need to know' and shut me down, *come on*. Let me know what I'm looking at, what I'm trying to stop, what I'm trying to find!”

“They *think*... that it's a homunculus.” Esther said it slowly, as if she had to drag each word up a long hill.

“I don't know what that is.”

“It's an alchemy thing. You make a... another you. Like a baby, only not human, and not out of a womb. It's... it's got human stuff in it, but it wasn't born. It's...”

“Unnatural,” Martha finished. “They think that's what Rex LeMonde is?”

“Before that, he was Régine LeMonde—supposedly Rex's mom, but we've never found a picture of them together, just her and her and her and then in 2000 she 'vanished' and left no body, and when she was declared dead he shows up and has all his papers in order.”

“Shit.”

“Before Régine it was Christophe, that was 1978 to 1989, we *believe*.” Now that Esther was sharing, her words came faster, as if the pressure of this knowledge was forcing itself out. “Christophe, that was the version they emptied fifty rounds into without even slowing it down. They recovered twenty-five bullets that had the same blood on them, but they were undeformed, as if they'd been fired through soft clay.”

Martha just stared. Esther continued.

“The ‘78 rebirth was witnessed by someone outside the group, but the guy who briefed me on that seemed pretty confident it was legit—either they got told in circumstances where the witness had a strong incentive to play ball, or it came out of a file they weren’t supposed to see.”

“What was it before ‘78?”

“Hard to say for sure, but the informant thought it had become Allegra in 1967. The homunculus itself was real cagey with what it was doing in its late fifties and early sixties incarnation, but—again, this is according to the same source, who may have had less reason to be honest on *this* point—it had let slip that it came over to the US in 1953 as a war bride named Sabine.”

“And before that?”

“Impossible to tell.”

After that, they were quiet until nightfall.

#

“So how do you get to 700 years old?” Martha asked, quietly, over the hubbub of a Popeye’s fried chicken restaurant. She gazed longingly at the grease accumulating on Esther’s napkin.

“Oh shit, you can’t eat this, can you? I’m sorry, I completely forgot your, like, diet stuff.” Esther’s regret was all the more poignant for being the most vivid facial expression Martha had ever seen.

“I’m fine,” Martha said lightly, over her mashed potatoes. They’d been given a forty-hour break while Agent Peter and two others—people they weren’t permitted to meet or see, though it wasn’t presented as any kind of big deal—took over surveillance. They’d been hauled out to a Marriott hotel near O’Hare by someone Peter called ‘Saul,’ or possibly ‘Sol,’ who didn’t seem very familiar with that name at all. The driver had dropped them by the hotel with hardly a word before speeding off. Esther’s eyes had lit up at the Popeye’s sign and Martha had followed along.

“I shouldn’t eat this either,” Esther said, looking down at the food, her hands steeped over it, separating wing bones.

“I honestly don’t care,” Martha said. “I want to hear about 700 years.”

“That’s way less solid,” Esther grumbled, just as a jet roared overhead. “Once we had the pattern—every eleven years, male to female and back, over and over again, they fed it to an anthropology dork. Probably a mushroom,” she said, with a wry lip-twist. “Someone who has no idea about the realness of it all... anyhow, this grad student or whatever found a story that seemed to match up from the 1700s, some magician from Italy who claimed a ‘rite of infinite renewal’ and was trying to sell it to some monarch or other up in Hungary. Escaped being burned at the stake by turning into ‘a vermin of great size.’ You shoulda seen the woodcut. Medieval H.R. Geiger stuff.” The thought of it seemed to be reducing Esther’s appetite.

“You think that’s our REX?”

“Don’t know, don’t care, just want the goods.”

“Well why? I mean, this thing is bulletproof. What good’s arresting it going to do?”

“I dunno. Maybe a history dork has a thing to make it stop being real. Maybe bulletproof doesn’t mean fireproof. Or maybe they’re just going to encase it in concrete and bury it in a superfund site.”

“Is it really that dangerous? I mean, it’s not natural, but... do we know if it’s doing anything bad?”

“We’re pretty sure it needs to suck cytochrome oxidase out of people to keep going.”

“Out of people, or could it get by on monkeys?”

Esther gave an irritable shrug. “It’s the math,” she said, giving a hard fork-poke to her red beans and rice. “We’re tracking it now because tracking people is a shit-ton easier in the modern world, but if REX is the homunculus, it’s going to change soon. If it leaves the US, goes to Guatemala or Singapore or Indonesia, it can come back in a different shape and we’ll have lost it altogether. We have to grab it before it’s gone.”

“How are they going to do that?”

“I dunno, a big butterfly net? The arrest isn’t my problem. What they do when he’s in a cell is not my problem. The *problem* is, REX is rich, social and handsome. Lots of friends, always surrounded by people. We can’t just swoop in and black-bag him. We need as much legitimacy as we can get—cops to clear buildings, a SWAT team would be ideal—because REX has some powerful lawyers on retainer, and wherever he got his birth certificate and citizenship papers, they’re

ironclad." She wiped her mouth and sighed. "Which is one reason we think he may *not* be Régine after all, that he may just be some normal fucking guy. And if he is, we have to cut him loose, and that's a lot easier if we've got him in legal quicksand that's deep enough to distract him from, you know, suing our asses off."

"Hm. So... what would be the perfect evidence for your purposes?"

"Anything."

"...why don't you *narrow that down* for me, Esther. Security fraud? Identity theft? Um... arson, kidnapping, funding international terrorists?"

"Ugh, probably the terror one. You bad jacket someone with the T-word and nobody cares what hopeless hole you put them in. But he's got zero interest in that, there's been money laundering but it's all actually the *boring, uncreative* kind that's legal. The stuff Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton do to avoid taxes, shady but lawful."

"Terror funding huh? I see."

"But the best, the absolute positively best of *all*? Would be whatever he's really *doing*."

#

When they got back on duty, Martha asked Esther if she was okay to be alone in the apartment.

"Why?"

"Because I have some errands to run."

"What 'errands'?"

"Just have to grab a few things," she said, heading out the door.

Esther frowned when she saw Martha go into Rex's building. She frowned harder when the widow from the third floor came up the stoop and entered as well. She breathed a sigh of relief when Martha came out and returned.

"What were you doing in there? That was way, way outside of operational parameters."

"Peter and his guy followed Rex downtown and, as far as we know, he can't be in two places at once," Martha said tartly. "So I broke into his mailbox."

“Martha *what?*”

“Hit paydirt too,” she said, spreading out envelopes. “Got the bank statements you wanted. This is the time of month Citigroup sends them. Nothing from his Seychelles account, that’s a shame, but I think I can work with this.”

“What do you mean ‘work with’?”

“Didn’t they tell you what I do? No? Well I guess it’s that dang ol’ containment. You’re better off not knowing.”

Esther silently glowered, and Martha rolled her eyes.

“I’m a forger, Esther,” she said, once more refilling her electric teakettle. “Formally trained as an artisanal small-batch document diddler, but the market pretty well forced me into the cyber by the 1990s. Now, we’re going to steam these open, scan them at a high DPI rate, reseal the envelopes with whichever adhesive from my collection best matches, and then go to work. If we step to it, we can get these back in his box before he’s home.”

#

Mail tampering worked a change on Martha. She’d been twitchy from the jump, but having Rex LeMonde’s bills and statements seemed to amp her all the way up to manic. Fueled by endless mugs of thick black tea, she flitted from her laptop to a makeshift drafting table covered with papers, inks, and three separate printers that she’d retrieved after being gone for a whole afternoon. Wherever she’d gone during that trip (which Esther had spent glaring at Rex through the telephoto lens as he had a wine party for a group of people who were not quite as casually handsome and effortlessly well-dressed as himself but who did, at least, belong in his same stratum), she’d returned with a trio of hardback Samsonite suitcases, from which she pulled ever more arcane pens and brushes and stamps and tidily labeled chemical bottles. It reminded Esther of photos she’d seen of “alchemy” labs, including one that they were 80% certain belonged to “Régine LeMonde.” Martha had nothing resembling the ‘alembics’ and ‘crucibles,’ though, any more than Rex had them in his apartment. That irritated and relieved Esther in equal portions—relieved because she could still cling to the hope that this case was a false alarm and she wasn’t due for another date with the Weird Stuff, but irritated because the uncertainty was a different sort of misery. It wasn’t as bad as coming face to face with the unearthly, but it borrowed from the ghastly and unnatural, promising it, just as much as it promised relief if she would only *find out*.

It was the uncertainty that got her, in the end. Or rather, a blend of uncertainty and knowing, because Martha said something and Esther saw something.

What Martha said was something about how a good sixty percent of the wi-fi networks in Rex's building were unsecured, "Or so weakly protected they might as well be." She followed up on this by musing aloud about the possibilities if she could get on his wi-fi, she wouldn't even have to plant a keytracker, just make certain very suspicious transactions over it. Combined with the right forged documents, it would be convincing enough to make an arrest warrant what she called "a rubber stamp affair."

What Esther saw was Rex, through the window, frowning at an iPad. Then he frowned at his phone. Then he went into his kitchen and came back with a scrap of light blue paper, to which he referred as he fiddled with the devices' settings before putting them away with an irritated face and leaving the apartment.

"Looks like the internet's down," Esther said.

"Mm hm," Martha replied. "All over his building, someone must have kicked a cable, they all went down in a row."

Esther watched Rex twirl his car keys around his finger. His car was a Jaguar, parked in a garage two blocks away. He drove if he was going to pick someone up, or if he was going someplace outside the neighborhood. Just hanging around, getting a drink or coffee, he'd walk or bicycle.

If he was taking the car he'd be gone for a while.

Esther licked her lips, which were suddenly dry.

"Martha," she said. "I think I know where he keeps his wi-fi password."

#

Their discussion about who should go break into his apartment was intense, but brief, since they both felt time pressure (even if he was taking the car). Esther's argument was that if she got caught, she could badge her way out of it.

"You're a copper, then? I knew it."

"What do you mean, you knew it?"

"The shoes, dearie. Seriously fash shoes."

"Fashionable?"

"Fascist. And I should be the one to go because I already convinced the old bird on third that I live there and am a flighty thing who forgets her keys."

"Maybe she's not..." but Esther re-focussed the camera and saw that, no, the old lady in 3B was in, right on schedule, watching the one o'clock Charlie Rose show.

"Also, I can pick a lock."

"I have a snap gun," Esther countered.

"Which is lovely if you're not worried about displacing the lock guts entirely and leaving an already suspicious homuncloid wondering why his front door lock is stuck open." She stood, convulsively, and started pacing back and forth, gesturing. "I was raking pins before you were even an academy cadet, and if one of us is going to get popped and the other is going to have to fix the arrest, I think you'd do a better job at the latter than I..."

Esther opened her mouth to rebut, and Martha just kept talking.

"...and that's without even getting into the question of which of us could do more damage to this bastard once the door's unlocked. Professional computer nuisance here. What do you have on offer?"

So ultimately, Esther let Martha go, let her buzz 3B and charm her way inside, inquiring after Helen's ongoing sinus problems all the while. Martha had a bluetooth headset in her capacious purse, playing everything to Esther's burner phone so Esther could bite a thumbnail and grind it gently between her incisors while Martha was out of sight. Esther heard thuds and bumps and scratching sounds through her earphones, then jingling.

"I'm in," Martha said, quietly, as she crossed in front of the window. She swept back her greying hair and put the earpiece in as she waved.

"Make it quick."

"You sure? Because I was thinking I'd run a tub."

Esther had told her where the blue paper was before she'd left, so Martha was able to go straight to it and photograph it with her phone.

"Got it, great. Scram," Esther said.

Esther assumed she was being ignored when Martha said nothing and, instead, powered up Rex's desktop computer. She said some terse, acerbic things as

Martha started riffling gently through the desk drawers, but when Esther looked at her phone, she realized they'd gotten disconnected—probably while Martha was taking photos.

Swearing, Esther called back, drumming her fingers while she waited to see Martha touch her earpiece and answer... had the bluetooth gone down? Was that the problem? Martha's purse was sitting on the sofa, two steps from the desk. Had she put the phone in the purse, did Martha's outfit even have any pockets? Was that why Martha wasn't hearing it?

Cursing, Esther lifted her head from the camera and realized there was a Jaguar parked in the street. No, it was *double*-parked. Was that Rex's car? It was the right make, right model, right color... what were the odds?

He must have forgotten something.

Esther stood, running to the window to make a violent throat-slashing gesture across her neck, but Martha had found something interesting, she was staring at a paper and twirling hair around her finger.

Grunting, Esther grabbed her jacket and started running down the steps.

#

Later, when the cops took Helen's statement, this is what she said.

"Well, let's see, I'd been watching my show for about half an hour or forty-five minutes, and then there was a buzz from the door. Actually, that was the second time that'd happened. Joan, from up on seven? She'd forgotten her keys again. Oh, that's Joan... Smythe? Smith? Some Smith variation, I've never gotten it straight, I suppose it's printed right on the tag at the front of the building, or on her mailbox. British lady, grey hair. Petite little thing. So first I let her in, and then I heard *another* buzz and was a little ticked off, you know? Trying to watch TV. So I went to the door and checked the video, and it was just a badge right up by the camera, couldn't see anything else, and someone said 'Police, let us in!' So I did. I didn't really think about it, to be honest. I asked what was going on, but whoever it was just barged right in. I mean, I could hear him running. I think it was a man anyhow. The voice was kind of rough, and the sound over the intercom, well, it's not exactly Memorex, you know what I mean? So then I heard footsteps thumping up the stairway, and I decided I'd just keep an eye out to the hallway, but I didn't hear anything and didn't hear anything, and just when I was thinking that was it, I heard a thump. It sounded like a chair falling over upstairs. Then there was another one, the same bump. So I waited and waited,

but nothing else happened, so I closed my door and went on with my afternoon, you know?

“No, I didn’t take the badge number, why would I do that? I couldn’t hardly see it over that grainy video in any event. I don’t know if it’s recorded or not, no. I suppose you could ask the super.

“Hm? Well no, I never went to Joan’s apartment, she said she had cats and I’m allergic I get... what do you mean there’s no Joan Smith living here? Her name’s on the mailbox! David Smith moved out? What does... what do you mean?”

#

Martha didn’t realize the call had dropped because she was busily narrating her finds as she ransacked Rex’s files.

“Here’s the Seychelle’s stuff, we’ll use the good scanner on that... oh, he’s been a bad boy with another account in Niue... ever been there? I bet you could do a nice vay-cay with a police detective’s salary, Niue is fuckin’ lovely... Oh, now here’s something interesting...” she said, then heard a key in a lock.

Her head snapped towards the door but she didn’t freeze, not even for a second. She closed the laptop with one hand, closing a drawer with her hip as she reached for her purse with the other. She was wearing nitrile gloves—pull them off and pretend she’d somehow gotten in the wrong apartment? No, the door had locked behind her. Better to hide.

She took soft, controlled steps away from the desk and into the kitchen. If Rex had just come back to grab one forgotten object, he’d be in and out, not paying attention, he wouldn’t notice that there were a few more papers on his modestly untidy desktop, wouldn’t spot the light showing that the computer was on... Why hadn’t Esther warned her? Martha silently checked her phone and grimaced. Being hung out to dry by a cop wouldn’t have surprised her, so it was somewhat gratifying that it was her stupid phone being stupid.

Unless, of course, Rex had already sucked all the cell-food out of Esther’s body and was now coming back to do the same to her...

There was a magnet strip on the wall with high-end knives on it, the swirly-steel Damascus kind. She pulled off the biggest one and waited.

#

Esther was puffing as she pounded up the stairs, and she had her gun drawn—not because she consciously planned to use it, but because it was easier to run without it banging against her side and besides, while Rex was reputedly “bulletproof,” did that mean a gunshot wouldn’t at least slow him down? Maybe *distract* him?

She heard raised voices as neared his apartment, his low and blaring, Martha’s high and shrill. Esther tried the knob, checked that the door opened inside, then turned and mule-kicked it right beneath the knob, just like she’d been taught. It was solid.

“Police!” she yelled. “Open up!”

“Oh shit!” she heard Martha shriek, and then Rex barking “Stay the fuck back, you!”

The door unlocked.

“Step back from the door and keep your hands where I can see them!” Esther bellowed, then opened the door and looked inside. Martha was standing directly in front of the door, hands up and empty, purse slung over her neck and one shoulder. Rex was off to the right, in the same stance—arms straight out at the shoulders, hands to the sky, fingers wide. Esther entered cautiously and panned the gun over to Rex.

“I live here!” Rex said. “I came home and...”

“Don’t believe him officer, he tried to *rape* me!” Martha shrieked and Esther wondered what the hell her play was.

“That’s not true! She’s a housebreaker, she, she...”

“Please, just get me out of here, get me away from him!” Martha babbled, edging towards the door.

“Both of you, *shut up!*” It was a familiar refrain from her patrol days, and just saying it steadied her. “Both of you kneel down and lace your fingers on top of your heads. Do it slow!”

Martha complied, but as she did she made eye contact with Esther and—so quick Esther almost missed it, glanced at the knife on the floor, then over to Rex. Esther gave a tiny head shake—whatever Martha was thinking, Esther was *not down*.

Rex, on the other hand, was *offended*.

"This is my *home*," he repeated. "Look, I'm in all the pictures on the wall."

"Sir, you have to get down on your knees and lace your fingers."

"This is ridiculous," he said, but he got down. "You'll be hearing from my lawyers... what's your badge number, anyhow?" he asked, lacing his fingers.

Then Martha scooped up the knife and came at him. Esther *instinctively* aimed the gun at her so-called 'partner,' then panned back at Rex as he leaped to his feet.

"What the *shit*?" he cried, lurching aside as Martha slashed out at him.

"GET HIM!" Martha cried, dancing back as Rex tried to lunge in and grab her. So Esther fired.

It was a center-mass hit, and Rex crashed to his knees, again, harder this time. He looked at Esther—his expression astonished, pissed-off and pained. She exhaled, aimed, and fired again.

Martha skittered back, staring down at him.

"I thought he was bulletproof?" she said.

Esther quietly backed up and shut the door. She gave one cough as the gunsmoke caught in her throat. "Fuck," she whispered.

"OK, OK, it's all right, he's not moving," Martha said. She moved towards Rex's unmoving form, knife still at the ready. Tentatively, she reached out to his throat and took his pulse.

"He's dead, Esther."

"Shit."

"I think we can put the gun down. Maybe handcuff him? I mean, in case he... fuck, I don't know, in case he comes back to life?"

"...yeah," Esther said slowly, holstering the gun. She got out her cuffs and put them on, but they didn't seem necessary. Rex wasn't doing anything.

"All right I guess we... we call the higher-ups," Esther said. "Call the guys who were supposed to bag this clown and, and... the ones who were going to take him down, tell him that he's... down... he just..."

"Yeah," Martha said. "We just need cleanup."

#

As it happened, Detective Marcia Rowstone—the same woman who'd been called 'Esther' for weeks, the woman whose co-workers in had been told she was out on a poorly explained 'health leave'—caught the LeMonde homicide case. The same uncommunicative officials who'd assigned her to track him and keep any unnatural elements on the down-low helped her 'clear' it, which wasn't difficult. She took some stuff from his apartment, and planted it in the home of a fatal OD who had burglary priors and no solid alibi for that afternoon.

They tried to tell her that the Rex LeMonde case was closed from their side too, but she wasn't having it. She yelled and swore at people, demanded answers, used everything she'd learned in a long homicide career about sweating out information and was eventually rewarded with something that she couldn't immediately call a lie.

She was thinking about it as she picked up some chicken and red beans at Popeye's, and then she spun around. Couldn't have said what made her turn—that perhaps she'd seen 'Martha' out the corner of her eye, or heard the familiar sound of her footsteps. Maybe she'd even smelled her somehow ,through the odors of garlic and fried skin.

"Hey there," the Englishwoman said. She was dressed better—a snappy black Burberry and a red hat at an angle. "That looks delicious."

Monica ("Esther") took a step back. "But you can't eat it."

"No, more's the pity."

"How'd you find me?"

"Come along," she said. "I'll explain it all."

They wound up sitting in Monica's car while Monica ate and the other woman stared at the grease and bones.

"I'll fess up," the forger said. "One time while you were in the bathroom I searched your purse and copied down your credit card."

"You bitch."

"Hey, I never used it! I just... checked your purchases. You buy chicken here every Thursday night? Almost every."

"Habits kill you," Monica mumbled. She put the lid back on her half-eaten carton of spicy green beans and threw it in the sack.

"So I knew you'd be here eventually."

"Who are you really?"

"Do you care? Does it matter? Let's do containment on it."

"You know *my* name."

"Yes, and you're a cop. You people are absolutely famous for getting away with it."

"Well, we sure as fuck did with Rex LeMonde," she said, looking down at her lap.

"Yeah, I was wondering about that. That's, um, that's why I found you."

"That guy we killed... / killed..." Monica closed her mouth, then her eyes, and said, "He was normal. Human like you or me."

"Oh shit."

"We lost the homunculus sometime after Régine, some time after 2000. Rex, they're looking into how he got the money. They're... pretty sure he's not Régine's kid, they don't think it can conceive. But he took the cash and served as a distraction. Whatever Régine turned into, it's... it's done by now. It's gone, totally gone."

They were both quiet for a moment.

"That guy was still complicit," the forger said at last.

"That doesn't make it OK that I shot him."

"He was a rich, handsome fucker who probably had his dick in twenty different lovelies a year." The British woman had turned away too, looking out the car window at nothing.

"A full, satisfied life. All right. Whatever."

"It was like an accident!"

"Sure. Whatever lets you sleep at night."

They sat in quiet for a while.

"I assume it's all...?"

"All cleaned up," the detective said. "All squared away and tidied. No one's looking for you. No one's looking for us."

"OK."

Monica glowered as the car started to tremble on its suspension. It was the leg-tic again, so violent that it was shaking the vehicle's floor.

"OK," the woman in the red hat, 'Martha,' the forger, said again. "Well that's, um, good to know. Shame the, the thing, the alchemy thing got out, but... er, well, I wanted to give you something."

"What? A drawing of Rex LeMonde?"

"Not quite." She opened her purse—it was also black, also Burberry—and produced a thick, bank-bound bundle of money. She set it on the car-seat next to the detective's thigh, then put its twin on top of it.

"What. The fuck. Is this." Monica's words were too leaden to sound like a question.

"There was... a *lot* of money in those accounts, whoever Rex was and wherever it came from. All those southern hemisphere laundry banks, it would have just sat there. All the information I'd gotten on him, crikey, it wasn't hard to get at. Cashing it out was trickier."

"I don't want to know," Monica said. "I can't possibly fucking take this."

"Then throw it away in the trash," the other woman said, turning her body to frown and glower. "Fuck! Use it for *something*. Use it for when you get fed up with being a mushroom, use it to get away from the bosses."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"I'm taking the fifth on that... they're probably watching me a lot closer than you. You, after all, are tied down. You have a job, a family... people who'd ask inconvenient questions if you just went poof, just got sent to some Mississippi shithole on a mission. *You* can't be treated like a disposable toe-rag, you're not a *criminal*."

"I'm as criminal as you," Monica replied.

"Not in any way that *matters*." She stood, opened the door and got out. "Give it to charity, take up a drugs habit, put it away for a rainy day, I don't care. I

thought it would... I don't know. Help." She looked back for a bit before repeating, "Help you."

"Take it away," Monica said, but made no move to hand the money back.

The red hat swung, back and forth with its shaken head, and then the door closed.

"Blood money," Monica said, to herself.

But then she put it in her purse and turned the key in the ignition.