

The Formula

The Formula

“No concept, however popular, will ever be accepted by all of the people.” -Chef Madrid Garboni, on the opening of his Iced Sphagetti restaurant chain.

“If I were twenty-seven again I would agree with you whole-heartedly, Rafael. But I'm seventy now. If you make me live forever at seventy years old you curse me forever!”

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“No, no, Franklin. That's not what happens. I guarantee you'll feel like you're twenty-seven again!”

“...and look like I'm seventy? That would be crueler by far!”

The mist intensified. Now droplets that gathered on the younger man's hair began to run down the side of his face. The older man wasn't good at sharing either his money or his umbrella.

“But your DNA will all be changed. Naturally you won't see results at once, but I guarantee you will return to a more youthful appearance over a year or two. Mature, but more youthful than now,”

Raphael needed patronage. Once, he thought the world would beat a path to his door, but something kept people from accepting his simple explanations. If he could just convince Franklin to try it he was sure the world would respond. But the process was expensive and so far had a less than desirable effect in lab animals... Half of them died within six months.

“Or I'll die in half a year...” said Franklin.

“You think I don't know about your results? The only reason I see you at all is that some of your experiments succeed. At least for a little a while. But drink your kool-aid?”

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I don't think so. Not before you do so yourself.”

Raphael burned inside. He was that close. That close.

He'd have to have a successful human example before Franklin would extend more money.

“You're right of course, Franklin. It was foolish of me to suggest that you would be the first to try an experimental process. But by the same token, it would be foolish to lose my expertise too, would it not?”

Franklin stared at the other man.

“You aren't thinking of entering human trials yet, are you? No government agency would begin to allow such a thing.”

“No, no, not at all. I was just... .. extemporizing, thinking ahead. But it's not outside the realm of possibility that primate studies would be a more suitable arena than rodents.”

“Humpf,” Franklin snorted, “With the FDA's rigidity, you're more likely to be able to study humans than lower primates.”

“Undoubtedly.” Raphael agreed.

The two men walked on in the mist, silently, cloaked in their separate thoughts.

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For two years, Raphael had come begging for more research money regularly. So when he went a week without hearing from Raphael, Franklin was delighted. The second week he thought must be miraculous. But before the third week ended, Franklin began to suspect that something unusual was happening in the lab.

The lab assistant Franklin hired had been locked out of the inner lab. The older man had expected that, after disclosing to Raphael that he had inside information.

It began to gnaw at him that if Raphael had made unexpected advances, he might be shopping the serum elsewhere. That would spell disaster. If Raphael ever got wind of how valuable even his flawed formula was, he would be gone in an instant.

What if Raphael had solved the problems? Would he have approached someone else to try the formula? Worse yet, what if he'd tried the formula on himself? A man with perpetual youth would almost certainly have a different outlook on life than one who simply owed a lot of money.

What if he'd tried the formula and died in the lab? Were his notes adequate for anyone else to duplicate his incredible find? Daily, Franklin's assistant made sure that everything on the lab

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computers was copied across his network. But it was almost exclusively statistical information on results, usually entered by Michael, the lab assistant. There had been no new development notes in the last month.

Each day with no news added to his curiosity and to his paranoia. Finally, Franklin went to the lab himself. It was his first return since he'd handed it over to Raphael.

He walked in on Michael, lab assistant and snitch, playing Freecell on the lab computer. This annoyed Franklin intensely.

“What the hell are you doing on my dime, Michael? I don't pay you to sit around and play computer games.”

Michael tried to leap from his seat at the same time he tried to hide the card game, which left him half leaning across his desk chair attempting to speak coherently and shut down the game at the same time.

“Uh. Sorry sir... .. I was just waiting...uh, trying to...uh,” he finally gave up and stood.

“Doctor Mahood is not here, sir. I finished with the tasks he sent in this morning and was just—”

“I am not interested in your excuses, Michael. Where is Doctor Mahood?”

“I'm not sure, sir...” Michael hesitated. “I just get text

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instructions from him with tasks to perform.”

“What kind of tasks?”

“Oh, just monitoring the lab specimens sir, weigh the animals, assess their health, etc.”

“Where is Doctor Mahood?” Franklin repeated.

“I don't know, sir,” Michael said, “I don't think he's at his apartment. I've delivered packages there twice and he's not been there either time...”

“What was in the packages, Michael?”

“Um... ..I don't know, sir. Just stuff from Amazon.”

Franklin was annoyed by Michael's ignorance and attitude. And he was frustrated at not being able to confront Raphael. He leaned aggressively across Michael's desk.

“Well how the hell do I get in touch with him if he's out fucking around somewhere, Michael?”

Beads of sweat grew on Michael's forehead. It made Franklin feel better to know that someone still respected his power.

“You can text him, sir,” Michael stuttered. “It's the only way I've been able to get in touch with him for the last two weeks.”

“Why the hell didn't you say so in the first place, you

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idiot,” Franklin glowered at him, “You text him for me. Tell him to meet me at Farini's today at 2:00 P.M., Understand? Tell him to be there or you're both finished here!”

He spun on his heel and slammed through the outer door before Michael could say another word. Seething with frustration and rage Franklin intended to nail Raphael's hide to the wall.

Two o'clock came and went. Franklin, at first boiling with self-important rage gradually fell from anger to angst as he struggled to understand why his usual aggressive control methods were no longer working. He was embarrassed to be sitting alone for so long in a public place like Farini's, where others of his class might see him and realize that he had been stood up.

He rose to leave at 2:15 just as Raphael sauntered casually in the door.

But the Raphael who entered Farini's that afternoon was a Raphael that Franklin had never met.

Against the dismal northwest April day, this Raphael glowed like a Christ-child in the creche. From his polished Italian loafers to his neatly creased faun colored slacks and

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satin lapelled sport coat he epitomized the suave Italian male that Franklin's Raphael had never known.

His once unkempt long brown hair was now superbly trimmed in a long but seductive wavy, blond-streaked style. He looked tan and healthy and even larger than the Raphael that Franklin had known for two years. The epitome of a healthy virile twenty-seven year old male, even though Raphael was over forty.

Franklin was speechless. He gaped at this apparition while his mind tried to fit it into his rational world. He could only conclude that Raphael must have taken the serum himself.

“Franklin, my good friend and patron,” Raphael said, extending a manicured and strong handshake, “I regret that I haven't given you appropriate attention recently. You see, I've been very... ..involved.”

“You've taken the serum,” Franklin whispered.

“Why no, not at all. I don't know what might have given you that impression, but I most assuredly have not. I've simply paid some personal attention to myself. I felt I was letting work become more important than living, you see.”

“You've taken the serum,” Franklin insisted.

“My friend,” Raphael said, “you're letting your imagination

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get the better of you. If I had completed my work, I surely would have told you first. You of all people, my patron and mentor.”

Raphael put his arm around Franklin's shoulder and gave him a re-assuring hug. It did nothing to re-assure Franklin. It even proved that Raphael was bigger and stronger than he had been, not to mention the psychological changes in the man. The calm, the self-assurance, the poise.

“You've taken the serum and it's changed you.”

Raphael lowered his voice to a confidential level.

“We shouldn't discuss this here, my friend. Farini's is a nice cafe, but not a place for confidential discussions. Let us walk a bit, we have wonderful conversations when we walk together.”

Franklin tottered after Raphael as he swept out of the restaurant, stopping only at the cloak room to recover a perfectly matching fawn topcoat and a large, gaily decorated umbrella. The young woman checking coats practically swooned at his feet.

He threw the topcoat casually around his shoulders and exited with Franklin in tow, popping up the umbrella and stepping closer to generously shield the older man.

The northwest air oozed wetness onto the umbrella

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without pause, but Raphael easily held it over both of them as they slopped through drain bound run-off. Raphael easily hopped over a four-foot wide puddle to a sidewalk while Franklin had to step half-way into it before he could jump up to the walk. Raphael offered his hand, as to a woman, and Franklin studiously ignored it.

“I have made progress, Franklin. In non-primates I've increased the reliability of the serum to nearly seventy percent and the mortality rate to 95%. The test subjects which do not achieve success with the first injection do not die now, for the most part. I have yet to test a secondary injection on these, but my calculations are so encouraging I feel they will all do well. This week will tell.”

“Michael said you hadn't been into the lab.” Franklin accused.

“I prefer to work when Michael isn't around to spy on me. He has his uses, but you must see, Franklin, if he would sell out my work to you, he would sell you out to someone else. I'm sure you intended him to serve a good purpose, but honestly, I'm a bit disappointed.”

Franklin was uncomfortable with the truth of that statement. His subconscious noted the admonishment, but his

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perceptions and reactions were adjusting to this far more assertive Raphael.

Even if Raphael denied it he had used the serum, Franklin was positive. This change couldn't be explained any other way. The possibilities made him almost giddy, but also dangled him on Raphael's string. What if Raphael withheld the serum?

“So you've been working at night? I've not seen you on the security cameras...”

“...and at home,” Raphael shrugged.

He turned to cast an accusing glare at Franklin, moving the umbrella from over the older man's head in the process. Moisture beaded atop Franklin's bald head and on his ears.

“And besides... ..your alarms and cameras are for unauthorized intruders are they not? Am I now unauthorized in my own lab?”

The question was an accusation, a dare. Go ahead, lock me out of the lab..., it shouted at Franklin, ...and you'll pay for it.

“Of course not. Of course not,” the older man repeated. “I occasionally review the lab facilities and I...” The answer was lame and he knew it. He let his response trail off into the surrounding mists.

Raphael moved back and covered Franklin's now wet head

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with the umbrella. They walked a few paces in silence, then Raphael spoke.

“I'm not sure we're doing either of us a service in continuing this relationship, Franklin. I feel your suspicions are a chasm between us. You seem untrusting and unwilling to provide the resources I need to progress. Perhaps an amiable separation would make us both feel better. Maybe the time has come for each of us to seek more satisfactory relationships...”

He let the threat hang like an axe in the air. Franklin was aghast at the thought, he panicked.

“No, no no, Raphael. That isn't the case at all!”

Franklin had to have the serum. There was no doubt that Raphael was a totally changed person. His new confidence could make him billions on the grey market. Empires would change hands for this secret.

“What do you want, Raphael? How can I convince you that our project is the most important thing in the world to me? I admit, yes, I've been truculent recently, but it's just my advancing age. Everyone gets that way when their mortality threatens. Please, disregard anything I accidentally said that may have upset you. What can I do?” he repeated.

“I am a scientist, Franklin, not a man-of-the-world,”

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Raphael said.

That is exactly what you've become, Franklin thought, that's what being nearly immortal did for you. But I'm more aggressive than you Raphael, I will become a giant in this world.

“My needs are simple,” Raphael went on.

That means lots of money, Franklin thought, preparing himself. But no matter how much Raphael asked, he'd give it. Once the formula was in his hands and he had an almost immortal life he knew how to sell it's effects for billions, maybe trillions. The treasuries of nations will open themselves to me. Franklin almost salivated at the visions of power swirling through his head.

“How much?” he asked aloud.

Raphael half-turned and cast a suspicious gaze at him.

“We need to move the lab, Franklin,” Raphael held up three fingers he obviously intended to tick off points against.

“We need to get away from Michael's prying eyes, re-establish the lab and advance our protocols to the primate level.

“I estimate that it will cost between 100-200 million dollars to accomplish all we need to do in a discrete way, in a well-

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protected and perhaps less... ..controlled country.”

You're still pretending that you haven't taken the serum aren't you? Franklin mused. Okay, I can play that game my own way.

“Splendid ideas, all,” Franklin said.

Raphael's mouth twitched up momentarily. An acute observer might have seen the facial tic, but both men pretended to watch the sidewalk as they walked.

“But the formula and the serum itself must remain here, in my care... ..until you establish yourself of course, in the new location. Is the formula in your apartment?”

Raphael shook his head.

“No. I lack the storage ability at my apartment. It's in the secure refrigerator at the lab, but the label is less than obvious. Call my cell when the funds are transferred and I shall disclose only to you the label codes I used for all sequences.”

“I can transfer the funds at any time, day or night,” the older man spoke. “But I insist that I have the formula and serum in hand before you depart.”

“You can transfer the funds now?”

“Why, of course.”

“Then let us act immediately. The lab is just ahead, I can

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show you first hand.”

Indeed, the lab was just a short block ahead. As they entered, Michael rose to greet them.

“Michael,” Franklin said, “Your services are no longer required. Clear your things and get out.”

“That's rather abrupt, don't you think?” Raphael rose to Michael's defense while Michael stood mouth agape.

“Surely you owe Michael at least two weeks notice.”

“Alright then, I'll send a check for what he's owed, plus two weeks severance.” Franklin spoke to Raphael, then turned to the stricken Michael.

“Will that suffice?”

Struggling to comprehend and adjust, Michael stuttered, “Y-yes s-sir. I'm sorry if —“

“For Christ's sake, Michael, just get your coat and get out,” Franklin said.

He was impatient to get on with the exchange. His fingers itched to wrap around the magic serum.

Michael doffed his lab coat, turning so tears wouldn't show to the other two and picked his topcoat off a nearby coat rack. Returning to the desk, he picked up a pen, a coffee cup and stuffed a small bag into the topcoat's pocket, presumably his

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lunch. He shambled out, head down, sniffles drifting back to the others, and went out the door.

“Well,” said Raphael, “that was brusque.”

“Why fool around?” Franklin shrugged. “It needed doing. Let's get on with it.”

Raphael punched in the code to the lab door, holding it open for Franklin and inviting him in with a flourish.

Inside, the lab was orderly. All the glass and steel appliances, tubes, vats distillers, centrifuges and safes looked like a serious lab. Rows of caged rats lined the back wall. Raphael sat at a computer screen and dodged through a series of files, finally opening an encrypted file with a code that Franklin didn't see.

He looked at the older man. “The file is called “FranklinsLife” and its decryption code is 'Franklin', your name.”

“That should be easy to remember,” Franklin mumbled, “show me the formula.”

The file opened to illustrate several paragraphs of chemical entries, and what looked like an embedded electrical sequence.

“The Serum is a product of significant processes,” Raphael said, “Each unique in its sequence. Should anything happen to

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me, do not place this formula in the hands of anyone less than a superior doctor of organic chemistry.”

“But the serum itself, where is it?”

“First, let me copy the essential documents onto this thumb drive. That way you can keep it on your person.”

“Are there other copies?” Franklin asked, “Have you done this before?”

“No. This is the only copy,” Raphael said as he handed the thumb drive to Franklin. “Be very careful who you show it to.

“Each appendix to this document contains a new evolution of the formula. The last version tested on the rats had a 70% success rate. It is in appendix G. Appendix H contains the evolution that I intend to use in opening the primate testing protocols. Appendix I contains the alternative which I believe will be useful to humans.

“I'm very positive about appendix I.” Raphael added.

Very positive about appendix I, are you? Franklin thought. I'm sure I know why you're very positive about appendix I...

“And the serum itself?” Franklin said aloud.

“Yes,” Raphael rose and beckoned Franklin to accompany him to the refrigerated vault, “Michael never had the combination to this vault. ...but wait.”

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Raphael had stopped before the vault door and turned to face Franklin.

“What?” Franklin was eager to see more.

“I'm not sure about this,” Raphael said, “What if your newly discovered generosity no longer bears once you have your hands on the serum? No. I think it best we finalize our financial arrangements for phase II. It is vital to ensure correct advancement of the formula.”

“But I assure you, Raphael—,” Franklin said,
Raphael cut him off.

“You can assure me by transferring funds immediately. You recall of course, that was the reason we came to this lab in the first place.”

“Oh, of course.” Franklin said disgustedly, “You would hold out for the money.”

“Franklin, Franklin,” Raphael's suavely coifed head rotated from side to side in a scolding way.

“Let me remind you that the serum is not ready for human use. I suspect that you have some ridiculous idea that I've somehow used the serum. That's patently absurd.

“But now that you've fired Michael, it becomes even more imperative that we move our operation swiftly. And even more

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imperative that we keep the information that is in your right coat pocket in YOUR pocket.”

Raphael emphasized his statement by jabbing an elegantly manicured index finger at Franklin's jacket pocket that held the thumb drive.

“I'm sorry, Raphael. You're right, I was becoming impatient.”

He pulled out his cell phone and asked, “How much would it take to move the lab again?”

“150 million dollars. Not a penny less,” Raphael responded.

“But you said 100 million earlier.”

“...or it could be up to 200 million.”

“Right, 150 million.”

The older man's fingers didn't blaze across the keyboard as a young person's would. It took several long minutes for him to get to the right site, activate the application correctly and verify his identity several times.

Raphael sat calmly letting his eyes roam over the lab, the animals, Franklin and the vault.

“There,” said Franklin, “it's done.”

“One moment,” said Raphael, “Please allow me to verify

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the transfer.”

Funds were being transferred between Franklin's own accounts, it was not a lengthy process. The only difference was that Raphael had access to the lab account.

A few flicks of his fingers across his keyboard, applications activated quickly and within a minute he looked up at Franklin with his blazingly white smile.

My god, thought Franklin. The serum's even made his teeth straighter.

“Let us enter the vault then,” Raphael invited with a magnanimous gesture.

He dialed the combination without hesitation, reciting the four numbers so Franklin could hear them clearly and asking Franklin to repeat the sequence to make sure he remembered.

He reached onto a shelf and handed Franklin a pair of white gloves with gripping finger faces.

“What are these for?” Franklin asked.

“The serum is extremely sensitive to temperature. The heat of a human hand will activate it and it must be injected or consumed within 30 seconds or it will become totally inert. Today we won't even touch it, but the gloves will give us a margin of error in case we should come in contact with any

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conductive element close to it.”

“Grab it and gulp it?” Franklin asked.

“Why Franklin, you surprise me; I had no idea you had poetic tendencies.”

Franklin ignored the jape.

“Here, on the center shelf you see the current iterations.”

Three vials rested on separate upright supports behind two glass doors. A blue vial, larger than the other two, a red vial and a gold vial that was the smallest of all.

“The blue is the G variant, as I mentioned previously it was used in the rodentia protocol. The red is the H variant intended for use in primates. The yellow or gold as it appears here, is the proofing version of the I variant. It's very promising, but I haven't completed its proofs.”

He said that before, Franklin thought. I'm sure of it. Promising.

“These do not need to be shipped. I'll leave them here in case you want to try an experiment or two on the rats, but when you send me the formula I can reproduce any of them at the new location. I suggest you destroy them thoroughly after we are assured of a new lab capability.

“We can't remain here, Franklin. Our body heat will affect

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the sera. Please, let's go out.”

“Hunh? Of course, of course,” Franklin nodded, and trailed Raphael past the immense vault door. The idea of bashing Raphael and taking the serum, then transferring his money right back was riding high in his mind. But the new Raphael might not fold as easily as the old one would have. He was younger, and much healthier....

Raphael closed the door and spun the combination dial.

“Now you try the door,” Raphael said unexpectedly, “it's important that I know you can get in if you need to.”

Franklin was ecstatic. Carefully he cleared the dial then worked each individual number in the appropriate number of turns. Resting finally back on zero he twisted the handle and it ch-thunked its way to the open position. The door released slightly and he could see all he had to do was swing it open.

“Very good,” Raphael said, pushing the door back into place, locking the handle and spinning the dial.

“We're ready, Franklin. With Michael now at large, it's imperative that we dissolve this operation at the first opportunity. I'd suggest you not spend a lot of time watching the rats become healthy and get on with destroying the sera as soon as you feel comfortable. I'll be back in touch with you as

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soon as I find an embracing environment.”

Raphael extended a set of keys, “Here.”.

“What are these for?” Franklin asked.

“These are my keys: Lab doors, apartment. I won't be using them again, but the rent is paid for a couple of months and you may find it useful. It's just above the Venicia restaurant, around the corner. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I've eaten there often.”

“It's the only apartment. The owner developed a fondness for me. She's a true saint. Tell her you are MY patrone and she'll ensure you get the best seat in the house.”

“But where are you going now?” asked Franklin.

“Patrone mio, I am going to disappear. As I said before, our work here could become a personal risk very soon. I'll be in touch. A bien tot.”

With a nod and a wave Raphael strode out through the lab door and into the wet evening, his broad shouldered overcoat and blond streaked head disappearing up the street into the darkening mist.

He left his umbrella behind, Franklin noted, seeing the large, golf-sized bumbershoot standing near the front door. What the hell do I care?

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Turning, he went back into the lab, dialed in the vault combination and walked back into the vault. Quickly and with confidence he opened the first glass door, then removed his glove and opened the second glass door, grasping the golden vial with his bare hand, removing the stopper and tossing back the whole of the small vial.

Ugh. Tastes like piss, he thought. Closing the glass doors he left the vault, again locking it carefully on leaving. He cut the lights and locked the outer door, striding out into the rain as a younger man might. Half way up the hill to his house he ran out of breath, as he always did, and wondered how long he'd have to wait to see an effect.

The black limousine idled at the curb, rain striping its darkened windows. Out of the mist Raphael strode, grasped the rear door handle and quickly settled into the nearside passenger seat.

“Done!” He exulted, as the vehicle quickly and quietly left the curb, following the streets of town to the freeway entrance, then on and northward. On the other side of the passenger compartment, Raphael's nearly identical older brother Vincenzo sat in sulking silence.

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“What's the trouble, brother?” Raphael asked. “Why are you not celebrating? We are immensely richer than before.”

“We'll probably get caught,” Vincenzo sulked, “This is a horrid way to make a living. I don't want to do it anymore.”

“You are such a wet blanket, Vincenzo. We won't get caught. You transferred the money as we planned, yes?”

“Yes, we did. But I still don't see how we won't be caught.”

“The British Virgin Islands depend on money coming through it for commerce and survival. If they let investigators know anything, they become nothing more than a pile of useless hot rocks in the Mediterranean sea,” Raphael answered.

“And Franklin?” asked Vincenzo, “What about him? He has great resources, he could hunt us down.”

“You worry too much fatello,” Raphael answered. “He'll probably drink the pee first, then it will be another week before he dares the kool-aid.”

“What if he tries the blue first?” Vincenzo asked. “What about that, eh?”

“He's old,” said the driver, “It's not likely he'd survive the blue, and if he did, well, perhaps he'll get what he paid for.”

“Tell me we won't do this again, Michael, please.” Vincenzo

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pleaded.

“We won't do it again, Vincenzo,” Michael assured him from the driver's seat, “You won't have to pretend to be something you aren't any longer. I know it's been more difficult for you than for Raphael. For you to take on a role as a shrinking violet chemist was quite an accomplishment.”

Vincenzo puffed up with pride at the compliment. For two years he'd had to suppress his normal ebullience and outgoing persona while Michael guided him in how a chemist should talk and what to say. How to draw Franklin into the trap.

“But Raphael, you also did a magnificent sales job. You closed the deal,” Michael added and watched Raphael inflate with pride too.

“You are booked for different cities tonight. Where you chose to go after that is your concern.” Michael said. “You won't have any problems getting out. You have your papers? Your correct IDs? Passports? Shots?”

“Yes,” they both said,

“Are you not leaving too?” Raphael asked.

“Not from here,” Michael responded, “You each have your separate accounts, we established those some time ago. Do you remember everything you need to access them?”

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“Yes,” Vincenzo answered.

“Here,” he handed them large envelopes containing generous amounts of cash in mixed bills. “You'll need traveling money that can't be traced to your new accounts. And personally, I'd shift my accounts at least one more time after you've landed someplace.”

“How will we contact you?” Raphael asked.

“You shouldn't need to contact me,” Michael answered, “But if its urgent for whatever reason, use the Craigslist for the Milwaukee area. You know the ad.”

“Si. But you, Michael,” Raphael said, “Why do you only take ten million and leave the rest for us?”

“It's all I need, Rafa. ...all I need.” he repeated.

“Will you continue to work on your formula?” Vincenzo asked.

“Probably,” Michael answered. “I think it has promise. But I'll likely burn in hell for all the rats we killed to make it look better.”

They all chuckled as the brothers got out at the terminal. Michael helped them remove their suitcases from the trunk, bid them adieu and returned to the drivers seat, looking for all the world like a limo chauffeur, with black suit and cap.

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Everything for the cameras, Michael thought as he watched the terminal shrink in his rear view mirror. He drove straight to a long-term parking area, checked the limo in, and walked out to a nearby diner. In the restroom, he shoved the hat into the trash, reversed the jacket and donned a nicely fitted blond wig. Then he walked back to the long-term parking area, entering at a different gate, found his Mercedes on a different level than the limo, and drove away.

Yes, Michael thought to himself. Now that the formula works, I no longer need to scam rich fools with the twins. I can take my time to make sure the formula I finally sell will work for only a limited time. Nothing like repeat customers.