

# Defense of a Monster

Midnight. The world outside slithered in darkness, and the only light in the room was the soft hum of my desk lamp. I sat there, eyes bloodshot, staring at the empty folder before me. It had held the documents for Phenix's case—defense motions, depositions, court transcripts. I'd buried them in my mind months ago. Night before last, the detective pulled them into the light again. But tonight, they haunted me. I'd lit a cigar, only to stub it out moments later. My hand shook, turning the ember into a smudge on the ashtray. I hated that I smoked. I'd always told myself it was the only vice I needed to tolerate, but I hated that in this moment I craved it like a lifeline. Because the guilt was sharp. Because I remembered how easy it had been—to make Phenix look innocent. The words came back, slicing through the silence: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, Mr. Raines is a man falsely accused..." My voice, eloquent and unwavering. My heart, detached. But there was no rhetorical flourish left in me now. Just cold regret. I pushed the folder away and slammed my fist against the walnut surface of my desk. The sound echoed in the empty room. The walls felt like witnesses. My reflection in the window looked back at me—gaunt, hollow-eyed. Some version of me snapped. Everything about this house felt false

tonight—every corner, every whisper of fabric on the couch sounded theatrical, staged. And me? I was the puppeteer who unleashed a monster. I had performed a brilliant defense for a man I didn't understand. A man who deserved justice. I slid out of the chair and paced the length of the room. My shoes clicked against the marble floor in stark rhythm with my pounding thoughts. The air tasted stale—like sin and old regrets sweated into the walls. I curled my hands into fists and slammed them into my skull. *Shut up, shut up.* The memories flooded in—Phenix's grin, Iris's face when she spoke his name for the first time. *I failed her.* I could taste bile on my tongue. I needed to expunge it. I walked to the kitchen and slammed cabinets open, rifled through until I found a bottle of whiskey. I poured a measure and swigged it straight. The burn registered, but didn't disguise anything. It only sharpened the ache. My phone vibrated once. A message from Iris. I stared—*"I know your still at work, love. Want coffee?"*—and my chest constricted. I teetered on the edge. I had to delete the evidence before she saw my name in old documents. I grabbed the folder—Clutching it felt like clutching a dead man's hand—and returned to my study. I searched for my case notes, then the depositions, and finally ripped them out, tearing them into shreds. Paper dusted the hardwood like ashes. Ashes. What I did for Phenix had given him time. His death—unexpected, violent. Justice delayed. Even his death due to my own hand's will never be enough. I dumped the pieces into the trash, sweaty with exertion. But it wasn't enough. I took the envelope Detective Hale left and burned it in the fireplace. Flames swallowed evidence. But they didn't absolve me. I knelt, watching the embers glow.

I wanted the guilt to go up in smoke too. But it sank deeper. I closed my eyes and pictured Iris—bright, forgiving. My daughter of darkness. I pictured her trusting me. And I wondered if I deserved that trust. I stood, my hands trembling, and grabbed my phone. My fingers hovered over Iris’s name. *I need you to trust me. I need to tell you everything. I’m sorry.* I could be undone if she heard. But she might hear anyway, if I didn’t say it first. My breath caught. I placed the phone back on the desk. I couldn’t send it. Not yet.

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Rain on the windshield. City lights blurring like memory. I drove because sitting still felt like suffocating. I didn’t think. I just ended up there. John opened the door before I knocked. He always knew when I was coming. Maybe it was a gift. Maybe just years of knowing my patterns too well. He looked at me—really looked at me—and I knew what he saw. A man crawling in his own skin. A man unraveling. He didn’t ask what was wrong. He didn’t have to.

“Did it again, I see,” he said, stepping aside. “Come on, buddy.”

I walked in. And the door closed behind me like it was sealing a tomb.