



A Witch in Time

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A Witch in Time

A three-story anthology

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Petting the Cat

Robin Danner

Dedication

“For Jodie, a friend who probably knows me better than anyone else. Thanks for being my shoulder to bitch on. And here’s hoping you find Mr. Perfect!”

Chapter 1

The path to the stream was lit by a full moon. Jillian Welch carried a rough-hewn wooden bucket she'd made herself. The coarse fibers of the rope handle bit into her palm. It would only be doubly worse once the bucket was full with water from her father's favorite fishing stream. She wouldn't have come out, but if ever there was a month to scry, this was it. Tomorrow she would meet and pledge her troth to her future husband, a man rumor likened to the Devil incarnate. It wasn't fear that made Jillian nervous. Rather it was the thought that she might enjoy mating with a man so evil that most of society spurned him. As a girl, she'd been introduced to the dark magics and had entered a world utterly unlike the one her carefully reared friends knew. So far, she'd managed to elude the mating rituals of her Coven, possibly because of her aristocratic lineage, but she'd seen enough to know what went on between a man and a woman. She'd watched some of the couples of her coven mate in ways she could never have imagined. Even when she had tried to turn her head to give them privacy, shadows had flickered on the stone walls, haunting her with the images of what she tried not to see. To this day, every time she closed her eyes, she could still smell the incense, the sweat of bodies pressed together, and the underlying trace of musk that had permeated the air of the cave. She wanted to be the one who stripped and stood proudly before her chosen partner, to have her hands lashed behind her back to signify her complete trust in the Coven, to pleasure one, sometimes even more, of the members. Instead, each month, she was forced to stand at the back of the cave and watch. Sounds were amplified, senses heightened in their surroundings. She couldn't escape it even had she longed to. She was twenty now, more than old enough to take part. The wetness between her thighs and hardened nipples were signs she'd come to associate with her desire to mate. Months of repressed arousal made her a prime target for seduction. Right now, Satan himself would suffice. But her father had promised her to the Earl of Evansdale. Her father was nothing if not cautious. She loved him, of course, but it sometimes seemed that her father was frightened of his own shadow. If he ever learned of her involvement with the Coven, he would probably suffer an apoplexy, bless his soul. Where she'd inherited her bold nature, she'd never know. Her mother hadn't been a timid sort, but neither had she exhibited her daughter's willful nature. Her parents often teased that Jillian took after a long-forgotten aunt, which had to be it, because she definitely didn't take after her parents. She didn't even resemble them in looks. Her parents were fair, her mother with brown eyes, her father with blue. Jillian was red-haired with eyes so green they gleamed like a cat's, or so she'd been told by many a stranger. Most wouldn't call her beautiful, but her looks definitely earned her a second glance. What sort of inducement had her father made to the earl to get him to agree to marriage? It couldn't be money because he was as rich as Croesus already. And it definitely wasn't her family's high standing in Society. Her father was the brother of a marquess, but he and her uncle had never been particularly close. In fact, her family seldom traveled to London, so the earl

couldn't possibly hope to gain re-entry into Society from his marriage to the daughter of a mere Mister. Why would a man want to marry a girl he'd never met, who couldn't bring anything but herself to the marriage?

She reached the stream and bent to fill her bucket. Cool water rushed over her hands and wrists, bringing welcome relief to skin that had warmed with the thought of the marriage bed. What would it be like to lay with the earl, skin to skin, and allow him to do what he wished to her body? Her nipples pebbled, whether from the cold or arousal she didn't know. Would he be long and thick like one of the village boys she'd seen during a mating ritual? Or would he be shorter, like one of the elders? Jillian fervently prayed for the first option. If she had to marry, it should be to someone who could please her. She'd noticed the difference in the moans each man had brought to his ritual partner's lips and knew that the village boy's length was the way to go. The weight of the bucket pulled on her hands. It was full.

She stood and tottered under the weight of the water. She steadied the bucket with both hands and turned to leave, then froze immediately.

In the hedges that lined the opposite side of the stream, a pair of eyes gleamed. The hedges rustled, and then out stepped a large cat that was as black as night, with eyes of the purest green. What in the hell was a panther doing in the middle of Kent? Jillian blinked, then blinked again. He was still there.

She set down her bucket as quietly as possible, yet she still drew the cat's attention. His massive head turned and a pink tongue flicked across his upper lip. His eyes appeared almost human as he watched her. There was no hint of malevolence, only an interest that felt predatory and almost sexual.

She began to back away. Four tiny steps backward, then she turned and fled. She heard the panther's growl, but she didn't stop to see if it had given chase. She flew over the rocks and pebbles that she'd tiptoed over on the way to the stream. Her fine silk slippers ripped on the uneven terrain, but she continued to run as if the very hounds of hell were on her heels.

Her house was within sight when she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. She cocked her head and slowed. *Footsteps?* How could a panther have footsteps? Ignoring the voice in her head that urged her to run, she stopped moving and turned to face her pursuer. It wasn't the large black cat she'd expected, rather a man who would've taken her breath away had she had any left after her desperate race across the grounds.

She stopped running and he did so also. She stared at him across a distance of a few feet while she struggled to catch her breath. He returned her stare, but had a much better control of his body. Damn him, he looked barely winded. He stood straight and tall, his dark hair ruffled just the tiniest bit. She couldn't see the color of his eyes, but they were probably light. Maybe blue or green. He was dressed in the rough clothing of a peasant, but had the bearing of a young lord. She put a hand to her waist. "Who are you?"

He performed an elegant, if somewhat mocking, bow. "Colin Donegal, at your service."

Her hand flew to her throat. Donegal? That was the name of her soon-to-be husband. Was he the one she was to marry? The man who would share her bed? As if he realized her assumption,

Colin continued, "The earl is my brother. I am only the youngest son."

She should've known. Her friends who'd been to London had regaled her with descriptions of his great appeal. Where the earl was rumored to be truly wicked, the younger brother, it was said, was the complete opposite. It seemed everyone who returned from London sang Colin's praises. For a moment, her heart had actually skipped a beat at the thought of being with him. The brief spurt of relief that had risen in her breast died a quick death. It had been no hardship to imagine herself with the man before her. He was handsome and athletic; his fine body was displayed to perfection in clothing that was shabby, true, but that completely molded to the muscles in his chest and thighs. Her gaze dropped to between his legs, where the wool of his trousers lovingly cupped a promising bulge.

She immediately realized what she was doing and tore her eyes away. He was the brother of her intended. What was between his legs should hold no fascination for her, yet it still did. In an effort to be hospitable, she offered her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, my lord. My father told me you were expected with the earl's party, but I wasn't aware that you'd arrived yet. How was your journey from London?"

He had to move closer to take her hand and, upon inspection, she saw his eyes were a clear green. "Uneventful. I arrived nearly half an hour ago and forewent being shown to my bed in favor of a relaxing walk. What great luck that I happened upon such great beauty."

She lowered her head to hide a pleased blush. The earl's brother was so handsome it should be sinful. And either she was mistaken or the look in his eyes spoke of desire. A flirtation between the two of them was strictly forbidden, but she'd never been much for rules anyway.

She lifted her gaze back to his face and was trapped by his stare. The cool green gaze swept her face and then dropped to her breasts, which still heaved in great gasps of air. "You are lovely, Miss Welch. Much lovelier than my brother deserves."

Was his statement meant to be a compliment or a warning? She opened her mouth to speak, but he immediately shushed her. His head turned to the right and his eyes narrowed as he stared intently at something in the distance.

"We should not be seen here. Come."

He took her hand and pulled her into the woods from which she'd just emerged. She didn't resist as he led her back to the stream. It would give her a chance to retrieve her bucket and, she had to admit to herself, she was intrigued by Colin and his odd manner.

The panther!

She dug in her heels and pulled back on his hand. "Stop! We can't go this way. There's a panther on the loose."

Colin turned his head and lifted a brow. "A panther? In England?"

It sounded fabricated, but she knew what she'd seen. "Yes, a panther. He was at the stream earlier."

"Was he thirsty?" Colin's lips twitched the tiniest bit.

She resisted the urge to smack him. "How would I know? I don't speak Panther." She realized what she said and smacked him anyway. "Don't tease me! You may want to be eaten by a wild

animal, but I assure you that I have no such desire.”

Her voice trailed off as Colin took the final step, closing the distance between them. They were close enough to touch, yet their bodies remained separate. “And what is your desire, fair Jillian?” She ignored the melting sensation inside her belly. “I haven’t given you leave to use my name.” His lips tilted even further. “You haven’t answered the question.”

She lifted her chin in defiance. “Perhaps I don’t intend to.”

He let out a soft tsk. “Come now, Jillian. I don’t believe you’re quite as reticent as you appear. What is it that you desire?”

What she wanted, no *needed*, was to touch him. Her hand lifted and she placed it against his chest. His skin was warm through his woolen tunic and firm with muscle. She pressed harder, not surprised that there was no give. Was he as hard everywhere? Her cheeks felt hot, but couldn’t begin to compare with the warmth between her legs. A heated rush of moisture flooded her and she had the embarrassing fear that it would drip down her legs and land at her feet.

Colin remained still, not even flicking an eyelash as her hand trailed across his chest in leisurely circles. Her hands moved as they willed, his only reaction visible in his gaze. The longer she stared in his eyes, the more his pupils expanded, until the green was almost completely swallowed by black. She was no stranger to arousal. She knew the intensity in his gaze signaled that he wanted her.

A frog’s *ribbit* and subsequent splash into the stream broke the spell she’d fallen under. She blinked, slowly removed her hand, and took a step back. As she did, she wobbled on feet that had been abused by her earlier run. She winced and shifted her weight to the sides of her feet. “Ow, ow, ow!” she cried as the sedative power of fright disappeared and left only pain in its wake.

Colin knelt and reached for her ankle. He lifted it tenderly and examined the sole of her foot. He winced sympathetically. “We need to wash and bind your feet, else you’ll get an infection.”

“But the panther!”

He made a big show of looking around the area. “If he was here earlier, he’s gone now. You are safe with me, Jillian.” He turned back and his eyes bored into hers. All at once, a feeling of protectiveness washed over her. *Was he a witch as well?* She opened her mouth to ask, but he moved his attention to her bare feet. “Now, may I tend to your injuries?”

She nodded. She was wise to the dangers of letting an injury go unattended. The Coven taught her much about healing. She was apprentice to a healer and often accompanied the Elder as he visited the infirm. They’d once called on a villager who’d nearly lost a leg because of an infected toe. She didn’t intend to suffer the same fate.

Colin helped her to sit near the edge of the stream. “May I?” he asked as he motioned to her feet. She responded by placing both feet in his lap, completely trusting in his company. He removed her slippers and she wriggled on the damp grass to keep from moaning. He tossed her ruined slippers aside and dunked both of her heels in the cool water.

Her breath hissed past her teeth. “It’s cold!”

His hands joined her feet in the water and his warm fingers swirled around her heels and ankles, carefully brushing them clean of dried blood and bits of grass. Though she knew he was only

trying to be helpful, his touch was that of a lover. He lingered over her feet, efficient yet caressing. Once her feet were clean, he lifted them from the water and the night air made her shiver. Quick as a wink, Colin pulled his shirt over his head and he began to methodically rip it into strips long enough to bind her feet.

She was suddenly covered in goose bumps of an entirely different nature. The last had been from cold. These were the shivers of a woman facing a man who made her skin heat from the inside out. She watched as Colin's agile fingers wrapped the woolen strips around her feet. He tied them in knots around her ankles, his fingers brushing her calf as he worked. Once, he glanced up and caught her watching him, but he only smiled in reassurance and went back to his task.

Her gaze left his hands and moved to the impressive chest she'd only caught a glimpse of when he'd removed his shirt. Earlier, she'd lowered her eyes in maidenly modesty, but now she looked her fill. He was dark, the area around his nipples and a line down his chest covered with a matting of hair that disappeared into the waist of his trousers. The muscles of his broad shoulders bunched as he worked his hands, the biceps taut with leashed power. He would have no trouble swinging an axe or lifting a maiden into his arms. She closed her eyes, fantasizing for a moment what it would be like to be in his arms, completely at his mercy.

His body would be heavy but comforting as he lay upon her. His strong hands separating her thighs with ease. Then he would push inside her, the blunt head of his hardness easing the wet ache inside her.

"Am I hurting you?"

Jillian's eyes flew open. He'd spoken the very words of her dream and she answered as she would've in her fantasy. "No, you're not."

He held her gaze a moment longer than necessary. He finished binding her feet, and then sat there with her ankles cupped in his large hands, her toes perilously close to the area between his legs. She was tempted to tickle him, but managed to resist the urge. Even so, her toes curled inward to keep from doing what her body demanded.

"You're different from what I expected."

She was momentarily distracted from her silent thoughts when he spoke. "I am?"

"Yes." Colin nodded solemnly.

"What did you expect?" Jillian knew she wasn't a raving beauty, but was she so homely he didn't understand why his brother would marry her?

"Someone less..." Colin's voice trailed off and he shook his head fiercely. "Less innocent, I suppose, is one way to put it."

Jillian frowned. Did he mean to say his brother didn't want to marry a virgin? It was an odd trait to be found in a nobleman.

Colin's hand lifted and traced the underside of her chin. "You are very young, my dear."

She leaned into his touch and nearly purred with pleasure. "Is twenty so young, my lord?"

"Call me Colin," he requested immediately. He spread his fingers and cupped the bottom half of her face. "You are pretty, of course, but why would he want to marry you?"

She had a feeling that he spoke as if she weren't truly there. His eyes were focused on her face,

but he didn't appear to see her. His brows knitted with a perplexed frown. She supposed she should be offended that he doubted her value as a wife, but he spoke with such concern that she knew his worry wasn't entirely aimed at his brother. He was concerned for her. But why? Was his brother truly as bad as gossip made him out to be?

She slid her hand over his and stilled his fingers. "If you know something, Colin, please tell me now."

He removed his hand and stood. Then he reached out to help her to her feet. "My brother is not who he seems. That is all I can say."

Her feet, though still tender, weren't quite as painful as they had been before. Yet she kept a hand on his arm. "You speak in riddles, my lord."

"It is for your protection, Jillian. It is best that you don't know the truth."

"How dare you say that? I deserve to know all there is to know about the man I'm to marry."

Colin turned away from her and headed for the edge of the woods. "Come. I will see you to your house."

"No!" She stomped after him and tugged him to a halt. She didn't continue to speak until she'd gained his attention. "Tell me about your brother."

He opened his mouth, and then snapped it shut again. His gaze lit upon her abandoned bucket and he appeared relieved to have found an excuse for a distraction. "Is this yours?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Leave it. What use is scrying when my entire future is in jeopardy?"

"Scrying?" His green eyes flashed fire as he stared down at her. The generous curve of his lip tightened into a thin line. "You are a witch!"

She wanted to slap her forehead. The principle rule in the Coven was to not reveal one's powers. How had she forgotten the most important commandment? She attempted to backtrack. "Don't be silly. Of course I'm not a witch. Besides how would you know that unless you are familiar with the Dark Magics yourself?"

"Familiar? Yes, I guess you could say I am."

Her mind raced. What did he mean? Was he a witch or had the Coven sent him to spy on her?

Her heart fell at that thought. "Why did you seek me out?"

He pretended innocence. "I did not seek you out. I merely happened upon you."

She gave him a look of patent disbelief. "The path to the stream isn't an easy one. You came here with a specific purpose in mind. Tell me what it is."

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. I did seek you out. I wanted to discover for myself what drew my brother to you. Are you or are you not a witch?"

"Why?"

He took her by her shoulders and spoke urgently. "It's utterly important that you tell me the truth."

Every rule of the Coven forbade her from announcing herself as a witch, but she fell under the spell of Colin's hypnotic green gaze. In his eyes, she found compassion, urgency, and honesty. He was trustworthy. She'd stake her life on it. In fact, if she answered in the affirmative, she very

well may be. "I am."

"Does my brother know of this?"

"I'm not sure. As I've never spoken to him, I certainly haven't told him. You must tell me. Why would my position of witch affect my marriage?"

Colin began to pace, his mouth forming words that were too low for her to detect. He stopped and gave her a hard look. "Now it makes sense."

"What makes sense?"

"Percy and why he wants to marry you. He needs a witch to increase his powers." Colin slapped his thigh and cursed loudly. "Why didn't I think of it before? If Percy mates with a virgin witch, he would be practically indestructible."

Jillian's mind reeled with his rapid fire conversation. "What sort of powers does your brother have?" She knew a few male witches, but none seemed inclined to pursue her, even with her virginity intact. It was no secret that she'd been forbidden from participating in the mating rituals, so it couldn't be from a lack of awareness of her untouched status. "What exactly is your brother?"

Colin's green eyes seemed fathomless. "He's a warlock." He came forward and gripped her arms. "You cannot marry him. If you do, he will never be stopped."

She didn't think it was possible to be any more stunned than she already was, but her stomach leapt into her throat at Colin's proclamation. A warlock?

The rumors were true then. The earl's evilness must know no bounds if he'd sold his soul to the devil. Some believed that all witches did, but it was not so. Only the ones who craved power and destruction gained warlock status. She'd been warned numerous times by the Coven to steer clear of any and all warlocks. How could she do so if she was married to one? Visions of the prophecy foretold by the mating of a warlock and virginal witch made her skin crawl with terror.

She straightened her spine and gave Colin a determined look. "What do I have to do?"

*

The moonlight gleamed in Jillian's hair, burnishing her red locks with a copper sheen. Her green eyes were lit with determination, but beneath her bravado lurked a sense of desperation. He had no idea how long she'd dabbled in the craft, but she had to know the dangers a warlock could pose, especially one as powerful as Percy.

Colin wasn't sure exactly when his previously lighthearted brother had sold his soul to the devil. One day, Colin had woken up and realized that the brother he remembered from his childhood was no more. In his place stood a young man who thrived on the misery of others. Colin didn't want Jillian to suffer at Percy's hands.

"My brother obviously had trouble finding you since he's been on the lookout for a wife for two years. Now that he's found you, he won't be satisfied until you are his. We have to make you undesirable in his eyes. That's the only way to protect you."

"Undesirable?" Her hand lifted to her hair and she gave him a perplexed look. "How do we do that?"

Even with the seriousness of the situation, he laughed. "Calm yourself. We do not have to do

anything so horrible as cutting your hair or marring your face, dear Jillian. I'm afraid that wouldn't stop my brother anyway. No, we must rid you of the one thing that he truly wants. Your virginity."

If it was possible for a person to go white, she did. Her mouth gaped and her green eyes appeared overly dark in her pale face. "How do we do that?"

He coughed to clear his throat. "The normal way I suppose."

"And you will be the one to help me?"

His cock twitched at the thought. Since He would be lying if he said he hadn't thought of being with her. It would be no hardship at all to rid her of her virginity. He carefully kept his face devoid of eagerness. "Unless you have someone else in mind?"

"No." She shook her head. "There's no one else."

He reached for her hand and enveloped her slender fingers with his own. "Do not be frightened, Jillian. I won't hurt you."

She gave him a look that clearly said the idea hadn't occurred to her. In fact, damned if she didn't look intrigued. "You are a virgin, are you not?"

"Yes." She lowered her chin and a long strand of red hair fell forward to caress her cheek. "I was forbidden from the rituals."

"The rituals?"

He knew a little bit about the craft, but not enough to discern her meaning. "Which rituals?"

"The mating ones." She boldly met his gaze. "I do confess I've been eager to learn more."

He was struck by a bolt of lust so strong it was a wonder he didn't fall off his feet. She'd just confessed her desire to have sex with him. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had been so straightforward. It would be a joy to bed her, even if it was merely to save her from Percy.

He tugged on her hand until she moved close enough for him to wrap his arms around her waist.

"What happened during these rituals you speak of?"

Her cheeks turned pink, but she gave him a mysterious smile. The juxtaposition between nervous virgin and worldly woman was intoxicating. He breathed in her scent, not surprised to learn that she smelled of the outdoors. Her hair carried a hint of rain mixed with fresh grass.

Her voice was quiet, yet steady, as she spoke. "Couples were paired to each of the four corners. No one knew who they would be paired with beforehand. The bodies were cleaned with water and then anointed with oil before the mating could occur."

"And you watched all this?"

She nodded. "Yes. I wasn't allowed to take part, but I convinced the Elders to let me witness the rituals."

He caressed her lower back with one hand and she arched into his touch. She was definitely responsive. Good, it would make things much easier for her. "And you liked what you saw?"

Her lids were half-mast and her cheeks filled with color. "Yes, very much so. I envied the women in the rituals."

Colin could imagine that watching four writhing couples would be arousing. He put one hand to her breast and squeezed lightly. She was firm, yet soft, in his hands. Her nipple immediately

puckered and pressed into his palm. Yes, she was definitely ready.

He lowered his head and placed his lips near her right ear. “We can do this quickly or we can take it slow. There’s no reason we both can’t enjoy ourselves in the process.” He pressed a tiny kiss to the lobe of her ear. “Which will it be, dear Jillian?”

She turned her head the tiniest bit. Her lips brushed the corner of his mouth. “Either sounds fine to me.”

He moved the final inch it took to seal their mouths together. Her lips opened under his, her teeth lightly scraping his tongue as he surged forward to claim her. The thought of why he was doing this disappeared. All that was left was the wonderfully erotic woman in his arms. An unskilled virgin, but not completely unschooled. She’d seen enough to not be frightened of him, but just enough to be enthralled by what he did to her.

A niggling voice in the back of his head told him that he should tell her what he truly was. Like his brother, Colin wasn’t what he seemed. He ruthlessly ignored his conscience. Unlike Percy, he didn’t mean her any harm.

His being not-quite-human should bear no significance on their mating.

Chapter 2

Jillian was on fire.

In all her years of watching the rituals, she'd never guessed that a single kiss could set her skin aflame. Colin's tongue dueled with hers, wrapping around and stroking as if he had all night to kiss her. She was wet between her thighs. Her nipples were hard and pressed against his chest, so he had to know that she was aroused. And she would have to be a fool to not recognize the firm length against her belly. He wanted her, too.

She wrenched her lips from his and fought to catch her breath. "I want to see you," she gasped. "All of you."

His breeches disappeared as quickly as his shirt had earlier. He stood there in the moonlight completely nude and let her look her fill. His skin was dark, yet the light lent him a silver sheen that made him appear as something out of a fairy tale. His dark hair was damp with a fine mist that had begun to fall sometime during their kiss.

She lowered her eyes to the part she craved the most and licked her lips in anticipation. He was even longer and thicker than the boy from the village. She encircled him with one hand just to see if her fingers could wrap all the way around the head of his cock. They could, but just barely. He touched her wrist, yet he didn't remove her hand. "Careful, Jillian. You don't want the game to end too soon, do you?"

She stroked him once, then twice, before releasing him reluctantly. "I suppose you are right." But she couldn't help sneaking another look downwards. His cock arched upward toward her belly, the tip wet with a droplet of moisture.

Her skin was still on fire. Her coarse linen nightgown was rough against her breasts and abraded her overly sensitive nipples. She drew it up and over her head in one smooth motion. She heard Colin's quick intake of breath and knew that she'd surprised him. She was nude underneath. Her breasts were proud and high, the area between her legs covered with a light dusting of curly auburn hair, just a shade darker than that on her head.

His green gaze swept her body and she watched as a muscle flexed in his cheek. "Do I please you, my lord?"

He nodded without moving his gaze from the curls shielding her sex. His nostrils flared. "Very much so."

Suddenly nervous for some unknown reason, she retreated to the banks of the stream. Cool water rushed over her toes and she shivered, yet she continued to back into the water until it swirled around her thighs and lapped at the petals of her wet sex. She'd bathed in this water a hundred times, but she'd never felt the sensations she now experienced. The water felt like a tongue licking around her sex. She spread her legs and the sensation increased. She bit back a moan and focused on the man who stood on the bank watching her.

She put her hands to her breasts and toyed with her nipples. Her spine arched and the ends of her

hair dipped into the water, the wet strands caressing her backside. The triple combination of water against her sex, her hands on her breasts, and the teasing strands of hair on her backside made her come in a violent rush. Her knees went weak and she sank deeper into the water. Before her head slipped beneath the surface, he was there. His lips covered hers as he followed her underwater, their mouths dueling in a wildly violent dance. Water filled both their mouths, but she continued to kiss him as if there was no tomorrow. Her bottom brushed the sandy bottom of the stream and her legs brushed his hard arousal. Moments later, she bobbed to the surface and broke the kiss only long enough to draw a much needed breath.

Water dripped into her eyes and she blinked to clear her vision. Colin stood beside her, his dark hair plastered to his forehead, droplets of water clinging to obscenely long eyelashes. His voice was rough as he spoke. "I will be damned if I let my brother possess you. You are mine, now." "Yes. Yours." She would've agreed to anything at that moment. Even after bringing herself to climax, she wanted him with a fierceness that should frighten her. She had no idea why she was so attracted to this man, but not even God himself could tear her away before she experienced the feeling of him deep inside her.

She lifted one leg and draped it around his hip. His cock brushed the inside of her thigh and her inner muscles tightened in expectation. Just a few more inches and he would be inside her. Colin's large hand gripped her other thigh and he guided it around his waist. She was wrapped around him, her face level with his, as the blunt head of his cock began to enter her. She bit her lip to hold back a cry of distress. He was too large. He wouldn't fit. Just as she was about to work herself into a flurry, he slid completely inside. She cried out as he tore through her maidenhead, but then he kissed her and her senses reeled.

Once he was inside, it was as if he'd lost control. His hands clamped on her waist, lifting and bringing her up on his hard cock like a man possessed. He was rough, but she liked it. The pleasure bordered on pain and her passion doubled. This was nothing like she'd expected. It was better. More energetic, more liberating, more...everything. The walls of her sex felt like they were being stretched beyond repair, a fullness that she'd never experienced. He was warm and hard inside her. She could feel the ridges of his cock as they brushed back and forth along her sensitive tissue. All her senses came alive and centered on what happened to her body. She experimentally rolled her hips. It felt good, so she did it again. She ground down towards him as he stroked her.

"Wait," he gasped. His fingers clenched on her hips to hold her still. His hands slid to her bottom and he lifted her free of his cock.

She cried out in distress. "No!"

"Just a moment, Jillian." He strode toward the bank and placed her on the wet dirt. The ground felt deliciously rough against her back as he lay upon her and began to feast upon her breasts. She felt empty inside where he'd previously been. She spread her legs, silently urging him to complete their mating.

"Colin," she pleaded, her voice little more than a whisper of breath. "Please."

His fingers moved to the swollen petals of her sex and he toyed with the tangled curls there. His

finger tested her, easily sliding inside to stroke her clit. "You are no longer virginal, my dear. You're safe from my brother."

Her eyes, which had closed moments before, suddenly popped open. She sat up and gave him a baleful look. "If you mean to..."

"Calm yourself, Jillian." He flicked his tongue over her nipple and she shuddered. "We're not finished yet." He gently pushed her onto her back and pressed his lips to hers. "I only wanted to point out this is no longer about protecting you. Just pleasure."

A second finger slid inside. "Does this please you, Jillian?"

He had to feel how wet and hot she was. She widened her legs further and openly invited him to take more, all of her. "Yes. Don't stop, Colin."

He removed his fingers and she cried out again. "Shush." He licked her lips and gave her a wicked smile. "I want to taste you."

He moved back down her body, placing tiny kisses everywhere he could reach. She giggled when his hair brushed the sensitive underside of her belly, and then gasped when he suckled the swollen nubbin at the top of her sex. "Colin!" Her hands dug into the wet dirt beside her hips, her fingers clawing at the moss and pebbles. His tongue flicked her clit, then boldly parted the lips of her sex and thrust inside. Shivers wracked her from head to toe. Surely this was a sin! If it was a sin, she'd gladly burn in hell to experience it to the fullest.

Colin lifted his hand and gave her another grin. "More?"

She tore her hands away from the dirt and cradled his face. She got mud all over him, but he didn't seem to mind as she pulled him up for another kiss. He threaded his fingers through her hair, holding her steady for the onslaught of his tongue. His pull on the strands tugged her scalp, almost to the point of pain. It was odd how the small sting increased her pleasure. She wondered if he thought the same. She nibbled on his bottom lip and then gently sucked it into her mouth. Her teeth nipped him and she was rewarded with a deep throated growl. He did feel the same. She did it again, this time clamping down a mite harder. Not hard enough to draw blood, but enough for him to know her purpose. He responded with a nip of his own on her upper lip. He roughly parted her legs and guided himself back into her body. There was the exquisite fullness she'd known so briefly. This time, he moved completely inside with ease.

He rolled his hips, his sac bouncing against her thighs from the movement. Her head arched back against the sand and her eyelids fluttered. It was too much! She was going to explode.

Then she did. The force of her climax sent her shattering into a million pieces. Her body went limp, yet still lovingly cradled Colin as he sought his own release. As she recovered, he continued to move within her. She watched his expression as his movements grew shorter and stronger. His brow furrowed and his jaw clamped into a hard line. He made a sound halfway between a purr and a growl, and then a rush of wet warmth filled her.

He collapsed atop her and she rubbed her hands down his perspiring back. "You've saved me. Thank you."

He lifted his head and his gaze sought hers in the darkness as a cloud drifted past the full moon.

"Don't thank me just yet."

His eyes gleamed, reminding her of the panther she'd seen. Even his pupils appeared catlike. It was obviously a trick of the light. She shook her head to clear it, but when she looked again, his eyes still gleamed. Could it be? It was a bit too much of a coincidence that he'd appeared right after her encounter with the panther. Had she escaped one monster only to be caught by another? She immediately wanted to kick herself. How had she let herself get so carried away?

"What are you not telling me, Colin?"

He slid free of her body and helped her sit up. He averted his eyes as she struggled into her nightgown and shakily got to her feet. He remained nude; his body still much too distracting for her own good.

"I'm a shifter."

Even though she expected them, his words took her by surprise. She plopped back to the bank, her bottom connecting with the ground with enough force to rattle her teeth. She put one hand to her forehead and keened. "Please don't tell me that I've just granted you powers by having sex with you."

He bent down, his spread knees and cock right in her line of vision. A thrill went through her. Even knowing what he was, she was still attracted to him. "Calm down, Jillian. I meant you no harm. I did what I had to do to protect you from my brother. Our mating has not affected you, or me, in any way."

It was a relief, yet she was disappointed by his casual review of the situation. Had their mating not meant anything to him? Was it not as spectacular for him as it was for her?

"What do we do now?"

He took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "First, we inform my brother that you are no longer a virgin. Then we hope we can withstand his anger."

She wasn't nervous by nature, but even so a frisson of fear trickled along her spine. An angry warlock was not a thing to be trifled with. She could only hope her powers and those of Colin were enough to protect themselves.

"What of my family? Will he harm them?"

"No." Colin shook his head firmly. "Percy, no matter what he has become, will not harm them. His anger will be solely directed at us. Namely me, in fact."

She crawled closer and put a hand upon his thigh. "Oh, Colin. Don't tell me you have endangered yourself to save me."

"I had to." He cradled her face. "You deserve better than my brother. His lust for power has damaged his sanity. You shouldn't have to spend your life shackled to a monster."

"It is a fate I'd gladly suffer if it meant that you will not put yourself in harm's way."

"Shush. Don't talk like that." Colin tenderly kissed her nose. "I will not let you sacrifice yourself."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"You are brave, my dear, but I fear you are no match for Percy." He got to his feet and helped her do the same. "Tomorrow, at the betrothal ceremony, act as if nothing has changed. Leave everything to me."

She wasn't used to following the dictates of others, but in this case she had no choice. Colin probably knew best how to proceed. She didn't know why she trusted him so implicitly, but she did. It was unexplainable the draw he had for her. Surely it was Fate? She could only trust that he wouldn't get them both killed.

* * * *

The breeze from her open window signaled that a thunderstorm was brewing. The mist that had begun during her and Colin's time at the stream had increased during their trek to the house. A rumble of thunder told her that she was right. A storm was coming and it wasn't just one caused by the weather.

She turned her attention back to the basin of water in front of her. Candles burned low and cast strange shadows across the surface. She ran her hazel branch over the rim, carefully listening to the sounds on the wind. She closed her eyes and shut her mind to everything but hearing what the water had to say to her.

Nothing.

With a curse, she tossed aside the branch and gripped the rim of the basin. She was just about to toss it aside when she caught sight of a shadow in the water. She peered closer. It looked like a lightning bolt. Was it a warning? How could it be anything but?

Her skin prickled as a gust of wind blew in a chilling sheet of rain. She pulled the window closed, but couldn't shake off the cold the vision had given her. She had to see Colin.

She knew his room was on the opposite wing of the house, with the rest of the Earl's party who had arrived earlier that evening. It didn't take long to reach it. She stood outside the oak-paneled door and debated the wisdom in coming to him. His brother's room was just across the hall. What if he sensed her presence?

Before she could talk herself out of it, she turned the knob and stepped into a room filled with darkness. Colin lay upon the bed, the covers rumpled haphazardly around his legs as if in a disturbed sleep. She stood over him, content to merely watch him as he slept. Her gaze traveled his handsome face, slipped across his defined pectorals, and then lingered on his now limp cock. In repose, he still portrayed a masculine vitality that would make any sane woman swoon.

She wondered how he would taste. What would he do if she took him in her mouth and laved him with her tongue, much as he'd done to her? Her fingers could trace the hardness of his shaft and toy with the soft sacs beneath. She pulled back the cover to expose more of his body to her avid gaze. His thighs were taut with muscle and dusted with a sprinkling of hair the exact shade of his panther shape. When they'd mated, she hadn't had much of a chance to examine her lover.

She did what she truly wanted to. She touched his cock and urged it to a hardened state. His size was impressive when he was aroused. What had previously seemed unassuming now took on great dimensions. She bent forward and put her lips to his head. His taste was salty, much like her own taste, which she'd discovered when he'd kissed her after licking her sex. She opened her mouth and took as much of him as she could.

Colin jerked awake and his hands lifted to tangle in her hair. "Jillian," he breathed. "What are you

doing here?”

She made a popping sound as she released his cock from her mouth. “Pleasing you.”

“Yes, you do that very well.” He pulled her face up to his. “But it’s dangerous for you to be here.”

She refused to let go of the grip she had on his cock. “We can be quiet.”

He pulled her across his body and underneath him in a swift motion. He spread her legs and entered her. She moaned and his hand immediately clamped over her mouth. “Quiet. Remember?”

She bit his palm and then laved it with her tongue. She couldn’t speak, so she used her eyes to communicate how well he pleased her. Colin buried his face in her neck and she felt a rush of warm air as he exhaled heavily. The bed creaked from his movements and he stilled.

“This won’t work,” he whispered, then pulled her to the side of the mattress. “Lay on your stomach. Slide your feet to the floor.”

She did as he asked and waited as he got to his feet and came to stand beside the bed. “What now?”

The edge of the mattress pressed against her sex and her bare bottom was exposed, shivering in the cool night. He placed a hand between her thighs and urged her legs to part. She balanced on her toes and opened herself for him. She glanced over her shoulder and was nearly burned by the heat in his gaze as he stared down at her damp sex. His finger slipped higher and toyed with her clit. He used her body’s moisture to ready her. His thumb joined his finger and he spread her juices higher, even going so far as to coat the hole between the cheeks of her bottom.

“Colin?”

He used his thumb to tease the muscles of her hole apart. The simultaneous motion of his fingers at both openings to her body was delightful. Her fingers curled into the sheets and she arched her lower body into his touch.

“Do you like this, Jillian?” His thumb moved a bit deeper.

“God, yes!” she moaned and buried her teeth into the bunched covers beneath her chin.

She grew wetter, her moisture coating the lone finger inside her sex and dripping to his wrist.

“Would you like me to replace my hand with my cock?”

“Yes!” She forgot to be quiet and fairly shouted the word. “Take me, Colin. Now!”

His fingers disappeared, and then she felt his cock brush her buttocks as he positioned himself between her legs. He slid forward, impaling himself between the damp lips of her sex. He thumb returned to her other hole and he continued to tease it as he moved back and forth. One day, she would like to know how it would feel to have his cock there, but right now she needed him to bring her release.

She lifted her hips and pushed into his thrusts. With each parry and thrust, he moved deeper and deeper until it felt he touched her womb. She bit the cover again to keep her keening moans at bay.

“Christ, Jillian, you feel perfect.” He uttered the words in a growl.

“Just take me, Colin,” she groaned in response. “Ease this ache you’ve given me.”

She knew she was close. She bit into the cover again and crested the waves of passion. He circled her hole with his thumb then roughly pushed inside at the same time he flexed his hips and went

deeper than he ever had. Her spine arched and only the wad of material in her mouth kept her scream from echoing off the walls.

He came immediately after her. Her muscles milked his release and they both slumped face down on the mattress.

Now that she'd found him, Jillian didn't know how she would let him go. But what sort of future could they have? She was a ruined witch and he was a shifter. An affair between them couldn't last.

She turned her head and gave him an exhausted smile. He brushed her hair away from her face and kissed her tenderly.

Or could it? Stranger things had happened.

Chapter 3

“To my daughter, Jillian Abigail, and her future husband, Lord Percival Donegal, the Earl of Evansdale.”

Seated beside his brother, Colin had no way of getting out of raising his glass in salute to the toast. He drained his wine in one gulp and set the glass aside. His brother, as always, was immaculately dressed and looked inordinately handsome in unrelenting black. To look at him, few would recognize the evil that flowed in his veins. Even Colin’s eyes sometimes betrayed him. Like now, as he watched an unfamiliar softness enter Percy’s eyes as he smiled at Jillian seated on his other side. Their hands were clasped and lifted for all to see. Jealousy burned inside Colin’s gut. It should be him beside Jillian, giving her a fond smile and serving her food. He’d not come here to find a new lover. His only hope had been to discover the reason behind Percy’s fascination with the young daughter of a practical nobody.

“You are brooding, Colin. Are you not happy for your dearest brother?”

Colin ignored the false sense of concern in his older brother’s eyes. “Happiness is objective, dear brother.” He cast a meaningful look at Jillian. “She appears to be an innocent.”

Percy smiled, but it lacked any humor. “Appearances can also be objective.”

Colin wondered what his brother’s reaction would be when he learned his future bride was no longer pure, that she’d been well and truly fucked by him the night before. He hadn’t been able to resist when she’d turned to him a second, then a third time during the night. He’d finally convinced her to return to her room right before sunrise.

“What if you find she is not to your liking?” Colin knew he toed the line between daring and foolhardy, but he had to know.

Percy’s dark eyes flashed. “It would be a simple enough matter to rid myself of an unwanted wife.”

Colin’s own eyes narrowed with malice. “If you harm her...”

Percy threw back his head and laughed. The sound drew the attention of everyone in the room, including Jillian, who gave them both a worried look.

“Settle down, Colin. I merely meant that I could ship her to one of my many estates.” He leaned over and his hand landed heavily on Colin’s shoulder. “Tread lightly, *dear* brother. I’ll not stand idly by while you ruin my plans.”

“And exactly what plans are those?” But Colin already knew the answer. Percy sought immortal fame. He longed to be a legendary power and to do that he needed a virginal witch.

Percy lifted a haughty brow and turned away without answering his question. Colin tossed aside his napkin. He’d lost his appetite.

He got to his feet, made his apologies, and strode from the room. He’d barely cleared the door before footsteps chased after him.

“Colin! Wait!”

He turned and relished the sight of Jillian in her white gown, her cheeks flushed with exertion and her eyes sparkling with concern. "You should not have followed me."

She rushed up to him and gripped the front of his shirt. "Please. You cannot leave me with him." "You are safe, Jillian. Even my brother, evil as he may be, wouldn't dare harm you in front of a roomful of strangers." He covered her hands with his own. "I will return before dinner is finished. You will not have to be alone with him."

"Yes I will! My father has promised him that he may take me for a drive to the village."

Colin's gut clenched with alarm. Percy must be desperate indeed if he was moving this fast. He pulled her close. "Whatever you do, find a way to get out of the drive. Pretend to be ill if you must. I will come to you."

He left her in the hall and hurried to his room. Underneath his bed was the small vial he'd obtained from a Coven near London. The witch Elder who'd given it to him promised that it would destroy Percy, if it came to that. Colin clutched the vial in his hand and closed his eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was murder his own brother, but Percy's madness had gone unchecked for too long. It was up to him to ensure that no one else suffered at his brother's hands. Most especially Jillian.

He returned to the dining room only to find that the dishes had been cleared and there was no sign of any of the guests. He flagged down a passing servant and questioned him about the family's whereabouts.

"Mister Welch and Lord Evansdale are in the music room. Miss Welch pleaded a headache and retired to her chambers. The rest of the guests have departed, my lord."

Colin nodded his thanks. He had two options. One, he could find Percy and end this once and for all. Or two, he could go to Jillian and make sure that all was well. It really was no question.

He held the vial and strode back to the stairs. He took them two at a time and hurried down the hallway to Jillian's room. He hadn't been inside yet, but she'd told him which one was hers. He pushed open the door and quietly slipped inside.

"Colin!"

She stood at the window, but when she saw him she ran toward him with outstretched arms. He saw the danger too late.

"No, Jillian. Wait!"

She collided with his chest and he heard the terrible sound of breaking glass as he lost his grip on the vial when he tried to stop her and it crashed to the floor. Jillian gasped and pulled away from him.

"What in the world, Colin?"

He unbuttoned his jacket and tossed it to the floor, covering the smashed glass. "It was a potion that I meant to use on Percy."

She lifted a hand to her mouth and her eyes mirrored her regret. "I'm sorry, Colin. I didn't know."

"No matter. Now we'll just have to use our wits to defeat him."

He looked at her, really looked at her, and winced. Her eyes were shadowed from lack of sleep and her expression strained. His heart melted at the sight of her distress. "Come here."

She flew into his arms, her hands tightly locking about his neck. "I'm sorry."
"Stop apologizing to me. I'm only sorry you're being forced to take part in this farce."
She lifted her head and gave him a tiny smile. "Some of it has been quite interesting."
He put his knuckle under her chin and tipped her head back for a soft kiss. "That it has, my dear."
"Traitor!"

One bellowed word was all the warning he received before a jolt of energy knocked him and Jillian off their feet. Colin rolled to the side to avoid another of his brother's deadly lightning bolts and sprang to his feet. He took one look in his brother's crazed eyes and knew that nothing he could do in human form would be enough to stop him. He crouched to all fours and prepared for the Change.

He could feel his muscles rearranging into a new shape as he glared over his shoulder at Jillian. "Stay back," he commanded a moment before his new shape took over.

In panther form, he was agile and quick. But was he strong enough to deal with an enraged warlock? He sprang toward his brother, but another bolt caught him off guard. He slammed into the opposite wall with enough force to make his ears ring. He shook his head and waited for the stars to disappear from his vision. Damn, that hurt.

"You!" Percy pointed a shaking finger at him. "How dare you seduce her under my very nose? What sort of brother are you?"

Colin wished he could talk in his cat form so that he could ask Percy exactly what sort of brother *he* was. What sort of person preyed on an innocent female to gain power? Why did he relish the pain of others? What had happened to the sweet boy Colin once knew?

"Have you fucked her?" Percy growled.

Colin gave a feline smile.

"Bastard! I will tear you limb from limb!" Percy visibly shook with anger. Even his aim was off as he tossed another lightning bolt in Colin's general direction, but missed.

"Stop! It wasn't his fault. I seduced him!"

Bugger, Colin thought to himself. He turned his head and cast an imploring gaze at Jillian, who stood and defiantly faced Percy head on.

"Whore!" Percy spat. He circled her menacingly. "Tell me, my dear. Did you like it when he stuck his cock inside you? Did you enjoy opening your cunt for my brother?"

Percy licked his lips and smirked cruelly. "You wasted yourself on a mere shifter when you could've been the wife of a powerful warlock. Think of the power we could've shared." He lifted his arms in a dramatic arc. "You would've been the envy of every woman."

"Perhaps I already am," Jillian responded with a smirk of her own. "Your brother has quite the sexual appetite. Would you like to hear how he made me scream with pleasure?"

"It is nothing compared to the screams you would've given me."

"Ah," Jillian sighed. "But those would have been of pain, my lord, if the rumors I've heard of you are true."

"Slut!" Percy cried out. He lifted his hand to strike her with a bolt, but Colin was faster. He leapt at Percy and knocked his brother aside. The bolt careened to the center of the room and fizzled

out harmlessly.

Percy got to his feet and brushed his hands together. He gave Colin a mocking smile. “The kitten has claws.”

Percy would feel the slash of those claws before this fight was over, Colin determined. His tail brushed Jillian’s legs and he hoped she took the hint to move aside. He heard her mumble, but couldn’t decipher the words she spoke. They seemed to be in another language, perhaps ancient Gaelic.

“So it comes to this?” Percy said with mock disappointment. “Brother pitted against brother?”

Colin narrowed his eyes, carefully keeping his gaze on Percy. He didn’t put any dirty tricks past his brother. Percy only laughed and motioned him forward. “Here, kitty, kitty.”

With a roar, Colin leapt forward and slammed into his brother’s chest. His jaws snapped, but Percy jerked away in time to keep Colin’s mouth from closing around his throat. Colin tried again, but Percy continued to elude him. He managed to sink his teeth into Percy’s shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain, but a wounded warlock was doubly dangerous.

Percy tossed Colin aside and aimed another bolt at his head. Colin ducked, but one ear was singed and he was pretty sure he would have one hell of a headache if he survived this.

“Colin! Move aside!” Colin sent an incredulous look over his shoulder at Jillian. What the hell was she doing?

She strode to the center of the room and lifted her palms, face out. Her face contorted with pain as blue bolts flew from her fingertips, aimed directly at Percy. Colin jumped to the side and the bolts slammed into his brother, shoving him against the wall and battering him. Jillian continued to slam bolts of energy into Percy, but Colin could tell she was weakening. He watched until finally Percy fell to the floor. A surgeon was not needed to tell him that his brother was dead. Jillian slipped to the floor in an apparent faint.

Colin struggled back to his human form and raced to her side. “Jillian!” he cried out as he gathered her into his arms. She was weak, but breathing. He closed his eyes and said a quick prayer of relief. “You dear, crazy fool. What were you thinking?”

Her eyelids fluttered and her green eyes were dazed. “What happened?”

“You fainted.” He refused to release her, even though she struggled to a sitting position. “You also killed Percy.”

Her mouth dropped open as she glanced at the body on the floor. “Oh God, Colin! I’m sorry.”

“Sweetheart, don’t apologize. If you hadn’t done it, I would’ve had to.”

A lone tear leaked from the corner of her eye. “So it’s over.”

“Yes.” Although he hated to look, he glanced at his brother. In death, the evilness of his features was replaced by the calm serenity Colin remembered from childhood. He said another prayer, this time that his brother’s soul would find peace.

* * * *

She stood at her window.

A light mist rose from the woods that encircled her father’s estate. In the distance, the midday sun

gleamed on the surface of the stream where she'd first come upon Colin. She smiled at the memory.

It had been two months since Percy's death. Their concocted story of him suffering an apoplexy had been accepted without question. It seemed that Colin and Jillian had not been the only ones relieved by his death. Her father had admitted that he'd begun to doubt the wisdom of marrying her off to the evil Earl of Evansdale.

But this morning, she'd married the Earl anyway.

A door closed behind her and she turned to greet her new husband.

Colin, smartly dressed in a blue suit, gave her a crooked, heartwarming smile. "Hello, wife."

"Husband." She extended her hand to him and he lifted it to his mouth to press a lingering kiss to its back.

"How was your meeting?"

She'd attended the ritual to commemorate her new status as a married lady. "It was very educational."

Colin unbuttoned his jacket and shrugged it off his massive shoulders. "I hope not *too* educational."

She smiled at his uncharacteristic show of jealousy. "Do not worry, dear husband. I have no intention of participating in a mating ritual that doesn't involve you." She eyed the skin he revealed as he removed his shirt and tossed it aside. "The Coven blessed our union in other ways."

"One day you will have to tell me about it, but right now I have need of my wife." He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her to his chest. His lips swooped down upon hers and she gave herself over to the intoxicating power of his kiss. In the past couple of months, her powers had grown. It was as if she'd absorbed Percy's powers when she'd destroyed him. But unlike him, Jillian planned to use hers only for good.

Colin's nimble fingers unlaced the back of her gown. He plucked the laces free and the bodice gaped. Then he stepped back and his hot gaze slid over her body. "Undress, my dear wife."

She did as he commanded; her gown and underclothes disappearing in a flurry. She stood there nude and opened her arms to him. "Now it's your turn, darling husband."

He undid his breeches and pushed them past his hips, revealing his cock, which was already engorged with his need. He kicked his clothing aside, captured her hand, and ruthlessly drew her forward. "There's no escape, my dear. Tonight you are mine."

"Just for tonight?" Her lips twitched with amusement.

"Every night," he amended as he swept her into his arms and tossed her upon the bed. She came up on her hands and knees and purred teasingly. He lifted a brow. "Are you a kitten begging for attention?"

She licked her lips in anticipation. "Yes and I'm looking for a strong male to pet me."

He climbed behind her and lightly slapped her bare bottom. "You've found one, my dear."

She purred again as he entered her from behind. For weeks, they'd engaged in every form of sex imaginable, but there was something intrinsically different about making love as a married couple.

A witch and a shifter. Who would've believed it?

She smiled to herself as she felt the familiar waves of pleasure sweep over her. She lived a charmed life, but there was still one thing she had left to do.

* * * *

“All who have been blessed by Aphrodite, rise and greet your partner.”

Jillian got to her feet and unclasped the single brooch under her breasts that held her sleeveless shift in place. It slithered to her feet in a pile of silk and she kicked it aside. The ceremonial flame in the center of the cave sent shadows dancing on the stone walls as the men came forward. They were nude, their proud manhoods rising from between their legs. Once, she would've looked at every man in turn, but now she only had eyes for her husband. Firelight danced across his strong features and illuminated the thick head of his cock. Members of the Coven came forward and rubbed oil onto the skin of the eight participants in the ritual. Numerous hands danced across her skin and Jillian moaned with appreciation. A finger insinuated itself between her legs and toyed with the moisture there. Her gaze locked on her husband, who was enduring the same treatment. A woman spread scented oil around his thick shaft. Jillian licked her lips in anticipation. Partners had been paired by the Elders prior to the ritual. Jillian was unsure who she would be placed with. She hoped for Colin, but they'd discussed the possibility that there would be others. He'd accepted her warning as it was intended. In fact, they'd even discovered their shared interest in being pleased by others. With him, she felt that the sexuality she'd repressed so long could be revealed. The Coven practiced sexual freedom and Colin's interest in some of the more risqué practices only increased her own interest.

Once they were oiled, the Coven retreated. Colin stepped to her and recited the words that she'd taught him in ancient Gaelic. He offered her his body to do with as she wished. She dropped to her knees before him and offered her hands.

“I am yours, the other half of your soul, connected through the power granted to me by Aphrodite.”

Colin repeated the words and bound her hands in the ritualistic knot. Unable to wait, she leaned forward and touched her tongue to his cock. He shuddered as she took him into her mouth. Moans echoed around them, but her world shrank until it was just him and her. He was salty, the taste of him almost addictive. His hands tangled in her hair and guided her in the motion he liked best, but before she could bring him to completion, he jerked himself from her mouth and crouched before her. “Why do you close your eyes?” he asked in a gravelly voice. His fingers were still in her hair and he turned her head to the other couples. “You once confessed that you enjoyed watching the rituals. Look at them, Jillian.” He leaned forward and put his lips to her ear. “Watch them as they pleasure their partners.”

It was a good thing she was kneeling, else she would've embarrassed herself by slipping to the floor on boneless legs. Her husband never failed to surprise her. She cut her eyes to the couple nearest them and watched as the woman straddled her partner and took him to the hilt. She moved rhythmically, the pale globes of her bottom shuddering with every roll of her hips. The man's cock was red and engorged as it thrust in and out of her sex.

“You enjoy watching, don't you Jillian?” Colin's voice rasped against her inflamed skin. He teasingly pinched her nipple and was rewarded by a strangled groan.

“Yes.” Her own voice shook with the strength of her lust.

“I want you to watch them as I pleasure you.” Colin met her gaze squarely. “Make her pleasure your own. Can you do that for me, Jillian?”

“I'm not sure.”

Colin pushed her onto her knees and turned her so that she could keep an eye on the couple in front of them. He spread her thighs and entered her from behind, gaining an easy entrance due to the oil and her heightened arousal. He put his hands on her hips and set the pace; at first achingly slow, then faster until they were bucking against each other like wild animals. She liked him best when he was like this, animalistic and out of control. She loved the wildness that lurked just beneath the surface. She bit her lip, but determinedly kept her gaze on the other couple. Their pace was furious as well, the look on the woman's face tight with passion. With a harsh cry, the couple peaked and fell together in a tangled mess.

Jillian shuddered as waves of pleasure crashed over her. It was intense, this sharing of passion with another couple.

She'd barely recovered when she felt a tongue brush against the puckered bud of her anus. She turned only to find it was not Colin. He'd been drawn aside by the woman she'd been watching and her previous partner was now the one with his mouth pressed to Jillian's backside. Her instinctively ingrained morals knew it was wrong to enjoy the touch of a man who was not her husband, but her recently awakened passions sent another bolt of lust through her. Even though she'd just been well pleased by her husband, she was ready for another bout of sport.

She glanced again at Colin and the woman who'd put the head of his cock inside her mouth and was sucking energetically. Colin caught her eyes and she saw the way he struggled with his passions. “It is fine, husband,” she mouthed to him. “Enjoy yourself.”

Colin nodded to signal that he understood, and then dropped his gaze to the man behind her. A particularly long swipe of the man's tongue against her anus made her fall forward and bury her face on her arms. God, it felt good! She bucked against him, moisture flowing from her swollen pussy lips and lending to the lubrication he'd begun with his saliva. His tongue pierced her puckered folds and she gave another cry. It was too much. She was going to embarrass herself by screaming for him to end this torture. Instead, she did nothing of the sort. She lay there and let him continue to fuck her with his tongue in a place she'd never dreamed a tongue would be. What was it like? How did she taste?

A hard cock appeared in front of her face. She lifted her gaze to the man in front of her. He was an Elder and his hand idly stroked his member as he watched Jillian and the man behind her. “Do you like the Rituals, Jillian?”

Her breath hitched. “Yes. Very much so.”

“Your husband seems to enjoy it as well.”

Jillian turned to gaze at Colin, who was still being sucked by the same woman. “Yes, he does.”

The Elder nodded with satisfaction. “I am glad that you've joined us.”

It was as close to a compliment as the Elder would ever give. Jillian smiled with satisfaction. She'd as good as sealed her fate with the Coven. Once blessed by an Elder, it would take breaking a major rule to be tossed out.

The tongue retreated, then she felt the blunt head of something much larger pressing into her tight hole. She cried out, this time in pain, yet she didn't stop the intrusion. Her tender skin stretched to allow his entrance.

"Relax, my dear. It will get easier," an unfamiliar voice spoke in her ear.

She nodded and took a deep breath. The cheeks of her bottom loosened their instinctive clench and he eased forward a few more inches.

"Better?"

It still hurt. She made a face as he moved again. "Not much."

"You fool. She needs more stimulation."

Jillian's eyes jerked upwards. Colin stood before her, his cock wet with another's woman's saliva, yet still erect. He got on his knees before her and tenderly kissed her forehead.

"Do you want to continue, Jillian?"

"Yes." It may hurt, but she was determined to see this through.

Colin nodded, his glittering gaze locked on her face. "Rise up."

The man behind her helped her to balance on her knees.

"Spread your legs."

She loved it when her husband was commanding. She did as he asked, her lap precariously balanced on the legs of the other man. His cock was still deep inside her anus, pulsing and waiting to begin again.

"Touch yourself."

Her fingers moved between her legs. They slipped easily through the dampness to locate her clit.

"Does that feel good?"

"Mmm," she murmured.

Colin nodded at the man behind her. "Now you may continue."

The man pushed forward and she cried out. This time, it was a sound of pleasure.

Colin's hands tangled with hers, his fingers unerringly joining her at her clit. He leaned forward and kissed her. "Would you like me to fuck you, Jillian, while he takes you from behind?"

Hers eyes fluttered with pleasure. "Yes. Oh dear Lord, yes!"

Colin straddled the lower end of the man's legs and took his cock in one hand to poise it at her entrance. He entered as the man behind her retreated. Then began an erotic dance. With every thrust and retreat of one man's cock, the other's parry would begin. There wasn't a time when she wasn't filled with a pulsing length of manhood. She should've felt ripped apart. Instead, she felt like a goddess. She had two men enslaved to her passion.

"Colin." She waited for her husband's eyes to meet hers. "I want you to kiss him."

He didn't hesitate. He leaned over her shoulder as she turned her head to watch his tongue duel with the man behind her. It was arousing watching as the two men exchanged a passionate kiss. Their movements increased to simulate the movements of their tongues.

Jillian's hips bucked, and then she bit into Colin's shoulder as she exploded. The man behind her was the first to come. His seed spurted deep inside her. She slumped against her husband as the other man's cock slipped from her anus. Warm semen dripped from her aching hole to the place Colin still occupied.

Colin groaned, and then poured himself into her. Jillian bucked against him once last time, then gave him a wicked smile of her own as she moved aside so the other man could get up. "So, husband, how do you find the rituals?"

His cock gave a twitch inside her as he playfully swatted her rump. "I think, dear wife, that you have successfully convinced me to join the Coven. How often do the mating rituals take place?" "Once a month. Think you can handle it?" She leaned back and spread her legs so that he could feast on the sight of her damp sex.

He fell upon her and kissed her roughly. "I'm going to enjoy every minute of it."

She put her lashed hands around the neck of her husband and repeated the words the Coven had taught her. Words of wisdom and experience, but most importantly...words of love.

The End

About the Author:

Robin credits her grandmother with first introducing her to the world of romantic fiction. She grew up reading her grandmother's dog-eared Barbara Cartland novels and Harlequins, all the while dreaming of the day her sultan/prince/knight would rescue her from the doldrums of day to day living. Since then, Robin has learned that there is still more fun to be had in a book than real life, so she turned her hobby into something a bit more productive and began writing her own happily ever afters.

Robin is currently dreaming up her next hero, but her readers can contact her at bookrobin@aol.com or through her website, www.robindanner.com

Spell-Crafted for Pleasure

Darragha Foster

Dedication

Thanks to *April, Lady Vampire* for the title idea: *Spell-Crafted for Pleasure*. Damn, it's nice to have readers with fabulous ideas!

Spell-Crafted for Pleasure

Salem placed a hand over her pounding heart. She couldn't catch a full breath in the wake of her last powerful orgasm.

She realized how sweaty she was and hoped her sticky body bore a sensual perspiration glow as opposed to locker-room stink. Not that Kane was any better off than she. He'd gone south of her belly button and stayed there for quite awhile. An oral *ivking*—an adventure in Viking terminology—between her legs. Plunder, pillage, ravish. Right fucking on, man. This Norseman certainly knew how to come ashore!

He'd collapsed after getting her off for the third time.

She reached her other hand out to touch his soft reddish-black hair as his tight curls cascaded across her naked thighs. His breathing told her that he, too, was exhausted. As odd a time as it was to think of Martin Luther King's famous speech, the words "Free at last! Free at last!" rang in her head. Kane was free. And his blood-brother, well, he'd be kept busy in his long confinement.

Pinioned under his weight and tangled in a confused mess of jeans and undergarments, she figured until she could catch her breath, she'd just stay where she was. On the floor of her shop. With the front door unlocked and within view of the window. If someone walked in or glanced through the window in passing, so be it. The only folks who came into her shop were open-minded sorts, any way. Puritans certainly didn't whip out plastic at a place like hers—at least not that they let anyone know about. Brown paper wrappers had been invented to hide the mail-order sins of the holier-than-thou. A multitude of sins. A fine collection of sins. Salem displayed her sins in a glass curio case for the curiously errant to peruse and purchase.

Salem felt fairly certain she couldn't walk, much less rise from the floor at this point, anyway. If the ultra-moral right decided to picket her shop again, she'd just have to let them. Hell, she'd invite them in to meet the new man in her life. And such a man! Even the most uptight, anal-retentive, I-only-do-it-missionary-style with my husband kind of woman would like Kane! She managed an exhausted "wow," which was quickly answered by a single-word reply from Kane.

"More," he uttered. He slid his hands between her legs.

"Oh, no. No more. I can't," she begged. "Kane, no more."

Kane chuckled, the sound rising low and teasing from his throat. He slid two fingers into her swollen, sensitive vagina. "I need you," he whispered.

"Can we at least get off the floor?" Salem asked, squirming as Kane inserted a third thin, dark finger.

"The floor is nice," he replied. "You on the floor is nicer."

Salem wasn't sure she could muster the energy to command Kane to stop diddling her clit long enough for her to lock the shop and move their party somewhere else.

How many orgasms could she have before noon?

Salem knew she was about to head into uncharted waters as Kane reached for the ancient whalebone dildo that for so long had been both prison and refuge to him.

“Exquisite,” he whispered.

“You do good work,” Salem replied. “For a spirituous being only recently made corporeal, you do damned fine work.”

“I’m not talking about the *tool*. You are the true treasure of this shop. You are exquisite.

Remarkable. Thoroughly enjoyable. It's time to show you what this thing can *really* do.”

Salem wasn't about to argue. One does not argue with a horny Norseman recently given a second chance at life.

With unimaginable, unearthly skill, Kane re-introduced Salem to her most interesting acquisition to date: dildo, *Balaenae Eburneolus*, Icelandic. She'd met Mr. Whalebone dick before, but oh, my, not quite like this...

Salem put every other thought out of her mind as climax number four came crashing in on her.

* * * *

At the end of October, when the veil between light and dark was at its thinnest, Salem's shop received a number of unique visitors seeking celebratory items for Samhain and various winter rites. They came hooded, covered by shroud or shadow. *Salem's Fine Collection of Sins* was the only occult shop for a hundred miles, and this October had been a strange, wild ride.

Her poor little familiars, pet white rats Dax and Pheelyx, were exhausted from identifying shadow from flesh. The veil must have been stretched pretty darn taut, as the chirps and squeaks from the girls had been nonstop. Seems every earth-bound shade, spirit, wraith and demon needed something she had to offer. They tried to act human. They really did, bless their decaying hearts.

In the business of ritual supplies and erotic antiquities for a solid nine years, Salem Grier catered to practitioners of the dark arts, both living and not-quite-living, novice Wiccan practitioners looking for their first *grimoire*, and seasoned dark witches on the prowl for new acolytes. Her shop was community and kindred spirit to all those seeking magic and mayhem. As long as she was paid in cash or credit (no checks, please), Salem didn't care if her customers smelled like an open grave or Chanel No5.

Dark souls milling about society sometimes wanted in, but she'd set her grid of spells so deep that those aligned to the foul side of magic couldn't enter her shop. At least not yet.

She recognized that she might be too well protected. She hadn't had sex in months—much less a date of any kind. Seems spells meant to keep out bad'uns kept out potential lovers, too.

She'd lifted the spells once. Accidentally.

That had been a big mistake. Big, big mistake.

Previewing new spell books aloud without having safeties in place had brought things right out of the woodwork that wanted to bump *her* in the night.

She'd found that her building was infested by horny Revenants—restless spirits leftover from the

days when the structure had connected to a Boomtown-era cathouse. The Revenants, soiled doves with a no doubt colorful past, just wanted to go about their business, with her as their first customer in, oh, maybe a hundred years. Salem politely declined the offer of two rouge-tinted doxies and set her barriers up again.

She'd had a passion for Norse mythology since childhood and used protective symbols from that mythos as guardians for her shop and tidy little upstairs flat. She figured the Norse Gods were the patron saints of her shop. Business had been brisk. The Gods were pleased.

After catering to beings living on both sides of the veil, very little surprised her any longer. She felt she was too young to be cynical—but when less-than-human customers paid for their purchase with platinum American Express cards, she just accepted the fact that even dead things and demi-gods had better credit than she did. She didn't qualify for a platinum American Express card. But that sacred piece of plastic was the card of choice for deities and specters in need of anointing oils and smudge sticks. Karl Malden would be so proud. American Express and Godly influences—don't leave home without them.

With no lover in sight, her collection of vintage and historical *objets pour réjouir les sens* was looking pretty darn tempting. A little time with a toy might be just the ticket!

Salem unpacked each shipment and carefully cataloged the items to include as much information as she could about each piece. It wasn't enough to say *this leather sheath was worn by a Scottish lord at the turn of the century*. No, her patrons wanted to know whose penis had graced said sheath. Whose blue-blooded sperm had filled it? Whose vagina it had penetrated? That is, if it had ever been used vaginally. Salem knew that buggery was commonplace in more noble circles, and there was a good chance that her vintage penile sheaths and highly polished, splinter-free ebony dildos had come a knocking on someone's back door in years past. To avoid one's contracting the clap, you know.

Research was often painstaking.

She'd recently managed to procure two Italian *dilettos*, dating from the late sixteen hundreds. Delicately fashioned, and oh, so very valuable with a distinct aroma of olive oil still permeating their smooth wooden surfaces, these were naughty, naughty little toys. One *diletto* was smaller in girth and length than the other. Dual plugs for play or display. She scanned the accompanying packing slip for the authentication and historical data. Belonged to the second wife of Visconte Vincenzo Alighieri of Roma, Anno Domini Sixteen-Hundred Ninety-Seven. All right, what's the history of the second wife? Why did she need *dilettos* when she was married to an Italian stallion? Salem rifled around the manila envelope containing the customs declaration and other documentation. Of course! The Visconte had a nasty case of syphilis and did not want his wife to suffer as his dick rotted off. Nice story. That should allow for a couple hundred bucks markup. The caring husband commissions toys for his wife. How thoughtful.

Salem carefully set the *dilettos* aside and opened the next box. "And what lovely item did my hard-earned money buy here?" She held her breath as she clipped the strapping tape and air-filled packing materials. Oh, my God. Did he get it? Is this it?

Salem had herself a lovely little pigeon of a Dutchman who scoured the European countryside,

various auction houses, and estate sales to buy everything he could of fine naughty sensibilities, and then ship it to her for twenty percent, plus expenses. He had a penchant for the macabre and the twisted. If anyone could have found this particular item, it was he.

She exhaled and attempted to calm her inner level of jubilation to that of mere excitement as she unwrapped the soft, butter-colored piece of antique erotica. “He got it. He got the *Viking’s Member* for me!”

Long, hard, and decorated with scrimshaw-depicting scenes from Norse mythology—scenes of love between the Gods, both male and female—it was by far the most intricate piece in her collection.

Salem circled her fingers around the girth of the thing, feeling its heavy, sensual weight. “Oy vey, and to think this once pleased some Viking wench while her man was away burning English coastal churches! Lord, from the fury of the Norsemen save us—and from the sex drive of their women with their whalebone peckers, preserve our souls.” She laughed at her own joke.

Longfellow had nothing on her.

She touched her lips to the head of the dildo and gave the cold bone a pleased kiss. “Hello, gorgeous,” she whispered.

The contrast of bone to flesh, warmth to lifelessness, heartbeat to etched memories sent a shockwave through the air. She didn’t feel it. She couldn’t see it. However, the spirits of the *Viking Member* awakened as the cascading surge of life force passed them. They reached out, trying desperately to ride the wave. It was but a teasing taste of freedom. It would take more than a simple kiss to set them free. It wouldn’t be long now, as a woman finally held the *Viking Member* again.

When sweet release came to her, it would be subsequently shared by them. The stronger of the two spirits encased in the carved bone managed a split-second sending of consciousness into the world. He’d had a plan for centuries. He quickly adapted it to this new era, and dug in like a tick into the vulnerable mind of a well-heeled passerby harboring her own fine collection of sins as she strolled past Salem’s shop, her heart closed to love, but her mind frighteningly open to suggestion.

*

The bell on her door chimed. Salem carefully set the whalebone piece back in its packing materials and dashed to the storefront, her mind still wrapping around thoughts of Vikings and their *toys*. “Hi, can I help you?”

“Santeria supplies?” the woman asked.

“Yes, of course. May I show you?” Salem replied.

“I need *sal negre*,” the woman continued. “Bad neighbor. He really needs to go away.”

“I carry *sal negre*. Black salt. I have it.”

“I need dove’s blood ink and a quill, as well.”

“I don’t carry true blood items. What I sell is made from various herbs and spices.”

“City regulation?” the customer asked. “No animal products?”

Salem nodded. Ink infused with blood—human or otherwise—technically fell under the umbrella

of religious goods, but she'd chosen not to carry any modern-era animal by-products in her shop. Her quills weren't even plucked. They were shed by happy geese.

"Let me show you," Salem offered, leading the customer to her mini-botanica section of Santeria candles, spells, and other ritual supplies. Not the best-selling items in the store, though occasionally she'd have a very good day Voodoo-wise.

"*Sal negre*. Good. Good. Is this the largest size you carry?" the woman asked.

"I have a large container in the back. How bad of a neighbor do you have? A little *sal negre* combined with the right spell should be enough to send the worst of demons packing."

The woman looked sharply at Salem. "I've separated from my husband and he will not move out of our townhouse. He's making it impossible for me to carry on...well, let's say he's making things difficult. And it's not because he wants or needs the house or me. He's just being stubborn. I'll take as much black salt as you have."

"I have five pounds. That should dispel even the vilest of future ex-husbands," Salem replied.

"I'll take two quills as well," the woman replied in a rather commanding manner that told Salem it was check-out time.

"I'll be right back with the salt. Go ahead and bring your quills to the counter. No ink?" Salem asked.

The woman shook her head. "I'll stop at the park on the way home."

Salem didn't ask any more questions. *Creepy, creepy, creepy*.

Her customer paid with that all-elusive Platinum American Express. The rings on her fingers flashed like lightning against the reflective, well-lit glass display case under the register.

"Blessed be," Salem offered as her customer departed the shop, her fabulous heels and heavy jewels carrying her toward the salty demise of her marriage.

She glanced at her watch. Nearly time to close, grab a bite from the deli next door and retreat to the comfort of her apartment with slippers and a glass of wine.

She retreated into the backroom to further inspect her new shipment. She pulled her price guide off a stool. Going rate for the only other known *Viking Member* was one-hundred—and-sixty thousand dollars, sold at auction.

She handled the whalebone penis carefully, stroking it as if it were the real thing. Gloves. She needed to put on white cotton gloves. "Screw it," she swore. Her gloves were put away. She liked the way the engravings circumnavigating the bone tickled her palm. She pulled her spectacles off her head and laid them on the bridge of her nose. She slipped a hair band off her wrist and pulled her hair into a ponytail.

The character depictions were as crisp as the day they'd been inscribed. Whalebone was like that. Someone had loved this thing. Kept it well-oiled and out of harm's way for a thousand years. She rifled through the box, looking for the authentication papers. "Unearthed by a farmer searching for the remains of lost lambs buried in several feet of purple moss, Berserker's Lava Field, Iceland, 1943. Sold by farmer Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson to the National Museum for ten ewes, 1945. Obtained by Prithan Auction House, 1997. Authenticated by University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 1998. Record of subsequent sales confidential," Salem read.

Salem continued searching through the packing materials. Her hand touched something round, hard and cold. A fourth dildo perhaps?

Her tone changed from one of elation to one of surprise quite quickly. “What the Hell is this?” She removed a spherical stone with a perfectly round hole chiseled through its center. The stone had one slightly flat side, allowing it to stand upright. It weighed a ton. “I bet this is Icelandic palagonite.” A flash of writing on a slip of paper in the box caught her eye.

It read simply “Odin Stone. Icelandic Palagonite. Naturally occurring center hole formed by volcanic gasses and magma cooling quickly in glacial waters. Once believed to be sacred to the God, Odin. Used in oath-taking and as a tool to discern fidelity between lovers and brothers.” Salem smiled. She wondered if the whalebone dick and the Odin Stone had had a fling during shipping.

She shook off the myriad jokes and sexually-oriented displays she could make about the two artifacts. They weren’t talking to her, anyway. Obsession and heavy concentration on a single subject made her personal grid of defenses weaken. The moment that occurred, her immunity to the wild memories contained in the various antique sex toys in her possession would come flying at her like a dust storm. Each one had a tale and each one wanted Salem’s undivided attention. It was her seventh sense...*I hear horny people.*

She had always heard voices emanating from objects around her. Disney said it best when he had his nubile young Pocahontas sing to John Smith, “I know every rock and tree and creature, has a life, has a spirit, has a name.” But Disney never mentioned that every sex toy ever to grace a snatch or bum had a story, too. Her *objets* wanted her to record their experiences. *Hello, madam! I am the leather sheath of the former Duke of Bourgeois, worn by him as a marital aid. The poor man suffered from an obnoxious case of premature ejaculation and I lessened his untimely outbursts with my thick, rough interior so that the Duchess would not have to resort to a succession of young lovers to keep herself amused sexually.* Followed by maniacal laughter that clearly meant the Duchess had screwed everyone while her husband, the Duke, had tried desperately to achieve an erection for more than thirty seconds. Someday, she was going to stick around and listen to the stories. Her, a bottle of wine, and a dozen antique sex toys. She needed to get a life.

* * * *

Salem snuck in the service entrance and through the kitchen of the Kosher Pickle Deli, helping herself to a delicious greasy potato latke as she made her way to the dining area.

“Hey, Miss Grier. Good day in the sex trade?” Misha, the Russian deli-owner, called as Salem pulled up a stool at the kitchen’s stainless prep counter. “Don’t worry about the latke. For you, it’s on the house. Your Reuben is ready and I put a surprise in the box. Something you’ll like very much.”

Salem smiled. “Thanks, Misha.”

“I’m no matchmaking gossip, Salem, but I need to tell you...”

Salem interrupted, “Again.”

Misha laughed. “Yes, *again*—that I think it’s wrong for a nice girl like you to be sleeping alone every night above a shop full of hoodoo candles and leather condoms.”

Salem laughed. “It’s a living. Now, about that corned beef on rye...”

“It’s in the cooler. Enjoy it if you can. You don’t get married soon I’ll be sitting Shivah for your youth,” Misha replied.

Salem shook her head and chuckled to herself. *I’m not in the market for something long-term. I just want something to lie atop me besides the book I’m reading when I fall asleep!* “Don’t cover the mirrors yet, Misha. I’m only thirty. There’s plenty of time for me to find a husband.” *If I bother looking.*

“You are the kind of woman who will meet your true love in a heartbeat and marry him in the next. I know you, Bubeleh. I work next to you for ten years. I think at first with your spirits and sexual items you might be *oysverf*, completely crazy, but now, I know better. If you were my son, I’d say you were a man of honor.”

Salem realized she was being given a great deal of respect by a man who refused to let his wife learn how to drive. “Thank you, Misha.” *Now, hand me that dry salami you have hanging in your cold case so that I can screw myself silly with it and I’ll be on my way.*

She retrieved her sandwich, dropped a five-spot on the counter and headed upstairs. But not before turning off her shop alarm to retrieve the *Viking Member* and the Odin Stone.

She couldn’t carry her to-go container and the heavy artifacts at the same time, so she tucked the bone dildo into her sports bra. It reached from the base of her bra to her chin, but at least it left her with two free hands to carry her food container and the rather large piece of palagonite.

The cold hardness of the Viking’s boner shifted in between her breasts as she climbed the steps to her apartment. She felt her female parts go tight at the thought of something hard and warm between her breasts. Something just as long and thick, but more animated than whalebone.

Maybe the Norseman who carved it. There was a man who knew how to give a gift that would keep on giving!

“Gods, I need a man. Maybe I should perform a Venus ritual and see if I don’t get some action.”

She paused. “No...a Freyja ritual. Norse passion. Bag myself a Berserker.”

She had never performed a ritual designed to draw in a romantic encounter. She’d read about them, discussed them, sold items designed to enhance their magic, but she’d never cast one.

She pushed the door open with one foot and set the stone and the container on her kitchen table.

She hadn’t locked her door. No need. Hers was a fairly crime-free neighborhood. She withdrew the dildo from her sports bra and inserted the tip through the hole of the Odin Stone. A little tease for the female object from the definitely male object.

Salem rolled her head back. “Crap, I forgot to feed the girls,” she cursed. “You two behave while I’m gone.” She patted the Odin Stone being teased ever so slightly by the tip of the *Viking Member* and jetted down the fire escape stairs.

The girls were going crazy in their tank—and it wasn’t because their dinner was late. Salem reached inside her jet-fridge for the field greens salad mix and cherry tomatoes and opened the tank. Dax nipped at her fingers as she removed food bowl. “Hey! What’s with that? Why are you

acting so skittish? There's no one around. And I'm human!"

Both rats turned their haunches to the plate glass and iron-barred storefront window, their long pink tails extended out like arrows.

Salem dropped the salad mix into the tank and squinted toward the window. The street lamps cast a reflective glare against the plate glass, and the store's security lights at the front entrance made it hard to see out the window. A shadowy figure lurked at her storefront, pressing his hands against the glass as if trying to get a good look inside. The bars held him back.

"It's just a lookie-loo, girls. The pub down the street is having dollar beer night."

Her little rats were insistent that the interloper into their airspace was far from human and, by their reaction, was probably extremely powerful. Salem took a step closer to the front of the store. The man reached one large hand through the bars and placed his palm flat against the glass.

Oh, my Gods... She could feel him. Who—or what was he? Salem slipped a runic necklace off its display peg. *The Helm of Awe*—a protective rune. Not that she wasn't already surrounded by spells and charms so thick she sometimes envisioned her shop encased in London fog.

She stepped forward, into the glow of her security lights. "We're closed," she called.

A deep, smooth voice replied as clearly as if he were in the room with her. "Yes, I can see that. You are *very* closed. How many charms and spells do you think you need for protection anyway?"

Salem laughed. *Well, ain't he a pisser?*

"I have enough. And a few mundane methods of protection in here, too."

"I'm not going to break in, Miss. I'm just wondering..."

Salem raised her left eyebrow, smirking. "Wondering what?"

The man continued, "Do you have an Odin Stone?"

Salem caught her breath. "Why?"

"Do you always ask potential customers why they want a certain item? If so, it's a wonder you're still in business," the man replied.

Salem wondered if she should say yes or no. She kind of liked the Odin Stone. Of course, if she kept everything she liked, she'd never sell anything and be out of business in a week. "Yes. I have one."

"May I see it?" he asked. "Odin Stones are aligned to the feminine side, you know. A woman is sacred, too. A keeper of oaths. The vessel for creation. Odin Stones are uniquely sensual. I need one for my collection. My own personal trove of sins."

"We're closed. Can you come back tomorrow?"

"I hate waiting," the man replied, his voice soft and teasing from behind the plate glass.

Salem smiled. "Tomorrow. Come back. I haven't even unpacked it yet."

"You don't lie well, Miss Grier. Give my regards to your pets. I've always enjoyed the company of rodents. I'll be back tomorrow."

Salem rolled her eyes. *Non-human beings making demands could be such a pain.* The creature locked outside her shop thanks to powerful magic was more vaporous than corporeal. As he walked away, she could very easily see right through him.

She called to her rats, "It's okay, girls. I think my new shipment came with a bit of extra baggage,

that's all. I'll work up an invisibility charm and the likes of that." Salem paused. "Rather sexy entity will forget all about my having the Odin Stone."

Why do all the hot guys have to be less than human? Hot guys...was even thinking about performing a Freyja ritual stirring up the ethereal sexual plains? Salem picked up a bundle of sage. "Smudge me, baby," she said aloud, giggling.

She pursed her lips, recalling the other items she needed to invoke and invite the sexuality of the Norse Goddess of Love into her life. A string of amber beads would avert Freyja's secondary role as the Goddess of War. Strawberries would invite sweet sensuality. She had strawberry jam. That could work. A falcon feather. A cat's eye marble. Something naughty. She smiled. The *Viking Member*. What could be better?

The girls had calmed down, but seemed quite intent on staring out their tank toward the window. Salem tapped on their lid. They ignored her, keeping their eyes focused on the street. She tightened her grip on her plastic sack full of ritual merchandise. "I'll bet *he* has something that could fill that Odin Stone's hole quite nicely." She walked out and reset the shop's alarm. *Talk about a cock ring!*

* * * *

Salem popped open a bottle of beer and downed it in three long swallows. She grabbed a second and sat down at her table. She popped the top off the second brew, took another long swig, and then addressed the artifacts. "Now what am I supposed to do with you? I have a spirit being after the stone, the bone is worth a bloody fortune, and I was thinking of keeping you both. You look like a matching set to me. One piece really should go with the other."

She finished another beer. Dark, frothy, and strong, it hit her empty stomach hard. She should have eaten before going for the beers. Two bites of a sandwich and a Kosher dill just didn't fill the void.

With unsteady hands, Salem set up makeshift altar on her kitchen table. A red placemat acted as her altar cloth. No pentagram needed; this was an invocation of a Norse goddess. Salem set out a peach tea candle, the jar of strawberry jam, the amber beads, and a small tray to hold the sage. She moved the Odin Stone and the *Viking Member* front and center.

She lit the candle and passed the end of the falcon quill through the flame. "I honor Freyja. I invite her into my home to make it ready for passion. May my true love enter in her wake and may the pleasure I receive in his arms delight the goddesses. I invoke the pure protection of the falcon and the clarity of the sage. Thank you, Freyja." Salem paused. "I vow to honor the relationship given me."

Now, bring it on. I'm horny and in need of serious lovin'. She giggled and held the Viking-age adult toy out over the altar and made the sign of Thor's Hammer over the objects, much like a priest making the sign of the cross before a congregation. "Freyja, hear my plea! May you weep tears of gold in joy instead of sorrow. May your ranks be filled with true and perfect soldiers. May Odin forgive you your transgressions and may you soar on falcon's wings in the hearts of all women."

Satisfied with her short ritual, Salem blew out the candle. She grabbed another beer and the container of food, and carefully navigated the piles of research books and occult references stacked in her hallway to the living room, the *Viking Member* again tucked into her sports bra. She wanted her treat from Misha—a piece of baklava. Honey. Nuts. Sounds like euphemisms for sex!

Salem plopped down on the sofa without grace or finesse and opened the Styrofoam container, ignoring the sandwich and going straight for the pastry. “Baklava,” she drooled.

She slipped the bone from her bra and set it on her coffee table. Misha had given her a huge chunk o’ glory. There’s nothing like baklava. Nothing. It’s better than sex.

The first bite sent her into a state of cascading delight from lips to toes. The phyllo literally melted in her mouth while the honey filled her senses with its rich taste and aroma. She took a swig of beer to cleanse her palate before enjoying a second bite.

“Tell me, my Viking stud, do you like baklava?” Salem picked up the dildo and ran its tip across the flaky goodness, covering the head with dripping honey.

The mushroom head of the carved bone dildo glistened with the golden nectar. “Damn,” Salem whispered as she brought the dildo to her lips. She flicked her tongue against the cold hardness, catching a drop of honey. The bone had a salty essence. It formed a contrast against the sweet honey and pungent beer with a kind of sensual balance found only in nature.

Salem lolled her tongue along the tip, capturing every last bit of the golden sweetness. She mouthed the head, as if it were the real thing.

Just like riding a bicycle. She could do this again. If she ever got the chance. She felt a flood of readiness between her legs. She pulled the dildo from between her lips and looked at its shining head. Why not?

She wiggled out of her cotton pants and ran the whalebone dildo across her thighs. “Oh, I don’t know Mr. *Viking Member*. You might be too big. It’s been a long time, you know,” she whispered, the beers doing some of the talking.

She pressed the carved shaft against her clitoris, through her panties. “You are a naughty Viking. All right, you can come inside and play.”

She reached for her beer and drained it. She then slid into a comfortable position on her sofa and maneuvered the dildo inside her panties. The honeyed head felt warm and sticky against her mound as she worked it between her labial lips and along her clitoris. She ran the head across her vagina, pressing inward slightly. She was wet. Really wet. She rubbed the member across her opening, and then let the Viking invader take the plunge.

It hummed and rang inside her. It vibrated with its own heartbeat. It lulled her into a deep fantasy—a fantasy so rich, the real world ceased to matter. In her alcohol-induced state of tranquility, she felt the fullness of a man inside her. Filling her.

She didn’t usually fantasize about blonds. She liked them a little more ethnic than that. But this masturbatory fantasy had a life of its own. And he was blond.

His long, braided, whiskey-colored hair smelled of salt and leather. The aroma of his maleness captivated her senses. This was a fantasy worth pursuing. Since it was taking its own course, she

didn't fight against the tide.

She was his sultry and helpless Irish captive and he was the Viking invader, ravishing her over and over until he coerced her into submission with pure pleasure. His need to conquer her consumed him. She held the key that would end his captivity. He couldn't steal it from her—she had to offer it.

His embrace enveloped her.

But he was not alone.

He had a friend—an unclothed, fully hardened friend with shiny dark skin and eyes the color of a summer field. They were brothers. Blood-brothers. The first child and the adopted child of a stout Norseman with white-blond hair and a penchant for eastern women. The dark boy was not his flesh and blood, but the son of a Norse mercenary killed in service of the Sultan. The Norseman had claimed the boy and the boy's exotic mother as his own, vowing to protect them in honor of his fallen comrade.

Born from the mating of Norse to Byzantium African, the adopted brother—the blond's blood-brother—had a radiant beauty never before seen in Iceland. He'd been popular during the long winters. With the women. With the men.

And he wanted *her*.

Salem reached out for him—Kane. She wanted to take them both on. Kane, the dark one, and Ketiljon, the blond.

Ketiljon growled. He didn't like to share. Not his father's affections, not the land his father left them. Never a woman, and even more potently, *never* his blood-brother. It had been over bruises and beatings that he'd given other men a chance at Kane during the long winters. Kane was his. Kane would always be his.

Ketiljon's obsession with his blood-brother distracted his love-making with Salem. He reached out his right hand and tried to urge Kane's thick penis into his mouth. Kane refused his touch. Salem felt Ketiljon's irritation as his pounding thrusts grew even more furious.

Salem parted her lips, inviting the dark Viking to fill her mouth with his dusky member. He smiled and allowed her to draw him in. He tasted like honey. He'd covered his thick member with the sticky golden nectar. She slid a hand around his sticky shaft and moved her head back and forth in time with her hand until her tongue tasted his sweet salt in the mixture.

"No," the blond brother ordered, pushing his adopted-sibling away. "She is mine. If you want her, you must let me have you, first. Like when we were boys—and during our long confinement."

Salem tried to protest, but found the blond's hand covering her mouth. His grip hurt. Ketiljon pulled away from her, leaving her rudely unsatisfied.

The look on the dark brother's face changed from soft to anxious. "Those days are over, Ketiljon." The blond, his expression sharp and his member jutting out from him like a ramrod, reached for Kane's arm, twisting it. "Is she worth it to you? One last time with me and she will be yours. At least for now."

"She is worth everything to me. Without her, we have no future," Kane replied.

"Then do as I wish."

Kane's voice strained over his blood-brother's heavy panting. "Let me take her from behind. While I am in her, you may take me."

The blond smiled. "Agreed!"

Salem sighed with relief when Ketiljon lifted his hand from her mouth. "Roll over, darling. Come along now. Since you are fantasizing that you are an Irish slave, then you must do as I say. That's part of the fantasy, is it not?"

Salem took a deep breath and rolled onto her belly. Who was he to control her drunken fantasy? Asshole!

"Bottoms up," Ketiljon commanded.

Salem pulled her knees up under her, lifting her buttocks in a frighteningly exposed manner. She didn't like him. He was hot, and she liked him fucking her, but she didn't like him—and she didn't think he really wanted her, anyway. He wanted to make love to another man. She could deal with that, but Jesus Christ, not in mid-fuck! Love the one you're with, bucko! This was not her fantasy! It was his! How did that happen?

Kane mounted her from behind. His hands went to her hips as he pushed his way into her vagina. She was so wet—still ready for sex in the wake of Ketiljon's withdrawal. His penis was longer and thicker than his blood-brother's. His style of thrusting was different, too. Whereas the blond was fury in the act, this man was molasses, using deliberate, slow strokes, easing his way in and out of her, making sure her pleasure was not ignored.

Just as Salem's clitoris responded to Kane's skillful technique, he withdrew and dragged the thick head of his penis across her anus, wetting it. Slowly, carefully, he pushed his way into her rectum. The pain was nearly unbearable at first.

"You're too...big..." she gasped.

He stroked the small of her back. "Relax. Relax and it will soon be over. Reach between your legs and touch yourself while I'm in you. You will enjoy this, I promise."

Something in his voice was not right. It was as if he was saying one thing, but meaning another. Like she should have been reading him between the lines. The blond guy, he was controlling them.

Nevertheless, Salem did as commanded. Her swollen clitoris responded accordingly. At this point, she didn't care how she got off, or by whom.

Ketiljon interrupted Salem's thoughts as he pushed Kane forward. "She will not enjoy you as much as I will, blood-brother," the blond said. Without a moment's hesitation, he assaulted his brother's anus, thrusting so hard he drove his way in up to his own pelvic bone.

The dark brother gasped. Though her back was to him, Salem could tell Kane's face was screwed tight from pain. Every muscle in his body tensed and rigid. For a few seconds he held motionless against her. In her.

She felt fear ball up her gut. Salem wanted to help him make Ketiljon go away. Far away. Kane relaxed and resumed his ardent lovemaking.

They succumbed to the bizarre, sensual rhythm of their ménage. Salem manipulated her clitoris in time to Kane's thrusts, who took his timing from the plummeting of Ketiljon into his ass.

“It is good, no?” Ketiljon asked, slapping his blood-brother’s butt cheek. “I am going to spill inside you.” He moaned loudly and made three long, hard thrusts into Kane. “I am coming,” he grunted.

“It is good to feel you orgasm inside me again. It has been a very long time since we swore off this behavior. Since this time will be the last, it is good that we can be together this way,” Kane replied.

Again, Salem envisioned Kane being nothing but a puppet on a string, mouthing words he didn’t want to say, but was forced to say. She wanted to cast a spell of Opening to force the truth to the surface.

Like wading through a vat of thick oatmeal, Salem tried desperately to mouth the simple spell to compel and pull truth to the surface. A very difficult act, when being buggered by a handsome black man being buggered by a handsome Nordic-type.

Open eyes. Open ears. Untangled tongues. Cast off the masks and remove the robes, for only the truth may enter this place.

A thousand images cascaded into her mind. It reminded her of a PowerPoint presentation on high speed. Her instincts were correct. The blond thrived on deceit and control. Control of his blood-brother. Control of her. Control of what he presumed was his destiny.

Ketiljon slid out of Kane’s rear, his erect member covered in semen. “Let me bring this act to a conclusion for you, Kane. I need to taste you. One last time.”

“What of the woman? She has not yet achieved climax,” Kane replied.

“What of it?” Ketiljon asked.

Kane shook his head. “I will not leave a woman unsatisfied.”

“Then put your mouth to her, and when you are finished, I will put my mouth to you.” Ketiljon paused. “Oh, the witch is scrying. As we make love with her, she is divining our true natures, brother. Look at her. She is lost in a trance. Well, we must remove her from that state so that she can enjoy our time with her.” Ketiljon raised his palms, directing his dark energies toward Salem. “Forget what you have seen and remember only the pleasure.”

Kane slid out of Salem and in one motion, rolled her onto her back.

She wanted to speak, but felt tongue-tied. She couldn’t remember something...something important.

Before she could take a deep breath or sigh in relief at having been freed of his anal love, much less clear her mind of the dim, suppressive numbness filling it, Kane’s dark, curly head disappeared between her legs.

It was almost comforting, the long, slow caresses of his tongue against her burning privates. Like a healing salve, his tongue made everything all better.

The protesting, swollen edges of her vagina and anus were soothed into warm oblivion as he gently and quite adeptly lolled his tongue across them. His beautiful full lips encircled her clitoris. He rolled her bud between them, inspiring it to new heights.

Salem slid her fingers into his thick, curly hair, and held his head against her mound as she exploded in orgasm.

As soon as her grip relaxed, Kane turned to face his blood-brother. Ketiljon dropped to his knees and eagerly took Kane's member into his mouth. It was obvious Ketiljon relished the act. His satisfied sighs told Salem that much. Kane seemed stoic. Hands on hips, he stood motionless, watching Ketiljon perform fellatio. He climaxed quietly, seemingly holding back embarrassed cries of pleasure. Ketiljon, however, had busied his right hand between his own legs and had brought himself to a second orgasm with vigorous gusto. Salem came down slowly from her orgasm. Her fantasy had drawn her into a very deep well. Seems her new acquisition had a bit of memory embedded in it. Memories of pleasurable moments between men and women and any combination of the two who liked their stories shared, not just told. That would make a good selling point. Because no matter how good it felt inside her...she still had to sell the *Viking Member*. Reeling from the beer and the force of her orgasm, Salem meandered to her kitchen and cleaned the dildo with alcohol wipes.

* * * *

Downstairs, in her shop, an otherworldly interloper zipped his fly, his head still swimming from his own climax. "Salem...hear me..." he called softly. "Not if I can help it," a second voice replied. The interloper's body went rigid as he looked out the window. "I am the first born, Kane, and it is I who shall reap the benefits of this woman's passion," he called. "Go away, blood-brother. You are a painful reminder of my father's poor decisions." "What our father left to you, he also left to me, though my mother was not born of Iceland, nor I of his loins." "Dark brother, be gone. Kane, there is no room for you here." "Ketiljon, remember the oath we took as boys and remember the bargain we made with the gods to escape death? We are bound together for eternity. If you are freed, then so must I be." Ketiljon spat on the floor. "Three hellish days with you at my side is too long. I was forced into the oath and I long ago forsook the gods. What pledges I made to them in times of imminent death, I now regret. And revoke." He paused, his bright blue eyes flashing lightning bolts of hatred at his blood-brother. "You cannot enter here and the stone shall not leave. This woman shall set me free. She is already learning the power of the stone, though she doesn't recognize it yet. I shall be set free." Kane laughed. "She will invite me into her life. I feel it. Though you controlled her mind and body in that fleeting moment of ecstasy born of loneliness and alcohol, I shall have her heart. You are trying to make her believe I am but a vessel for your pleasure, when in truth I have refused you all my life and taken beatings for defending myself from your advances. She will know the truth. I am not your lover, nor the lover of any man. I have loved only once, and her name was Grettir." Ketiljon scoffed at his brother's goodness. "Before you bury your bone in the keeper of the stone,

I will rip your heart out from between your shoulder blades and suck the living blood from it.”
“Spoken like a true Berserker. It was that talk that put us asunder in the first place, brother. Have you not learned anything in the last thousand years to calm your temper? Has not the wait been enough?” Kane asked.

Ketiljon moved to the window and placed a palm against the glass. “Do you remember the old days, Kane? When we lived and drank and fought side by side?”

Kane nodded. “I cherish those memories, Ketiljon. I remember the laughter of our father and the way he looked at my mother with such love and respect, until she died.”

“Your mother was not born to live in our homeland. She grew cold and could never find warmth,” Ketiljon replied.

Kane interjected, “Save in our father’s arms. She grew to love him deeply after the death of her first husband. She was a consort for our father and surrogate mother to you. Without him, she would have been stoned for bearing a half-breed child and I would have been emasculated.”

Ketiljon looked sharply through the glass. “I hated her. Though I am glad Father brought you to Iceland. I would hate to think of your balls being touched by the kiss of steel. They should be touched by something much softer. From the moment you came to live in our house, I thought there was no more handsome a youth in all the world. I have never wanted anything for you, save for your happiness.”

“Your obsession with me and hatred of my mother have poisoned you to the love of any woman, Ketiljon. It was your hatred that imprisoned us.”

“In a widow’s bed warmer.”

They’d had this same conversation a thousand times over a thousand years. “My plea was heard and the deal was struck. I assumed the place our souls were to be sealed should be something other than rock or stone. I did not want to be overlooked. The carving was ideal.”

“I might as well have died in that hot pot, brother. A thousand years trapped in a whalebone penis is humiliating.”

Kane wished his fair blood-brother would someday understand the necessity of going into the carving, as opposed to being lost in the wilds of Iceland’s interior rocky permafrost. “Freyja said choose and I did so. I carved the bone for my love and, though you found our captivity painful, to me it was just an extension of my love for her. Though I, too, long for freedom now. I had no other object save my leather breeches, which would not have withstood the ravages of time. And you were nude! It is to the goddess Freyja, my savior, that I pledge my sword. It is to her I owe my chance for freedom,” Kane said.

Ketiljon pounded his fist on the glass. “And to her I owe a lifetime of misery being shackled to your heels. Through your selfishness I have lived a thousand years as an extension of an object meant to pleasure a woman in her husband’s absence!”

Kane sighed. “There is no shame in survival, brother.”

“The shame I feel is that I did not gut you like a pig and then bugger the goddess as she stood over your rotting corpse! You shall never enter this place and find freedom between the thighs of Salem Grier! It is I who shall put the bone to the stone!”

Kane shook his head. “Your rage will be your undoing, brother. She will never accept you as her lover.”

Ketiljon smiled a devilish, loathsome smile. “I have always taken what is mine, and this shall be no exception.” He looked to the ceiling and raised his spirit to the upper floor where Salem lay sleeping.

Kane vanished into the night, knowing that his blood-brother would never win this battle. Though light dispelled darkness, his light was but a thin disguise. Dusk would conquer dawn.

* * * *

Silent as a cat, Ketiljon stepped around the sofa to the table where the Odin Stone and the *Viking’s Member* lay joined. He nudged the whalebone deeper into the hole. Salem moved and sighed in her sleep.

Ketiljon smiled. “Tonight you pleased yourself with my prison, dear one. And though you are a skilled witch full of magical spells to ward off the likes of me, you turned the latch on the first door exiting Hell. I’ll have you soon, and freedom shall be mine, alone.”

He ran his hand along the carved shaft of the dildo, and then brought his fingers to his lips to taste Salem’s essence. “Soon, I shall be set free. My pretend brother will never cross your boundaries. The weak-minded are easy to seduce and I found my accomplice readily. *She* was so easy to coerce. To control. To cut. It was a good victory over wealthy sensibilities and her blood was so rich and sweet. Tonight, I am sated.” Ketiljon melted into the carvings, vaporizing in a swirl of firefly lights.

Just around the corner from the deli, slumped over in the alley, lay the body of a rather attractive older woman; her receipt from *Salem’s Fine Collection of Sins* clutched in her cold, dead hand.

* * * *

A strong, urgent rapping at her door awakened Salem with a jolt, causing her to fall off the couch, thinking the place was on fire. “Who is it?” she called. Jesus. It wasn’t yet five in the morning. “Misha! Open the door!”

Salem hadn’t locked her door. “It’s open, Misha. What the Hell is going on?”

“I came to work to start the bread and there is a body in the alley. A woman. I lost my keys. I cannot get into my place. Call the police, eh? I need to find my keys before the police take them as evidence,” Misha blurted.

“A body? In the alley? A dead body?” Salem asked.

“You phone now, yes? You should start locking your door.”

“Christ. Yes, I’ll phone. Right now,” Salem replied reaching for her telephone. She dialed 9-1-1. She didn’t wait for the operator to finish her standard *what is the nature of your emergency* response. “Hi. There’s a woman, dead in the alley behind my store. Behind Misha’s Deli and Salem’s Fine Collection of Sins. Sixty-seven-hundred Crowley Way. Downtown. No, I don’t know who she is. I haven’t looked. Misha found her. He’s with the body now. No, he won’t touch

anything. Yes, thank you. Please hurry.”

Please hurry? She’s dead. She ain’t going anywhere. Salem paused, realizing the absurdity of her comment. “Me? I’m Salem Grier. I live above my shop. And Misha Ivanov found her. He owns the deli. Thank you.”

She hung up the phone and slipped on her clogs. The metal handrails of the fire escape were covered in morning dew. A heavy chill still clung to the darkness of pre-dawn.

Misha had found his keys. She also heard the soft wailing of the Mourner’s Kaddish emanating from her friend. *Yeetgadal v' yeetkadash sh'mey rabbah...*

“Did you know her, Misha?” Salem asked.

He nodded. “She bought a cup of coffee from me yesterday. And struck up a conversation with a man who ordered warm milk. He looked like warm milk. What man drinks warm milk?”

“Blond man?” Salem asked.

“Like a banana he was blond,” Misha replied.

Salem sucked in her breath. “She came into my shop today. She bought black salt. Said she had to get rid of a bad neighbor. A blond man showed up after closing. He kind of gave me the creeps.” *But he turned my cookies, too. He was hot.*

“You think he’s the one who did her in?” Misha asked. “Do you see how he did it? Look at her throat. Those marks—someone strangled her. And cut her. How could someone do such a thing?”

“Does she have something sticking out of her ear?” Salem asked, squinting to make out the object without having to get too close.

“It’s a quill. Drilled into her brain.”

Salem turned and vomited.

* * * *

She still had shakes and the dry heaves when a black and white pulled into the alley. A svelte female officer stepped out of the car, radio in hand. “Confirming need for wagon,” she said into the speaker. “Hi. I’m Officer LeBrey. Who found her?”

Misha held up his hand sheepishly. “I did, ma’am. I am Misha Ivanov. I had Salem phone you.”

“Touch anything, Miss?” Officer LeBrey asked.

Salem lifted her head slightly and whispered a hoarse, “Salem Grier. No, I touched nothing.”

“I got close to her to see if she was alive and touched her cheek. That’s all,” Misha replied.

An ambulance and two additional police cars rounded the corner.

Shocked and cold, numb and feeling like she’d taken a fist to the gut, Salem wasn’t sure if she could stand for much longer. “I know who she is,” she said softly to Officer LeBrey. “I mean, she bought something in my shop yesterday. Used plastic.”

LeBrey’s ears piqued. “Can I get the merchant copy of that transaction from you, Miss Grier?”

Salem nodded. “I’ll go get it.”

As the cops drilled Misha who, with great enthusiasm, recounted the same story five different ways, Salem somehow made her feet carry her body to the back entrance of her shop. She punched in the code to the alarm and opened the back door using the electronic keypad.

She rifled through her receipts for the previous day. “Marguerite Pamona. Five pounds of black salt and two quills,” she mumbled. “Rest in peace, Marguerite.”

She re-secured her shop and somehow managed to make her way back to the flashing blue and red lights. She handed Officer LeBrey the slip, took a step back and then felt everything go black around her. Literally.

* * * *

Salem was revived by a paramedic. “You’re all right, Miss. It’s called a visceral reaction. You fell right into LeBrey’s arms. Good thing, huh? Not a scratch on you. I’ve seen people go down and knock out their front teeth.”

Salem tried to focus. She wasn’t in the ambulance. She wasn’t on the pavement. “I’m in Misha’s shop.”

“You are, yes. We couldn’t very well put you in the wagon now, could we? Thanks to you, we have a good idea as to whom we did load up, however,” the paramedic commented.

“Are you trying to be funny?” Salem asked. *He’s cute.*

“Never while on duty, ma’am,” the medic replied.

Salem sat up. “Oh, please don’t call me that. I had to call my mother ma’am and I never want to be that stuffy.”

“What—and when—shall I call you?”

Salem smiled. “Are you flirting with me, sir?”

He nodded his head yes, but he replied, “No.” He paused. “I need it for my report.”

“Salem Grier. That’s my shop next door.” Salem felt very, very comfortable in spite of her surroundings and the trauma of the morning. Why pass up the chance to flirt with a Warrick Brown look-a-like? “Why don’t you come by and see me sometime? I’ll make you a nice cup of tea.”

The paramedic smiled. Salem liked his cool green eyes and café-au-lait-colored skin. And those shoulders! And his voice! Like honey! *I think I need mouth-to-mouth, Mr. Paramedic.*

The medic smiled slyly at Salem, as if he were reading her mind. “I’m not sure I can cross your threshold. All those runic inscriptions. You seem to be very well protected against the wiles of bad boys.”

Salem’s smirked. “You’re a bad boy? With that baby face?”

The medic nodded. “I come from a long line of men who know how to revive a still heart.”

“Well, how nice for you. And me, as the case may be. I have actually been realizing of late that I could use a little less protection. Do you read runes?” Salem asked.

He nodded. “My adopted father taught me when I was a boy. He was an old-world Iclander.”

“And your mother?” Salem continued.

“North African. My father met her while he was traveling down that way in his youth. I am the biological son of one of his countrymen. My father was a good man and took me into his home as if he’d sired me.”

“Where were you born?” Salem asked.

“Tunis, Tunisia. But I spent most of my life in Iceland.”

“Forgive me for playing twenty questions...” Salem began.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll ask you some questions here in a minute,” the man replied.

Salem smiled. And he smiled right back at her.

“When did your family immigrate to the United States?”

“Recently.”

Salem sat upright. “You don’t have an accent, Mr...”

“Call me Kane. Oh, and I’ve worked very hard to blend in.”

Salem held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Kane. So, tell me, in your professional opinion, which charms should I remove?”

“I was teasing. I can cross the rune charms as long as I am invited to enter. At least that’s what my father taught me. All I need is an invitation from the owner.”

“I thought I’d already done that,” Salem replied. God...she hoped she looked attractive in some way. After passing out in an alley and vomiting, she doubted she looked her best. Jesus Christ. She wasn’t even dressed. “You a vampire?” Salem asked. “I mean...needing to be invited in sounds awfully Bela Lugosi to me.”

“Nothing as grand as that. I’m just an aide car driver. The morgue bus picked up Ms. Pomona’s body. The police have the place taped off. Your friend Misha closed his shop for today and went home. I’m off the clock. I said I’d stay with you until you were ready to return to the living. No hurry,” Kane replied. “Are you going to open your shop today?”

“Life and death are opposite sides of the same coin. If I don’t open my shop, I don’t make rent.” Kane helped Salem to her feet. His touch inflamed desire in her. “Well, let me walk you to your door. Maybe I’ll get that cup of tea if you invite me properly.”

“What time is it?” Salem asked. “I’m not wearing my watch.”

“Nearly nine.”

“I need to open in about an hour,” Salem replied. “Misha’s rear door locks automatically. We can go out that way. You don’t have to walk me to my shop. I need to shower and change.”

“I can wait.”

Salem mused over Kane's comment for a moment. She wasn’t used to men wanting to be around her; to protect her. She needed to know if this was the result of her Freyja ritual, or just another horny crazy. “You know, Kane, I’m grateful you waited here with me while I recovered from my visceral reaction to having a dead body in the alley behind my shop, but I can manage from here. Why don’t you drop by later?”

“I really don’t have anything better to do right now,” Kane replied.

Salem shivered. This guy was now going from teasing to possessing. “I have things to do. I’ll see you later, all right?”

Kane smiled. Oh, goodness, he has a beguiling smile. Salem felt like melting into his parted lips. She reached up and squeezed the amulet around her throat. Her protective touchstone. “I’ll see you later.”

“I need a proper invitation. Old custom,” Kane replied.

Salem ran her thumb across talisman emblem on her amulet. “I’ll see you later, Kane.”

“My pleasure.”

“Until then,” Salem said, backing away. She exited Misha’s shop, fighting a pounding headache and muscle tension that seemed to concentrate in the area right between her thighs.

She dashed as quickly as she could up the fire escape to her little apartment and locked the door. Salem slumped down onto her sofa where she’d been sleeping quite soundly until Misha’s frantic cries had awakened her. A quick, shadowy image darted out of her line of sight as she scanned her front room. Something felt funky. Out of place. “I don’t have time to acknowledge you right now. Come out when I have more time!” she called after the shadow. “Damned Revenants. What the Hell are they doing out of the woodwork?” she said aloud.

A loud thud from the wall separating her living room from bedroom alerted her to the fact that the Revenants were, indeed, awake. What had caused them to stir? She had this place so well spelled that nothing should be able to say boo without clearing it with her first. Salem rose and stripped as she headed toward her shower. She knew she was being watched. Horny old whore-spirits.

“Can’t you ladies move on to that great big cathouse in the sky?” A second loud bump from inside the wall and soft giggling like the sound of wind rustling through trees gave Salem her answer. Her house spirits liked it right where they were, thank you very much.

It was hard not to feel a tad bit paranoid behind the shower curtain, nude, vulnerable and soapy. Everyone has one thought that, when played over and over, can frighten the living daylights out of them. Salem’s was the shower scene from the original *Psycho*. The murder, the awakening spirits, the damned fine horny dream—and that heavenly ambulance driver who had left her with too much to sort out. Her personal defense grid was down. That’s why the spirits were restless. She towel-dried herself quickly and applied a little eyeliner and mascara to brighten her face. She looked tired. Really, really tired. If she even had any customers, she’d likely frighten them off. She dressed simply in khaki pants and a white t-shirt. She wrapped the Odin Stone and the *Viking Member* in towels and slipped them into a plastic sack.

Her first step onto her fire escape stairs made her skin crawl. It felt like she was walking on beetle shells. Black beetle shells. She bent over to examine the gritty substance covering every step from landing to alley. “The black salt. Someone has sprinkled black salt all over my…” she paused. “Oh, crap. Someone’s trying to cast a spell of banishment—on me!”

Her first thought was to sweep the stairs clean and hose down the alley to melt the salt. That would only send the spell further into her environment as the water trickled into the cracks and crevices of the concrete alleyway and building foundations. Sweeping it up and burning it would be no better. The salt fumes would permeate the air and saturate her environment. Salem stood on her landing, paralyzed with indecision. And that meant the spell was working.

Advice she often shared with customers seeking to cure a curse put upon them rang through her head. “If it’s not within your belief system, it’s not going to work.”

No wonder the Revenants were acting out. They were frightened. A dark spirit had oozed over the alley last night and left its slime behind. And while she was out of it, someone had salted her

stoop. She needed to re-charm her shop, or she'd be out of business in a week. Something wicked this way comes—and it was centering around her!

Salem closed her eyes, concentrating on her years of knowledge. There was a way to combat a black salt curse. Agrimony, lavender, and sage. She re-entered her apartment and reached for her mortar and pestle. “I am going to fight fire with fire.”

Her thoughts turned momentarily to the fire department medic who had flirted with her after she'd fainted. Salem tried desperately to clear her mind of carnal thoughts. Hard to do when she'd invoked Freyja's passion. She couldn't take anything to chance with a Freyja ritual working its magic, a murderer on the loose, and a damned whalebone dildo wanting her to drop everything to play hide the boner. However, the counter-charm had to be true and pure, or she'd end up a blithering idiot singing “My bologna has a first name...” in a corner somewhere. Black salt curses could send a person on a little holiday...from themselves and everyone else.

She dismantled her makeshift altar and chopped up a portion of the sage bundle, adding it and dried lavender and agrimony to her mortar. “I invoke the power of the *Helm of Awe* to protect my travels on dark roads,” she said softly, grinding the herbal mixture to a fine powder. Salem stopped. “All this started happening when I received the *Viking Member*. There are strong spirits trapped in that thing.”

She opened the plastic sack and unwrapped the bone and the stone. Salem reached for a dinner plate and placed the Odin Stone on its side so that it resembled a doughnut made of rock. She poured the herbal powder from her mortar into the center of the doughnut's hole. “I invoke the power of the *Helm of Awe* to protect my travels on dark roads,” she began, this time using the *Viking Member* as her pestle and the Odin Stone as her mortar. “In darkness and in light I repel and avert all souls who would trick, tease or hinder me.”

As a girl, she'd once played with an Ouija board. The planchette had rocked and swooped across the board seemingly moving with the aid of some unseen hand. Frightened the crap out of her, while at the same time giving her the impetus for her career. The *Viking Member* now buzzed and rippled in her hand as she used its boney head to further grind the herbal powder welled within the Odin Stone. Though she was not moving her hand forcefully, for both artifacts were too valuable to abuse, the bone pulled and tugged, wanting to break through some invisible barrier within the circle of the Odin Stone. Salem forced her hand open as the dinner plate under the stone cracked from the weight of the bone's strikes against it.

The *Viking Member* slipped from her hand and onto the counter, spinning wildly. A soft blue glow enveloped the bony beast. Moments later, every metallic object in her kitchen throbbed to life with a rich, bluish fire. The electrical current sparked by the spell had ushered forth the miracle of St. Elmo's Fire...in her kitchen.

“Holy shit,” Salem cursed. She knew better than to touch anything metallic as the blue ball of lightning arched and jetted from toaster to blender to oven to ladle. The Revenants reacted to the electrical charge, too. Salem turned her head to see a doxy in turn of the century cotton bloomers standing transfixed in her living room. The spirit's mouth opened, as if to ask, “What the Hell is going on here?”

Salem bit her lower lip and closed her eyes. Hoping her next move would not be her last, she reached for the contents of the Odin Stone. Though her eyes were tightly shut to avoid being burned by the electrical current dancing around her countertop, Salem managed to get a pinch of the herbal mixture between two fingers. She released it into the air, hoping the good magic of the herbs would cleanse the space.

She opened her eyes as the popping sparks dissipated. The blue glow faded. Salem exhaled. She quickly sprinkled the herbal powder on the floor, slipped off her right clog and made the sign of the *Helm of Awe*—the *Ægishjálmur*—with the tip of her bare toe.

She snatched up the bone and the stone and jetted down the fire escape in one breath's time.

The hair on her forearms was singed. The distinct aroma seemed to permeate her airspace. Salem lit a few sticks of sandalwood incense hoping to dispel the noxious odor. Oy, Mr. Hottie should be dropping by today, too. Well, she was sure he'd smelled burnt flesh before. But how did she explain it? *Oh, I was casting a spell of protection and my giant whalebone dildo decided to go St. Elmo on me and nearly burnt down my kitchen. But I'm fine. No damage done. I whipped out my magic powder, made the Helm of Awe on my floor, and opened the shop like nothing unusual happened around here, at all. Everything is copasetic. Just peachy. And how are you? Wanna fuck?*

* * * *

She opened her shop two hours late. Disappointingly, there was no throng of wealthy wiccans outside the door to enter in droves to buy beeswax candles and books on Egyptian rites. However, a quiet day would afford her time to research and price her new acquisitions. And re-grow her arm hair.

Salem had no problem pricing, tagging, and setting up a display for her new Italian toys. Italian and French sex toys were fairly commonplace. The history of the piece is what made the sale. Unscrupulous purveyors often fabricated fanciful tales to market their wares. Salem figured the truth was usually more interesting than fiction—especially when it came to the whys and wherefores of buggery and illicit sex.

She moved her current display of early twentieth century whips to her secondary curio and set about making a fabulous display for the boys—her two Italian *dilettos*. Of course, that would leave the problem as to where she should display the Viking-age artifacts. She looked around her shop.

“Of course,” she said aloud as her eyes fell over the tank used to house her pet rats. “Look, ladies, I need to move you to your habitat for a while and clean out your tank for a display.”

Dax and Pheelyx spread out across their wheel in defiance.

“You’ll have little tunnels to play in. You like that! I’m not going to go buy another fish tank, ladies. You two are just going to have to let me use your tank.” Salem shook her head. Why was she arguing with rats? She knew why...they were smart...and they saw things she couldn’t. But that didn’t alter the fact that she needed their tank. Sorry, girls!

Salem retrieved the plastic habitat from the closet and set it up on her work table in the back

room. After filling the habitat with paper litter, little treats, and fresh water, she moved her rats. Her unhappy little white rats with their pink eyes flashing at her as brightly as if they held St. Elmo's fire in their skulls. "Enough of that, girls. I've played with enough fire for today." She took the tank out back and hosed it down with bleach water, then polished the glass sides to a high shine.

Using tempera paints, she designed a seascape on the outside back of the tank, filled it with polished rocks, some inscribed with runes, and a bit of dried purple moss for show, and then placed the Odin Stone and the *Viking Member* in their new home.

It looked fabulous. Eye-catching. She set the tank on a little table next to the *diletto* display and affixed price stickers that read, "Serious inquiries only."

As she finally sat down at her computer to research her new toys, the bell on her shop door chimed.

She couldn't believe her eyes. An angel just walked into her shop. Salem took a few steps back to check out the girls. Like dogs begging for a treat, both chubby white rats were up on their haunches facing the entrance to the store, their tails curved around them and their pink eyes flashing. The customer smiled at Salem and nodded.

Angel-speak. The gentle nod of his head was all he needed to say. In fact, if he didn't open his mouth and say anything at all, she could die happy, entranced by the tall, blond man with his magnificent blue eyes and graceful, fluid movements.

"Hi," Salem said, hoping he wouldn't reply so that her fantasy bubble wouldn't burst just yet. She checked out his ring finger. Clear! She checked out his package. *Lovely! Thank you, Freyja!*

"Good morning," the customer replied. Salem took a breath. He had the voice of an angel, too. Smooth, rich. Like warm, melting chocolate. "I am new to your city. I wondered what you have in your fine collection of sins."

"I sell occult practices merchandise and historical *objets pour réjouir les sens*," Salem replied.

"Ah, yes, it does sound better in French. Saying you sell antique sex toys does come off a bit crass, does it not?" The customer held out his hand in introduction. "I am Ketiljon Heraldsson." Ketiljon. She knew that name from somewhere. Where? Salem slipped her hand in his, feeling his large, warm palm and fingers wrap around hers like his legs should have been doing to her body. On the floor. Right now. Angel-sex. "I'm Salem Grier, owner. Is there something I can help you with?"

Ketiljon smiled. "I'm sure there is. I am a collector of certain artifacts. Norse Age. I don't suppose you have any? Oh, but you do! Look at this lovely Odin Stone and my...you have a *flannfluga*. And a very nice one at that. How much for the set?"

"What's your offer?" Salem asked. "And what is a *flannfluga*?"

"Ah. It is a term not used too often, even in Iceland. It is the word used for a woman who flees from a man's sexual organ. A man's living member. She turns to the bone. We also call it *níðstông*—the scorn pole. It insults a man when a woman turns to the bone for pleasure."

"Well, that's something I didn't know about my *Viking Member*. I do know it is very valuable, however."

“Of course it is. Do you see the markings—the scrimshaw? They depict acts of true love between the gods and humankind.”

Salem nodded. “Yes. I’ve studied the carvings. Odin and Loki. Odin and Frigga. Odin and Freyja. Freyja and everyone. Loki and everyone—as a man, a horse, a serpent, and I’m not sure what that is, but I don’t think I’d want to sleep with it.”

Ketiljon laughed. “It’s a fly. He became an insect. Loki was quite the god.”

“Fly fucking. How lovely,” Salem commented, realizing she shouldn’t have used such a vulgar term in front of a customer. “Oh, I’m sorry. My language…”

“I am not offended. There are other stories on the bone, too. The tale of two Berserkers—blood brothers who loved and fought side by side. They shared everything—until a woman tore them apart and they died at *Berserkerhraun*, the Berserker’s Lava Field.”

“Oh, my. Do tell,” Salem said. She slipped on a white glove and came around the corner.

“Ah, it is nice to see more of you,” Ketiljon said. Salem didn’t reply. Was he flirting with her, too? Happy days!

She reached into the tank and carefully withdrew the *Viking Member*. Of course, she’d used it more aggressively than this on herself, but she didn’t want a potential buyer to know that.

“Roll it around. Yes. There’s the tale. It is very famous. How did you come by it?” Ketiljon asked.

“My buyer picked it up at an auction. Tell me the story, please” Salem replied.

“Ah, yes. It is a good story. May I sit?” Ketiljon asked.

Salem offered him a chair. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Salem wandered back around the counter and plugged in her electric kettle. “Please begin.”

“Once, many years ago, there were two brothers. Blood-brothers. Their father cut their arms and mixed their bloods to quit the bickering between them, proclaiming them of the same flesh and, thereby, full kin. He claimed both boys as his own, and he wished everyone to know that. One son was born and bred in Iceland on the Snaefellsjokul peninsula in the western region of the country. Life was very hard there. The boy’s mother died of lung fever one winter and the next summer his father placed him with relatives while he went off in search of fortune. The father stayed away for many years. When he returned home, his son had grown into a fine young man with a bright mind and a good hand for working what little fertile soil there was on his father’s land. With him, the father brought a new mother and a new child. A boy of mixed blood. The woman was as black as night and had been wooed by a fellow Norse mercenary in far away Byzantium where he and the father had served as mercenaries for a potentate. Her eyes glowed like coal embers and her hair was as soft as lamb’s wool. In the land of the midnight sun, her dark beauty radiated like a star-filled night. Her son was strong and quick. He took to the tundra like he’d been born there. He had his mother’s coloring, dark skin and hair, but his father’s eyes. Green like a fertile plain. Green like new shoots of barley.

“Although he had not married her, the father made the mistress of the dead mercenary second wife in his house and placed the mixed-blood bastard child at the table with his legitimate son. The boys fought, as boys will do, but eventually became as close as true brothers. Of course,

having one's wrist slit will stop any fighting. They fought side by side at the battle for Helgafell and shared all they had. Until Grettir, daughter of Ragnar Olrudsson, came to Snaefellsjokul. The oldest brother loved her madly and had asked Ragnar Olrudsson for her hand. Before the bride price was set, the younger brother stole her away in the night and ravished her. He ruined her. He poisoned her mind. She was a simple girl who could not make up her mind as to which brother she would wed. Though the eldest had made first claim, the younger had taken her virginity and had filled her belly with child. She was a silly girl, truly. She could have had the younger brother killed for his crimes, but her mind was poisoned, and she would not hear of it.

"Ragnar took Grettir to the church at Skalholt to be looked after by the priests during her confinement. He then set a plan to rid himself of both meddlesome brothers, as he knew that there would be no peace for his daughter as long as they both lived.

"He called upon the brothers, begging them to journey to his farm beyond the peninsula at the great lava field beyond the mountains. There, he said, he would let them bargain for his daughter and her unborn child. He said he cared not which brother wed his Grettir and raised her child, for they were both sound and decent men who loved her." Ketiljon paused, taking a sip of the tea offered him by Salem.

"This is quite the tale. All this is carved on the bone?" she asked.

"In a manner of speaking. One must know the entire saga to understand the inscriptions. Now, where was I? Oh, yes...the brothers made their way across the mountains to the lava field beyond. The journey took twelve days by horseback, and they were very tired when they reached their destination. Ragnar greeted them and bade them rest for a day at his hot pot."

"Hot pot?" Salem asked.

"His geothermal pool. Ragnar had a hot pot on his land. He'd built a stone shelter over it—rather like a sauna. The brothers relished the idea of a warm place to sleep and it is easy to cook one's dinner when boiling water is so easily obtained. In Iceland, one must simply look down to find hot water! They accepted Ragnar's offer. He gave them flatbread and smoked lamb to eat, and a large flask of mead. The brothers ate and drank their fill. Ragnar spied upon them. What he saw confirmed his dislike of them both to such a degree that he wished them both slow, painful deaths. The brothers engaged in a sexual union. Forbidden and outlawed in Iceland, it was a crime so severe that the farmer knew he would not be banished for the killing.

"After the brothers fell asleep, he sealed the entrance to the pool, knowing that it would soon erupt like a geyser if the steam was not allowed to escape. A great rumbling in the earth awakened the brothers. They could not move the great stone blocking the exit and the heat had become unbearable. The ground shook again. It was an earthquake! This is a common occurrence in Iceland even today; but when the earth rumbles one does not want to be in the vicinity of a geothermal pool. The water levels rose and, little by little, the brothers were cooked alive. The younger brother called upon Freyja to save them. Now, asking the gods for a favor is to invite trouble. But Freyja heard his plea and granted reprieve. Their bodies would die, but their souls would live on, trapped in an object of their choosing, until such time as a magical spell was cast to free them. The younger brother removed a gift he'd been making for Grettir, for those times he

was away from her. The older brother scoffed at the lewd gift and said he should rather be trapped in a stone buried in three feet of moss than in a penis of whalebone. But it was the younger's decision, for it was his prayer to Freyja that had been answered. He chose for their souls to remain trapped in the whalebone penis for all time. Or at least until the right words are said at the right time to free them."

"What happened to Grettir?" Salem asked.

"When she learned what her father had done, she took her own life. Never was it known which brother was actually her true love. The elder, who courted her according to custom and would have made her a fine husband, or the younger, who took her by force and convinced her to accept his love."

Salem asked a second question. "Which brother do you believe was her true love? And why, if they were gay, would they have wanted a woman in the first place?"

"The fairer brother, of course. The eldest. The younger brother, the dark one, had only ill intentions for Grettir. He used her body and stole her mind. It is not believed by scholars that the blood-brothers were homosexual. Sometimes in the times of the Vikings, one man would subjugate another by using him as a woman. The older brother was clearly the stronger of the two and it was his right to control the younger."

"That's a very interesting story. Where on this thing is all that depicted?" Salem asked, holding out the *Viking Member*.

"It is here. See the two lads encircling the girl? This is symbolic of their love for Grettir. They both wanted to take her."

"It looks like a Grettir sandwich to me," Salem replied.

"Yes, exactly. See how the hair on this brother is curly like sheep's wool? That is the younger brother. And the long braids are those of the elder."

"I need a magnifying glass to see it better, but yes, I see the differences in the men."

"Have you set a price for this marvelous object?" Ketiljon asked. "Perhaps we can discuss it over dinner, hmmm?"

Thank you, Freyja! Salem was just about to respond when a crashing noise in the back room interrupted her. "I'd better see what that was." She placed the *Viking Member* carefully in the tank before moving the entire display behind the counter. "Excuse me for a moment."

"Of course. But I believe it is just your pet rats showing you their dislike of their new home," Ketiljon replied.

Salem stopped dead in her tracks. A cold sensation washed over her. "How did you know I moved them to a new habitat? I don't recall you visiting my shop before."

"I..." Ketiljon began.

"You've been watching me, haven't you?" Salem asked.

"Well, yes. I am sorry for the deception. I did not think it was wise to tell you I followed your shipment from Amsterdam, in hopes that you would sell me the *Viking Member* and the Odin Stone."

"Are you a dealer?"

Ketiljon shook his head. “No, I am a collector.”

“I’m sorry. The *Viking Member* isn’t for sale. You need to go now,” Salem replied. “I don’t take kindly to subversion.”

Ketiljon rose from his chair. “It is I who am sorry. I must have the *Viking Member* and the Odin Stone. You must offer them to me. And then we must make love.”

Salem turned. She turned a cold eye to Ketiljon. “Excuse me?”

Ketiljon repeated, “Please, you must offer me the artifacts and then we must make love.”

“I’m reserving my right to refuse service. Please leave my store. Now,” Salem commanded.

Ketiljon gave her the distinct impression that he was surprised by her response. “Leave? You want me to leave?”

“Now,” Salem replied.

“I cannot. I must have the artifacts. We must consummate the agreement by sexual relations. Were you not aware of the curse?”

Salem glanced right and left. No baseball bat. She wasn’t near the phone. Why was this freak bothering her? Did the Freyja ritual weaken her no losers spell? “Curse?”

“Yes, of course. Did not your buyer tell you why he was able to win the artifacts at auction?

Valuable Norse-age items such as these would fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars, and yet he bought them for a few thousand,” Ketiljon replied.

“I don’t question how my money is spent. I trust him.”

“Then he is a liar and a thief, for he knew of the curse and I know he put many thousands of your dollars in his wallet. He won the auction because no one else would bid on accursed items.”

“If it’s not in one’s belief system, it won’t work. I don’t believe in curses,” Salem lied poorly.

“Now who is the liar? Of course you believe there is a curse and I think you want to know more, do you not?” Ketiljon asked.

Salem nodded. “Yes. But I’m not offering you the bone, the stone, or a roll in the hay.”

Ketiljon smiled. Salem felt it hit her like a ton of bricks. His huge blue eyes looked just like those bluish fireballs in her kitchen not too long ago, only his orbs were hidden behind thick blond lashes like a lion’s mane. And those lips. Full lips. Like soft pillows. Why were all the nut jobs so hot?

He began slowly, not moving anything but his voice across the room toward Salem. “There is a part of the story about the brothers I did not tell you. To call upon the gods for a favor is to invite a bit of mischief as well; I said this. The old ones are best worshipped from afar. There is always a trick. In this case, Freyja had her dark-elf husband forge a very special Odin Stone from the rock of the lava field. Only if the great vow is taken through the stone can the souls trapped in the *Viking Member* be freed; but the stone is just the catalyst for the magic. If, however, a woman pleasures herself with the *Viking Member*, a taste of freedom shall be given to the spirits. Three days. Three days to taste life and attempt to bring the stone and the bone together.”

Salem raised her eyebrow. “I get it. We’re not actually talking about the dildo being plunged into the doughnut hole of the stone. We’re talking about the spirit in his temporary corporeal form boning the hole in the woman who holds the stone. Namely, me. And you’re the doer of the dirty

deed. Right?”

Ketiljon smiled. “My blood-brother must not be first in breaking the curse, for only one of us can return. He is an evil man, a rapist. A murderer.”

“I haven’t met your brother,” Salem replied.

“No, of course not. I put the black salt all around you so that he must stay away.”

Black salt? Oh, my God. Salem looked around again, willing a handgun or any weapon to appear before her. “But you can enter through the charms and spells surrounding this place?”

“Yes. Because it is I who poured the *sal negre*. I am neither immune nor repelled. I am invisible.”

“This has become neutral ground for you. I get it,” Salem surmised.

“I was born first, so my spirit was released first when you made love to yourself. Now, it is my turn to make love to you. I have much to offer a woman. You will enjoy your time with me.”

“Where did you get the black salt? Bring it with you from the ethers?” Salem asked, afraid of Ketiljon’s reply.

Ketiljon laughed. “No! I had a woman buy it for me. It was before I could enter your store.”

“She’s dead, you know,” Salem replied.

“My brother killed her. I told you he is a bad man. It is best you make love with me now, and release my spirit from the bone.”

“I’m not the reincarnation of Grettir, you know,” Salem smirked. “I don’t love you. I don’t know your brother, and I’m not going to have sex with you.”

“I am sorry,” Ketiljon replied.

“You should be!” Salem stormed. “This is the twenty-first century, not the tenth. Women don’t just leap into the arms of the first handsome Viking they meet.”

“No, you don’t understand. I am sorry *for you*. I’m going to have to convince you to give me what it is I need. And you may not like my methods of persuasion.”

Salem didn’t like being pushed around. Especially by a damned ghost on leave from the spirit realm. “No one threatens me in my shop, you son of a bitch. Get out!”

Ketiljon’s bright blue eyes grew flaming yellow and his once absolutely flawless golden complexion took on a gray pallor. “I am going to have to hurt you. You are a very nice woman and to you I shall soon owe a large debt of gratitude. When you have felt pain, perhaps you will offer the artifacts to me and I shall make your pain vanish with my love.”

Before Salem could release the scream forming in her throat, Ketiljon lunged at her, knocking her to the floor. In two quick moves he had her on her belly with her arms twisted around behind her back. She kicked at him with her legs. He screwed her arms tighter.

“Get off me,” she cried. “You’re breaking my arms!”

“I do not sleep. I do not eat. I can hold you here for quite some time. When you say you are ready to comply, we shall make the exchange.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her ears.

“I am hard for you.”

Salem squinted, seeing a flash of white dart before her eyes along the wall. The girls hadn’t run off. They were watching. Waiting. As Ketiljon’s hands pawed at her ribcage and the sides of her breasts and his hot breath steamed against the back of her neck, she summoned every bit of

strength she had and called her white rats into action. Every white witch has a familiar, she had two.

Dax ventured away from the safety of the wall first, her tail straight and her eyes burning red. Pheelyx snuck out behind her sister, a bit more intimidated, but heeding the call of her mistress, nevertheless.

Ketiljon bent Salem's wrist back and dropped a knee against the small of her back. He again leaned forward to nuzzle her. "Are you ready, pigeon?"

Attack! Attack him! she cried with her mind, visualizing Dax's sharp teeth sinking into Ketiljon's face. Dax complied.

The white rat leaped like a panther onto Ketiljon's face, biting into his lower lip. Ketiljon shook his head to free himself from the rat's vice-like grip. The rat bit again, chewing through the web on the side of his mouth, blood spurting from her sharp teeth.

In her mind, Salem saw Pheelyx sniff the air, answering the call of blood's primal scent. A caged vegetarian pet rat didn't get a chance to taste blood and she growled at the opportunity. The usually timid of the two dashed to Dax's side and sank her teeth into Ketiljon's chin. Ketiljon screamed as he released Salem, in pain or defeat she didn't know, or care. As soon as her arms were free, Salem rolled and punched her assailant with the skill and fury only a girl born between two brothers could muster.

Ketiljon fought his way to his feet, ripping and clawing at the chubby white rats now scurrying around the back of his neck. They leaped to the table they'd knocked their cage from. Ketiljon wiped his bloody face with his hand and spat. "I'll kill them!"

Salem shook her head. "Not a chance. They're quicker and smarter than you."

Ketiljon snarled at the insult, gingerly touching his swollen, bruised lips with his fingers.

Salem looked around for a weapon, any weapon, and spied an unused floor lamp. In two swift steps she retrieved the floor lamp and swung its heavy base at Ketiljon's head. Her aim was true. The crack of the metal lamp base against her attacker's skull was deafening.

She later recalled more blood and the sound of his body hitting the floor. Later. That moment for her became shrouded with cotton fuzz. Salem went cold.

Then everything went black around her.

* * * *

A gentle rapping at her front door pulled Salem out of her exhausted catatonic state. She tried to stand and take a step forward, catching her balance as her stiff body balked at the movement. What's that sound? The door?

A blood pool had formed around the broken lamp where she'd dropped it...next to Ketiljon. He moaned. Salem tensed. He wasn't dead. She hadn't killed him. She touched him with her foot. No reaction. Unconscious. She'd downed a spirit. Wow. She wondered if she should call an ambulance. Her stomach fluttered. Maybe that hot medic would show up again. What a thing to think after beating the pulp out of someone. She needed help. Professional help. Little bloody footprints led away from the body. Salem made a chirping noise and followed the

rat tracks into the storefront.

There was an eerie calm in the air. Not suffocating, but heavy, like the first moments after spraying a room with air-freshener. Three hours had passed, if she was to believe the concept of time as displayed by her black cat wall clock.

A knocking drew her out of herself again. There *was* someone at the door. The door should have been open. Had it not been open?

Salem stepped closer to the front, continuing to follow the red tracks. She spied Dax, streaked with blood and desperately trying to clean herself inside an empty basket Salem sometimes used to display bundles of sage.

Salem concentrated her sight on the figure outside her shop door.

“Miss Grier!” a voice called. “I can’t get in!”

It was the medic.

“Kane?” Salem called. *Christ! This isn’t a good time to get a cup of tea!* Wait...she needed him.

“Open the door! I can see it’s unlocked,” Salem called.

“The spells, Salem. Remove the spells. There’s black salt everywhere and levels of protection nine layers deep,” Kane replied.

“You’re not human, are you?” Salem asked.

“No, I’m not human—but you must see that I’m harmless. Your familiars aren’t on alert, after all.”

That was true. With Ketiljon they’d stood at attention as if watching a train wreck, so terrible, yet unable to turn away.

“I’ve kind of had a bad day, Kane. I’m not sure shedding my defenses is a good thing right ’bout now,” Salem replied.

“Trust me,” Kane continued. “I am not your enemy. *He* is your enemy, though I cannot call him mine.”

Salem held the impulse to glance backwards. “Of whom do you refer?”

Kane’s voice came softly, “My blood-brother, Ketiljon.”

She again fought the urge to turn around, though the sensation that she was being followed had turned from prickling to churning. “He’s behind me, isn’t he?”

“Salem, remove the spells. Remove them all. Quickly. I can help you.”

She turned her head. Ketiljon had risen to his feet, but was far from a threat at that moment. He seemed confused. Dazed. As he should have been since she’d knocked the crap out of him.

“That’s what he said.”

Kane placed one dusky palm against the glass door. “He is untruthful.”

“And you always tell the truth?” Salem asked.

Kane laughed. “No, I have lied many times. But right now, I am telling you the truth. Listen to me, carefully.” He paused. “Whatever Ketiljon has told you is truth shadowed by jealousy and vindictiveness. He has entered your mind, Salem. He wishes you to believe that I am less of a man so that you will not be attracted to me. He wishes to return, not to make amends for his crimes, but to punish those he believes have wronged him. He has been controlling your personal

fantasies. He is aligned with dark spirits of torment and trickery.”

“Aren’t all those he wants to punish dead? I mean...it’s been a thousand years.”

“Death is irrelevant. There are ways to exact revenge that go beyond the earthly plane, though in Ketiljon’s case, he must return to the living to have an advantage...”

“Over you?” Salem asked.

“Yes.”

Salem strode forward, raising her hands before her, palms toward the door. “Fetters unbreakable forged from the footfall of a cat, the roots of a rock, the beard of a woman, the breath of a fish and the spittle of a bird, allow this being entrance if his intentions are true.”

Kane put his hand on the doorknob and opened the door. An unseen force punched him in the gut. He doubled-over from the blow, trying to catch his breath. Salem repeated the spell. “Fetters unbreakable forged from the footfall of a cat, the roots of a rock, the beard of a woman, the breath of a fish and the spittle of a bird, allow this being entrance if his intentions are true.”

Kane, in obvious pain, his bright green eyes tearing, clenched his fists and took a step forward. “Invite me to enter,” he choked.

Salem cocked her head to one side, thoughtfully. “Would you please come in?” *And rescue me from your evil brother and tell me the truth about my bone dildo and then screw me until I scream.*

Kane nodded. “All of the above, yes. Yes.”

Shit! He heard me! “Did I just say that aloud?” Salem asked.

Kane sloshed through the quagmire of spirit spells trying to stop him. Little by little, his passage grew wider, and easier to tread. “I know your heart, Salem. You are the binding oath of the stone. I can hear your thoughts and your desires as strong as though they are my own.”

Salem turned in alarm as her white rats bolted from the shop to the door between the storefront and the backroom. Looking more like guard dogs than pet rodents, Dax and Pheelyx took defensive positions between Salem and the groggy and slowly moving Ketiljon.

Salem turned back to Kane. “If you know my heart, then prove it.”

“I can defeat him only if you release my soul,” Kane replied.

“What? Now? I have to screw you, now?” Salem exclaimed. “He’s fucking nuts and he’s going to beat and rape me and you want me to drop my drawers and do you? Please! There must be another way.”

Ketiljon stumbled, falling to his knees. “Kane!” he cried. “Help me.”

Kane’s face softened.

Salem shook her head, she could see the genuine love Kane had for his brother. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“We are bound by blood. I know I must defeat him to save many others from his wrath, but my heart bleeds for him.”

“Kane!” Ketiljon cried again.

“I come, brother!” Kane replied. “I shall take you home, and there you shall be healed.”

“Like Hell!” Salem spat.

Kane lowered his gaze, his eyes meeting Salem's. "Let me take him somewhere safe." He winked, mouthing the word *Revenants*.

Salem nodded. He wanted to give his brother to the Revenants. Smart. Very smart.

Kane continued, speaking just loud enough for his ailing brother to hear. "Let me help him. Stand aside. There is strong magic in the very walls of this building that will afford him safety and rejuvenation. Please."

Salem had always liked acting. "No! I'm going to finish him and spell-lock him into...into..." she tried to think of something that would mortify a Viking. "Into a tube of lipstick! Or a box of tampons!"

Ketiljon groaned. "Bitch!" he cried.

Salem turned again and stepped closer to the hunched-over body of Ketiljon. "No. It's *witch*, you lying sack of..."

With the grace of a gazelle, Kane darted past Salem, standing between her and Ketiljon. "We have company," he whispered.

Salem glanced to her right. One of the old whore-spirits had materialized beside her. The turn-of-the-century lingerie, brilliant rouge, and crimson lipstick glowed against her nearly transparent form. Salem knew her.

"Hey, Sal," she said to the Revenant. "You want him?"

The Revenant nodded.

"Release me, Salem. Release me and your household spirits will never want for male company," Kane said softly.

Ketiljon spit blood. "He lies."

Salem shook her head. "No, he's telling me the truth. You reversed the characters in your story. It was you who took Grettir from Kane. It was you who killed my customer and left her body in the alley. And I don't believe the things you put into my head. The sexual relations between you. That's your fantasy, not mine! I get it now. You've been trying to control me, and sway me from releasing Kane. You stupid son of a bitch! I'm not a tenth century woman ready to believe anything that pops out of a man's mouth."

Ketiljon spit blood. "I am dying, brother! This wicked white witch has knocked what life force I had from me. I am dying!"

Salem shook her head in disbelief. "The dead can't die. Go back to Hell, Ketiljon." She stripped off her shirt and threw her arms around Kane's neck. "Kiss me, Kane."

Mashing like teenagers in heat, Salem fell against Kane frantically. Urgently. Lips locked to hers in eager exploration, he dragged her to the floor behind her counter, ripping at her clothing while she tugged recklessly at his. The desperation of the moment drove her to complete the act with little or no foreplay. Not that she needed any.

She took control, urging Kane onto his back. He had a trim, muscular body. His chest was covered by delicate little black curls that trailed down his tight belly to his groin. As much as she was ready for sex, so was he. Salem squatted above his thick member, holding on to the display case countertop with her left hand to steady herself as she reached between her legs and guided

him into her.

As her softness enveloped him, Ketiljon emitted a sickening gurgling noise. Salem pushed her body down as hard as she could to swallow all of Kane.

Salem felt Sally's ghostly hands stroking her hair and shoulders as she rode Kane. And it wasn't Kane's lips across her breasts and bottom, either. Other Revenants had appeared. Their none-too-subtle encouragement of Salem's sex act with Kane was far from a distraction. She felt like she was in a horse race, and they were the crowd cheering her on.

Between Kane's moans, Salem heard a steady murmur of words in Old Norse. She recognized the incantation. It was a form of *Galdr*, a sing-song chanting spell.

Kane's voice became increasingly strained as he came closer and closer to orgasm. His breathing was labored and the words of his spell became nearly indiscernible. Salem recognized the name Freyja repeated several times, though she, too, had difficulty concentrating on the spell. She gave up trying to decipher Kane's words as the invisible tongue lapping at her clitoris and the throbbing penis embedded inside her sent her into a climactic state she didn't know mere mortals could experience.

Her world went dark as she came. Dark like the man under her. Dark like the ethereal prison he'd been trapped in for so long. Dark like his brother's tainted soul.

Her eyes were sealed shut and she did not witness Ketiljon's departure. But she heard it. The protesting. The rage. The joyful laughter of the Revenants.

* * * *

Salem opened her eyes slowly. Fluttering open like little butterfly wings, her lids wanted to remain closed, afraid of the light. A brilliant blue light. Kane's earthly aura; a deep, rich healing blue.

Soft, full, warm, moist lips pressed against hers. "Kane," she sighed.

"Yes."

"Is it over?" she asked.

"Thanks to you, yes. Ketiljon will not be lonely in his confinement; and your house spirits are most certainly going to enjoy the passion of their new guest for a very long time."

"My artifacts?" Salem asked.

Kane laughed. "Always the businesswoman! Here I am ready to make love to you again and you think about business!"

"If Ketiljon went with the Revenants when I released you from the *Viking Member*, did it destroy...?"

Kane silenced her with a kiss, his tongue flicking against her lips until she responded in kind.

"The magic is drained from the bone, and Salem, you were the magic of the Odin Stone. The artifacts were spell-crafted for pleasure, but now, that magic has drained away, leaving only valuable antiques for you to keep or to sell. A woman has more magic in her than any sacred object. You channeled their magic. We channeled their magic. And the Revenants captured Ketiljon."

“Now what happens?” Salem asked. She let Kane kiss her throat and shoulders. She felt his long fingers slide between her legs.

“Right now, I want to make love to you again,” Kane replied. “I need to thank you.”

He trailed his kisses across her smallish, round breasts, stopping to suckle her dark pink nipples before turning his attention to the curve of her belly and beyond. “It has been such a long time since I have tasted a woman’s flesh. There is nothing sweeter.”

“Grettir?” Salem asked.

“Yes, but that was long ago.”

“I’d like to hear your version of the story someday,” Salem replied.

“It starts like this,” Kane said, pushing his tongue through her nether lips to coax her bud from hiding.

Salem relaxed her legs, opening them to allow Kane full access. “I think I’m going to like this story,” she whispered.

The End

About the Author:

Darragha lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and daughter, in a one-hundred-sixteen-year-old house that is continually under renovation. The house is haunted by the spirit of a Union Civil War-era soldier who seems to enjoy watching the construction every now and then.

Someday, he may turn up as a character in one of Darragha's stories. Darragha’s pretty certain the old gods are happy with *‘Teaching Old Gods New Tricks’* as two ravens have been hanging out in her yard for months.

She’s named the birds ‘Thought’ and ‘Memory’ after Odin’s ravens and tips her cup of joe in mock-salute to the symbolic birdies every so often, just to keep on the gods’ good side—’cause sometimes we choose our gods—and sometimes they choose us.

Hounded

Xandra Gregory

Chapter 1

Fear does funny things to a man. Strips him down to the bare bones of his instincts and reflexes. Fuels him via the chemical reactions of adrenaline and causes him to navigate his actions by pure animal reflex. Fear reaches down deep into the brain and the psyche and drags out what is hidden and primal and puts it in the pilot's seat. Fear speaks to basic instinct.

Fear drove Rex through the crowd of parade-goers, right through the center of the solemn protesters forecasting doom on the event everyone else celebrated. Fear of being caught by the Cinco City security force sharpened his instincts and fine-tuned his reflexes in the exact scenario that the laws prohibiting uncollared gen-hanced from running free were supposed to prevent. His body pushed itself to the limit and he dodged, bolted, and skimmed in and out of the crowds of people, his only thought to putting more space between him and the Whites.

Avoiding one knot of partygoers pushed him into the protesters and too close to the parade route. He stumbled and fell flat on his face at the sight of the parade float in front of him. *No*, he thought. *It can't be*. The Lady he served sat upon the decorated float and waved to the people, looking so radiant his chest ached. His legs folded back under him and he jumped from a crouch all the way up over the barrier to the other side, landing on the edge of the float. His throat ached. *My Lady*, he thought. *She came for me*.

Fool! Idiot! Of course it wasn't Diana up there on that foam-form crescent moon. Just a woman dressed as the Queen of Heaven. Even enhanced senses could be fooled, especially when they wanted to be. A glance behind him showed the Whites searching the protesters for signs of his passing. He crouched down behind one of the raised levels of the float. A hat had fallen under the foam-coated scaffold of the dais where the crescent rested, and he pulled it out and slipped it over his head. Some silly green thing that was supposed to be a hunter's hat, he guessed. Going along with the theme. How little these fools knew.

Just to be safe, he wedged himself through the odd-shaped opening created by the curve of the crescent and the raised edge of the float. *My Lady protects me*, he thought, *even when it's Her I run from*. The run-in with the Whites might turn out to be a good thing after all. The parade was going to the spaceport, the closest he could get to the shuttle hangar that housed the Helios project, and his last hope. All he had to do was stay out of sight of the Whites and blend in. And enjoy the view of the pseudo-goddess in the see-through dress.

She really didn't resemble her namesake beyond the dark hair. Golden skin and a very definite athletic build made her attractive, but nowhere on par with the liquid grace of the tall and willowy Olympian he served. He watched her draw back the toy bow she carried and enjoyed the way her muscles stood out. She was holding the bow the wrong way. The real goddess would have smirked, if she still had her sense of humor. Diana's competitive streak would have let the impersonator miss her target, but her sense of fair play would have her correcting the woman's posture and handling of the weapon before she shot again.

An unexpected stab of loneliness cut through him. He missed the other gen-hanced Canids who made up Diana's Pack. He missed the sense of belonging—of waking up next to a warm body or having a reassuring touch any time he needed to reach for one.

The woman playing the part of his mistress tapped one of her silver bracelets and fired a cartridge of glitter from her wrist. She grinned at the cheer that came from the crowd and waved, leaning back against the crescent. He didn't need enhanced vision to be able to see the shadows of her nipples under the dress. The plum-colored peaks stood proudly to attention atop a pert pair of firm breasts. Another point of difference, he thought. Diana would have never assumed such a cheesecake pose for any crowd. In fact, she was rather touchy about being seen at all.

The float wobbled and the woman looked down. Her almond eyes widened and her eyebrows went up. Her lack of screaming meant that luck was on his side, at least for the moment. Of course, she wouldn't have any idea of the gravity of the situation. She was likely identical to any of the other revelers lining the streets of the giant ring city. Secure in their misconceptions that the current advances in science and technology had solved all the mysteries of the universe, and completely oblivious to the gods and monsters that still walked among mankind.

He envied her blissful, sensual ignorance. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the otherworldly chill that had caused him to bolt from the Pack and Diana's presence. Still smell the stink of a Titan's filth, mixed with Diana's ambrosia-scent.

“Come to get a blessing?” The false Diana kicked one leg out towards him, sending her short skirt up in a playful swish. For a moment, he wanted to join her in her ignorance. To be just another partygoer, caught up in the fun. Though that fun wouldn't last, he tried to pretend for a moment, grinning back at her just as he caught her scent.

Hello, he thought as the warm musk-spice of feminine arousal rolled over him, strong enough to chase away the scent-memory of the corruption that hung about the real Moon goddess. She put her foot in his lap, her toes finding where his body had responded to the scent of her invitation. His first thought was to control himself. As one of Diana's Hounds, he was expected to exercise strict discipline—service to the Virgin Huntress tended towards the celibate end of the spectrum. But he was free now and, as bittersweet as freedom was, he had no reason to fight the attraction to her scent, or ignore the music of blood rushing through her body in quickening spurts as her heart beat faster.

He looked up. She's not Diana, he thought. But maybe...maybe there was enough Moon in her to ease the loneliness, at least for the moment.

* * * *

Lin draped her body over the giant foam crescent moon on top of a float, wearing a nearly see-through tunic. Her dark hair was tied up in ringlets on top of her head and secured with a shiny silver band. She pasted a smile on her face and waved to the crowd. *Ironic that it's me, of all people, up here impersonating Diana*, she thought. *I'm certainly no virgin goddess of the Moon, even if I do live there.*

From the speaker poles placed at intervals along the street, music blared behind a voice-over of a

feminine voice extolling the historic occasion of LEO independence. The citizens of Cinco City, also known as LEO-Ring 5, for Low-Earth Orbit, danced along with the music, hugging each other, and snapping flash holographs of the floats.

The lights hurt her eyes and bitterness squeezed her heart. Once this parade reached the Cinco City spaceport, LEOs would be one step closer to true freedom from Earth, thanks to the massive solar array known as Helios. Yay for the LEOs, she thought. Too bad Earth still needed the Moon enough not to permit the same freedoms for the He-3 miners who lived and worked there. Forty percent of her paycheck, along with the payloads of Helium-3, would still find its way down into the Earth's treasure chests for the foreseeable future, while the LEOs suddenly found themselves with more money than they knew what to do with.

Don't think about politics—concentrate on the task at hand, she told herself. *Find him*. She scanned the crowd and waited for something—anything—to tug at her midsection and let her know she'd found the man she was looking for.

Nothing. Zip. Zilch. Her pendulum, its chain dangling from the end of her toy bow, swung quiescently, pushed by nothing more than the motion of the anti-grav platform on which the float rested. So far, the only thing the little chip of diamond had done was hide her little condition and its associated stigmas. She was supposed to have found her target by now, but so far all she had found was that she rather enjoyed the idea that the crowd could see her naked body through her sheer tunic. She liked being watched.

The downside to her burgeoning exhibitionism meant that the little thrill of warmth that zipped through her grew as the parade float made its way past more people. She leaned back on her foam-form crescent moon and thrust her breasts out, indulging in a little harmless titillation for the crowd. The people lining the street seemed to appreciate it. Several men clapped and tossed gold glitter at the float. She smiled back and waved again, taking special care to wink at the dour-faced Doomsayer protesters holding up their little marquee signs scrolling LED-lit messages predicting Armageddon due to mankind's arrogance.

One of the protesters stumbled into the parade path. Flashing street lights began to rotate, and his compatriots yanked him back into the crowd just as the plexiglas barrier rose from a slot in the street surface. She scanned the crowd and saw that the protester's forward gaffe erupted from a disturbance behind him. A crowd of people wearing white coveralls with red braid—Cinco City's Finest—pushed through the revelers, scanning with their little handhelds. One pointed forward and the group moved down the street, shoving at the people dancing in their way.

Rude, she thought, and turned to the crowd on the left. One of the handmaidens on the lower tier of the float flung a handful of Moon-cakes out into the crowd. Some people were actually stupid enough to reach for them. The Moon was famous for many things: its bright nocturnal gleam, its influence on Earth tides, its inspiration for insanity, its ore-mining. It was not known for its confectionery.

A young man with stag antlers strapped to his head waved from the front of the float and called out, "They'll rot your teeth!" He flashed his loincloth at the onlookers and Lin repressed a sigh. If only he weren't gay, she thought, eyeing the bulge underneath the scrap of synthetic doeskin. *Ask*

him if he's bi, her voice of reason prodded. *It's been over a week, and your appetites aren't going to wait.*

The crowd cheered, she waved again and nocked a toy arrow, pretending to aim for the young buck. Too bad it was illegal to find a compatible man that way. It would be a lot less complicated than having to explain that yes, she did have an aggressive libido and no, it didn't make her a slut. She'd trade in the false promises to call afterwards for a little gentleness and creativity during. But she'd settle for finding someone who wouldn't automatically put her under quarantine. Her urges were growing stronger again. She needed a man, and soon. Already, her focus strayed towards finding potential mates rather than her mission. If she let the situation go, the urges would blossom into full-blown obsessions. Whether it was food, drink, sleep, or sex, once her body decided it needed something, she could ignore it at her own—and others'—peril. Small price to pay in exchange for health, though. The float wobbled and her attention went from the crowd to the float.

My prayers have been answered, she thought, looking down at the man who crouched at her feet and stared up at her with the most liquid brown eyes she'd ever seen. “Come to get a blessing from the Moon goddess?” she asked.

Where he'd come from, she didn't know. But she knew where he'd be spending the night. She smiled and raised her leg, feeling a thrill as his gaze followed her motion, drifting upward to what she exposed for his benefit. His hunter's cap rested crookedly on silky auburn hair that curled over his forehead and led to an aquiline nose. His nostrils flared, as if he had caught her scent. The blush creeping up his neck from the collar of his white shirt surprised her.

Very deliberately, she set her foot down right over his crotch and felt heat and hardness there. An answering flush of heat coiled between her legs. Without the confinement of underwear, she felt herself swell and open, the motion sudden and immediate. *I could do him right here*, she realized. *On this float, with people watching. Spacedust, that's a turn-on.*

His hands closed around her bare foot, enveloping her in warmth. Her own lips suddenly dried when he pressed her foot more firmly against his erection. Her tongue darted out to deliver much-needed moisture. He squeezed gently and the touch traveled up her leg. She shifted, the crescent foam suddenly feeling too warm.

She pushed back with her foot, stroking his cock through his pants. Hells bells, even the soles of her feet were getting turned on by the feel of him. A hot flush crept upwards from her midsection at the answering swivel of his hips against her foot. Her nipples became hyper-aware of the slide of sheer silk over their hard tips, and the sudden need to touch herself to ease the pressure created a damp heartbeat centered just over her clit.

One of the handmaidens aimed a remote control at the top of the crescent, and a puff of glitter erupted, drifting down to coat the crowds with silver. The girl sent her a glare. Lin hastily activated her own remote and dry ice mist hissed from the bottom of the Moon crescent.

Hands circled her ankle now. His fingers brushed up the back of her calf. “You catch on quick,” she said.

His gaze flicked side to side, taking in the thickening fog, and how it obscured him from the

spectators. "You'd better wave again," he said. "Or else people will think you're up to something." She lifted a hand, but on the way back down, she twitched the sheer fabric of her tunic higher up her legs and met his liquid brown eyes. The mist swirled up level with her waist and she swung her free leg away from its mate. Tendrils of chilly air snaked into places normally insulated by body heat and the throb between her legs intensified.

She looked down at his fingers. Slender digits circled her calf and made maddeningly slow progress higher, past her knee to her thigh. She hissed with impatience. If he didn't get there soon, she would.

She tugged at her skirts again, this time casually brushing between her legs at her swollen lips. The touch felt so good! Her would-be lover stared, rapt, his lips parted. She stroked again and a fluid shimmer raced through her. Her eyelids fluttered, but a cheer from the crowd had them snapping open again and she darted her gaze around to see if anyone had noticed what she was doing. The thought of it sent another shudder through her and a rush of wetness coated her fingertip.

His hands moved to her thighs, lightly squeezing—both soothing and arousing. The broad tips of his fingers tormented her with their proximity. Her own finger dragged over the sensitive pearl of her clit, down to dip into the well of her pussy, and back up again.

He glanced up at her as his fingers finally reached her crotch. "May I?" he asked, slightly shocking her with the absurdity of the formality. A definite change from the other Lunar miners she usually played with.

"I'd be insulted if you didn't," she responded playfully. Very delicately, he probed her lips and the alien feel of his finger sliding into her slippery pussy nearly sent her over the edge right there. She bit off a moan as he thrust again, this time deeper. She opened for him, slick and wet. "Ohh, yes," she murmured, leaning against the crescent moon. Above the mist line, she could clearly see the heads of the people lining the street. The float erupted with spurts of confetti and glitter, coating everything with colored paper and silver flakes. She let the toy bow slide down to her elbow as she leaned back further and stroked her clit again.

His finger glided in and out of her, building tension and increasing her pulse. After one became slick with her juices, he twisted his wrist and slid a second finger inside her. She bit her lip to keep from screaming and instead looked down at him. "Is the goddess pleased?" he asked, pushing more deeply inside her.

"Very," she said, a little breathlessly.

"You smell delicious," he murmured. "I'd really like to taste."

Her inner walls clenched and her belly tightened in anticipation. As hot as she was, the mere thought of having a tongue swirling between her plump folds nearly made her come. "You may," she said archly.

He leaned in closer and his silky hair tickled her inner thighs. The touch of his tongue over her slick folds sent a stab of sensation through her. He licked lightly, tentatively, as if he thought he might hurt her. She twisted slightly, encouraging him. His tongue pressed more firmly, parting her outer lips and gliding over her clit. She shivered and dropped one hand to rest on his head.

His hair was so soft. A lovely auburn color. His large hands rested lightly on her thighs, and when he looked up at her, she really did feel like a goddess for an instant. Then he plunged his tongue deep and high inside her and her eyes fluttered closed. His mouth covered her clit and his tongue turned to flicking while he worked his fingers back into her pussy. She stroked his silky hair in time with the flicks of his tongue and scratched lightly behind his ears. Cocooned in the mist, he was her precious secret.

She moaned, glitter-lights flashing in her eyes. He curved his fingers inside her and hit her sweet spot. Her fingers dug into the foam-form of the crescent, punching through the paint on the outside and leaving dents as she rode the first shockwaves of orgasm. Her hips made little restless movements around his fingers and she cried out.

A blast echoed in her ears and she was sure her head must have exploded until the glitter rained down over her bare thighs, coating them in silvery flecks that caught the light and threw it out in sparkling shards. Like a million tiny moons on a backdrop of stars.

* * * *

So this is what it's like to be free, he thought. Free to embrace the instincts instead of fighting them. He withdrew damp fingers from her body with one last twist and inhaled the scent of her pleasure. She smiled down at him, the lights of the spaceport doors reflecting green in her eyes. One hand idly stroked her bow. "Cancel your plans for the rest of the night," she said. She might not be the Lady, but she knew how to give orders like a goddess.

Things went dark, save for the spotlights on the float, as they passed all the way into the spaceport doors and began drifting down. "I'd love to," he said, getting to his feet. "But I'm afraid my plans won't wait."

She raised her eyebrows. "Mine won't either, but I'm good enough at time management to schedule in a fuck when I so obviously need one." She reached out and cupped the aching bulge in his pants. His cock strained like a live thing and he closed his eyes. If only Helios could wait. "I'm afraid my schedule's tighter than your channel, my lady." He took the hat off and tossed it to her. "Thanks for the ride." He made to step down from the dais, but she thrust her bow out in front of him. That was when they both noticed the chain dangling from the end of it. Or rather, not dangling.

Sure, he'd heard that the ring-cities had gravitational dead spots—kids would try to find them all the time, the promise of a few hours of free weightless entertainment a powerful motivator. He just thought it was an urban myth, left over from the early days of space settlement when gravitic technology was a less sure thing. But the little crystal on the chain fixed to the end of her bow stood straight out, floating in the air as if it were pointing right at him. "Huh," he said. "Weird." He glanced at her, hoping to share a smile before parting ways.

Her face beneath the heavy stage makeup was pale. "It can't be," she whispered.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he said. "Just a spot of null-grav. They're not supposed to happen in ring-cities, but who knows..." he trailed off as he felt her fingers encircle his wrist. As his own fingers brushed against her silver bracelets, he heard a familiar subsonic jingling and his eyes

widened. “This can't...”

She was already ahead of him. “Arrow flies by Diana's hand, carried by the silver band. Face of Heaven, bright and dark, Lady's Arrow has found its mark.”

“No!” he cried, trying to pull his hand away from the bonds of invisible magic that snaked out from her bracelets and wound up his arm. “You didn't smell like...” How could he have missed it? She looked up at him. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I didn't realize—I mean—it's just my job.”

He turned away, his hand still in hers. Above them, the float carrying the Helios assembly peeled off from the queue and glided down past them at accelerated speed. As it passed level with them, he gathered his strength and jumped away from the surface of the lunar float.

“Hey!” she yelled and lunged after him. He made it as far as the edge of the anti-grav pad and took two more stumbling steps before jumping again into open space.

The barrier might as well have been made of steel, the way it slammed into his body. He landed hard on both feet and dropped on his ass, crab-scuttling back as the invisible tether of magic pulled him towards the crescent moon.

Her face reflected nothing. “Sorry, kid,” she said.

“You don't understand.” *I don't understand.* How could she be an agent of an Olympian when she had no scent of them?

Her lips twisted in derision. “I don't care,” she said, not unkindly. “I've got twenty hours to deliver you to Diana on the Martian moon of Deimos.” She shrugged. “The real Lady wants her Hound back.”

Over her shoulder, the Helios float glided into the gaping maw of an access tunnel leading to a separate wing of the spaceport. As the doors thundered shut behind it, his shoulders sagged. “It doesn't matter now,” he muttered.

There went my last chance.

Chapter 2

His face fell, and Lin didn't feel at all like the righteous justice of the Moon goddess. "Look," she said. "I'm sorry about this, but it's my job. Well, my other job. Usually I just mine Helium with the other Lunies, but we're kinda serious about our Goddess, and I made a promise that I'd deliver you to Her, and I keep my promises." She looked away, towards the darkened cavern housing the other floats. Without the glare of streetlights in her eyes, she could see just how young he was. He couldn't be any less than fifteen years younger than her. "I didn't mean...I'm...if you weren't who you are, we could have had more fun together. You were very considerate. I don't get that much."

The float drifted past the access tunnel where Helios had disappeared. A sudden deep rumbling roared up from below and the doors to the tunnel flew open. "What the..." Her mouth fell open. "Get down!" He threw himself on top of her. They crashed into the curve of the crescent as a rush of pressurized air blew out of the tunnel. Lin hit the ground hard, her gaze going upward just in time to see the top of the crescent collapse and shrivel. Her ears popped and her lungs tightened as the air around them depressurized and re-regulated in the wake of the concussion wave. The confetti tank exploded, showering down a pile of glitter on top of them. Tarnished silver flecks shook out of his hair as he looked down at her. He had a nice feel, lying on top of her like that. Tall enough to fit well. "You okay?" he asked.

Way to make me feel worse about this. "What the hell was that?" The glitter he shook out of his hair didn't quite make it to the floor. She felt herself growing lighter and one of her arrows floated up out of the upturned quiver. "Hells," she said. "Gravity's out."

Chloe, one of the float handmaidens, sprang up out of the crawlspace beneath the float, a lanyard clipped to the silvery belt she wore around her dress. "Concussion grenade," she said, scrambling to secure the platforms and all the bits starting to drift away from them. "They're locking down this whole wing of the spaceport."

Locking it down? Hells again. It could take hours to sort through the mess.

Chloe noticed the man on top of her. She made a tsking sound. "Geez, Lin. Couldn't you wait?" She glanced up at the young man. *I'm glad I didn't*, she thought. Now that she knew who he was, recreational activities were out of the question. "Shut up, Chloe." Only reason the little priss was here was so she could go shopping for Earth goods with daddy's money.

"Who is he? Security's going to want to know."

She felt him tense. She frowned, remembering the scuffle along the parade route with the Whites and the protesters. All the more reason to get him back to Diana.

"He's..." she broke off and looked up. He floated above her, tethered to her by virtue of the magic she'd spoken a few minutes ago. "He's..."

"You don't even know his name, do you?" Chloe smirked. "Wait until City Council hears about this."

Lin rolled her eyes. “They’ll be sure to give you the part of Diana, then?” she asked. Chloe was pretty transparent. She’d spent the last four trips sulking about not wearing the crescent crown. “No, you slut. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation will finally see you so-called Truebreeds for what you are—genetic freaks who are a health risk to society.”

“You really want that crown, don’t you?” She reached up to pull the silver band off her forehead. “Let me save you the trouble.” She flung it at Chloe. The girl jumped to snag the flying tiara and her tether stretched to its limit, jerking her back just as her fingers clutched at the crown.

Lin fumed. Just because she’d been born lucky enough to thrive in an off-planet environment without the need for gene therapy or pharmaceutical assistance to maintain her well-being, entire segments of the average population actively loathed people like her, considering her state a condition to be shunned. In some of the LEOs, like Cinco City, her kind was even quarantined, their natural health—the need for just a little more of everything, food, sleep, sex—was considered a threat to the social and moral fabric of the community. What a crock.

But because of this prejudice, there was a healthy underground trade of forged health papers in every LEO spaceport. *What people don't know won't hurt 'em.*

Lin rolled off the back of the dais, taking her new friend with her. She pushed off the edge of the foamboard clouds and snagged his wrists in her grip before drifting out into the cavernous space of the tunnel hangar. “Come on,” she muttered, dragging him with her as they began to fall downward. “I’ve now got less than twenty hours to make it to the Martian system. I hope they have an Express.”

* * * *

Having no choice, Rex fell down with her. Native Lunar, he thought, watching the way she drew her limbs close to her body and kept her movements small. She angled her body towards the wall of the descent tube and began a graceful spin with a slight, deliberate wobble designed to bring her close to the wall. *She's good*, he thought. He remembered the scent of her tight, musky pussy. *In more ways than one.*

She caught a maintenance ladder with one foot and brought her body in against it. He used his own methods to get there—actually he could have just hung there in null-grav and waited for the magic to drag him along after her—but he still held out a small hope he’d be able to get away. Maybe she could be reasoned with.

And maybe the Moon really is made of green cheese. She was one of Diana’s. The Moon goddess didn’t choose Her servants from those who gave up. He landed against the wall and wondered what to do next. Beside him, Lin muttered. “Hah! Always an access hatch.”

She gave the circular hatch door’s panel a quick jab with the palm of her hand. The panel’s faceplate sprang open. On the inside, she pushed the yellow emergency release and the hatch released with a hiss. She turned around. “Don’t lag. The binding will make you sorry you did.”

“I know all about the bindings,” he retorted. They got you physically at first. Then they crawled into your headspace. The longer you spent with bindings on you, the less they were needed. The more time he spent with her, bound to her, the less he’d *want* to leave. “You’re making a

mistake,” he said. “You don't want to take me back to Diana.”

She crawled into the tunnel, her heart-shaped ass in front of him. “Diana wants me to take you back to her. And she overrides you.”

“She's not herself. There's something wrong. If you were really an Arrow, you'd have sensed that.”

“Take it up with her.” She paused to look over her shoulder and he wished she were looking back with other thoughts on her mind. Serving a celibate goddess messed with your head sometimes.

“Why do you think I left,” he muttered. A good Hound obeyed his Mistress without question.

Questions generated...retribution. He resisted the urge to rub away phantom pain from his ribs.

They came to another hatch and she twisted her body to pop it open with her legs. “I don't care,” she said. “I can't.”

* * * *

She emerged into a closet space and drifted to the ground, the Hound floating behind her. The sign on the door read *Commercial Hangar Egress* and she stepped forward. The gravity shelf tripped her up and she fell. His arm shot out to steady her. She shot him a sideways look.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

He dropped his arm. “If you're one of Hers,” he said, “you know there's something wrong.”

Her fingers went to the chip of industrial diamond around her neck. The one that served as her pendulum, and interrupted what would have been a fantastic evening by pegging him as her target.

Wrong kind of target, she thought grimly. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she said, ignoring the questions of her own she'd never received answers to. “Besides, I'm not one of Her regulars. I'm just on...short-term loan, I guess.”

“I didn't just run for my health, you know,” he said. “I wouldn't break an oath like that. Especially not to Her.”

“I don't care,” she said again. “I have promises of my own to keep. And one of them involves getting you to Deimos in the Martian system.” Although why the goddess had chosen Deimos she would never know. Deimos barely had gravity, much less anything in the way of spiritual centers.

Lin rounded a corner and came out into the public area of the spaceport.

“There are others, you know,” he said. “I'm not the only one who escaped. Maybe you have the wrong guy.”

She tapped her pendulum. “It's tuned to you. This is your personal tracking pendulum.” When the Goddess had given her the diamond chip, it had been attached to a thick length of leather that she now realized was the perfect size to be a Canid collar. The idea of collaring a sentient human being, no matter how genetically altered, left a bad taste in her mouth, but the law was the law.

Terminals listing outbound shuttles lined one wall, while the inbound were displayed on a giant, 3-D holographic projector in the center of the main intersection.

People milled around the gates leading to departures. She paused to consult the outbound screens, searching for something going to Mars as soon as possible. Beside her, the Hound shifted

backwards. “Don't get any ideas,” she muttered, trying to read. “Over there.” She pointed to a hallway three arches down from where they stood and started towards it.

A knot of people emerged from one of the arches she had to pass, and with them came two Whites. She couldn't help but meet their gazes, and one of the security men frowned. “Hey,” he said. “That's the woman who skipped out on the parade!” The two men lunged for her.

Hells bells! She dodged to the left and broke into a run. Behind her, she felt more than saw that the Hound had swung around to follow her. The binding tugged at her, somewhere behind her navel. She ran out towards the main atrium, counting on the crowds of people to run interference. A glance back showed her the two Whites moving through the clusters of people, stun-sticks raised. The one on the left brought his stick down on the shoulder of a man who didn't move out of the way fast enough.

A large support column flanked by two kiosks loomed in front of her. She flung herself around the side of one of the kiosks and crouched down by a garbage can. She pulled the Hound down in front of her. “Keep your mouth shut or we're both in trouble,” she hissed.

He shot her a look. “Hey, I'm an uncollared Canid. I'll take you over the Whites any day.” The clump of security boots—made for kicking asses—came closer. A few people browsing at the news kiosk scurried away, stealing some of the cover their bodies would have provided. The white coveralls of the guards appeared in between the scrolling headlines and flashing ads of the thin plastic newssheets hanging from the kiosk's supports. She pressed her back harder against the column. Maybe if she wished hard enough, she'd go right through it.

A man in a long black coat stepped up to the kiosk and snatched one of the dangling sheets of flimsiplast. He stepped close to the garbage can and shook the sheet open to full size. The liquid crystal inside the sheet flared to life and began scrolling the news headlines over the sheet. The shaggy-looking man spread the newssheet over the garbage can and stood off to one side, holding it up as the Whites stomped by.

He glanced down at her, huddled in the corner alongside the Hound. “You folks need to get out of here fast?”

Lin sized him up. The guy looked like he'd been living out of a spaceport locker for at least a week. He grinned, white teeth gleaming in his unshaven face. Her eyes flicked over his shoulder. The Whites had passed them, but had slowed their pace while they scanned the milling people. Hells bells. “You go to the Martian system?”

“Lady, I go anywhere they pay me.”

Large headlines scrolled over the sheet and masked their presence from the passers-by. *Helios array shines light on class warfare in LEO cities* screamed the largest. *Plight of lost Lunar miners worsens—several still missing* caught her eye and twisted her heart. Hang in there, guys, she thought. *Union busted on Phobos—riots expected.* “Deimos.”

“I could let the Whites toss you in jail. It's nicer.”

She shifted in her crouch. “I don't have time for games, space cowboy.”

“Okay, okay. Eight thousand, round trip.”

Holy crap *and* Hells bells! “Two,” she replied. “I'm only going one way.”

He flicked the paper with his forefinger and the scrolling headline expanded and displayed an Op-Ed claiming the Helios project's ambition encouraged a false hope of independence among LEO cits. "You're crazier than I thought, lady. And that's saying something, since you look pretty hot in that dress."

Oh hells bells. She still wore the Diana costume. *And I had time to change when?* "Look, cowboy, are you going to deal with me or not?"

"Cool your jets, Precious. Two's too cheap," he said. "You ever see the spaceport entrance on Deimos?" She shook her head. "Have an easier time trying to suck your own dick."

"Nice," Rex muttered beside her. The Whites were joined by two other security guards and they began fanning out. Lin fidgeted. *It's too hot to be pissing around now.*

"Three," she said. "It's all I got. And my name is Lin, not Precious."

He glanced from her to the Hound. "And what about hangdog eyes, here? You give yourself a name, or do you just answer to Good Boy?"

Lin thought it was a funny way to ask someone's name, but the pilot didn't seem all that stable overall. *As long as he can fly.* Beside her, the Hound stiffened. "Call me Rex," he said through gritted teeth.

"Good boy, Rex," the pilot said. "My name's Max. Wasn't that easy?" He turned his bright blue eyes back onto her. "Okay, Precious, you win. I'm a sucker for hangdog eyes."

Chapter 3

Lin fully expected their eccentric pilot's ride to be as scruffed up as he was, but the inter-system shuttle proved to be top of the line. She frowned. "Who did you say your client was?"

"Right this way, ma'am," the pilot said, pulling back a curtain right in front of the docking hatch to reveal the clean lines of a state-of-the-art passenger section. Plush, full-recline seats with footrests, a wet bar, and even a vid-game station all waited.

Hells bells, she thought. *I got a deal at three thousand.*

"I'll just go and take her out of sleep-mode and we'll be off."

"You do that," Lin said.

Beside her, Rex whistled, a little series of pitched trills, while he pulled the hatch shut and keyed the OK-green button. A hiss of air echoed through the chamber and the distant clank of the docking hood pulling away from the hatch covered up any further questions before Max ducked through another curtained alcove that hid the door to the pilot's cabin, leaving her alone with Rex. A second later, Max's voice came over the intercom. "You folks pick a seat and strap in. The armrests are programmed to induce sleep after liftoff."

She settled into one of the seats. A vid-screen descended from the ceiling. Beside her, Rex strapped himself in, securing the seat's crash webbing over his body. He fumbled with the last clasp and she reached over to help him. Again, his liquid brown gaze held hers.

Craters, but he's young, she thought. His face was just so... open. "Don't be scared, kid," she said. "Whatever you did, She..." she trailed off. It was none of her business.

His hand clamped down on her wrist. "Don't send me back there," he pleaded. "You don't understand. If you were one of Hers, you'd know."

She shook her head. She wasn't supposed to care. "She thinks you're important enough to chase," she said. "She cares enough to want you back."

The shuttle rumbled, and then made a sickening drop as it fell away from the outer shell of the ring-city. The monitor displayed the outside camera view of the shuttle arcing backwards into an apparent free-fall, curving itself away from the stately turn of the ring-city. Her ears popped and her stomach straightened itself out until the curious lightness of microgravity settled into her body. She bumped gently against the crash webbing of her recliner. A faint hiss sounded as the lights dimmed and the sedative gas started its work. *Must be nice*, she thought, *for someone to care when you go missing.*

* * * *

Rex couldn't help but watch her sleep. And wonder why he wasn't going out as well. His question was answered a minute later when the pilot came back through the door from the cockpit. "Am I glad to see you, little brother." Max made his way hand over hand to Rex's seat and clapped him

on the shoulder.

Rex sighed and embraced his former Packmate. His cheek rested against the other man's and he breathed in the wolf-scent of home gratefully. His body pressed against the older man's and Max wrapped his arms around him, responding to the need for comfort and touch.

"I thought we'd lost our last chance," Max said. "I worried about you being on your own." He glanced over at the sleeping Lin. "But you found yourself a patron, I see."

Rex's gut sank. He didn't want to break Max's bubble. "It's not what you think," he said.

Max chuckled. "Hey, the Lady doesn't rule us now, remember? We're not subject to Her rules."

"No, it's just..."

"I can smell her all over you," Max said, drifting over to the sleeping woman. "She's delicious. Would you share?"

Rex's laugh was only a touch bittersweet to his own ears. "Forget it, Max," he said.

"I'm crushed, little brother." Max lifted a hand to touch the sleeping woman's hair. "There's certainly a resemblance."

"You're better off not knowing. She's an Arrow."

Max drew his hand back so fast it sent him into a tailspin. "What? How did...you get...caught up in that?" His words came only when he was facing the younger man.

Rex watched Max spin, his coat flapping like great batwings around him. Finally dizzy enough to take mercy on his friend, he unhooked one latch of the webbing and stretched out an arm to stop the pilot's crazy trajectory. The coat kept spinning another quarter-turn until it came to rest, wrapped around Max's legs. "I didn't know," he said. "I was running from the Whites and I looked up and there she was. I thought she was the Lady at first." That moment of fear-terror-relief still confused him. "I just jumped on the parade float and hoped nobody would notice me long enough for me to lose the Whites."

Max quirked his lip. "And the sex came into play when?"

Rex blushed. "She was already worked up when I got there. I think I was just in the right place at the right time." He looked over at Lin. "She's a Truebreed. They're not known for their discriminating tastes. She said so herself. It wasn't until after she was done that her pendulum gave me away."

"I'll change course," Max said. "I can put us on an intercept with Helios. If she gives us trouble, she can go airlock-surfing." The disreputable grin was gone, and the older man's eyes hardened. "I've made a contact on board the array. I think he might be able to help."

Rex's heart jumped. "Who is it? How..."

Max shook his head. "Let's deal with our present problem first." He reached for the medkit panel housed in the wall. "I can make it painless..."

"No!" Rex unbelted himself all the way and floated out of his berth towards his Packmate. "We don't kill."

Max's nostrils flared and Rex smelled the wolf in him stir from slumber. "We don't have the luxury of mercy," he said.

Rex grabbed hold of a stabilizer strap and pulled himself in close against the wall. "Mercy is not

a luxury,” he said. “*We. Don't. Kill.*”

A low growl rumbled in Max's throat as his blue eyes met and held Rex's. Rex's stomach clenched at facing down the elder Packmate whose will should have been sacrosanct. He took a shaky breath. “We are not animals, Brother.”

Fine trembling started in his limbs as Max raised his eyebrows. “Of course we're animals,” he said, pushing himself back from the medkit panel. “We're all animals, formed of clay and by the whim of the Gods.” He spread his arms and executed a graceful flip, and Rex felt the tension ease between his shoulder blades. “She gets to live. For now.”

Rex tried not to let his sigh push him across the room. “I appreciate that. Especially as she's put a binding on me that keeps me close to her. She goes out an airlock...”

“And you follow her like a Good Dog.”

Rex's lips twisted.

“So why the hell is she dragging you to Deimos?”

He shrugged. “Ask her. I'm planning to. As far as I can tell, Diana's given her a limited time to bring me to Deimos.”

“Why Deimos? It's a shithole.”

“I don't know,” Rex said, agitated. “Maybe she's into the food. All I know is that once Lin delivers me to Diana, the compulsion to follow her will be gone. After that...I'll deal with that when it gets here.” He made his way back to the recliner and wriggled back into the webbing.

“And the other compulsion?” Max asked archly, settling his hand over Rex's crotch. “The one that's keeping this in a semi all the time?”

Rex sighed. “I want her. A lot. She felt so good when I put my fingers inside her.” Just thinking of it made his cock ache. “But not bad enough to start thinking with my dick instead of my head.” Max's arms went around Rex's waist. “Maybe you need a little relief.” He ground his hips against Rex's erection.

Rex hardly dared to ask. “It's been lonely,” he said. “Without the Pack.”

Max's hands worked at the fastener of his pants. “I know. It's not easy being an exile.” Rex's cock sprang free into Max's hand and he pushed himself to his knees. Sudden tightness built in Rex's gut. The mere sensation of human contact sent such relief through him that his chest caught. And when Max's mouth closed over his dick, there was just as much comfort as pleasure. He whimpered as the blood rushed to his cock, swelling it in his Packmate's mouth.

Max's rough fingers encircled his shaft, working up and down in time with his mouth. The shudders raced through Rex in time, then double-time, with the motions of Max's hand and mouth. His hips started to move. The motion sent Max's legs up and out, dangling upwards in the absence of gravity.

Weeks of sleeping in boxes or on top of cargo crates had worn on Rex. Surviving on his own, without a friendly hand to help or a warm body to curl up next to, had taken its toll. He missed the goddess...it ached so deep being alone. His hands threaded through Max's unruly hair, shifting the other man's head in little motions up and down along the length of his cock.

Max growled deep in his throat and wrapped his arms around Rex's waist, taking his cock deep.

The tension built, coiled low in Rex's abdomen and he thrust in time with Max's motions. The warm weight of Max's arms around his hips, the scent of the other man's arousal, mixed with the traces of Lin, wove a coil of sensation around his head and pulled tighter. Max twisted his hand and ran his tongue around the head of Rex's cock. When Max cupped his balls, the sensitive organs tightened and the floodgates inside him burst.

Release washed through Rex. A massive thrust of his hips sent Max's body almost straight out, holding on to Rex by his mouth and hands. Hot bursts of seed emptied from Rex, and with it, some of the hollow ache he'd been carrying around. He groaned, just as much from exhaustion as pleasure, his thundering heart filling his ears for several minutes.

Max spun around, head over heels, and wiped his mouth with the tail of his shirt, planting a salty kiss on Rex's lips. "There," he said. "Isn't that better?"

Rex nodded. "We're still not flushing her out the airlock," he said.

Max laughed as he helped Rex right his clothes. "You and your lost causes. Fine. We'll keep her as an air freshener. She smells good."

"She's one of us," he said. "Touched by Diana, even if she's at cross-purposes with us now. We take care of our own."

"Suit yourself," Max said over the slight hiss of the sleep inducers. "Just remember, Little Brother, I've got your back."

* * * *

Space-dreams sucked. Lin got caught in a loop of dizzying nightmares of making love to Rex, only to look down at him and see his youthful face wither and age before her eyes. "I must be more hung up on his age than I thought," she muttered when she came out of sleep into a groggy consciousness.

Max's voice came over the intercom. "Sorry if you felt that bump," he said. "A little hairy there with the wobble-and-spin."

"You think?" Rex called back.

Lin shrugged. "I completely missed it." It didn't feel like they were moving, so she guessed they'd landed in one piece. She unstrapped and floated upward. "Got any magna-shoes?"

"Storage tub, aft end."

She floated over to the tub in question and rummaged, careful to keep her movements slow and smooth. The magnetic shoes were on the bottom and she separated a handful of the metal braces out of a snare. She also found a pair of coveralls that gave her far more insulation than a parade costume. She looked back to find Rex staring at her. "You going to put these on by yourself?"

His eyes were sad. "If you ask me to, I have to."

Oh yeah. The binding. "Then do it," she said, checking her chrono. Four hours to go. She tossed a pair of the shoes in his direction and clipped the magnetic braces to her own short boots. Her feet stuck to the floor and she pushed herself up, testing the fit with a few heavy steps.

She looked up to find him staring at her. "What?"

He shook his head. "I don't understand you," he said. "How can you sell me out like this? I've

tasted your scent—you're not unfeeling.”

She wondered the same thing herself. “Look, just because you had your fingers inside me doesn't mean you know me,” she said. “If that damn pendulum hadn't gone off, we'd have had more fun after the parade. But it did, and I have a job to do.”

He pulled on his own magna-shoes. “And you won't even consider that there might be something off about this.”

She shrugged the top of the jumpsuit up and over her shoulders. The neckline gaped, but it kept her warm. “I'm Diana's Arrow. I'm not supposed to think about it. Arrows don't think about hurting their targets.”

“They don't come for them, either.”

She had the grace to blush. “Look, that's how I am,” she said. “I'm a Truebreed. Sex is like eating. Sometimes you have gourmet at a sit-down place, and sometimes it's protein slabs from a synthafood stall.”

He winced. “Which one was I? Never mind, I don't think I want that answer.” He tilted his head.

“Don't you feel it when your body's so disconnected from your emotions?”

She clumped to the hatch and started the release sequence. “That's where you got me wrong,” she said. “For Truebreeds, it's just biology. We like to eat, we eat a lot. We need to sleep, we sleep a lot. We like to fuck...”

“You fuck a lot.”

“That's it.”

* * * *

“I feel sorry for you,” Rex said as they exited the docking bay. Deimos was a small, dark moon, a little dustball whose tunnels inside reflected its dreary outside. Life on Deimos revolved around little else besides refining dirty ice from Mars. Lack of mass meant everything needed to be either bolted down or magnetized to stick to the metal plates of the flooring.

And it was hot. The nature of the small moon made the sunward side toasty, while the humidity from the dirty ice refinery turned the atmosphere into a barely breathable soup. Still, Rex shivered. A clammy tendril of ice snaked up his spine to a place just below his nape. The Lady was here somewhere. And so was her corruption.

“Why?” she asked.

“It must be terrible to be so alone, even when there's another person inside of you.”

Her jaw worked soundlessly and her green eyes flashed. She took a breath.

“Hey! You weren't thinking about leaving me behind, were you?” Max slipped through the door behind Lin just before it closed.

“Yes, we were,” Lin said.

“Revise your thinking.” Max showed his teeth, falling into step on her free side. Deimos had no organized spaceport; the docking bays were all located in the bowl of the Swift crater and opened directly onto the main concourse of the moon's habitable tunnels. A saloon and a commissary

opened on the other side of the open space, and a bank kiosk shared the middle with a trade post and a newsstand. Two information terminals marked the space between the recreational area and the industrial warehouse next to it, stacked with cargo containers and shimmering with a faint static field.

Lin made for the saloon and Rex's stomach did a flop. The door was little more than a sheet of Plexiglas scratched to opaqueness and riveted to hinges made of nylon safety webbing. Even so, his kind didn't do so well in saloons. The stench alone put him on edge.

"You didn't come all this way for a drink, did you?" Max said, shooting Rex a look. He circled his finger around his ear, suggesting she was crazy.

"Saloon's the best place to find out where things are on this rock," Lin said.

"Info-terminals all have downloadable maps," Rex pointed out as Lin pushed open the door. He had a bad feeling about this.

A body came flying towards them. Max jumped in front of Lin and deflected the stumbling man's flight. Rex's bad feeling got worse as the scent of testosterone and agitation rolled over him, forcing the hairs on the back of his neck to attention. Beside him, Max rumbled low in his throat. Lin sidestepped the mess and strode up to the bar. The bartender glared at her. "Put your dogs on leashes or leave."

She scowled. *Prejudice is such an ugly thing*, she thought. *And this guy really can't afford any extra ugly*. "They're not dogs. They're people."

The scarred man threw back his head and laughed. "Right. And Minnie over there ain't no rat, either." He jerked his head towards the middle-aged woman sitting at the end of the bar. Lin blinked.

The woman's eyes were completely black. Beneath a thin, pointed nose, her front teeth jutted out over her bottom lip. Her coarse brown hair stood up from her head in short tufts all around, and the hem of her bulky coat twitched, even though both feet could clearly be seen on the bottom rail. "Blessed art thou whose genes runneth true," she said, her voice raspy. , Lin could just make out a battered electronic collar under the grubby coat's lapels. Scorch marks from failed escape attempts marred the collar's ceramic surface.

Sweat trickled down the back of Lin's neck. "I don't want any trouble," she said.

The bartender snorted. "Picked the wrong rock then, honey."

"I just want to find a house of worship." She glanced around the low-ceilinged room, taking in the stoop-shouldered people muttering in small, suspicious knots over the prefab tables, and the two fistfighters, still half-heartedly shoving each other.

The barman snorted and set a glass on the bar. "There's a Doomsayer church in Segment 2-E." He poured a small measure of murky amber liquid from a bottle with no label into it. "Best have one of these, so you'll have a sin to confess."

"It's a start," she muttered, pushing back from the bar.

The rat-lady hissed. "Got two good eyes," she rasped. "If you ain't usin' 'em, I'll buy 'em off ya." Lin shoved past her and back out the door, resisting the urge to scrape the atmosphere of the place off her arms. She glanced at the flimsiplast paper posted on the support column. *Unrest in*

refinery—cits wary, mgmt crackdowns predicted was the main headline. Below it, a smaller one read, *Vandals continue strikes, mayor swears vengeance*. “Sounds like Deimos is a real family place,” she muttered. Before turning away, she noted the *Around the solar system* segment still bore a headline: *Time running out for trapped Lunar miners*.

Not if I can help it. And not if that Goddess comes through. Diana had said to bring Rex to Deimos. Lin figured there would be a grove or grotto or something similar to what her own community had set up. Of course, the gap between academic knowledge that not everybody believed the same way, and the reality of it was a wide and deep one. Did the Doomsayers have open circles? Offering tables? “Segment 2-E it is,” she said. “Let’s go to Church, boys.” Rex walked beside her, his feet making deliberate snaps on and off the metal flooring, courtesy of the magna-shoes. The pilot was a complication, but not unduly so. At least she could trust him to get her back to the Moon in one piece when the time came.

Rex’s voice, quiet and threaded with anger, cut into her peace. “You worship Her, and yet you don’t know Her at all, do you?”

“What do you mean by that? The Moon’s full of Goddess-worshippers. The city council sponsors the major Sabbats. There’s an offering altar in the Rec dome that’s always full. I’ve brought half of the offerings myself!” A bit of an exaggeration, but she was a part of her community as much as anybody else was. “I go to the circles, I say the prayers.” She started walking. *I can’t help it if I’m an outsider among outsiders*.

“When I was born, there was a problem with my gene fusion,” Rex said. “Diana took me. Made it better. And made me Hers.”

“But that...how?”

“She’s a Goddess. Just because people want the Gods to stay safely in the realm of philosophy doesn’t mean they will.”

“True,” she muttered. It had certainly come as a shock to her when Diana had manifested herself as an actual, touchable person, complete with cold hands. “I guess it’s easier to worship when there isn’t so much...mundane life in the way.” Helium to mine, her condition to take care of.

“Did you live with her there? On the Moon, I mean?” she asked.

He nodded. “She kept us in great digs. Fed us well. Kept us happy. When she needed something done, she sent us out.”

“How do you get around without ID...without discovery?” Lin glanced behind them to make sure Max still trailed behind. Outside the common area, the segments shrunk to a single, low-ceilinged tunnel with modular dwellings on one side. Every sixth residential cube served as a social service center—a Security kiosk, an exercise hut, a public library filled with terminals.

“I grew up just like everybody else,” he said. “Went to school, entered training. Just...when Diana called, I went. My family made that bargain and I kept up my end of it. I served in Earth Security for a while, too. Then Diana called me permanently. It was a good life.”

“So why don’t you want to go back to it?”

“I do,” he said. “More than you can know. Being in the presence of a Goddess...it’s addicting. Headly. Like being oxygen-drunk all the time. You can wallow in the benevolence like a tactile

thing.”

“Sounds sensual,” she said. It also sounded right. Like the way she used to feel during a Circle or a Sabbat celebration. Surrounded and warm and safe and loved.

He nodded. “But there's something wrong with her.”

“How's that possible? She's a Goddess. Gods don't get sick.”

“She stopped smelling like one several months ago. There's a stench about her now.” He shuddered.

She noticed he'd slowed down. “A little rude to be saying that, isn't it? Get the lady some perfume if she stinks.”

He turned his head to give her a look. “Don't be thick,” he said. “It's serious enough that the Pack has lost a few members over it.”

“Look, I sympathize. Really, I do. But I have reasons of my own for...” She glanced at one of the residential prefabs and stopped short. “There,” she muttered.

The door of the apartment bore a placard made of scavenged newspaper flimsiplast whose touch-sensitive diode had been smashed, rendering it unprogrammable and permanently blank. On the blank transparent surface, someone had taken paint and sketched an elaborate and detailed sigil containing diamonds and stars and intersecting lines. The door hung partially open. Lin's solar plexus tugged. “There's something here,” she murmured.

“It's a veve,” Max said, approaching from behind them. “A sigil to invoke an Orisha. Here's your house of worship.”

“Of course,” she murmured, pushing the door open.

“Don't...” Rex said, reaching out.

She shook his arm off and stepped through the door. Boxes had been stacked on either side of the doorway, turning the cramped apartment into nothing more than a hallway. Niches had been cut into the bottoms and sides of the boxes, and little diode-lights flickered, running off tiny, tablet-sized power cells. The air felt heavy as she stepped into the dark and cool hallway.

“Bad juju,” muttered Max. “I can smell it.”

She approached the end of the hall. On the floor, someone had used regolith—the loose dust kicked up by asteroids nailing a planet—to trace a larger version of the veve on the door. The air hung thick with incense and another heavy, damp odor.

“Find the body,” Rex said. “And then let's go.”

The mambo lay, face down, off to one side and partly behind the wall created by the boxes. The corners of the tiny apartment lay in shadow and, as Lin crouched down, the shadows seemed to creep forward, solidifying and becoming a live thing. She edged out of the way, careful not to scuff the veve.

When she looked at the body, she felt sick. The woman's face had caved in, as if some incredible force had sucked all the...everything...out of her from inside. “She's dead,” she muttered.

“Somebody desecrated sacred ground.”

Max edged forward. “Oh, spacedust,” he said. “It hasn't been long.”

“Look!” Rex said, pointing at the shadowy corner. Lin looked up just in time to see something

black twist and retreat through the dim grayness into a patch of deeper dark. Fear tightened her stomach. Goddess or no, she didn't want to be here. Beside her, Max growled.

This is wrong. But the tug in her breastbone wanted her to move forward. Diana's beacon pulsed a familiar moon magic that coursed through Lin's blood. *This is the place*, her heartbeat said. *Go into the dark.* Her feet began to move.

“Uh-uh, sister,” Max muttered beside her and yanked her shoulders hard. She fell back against him and he wrapped both arms around her. “Time to leave. Rex, pour the last of that rum over the veve. Ogun's gonna be mad enough about losing his horse.”

Max dragged Lin from the dark altar. She tried to help, really she did. But her feet wanted her to stay and the pull to stay physically hurt. “Quickly,” he muttered. “We want to be in preflight check before people start asking questions. Once Security starts poking around, they won't be interested in solving a crime, when blaming a suspect is faster and has the same effect.”

They went back the way they came at double time. Lin's legs burned with the effort of picking up her feet and putting them down again in what every nerve in her body insisted was the wrong direction, fighting herself and fighting the magna-shoes on top of that. That slimy, squirming darkness called to her and, Gods help her, she yearned for it. She couldn't trust her senses when they told her that sinking into it, feeling the slide of that cold blackness over her body, was home.

Chapter 4

After the shuttle hatch closed, Lin twisted in Max's grip and ran back to it. "Oh no you don't," Rex muttered, grabbing her around the waist. Max lifted the safety webbing and helped his Packmate secure her in the recliner.

"I'll get us off this rock," Max said. "You keep her down until we can sort things out." He disappeared into the cockpit. Rex stretched himself over her, trying to keep the thrashing woman from hurting herself. Through the webbing, she grabbed his shirt.

"Take me back," she mumbled.

He held her hands in his. "I feel it, too," he said. "Do you see what I mean?"

She shivered. "I—It's crazy. That place was wrong. I don't know how, but I felt it all the way down in my bones. But..."

"But your senses are telling you it's right. Not only right, but good. Where you need to be or else you'll never feel right again."

She looked up at him, her green eyes cloudy with tears. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I've just been thinking of getting the job done, and not how it would affect people. It was just another job, like mining and refining."

The shuttle hummed to life, and the launch required so little force to leave the little moon that Rex could barely detect it with all his enhanced senses. He stroked her face, and the tension in her body relaxed a little.

"I felt the same way you did," he said. "Diana's requests started drifting away from what I was used to, but it was hard to speak up. We drifted so subtly from helping people, answering prayers, and dispensing justice to taking vengeance, that I still can't remember when the turning point came." That confusing time still shook him to the core. To not trust your own nose was unthinkable. "My instincts were telling me something was wrong, but my senses disagreed. And for me, it's hard not to trust my senses." The doubt still haunted him, and sometimes the urge to return to Diana and pretend nothing was wrong proved too strong to fight. *Perhaps that is why you chose her float to hide on during the parade.*

She laughed bitterly. "You were right before," she said. "I guess I don't really know Diana at all. I should have asked more questions. She didn't feel like the Diana I remembered from Circles when I was younger. And I didn't even think to ask *Why Deimos?* If I were a better worshipper, I would have realized something was off."

"She made you an Arrow," he said, unhooking the clasps of the webbing so she could sit up.

"You said it yourself, an Arrow doesn't think about its target. The only reason I ran from the Pack was because the stink of the Titan was too much for me to ignore."

Max emerged from the cockpit. "We're going to Helios. I don't think this can wait."

"The Helios array?" Lin asked. "What's in the Helios array? Besides a lot of sunshine?"

"I know people," Max said. He sat down on the edge of the recliner next to Rex. "Sonny

Solaverde is one of the chief engineers. He's one of ours. Serves the Olympians. If my instincts are right, he can help.”

Rex's lips tightened. “Your instincts had better be right,” he said.

“Little Brother, if you've got a better idea, I'm open to it,” Max said, flopping back onto the recliner couch next to Lin. He looked up at her. “You don't look too good, Precious.”

Lin frowned. “Don't call me Precious.” She turned on her side. “I can't believe I was so blind. That woman's body...” she broke off. “I've seen death before. Why does that seem so...”

“Profane?” Rex asked quietly.

“People die all the time,” Max said. “All over. It's a natural part of the life cycle.”

“Accidents, diseases. Even the unnatural deaths, like murder, can be laid at the feet of humankind.” Rex stroked her hair. Poor thing. She didn't even know she needed comfort. “This was the direct work of a God.”

“They're not supposed to do that,” Max said. “Gods don't directly interfere with the flow of life.”

“What stops them?” Lin asked, wrapping her arms around herself. “I never knew how close we are to being obliterated. Just on a whim.”

“They have rules, too,” Max said. “They can intervene, but it has to be through human activity. That Mambo had the Titan-stench all over her. Ogun won't be happy he lost a Mambo directly to a Titan. If the Olympians don't take care of things internally...” Max let the sentence hang. Rex didn't want to finish it. If the Voudon Gods declared war on the Olympians...two whole pantheons of deities...

“If more people knew this...”

“The world would go into chaos,” Rex said. “Madness. So we keep the secrets. The Gods keep the secrets. And the world goes on, because it's better than the alternative.”

* * * *

Lin still reeled. Nothing in her experience had ever suggested that the Gods could or would move among people so directly.

“Now you know,” Max said quietly. “We've all been touched by the Gods. We're all Hers, no matter what the circumstances. It changes you.” The residual gravity left over from takeoff faded away and Max began to drift upward.

“Sets you apart,” Rex said. He stroked her arm. “We take comfort in each other, because nobody else understands.”

Warmth ignited from his touch and she looked up at him. The constant, low-grade desire kicked up a notch and it occurred to her that she had no place to go, had nothing else to do, and had the company of two men who were equally unencumbered and offering her comfort. The notion of using sex as comfort wasn't familiar to her, any more than using the need for a drink of water as a security blanket. But they understood. She needed a little understanding right now.

She toed off her magna-shoes with careful movements and stretched, floating just above the recliner couch's surface.

Max pulled her back into his arms to soak up his warmth. Rex's deep eyes held hers as he reached

for the fasteners on her coveralls and undid them one by one. Disorienting, she thought, that unsnapping her clothes could hold such...gravity. "You smell so good," Rex murmured. "On the parade float—I thought I could drown in your scent."

She laughed. "It was an inconvenience to me, being turned on like that. Cinco City's not a very sexy place." Cool air swirled around her bare skin, sending goosebumps racing over her flesh. "I realized people could see through my dress and it was a turn-on. I just wanted to scratch an itch." "See, that's where we're different," Max murmured from behind her. His hands cupped her shoulders and slid into her collar, moving the fabric away from her bare skin. His fingers grazed her nipples and slid down to cup her breasts. "It's not just *scratching an itch* for us."

Rex pressed his lips to her belly and she shivered, bouncing slightly on the cushion of the recliner and drifting upward again. Part of her wanted to dispense with the clothing and get to having two cocks inside her. The rest of her wanted to explore the idea of being fully engaged with these two particular men. "It's about being together for us," he murmured. "Reminding each other that we're not alone."

Max licked the back of her neck and bit down lightly, sending a stab of heat racing through her. "Mixing our energies."

She shrugged out of the arms of her coveralls, freeing her torso. Rex's arms slid around her waist and he lifted her hips to pull the coveralls the rest of the way down. On his way back up, he stopped to nibble her toes. His legs drifted out past her feet, bobbing slightly upward.

"Hey!" She twisted, but Max held her down. Her movement sent them both into a drift away from the couch.

Rex pulled his way up her leg, kissing behind her knee, nipping her inner thigh, until he reached the thatch of curls between her legs. "I wanted to taste you before," he said. "You were so ready, so delicious." His thumb stroked down over her clit into her slick slit. "I didn't get a chance to watch you come."

Lin's breath caught in her throat. "You were very considerate," she said.

Max bent over to kiss her and she saw he'd taken off his shirt. His chest was powerful and thick, dusted generously with dark hair. Different from Rex, but no less appealing. Her tongue twined with his, her attention was on his kiss, so that when Rex's tongue delved into her already-swelling slit, it surprised her.

Her limbs went limp and she drifted on the sensations rippling out from her clit to her extremities. Behind her, Max worked himself out of his clothes and cradled her between his bare thighs, the heat from his body surrounding her. Her head in his lap, she could turn her head and nuzzle his cock, and she did so. With Rex's fingers and tongue filling her pussy, she wanted more—both to give and to receive.

Max stretched out over her, his body drifting above hers. His thick cock bobbed in front of her nose, jutting proudly from the patch of dark hair. She closed her lips around the shaft and dragged them down, then up again. He groaned. She felt the tiny tremors racing through his body as his hips moved involuntarily. His scent filled her nostrils, wrapping around the inside of her head. She'd been the benefactor of the inherently generous nature of a good blow job many times, but

Max's appreciative noises made her conscious of how good it felt to give.

Rex wrapped an arm around her hips and shifted his body so that she sprawled above him. His tongue worked in and out of her and her hips moved in time. "I need..." she gasped, her voice muffled by Max's cock. It was impossible to get traction in the lack of gravity, and what she wanted was some resistance. Some friction.

Rex slid down underneath her and pulled one of the belt harnesses from the wall. "Hold on," he murmured. She cupped Max's balls in her hand and used the slight pressure to guide his body towards the wall.

Max laughed, a little nervously. "Leading me around by the balls is just an expression, you know," he said.

She released his sac and twisted her fingers in the harness straps. Taking his cock into her mouth again, she pushed her body out horizontally and spread her legs for Rex.

Behind her, Rex wrapped his arms around her, cupping her breasts. "I need to be inside you," he whispered. She nodded and tilted her hips. The initial thrust and stretch of his cock filling her released something tight in her chest. She purred low in her throat.

Above her, Max laughed. "That tickles," he said.

She drew her teeth lightly over the head of his cock, licking the salty bead of moisture from the tip. Rex thrust into her from behind and she rode the first waves of pleasure for a few moments, arching her back to allow him better access. If she'd been with other Lunars, they'd have been done already, and it was all Lin could do to keep from bucking back against him to speed him up. She bit her lip.

Max laughed, bumping against the wall with his own movements. "Patience, Precious," he said. "We like to take things slow. Helps with the gravity."

She scowled at him. "Are you enjoying this?"

"As a matter of fact..." Max's gaze went over her shoulder. "Little Brother, will you share?"

Rex withdrew from her and she uttered a whimper. Seconds later, she had nothing to complain about as she felt the blunt head of his cock pressing against her ass. Her nether muscles flexed and released. He eased into her, holding her hips. "Lin, you feel so good," he murmured.

She didn't have the words to return the compliment. Max slid down carefully, pausing to lick and suck at her nipples before matching himself to her. He fit his cock into her pussy with a careful, gentle thrust and she cried out.

The two men moved inside her, in asynchronous rhythm. While Rex withdrew, Max thrust in, both filling her and releasing her. Their bodies bumped against hers while she held onto the safety harness as hard as she could. Her abdomen tightened, sensations spreading outward in waves that lapped against each other, washing through her and building upwards.

Max pressed his lips on the pulse at her throat, his stubble scraping against her neck. Her head fell back onto Rex's shoulder, his soft lips pressing against her ear. Her hips twisted and bucked, and a shudder from Max rippled through her. Her fingers fumbled their hold on the straps and they drifted away from the wall.

She caught the straps and pulled, slamming Max back into the wall and sending him deep into her

pussy with the movement. Rex gripped her hips and pushed up into her ass and groaned. "I'm going to come," he whispered.

Seconds later, she felt the shudders wrack his body and hot pulses filled her, starting a chain reaction in her own body. Her pussy clenched and a rolling wave pulled her under as she came. Max moaned into her mouth. "Come around me, Precious. That's it." His loud groan heralded his own orgasm. Lin's fingers lost the battle with the straps and the three of them drifted out into open space, shimmering pulses of pleasure spinning them into freefall.

Lin had learned from an early age to avoid emotional entanglements with her lovers. Forming bonds with people encouraged expectations, which were too often easily disappointed. She didn't want to settle down and become one of the many homesteaders settling around the solar system and trying to make outer space a cozy neighborhood.

In that respect, she had always empathized with the Diana of the legends who refused the attempts of the other Olympians to force her into marriage. In the Circle skits she'd taken part in as a teenager, her favorite one featured Diana declaring, "I am owned by no man!" just before running offstage with her bow and arrow.

She wasn't fond of cuddling. It created bonds where there shouldn't be bonds created. Yet when Rex's hand snaked around her hip and he pulled her against the warmth of his body, she didn't object. Caught between the warm bodies of the two Canid men, their hands brushing gently over her body in the afterglow of zero-g sex, quiet peace surged within her, and she was content to doze in Rex's arms, secured by the crash webbing and the feel of his even breathing against her cheek.

Chapter 5

Lin slouched in the co-pilot's chair and tried not to touch anything as she listened to Max. "His name's Sonny Solaverde, and he's the project manager for the array's power conversion."

"How is he supposed to help us?" she asked, scrubbing at her face with her hands. "Who's going to help us go up against a Goddess, let alone one who's on the rampage?"

"Hey, Sonny's good people. I sniffed him out on LEO-2. He needed some help getting out from under the religious zealots."

"Who are," she pointed out, "not quite fundamental enough to turn down the cheap power from the Helios array."

"Just so," Max said.

"What if he can't help us?" *Or more likely, what if he thinks I'm effing nuts and boots me out on my ass?*

"Then we're screwed," Max said cheerfully. "Any other questions, Precious?" The obscenely rapid way in which Max had adopted nicknames for her should have made her feel uncomfortable and highly annoyed. Instead, she only felt mild annoyance for the nickname.

"What's your story, anyway?" she asked. "Why did you leave Diana's Pack?"

His raised eyebrows asked her if she really wanted to know. She folded her arms in unspoken answer to his silent question and waited. After a long moment, he scratched his unshaven jaw.

"Let's just call me the black sheep of the family. Or black dog, in this case."

Lin's lips twisted. "I know a little about that. Lunies are a pretty open bunch as far as genetic prejudice goes, except when you're not sorry for it." She just wasn't as ashamed of being called the town slut as most of her fellow miners thought she ought to be. People like Chloecouldn't understand Lin and only seemed to get irritated by her.

"You don't apologize for who you are," Max said. "I like that." His teeth flashed white behind the stubble of his beard.

She smiled back, warmth coursing through her. "Not a lot of people get that." It didn't escape her awareness that Max had deftly avoided answering her original question. "So what about Diana? What..."

The golden array filled the viewport and whatever she was about to ask fell away. "Wow," she breathed. A giant golden flower spun in a graceful, massive pirouette, reflecting enough sunlight that she actually felt warmth on her face from the viewport. Or maybe the warmth was just her imagination. As they approached, the petals of the flower tilted in unison and the center of the flower—a massive orbital ring itself—emerged and withdrew. The petals continued their angling, and then returned to their flat state, flexing inward and outward as they went. "It's beautiful," she said.

"And expensive as hell. But worth every bit." Max pulled back on the stick and the shuttle angled in for docking, diving below the delicate photovoltaic ballet towards the flower's stem.

Icarus flew too close to the sun and plummeted to earth when the heat melted his wax-coated wings. Was this humanity's Icarus moment? Stealing the power of the Gods for their use. There was a time when she would have scoffed. Now, a chill chip of ice lodged somewhere just under her heart, along with a pull towards darkness that oozed and seethed and wanted to swallow her whole.

Max told her that Sonny Solaverde was one of theirs. He could be trusted, Max had said, and that he knew what he was doing with solar panels. Max hadn't told her that Sonny stood a head taller than her, had golden eyes that could have melted chocolate in space, and a smile measured in kilowatts. She wouldn't have expected an engineer—and a Union one at that, he insisted on clarifying—to look like a viddy star and be, well, dazzling. Or for Helios station to be so dazzling itself.

“Oh, it's a working station,” Sonny said. “But its unique status as an Earth-independent entity requires us to have some flash.”

Flash was a long, narrow, curved room with wide, thick viewports on the outer wall, and seats on the inner curve, facing the viewports and the jewel displayed there. A full quarter of the giant sunflower that was the Helios Array filled the viewports, shining golden in the light from the sun. The petals of the array shifted, turned, and tilted according to computer calculations designed to catch solar energy and transfer it into storage cells at the flower's stem.

“Impressive, isn't it?” Sonny asked.

Lin nodded. “I wonder how much we defy the Gods by merely being out here like this.”

Sonny touched her hand. His fingers felt warm. “Where mankind goes, the Gods go, too.”

“Isn't that the truth,” she said fervently.

Sonny regarded her through the tops of his eyes. “You're troubled,” he said. “Max told me you're a Lunar, and that you aren't one of Diana's from birth.”

Perfectly normal conversation, she thought. Just chit-chatting about the Gods. No crazy people here. “I...stumbled across her, I guess.” She looked towards Helios's petals. “Irony, isn't it, since I've been worshipping her all my life.”

“It takes more faith to worship when you don't know for sure,” Sonny said gently. “Maybe if I could see what happened when you met her, I could offer you some comfort. If I may?” He held out his hands.

She nodded and closed her eyes. His large, broad hands settled on either side of her head and warmth flooded through her.

Memories rose in her mind as if pulled. She and her team of survey crew had gone overland, to the first domes ever built on the Moon. Up near the Moon's North Pole, long since abandoned after the mining effort had found more efficient facilities around the equatorial region. The old domes were sunk deep into the lunar surface and accessed through tunnels in the rock.

It was in one such tunnel that the rockfall had collapsed the doorway to the dome leading out. Lin and her team had been trapped. Rescue teams had been dispatched immediately, but the crew had split up to seek separate ways out. In their wanderings, Lin and her partners had stumbled onto one of the oldest domes, and the crumbling section of habitat had made something on the back of

her neck crawl in discomfort. Mostly buried under moon dust, the dome's dank gloom created shadows in shadows, until a blue-tinged paleness appeared out of the deepest of blacks.

“Who disturbs My sacred space?” the feminine voice demanded. Lin’s first sight of the Moon Goddess froze her in her tracks.

“Is that...” Marko breathed, his helmet fogging.

“I see it, too,” Greiling muttered.

The goddess flung a hand out and, even though it was memory now, Lin couldn't stop the cold-water fear that clenched her gut. Beside her, Greiling and Marko dropped, completely and suddenly unconscious.

The Goddess stared at her, blue flames in her eyes. “You resist my power?”

Lin's mouth was too dry to answer. Her mind couldn't quite wrap around the logic of seeing a woman dressed in a tunic, without suit or helmet, appear out of nowhere and pad barefoot around this old dome as if it were a summer day on Earth.

She hadn't needed to answer, though, as the Goddess crawled inside her head and read her thoughts. “Lost...separated from your friends...such a shame. You have invaded my sacred space uninvited, and for that you must make amends. But you know who I am and you keep the faith that honors me. Perform a single task for me, and the slate will be wiped clean.”

“Wh-what task?” Lin asked, her brain aching. She felt violated. Exposed. The Goddess wasn't supposed to be like this. So calculating and...cold.

“My Hound has gone astray. Find him and return him to me. You have seventy-two hours.”

“How? Where?” Lin asked. “I don't even know where to start.” *Maybe she saw inside my heart. Maybe she knew how little I believed.* Needless to say, that was quite changed right now.

Diana pulled a glittering mote from the crown encircling her head. A diamond chip on a spun-silver chain gleamed in her hand. “You know how to use a pendulum, do you not?”

“I've been a moonwitch all my life,” Lin said. She had just never expected the religious aspect of it to be quite so...literal. “I can work a pendulum.” The Oracles—the religious leaders of the Lunar colony—had trained her to use dowsing equipment to find concentrated pockets of trapped He-3 in Moon dust.

She took the bob from Diana. It was freezing, even through her spacesuit gloves. She slipped it into a cargo pocket on her belt. “What will happen to my friends?”

“They remain trapped until you fulfill your end of the bargain. You, however, will go to the jewels that gird the waist of Gaia, as scheduled.”

The jewels—she must have meant the ring-cities. Lin's throat tightened. “How did you...” Stupid question. The Goddess could easily have known that she'd been volunteered to represent the Moon at the LEO Independence parade. Mostly as a way to get her off the Moon while her little peccadillo with the city Councilman blew over.

She looked down towards the still forms of Greiling and Marko. The old stories started coming back to her. Diana hunted with a pack of hounds, and always shot her arrows true. And the Goddess had once turned a man into a stag for stumbling across her while bathing. But they were supposed to be just stories, different from the living Goddess they prayed to in Circles. “Okay,”

she said cautiously. "I'll find your dog..."

"Hound."

In the old stories, the Gods could be bargained with. "I'll find your Hound for you in exchange for the lives of these two and those of the other team."

"Done." Then, Diana had put her hand on Lin's chest. A cold blast had shot through her, through her suit and into her skin to lodge just under her breastbone, and she had slumped forward.

Sonny's gentle touch under her chin brought her back to herself. "Thanks," he said. "I think I can see some things."

Lin blinked. "What do I do now?" she asked.

He stroked her hair. "Go back to your shuttle and tell Max to wait for my signal. You'll know what to do then."

Taking comfort from other people wasn't something she engaged in. But in this case, she leaned into Sonny's touch. His golden eyes penetrated hers, and an ache tightened in her chest. He lifted a hand and placed his index finger against her forehead. "Be at peace, Lin Itoh," he said.

Her mind filled with warmth and light. Heat swelled in her, driving away the chill that seemed to take up permanent residence. Fantasies that always seemed to lurk beneath her consciousness surged to the surface of her mind. Lovers, men whose bodies had slid over hers and whose lips, tongues, and hands had found places that triggered her pleasure centers. The shiver of the brink of orgasm, and the heat of hyper-awareness. The satisfaction of being replete. The loving embrace of acceptance.

Her eyes snapped open. Sonny smiled down at her. "Damn," she breathed. "No wonder everybody and their sister wants to work on the Helios project."

Sonny laughed, and the sound of it filled her with visceral joy. "Go on, little moonwitch. Solar arrays don't run themselves."

Chapter 6

Sonny's idea of a signal was a wide-band broadcast that had news agencies all over the solar system scrambling to post the headline that the Helios Array's initial test run would occur when the array beamed its first collected energy at the Martian moon of Deimos, to a point on the Voltaire crater.

“That's our cue,” said Max. “Back to Deimos we go.”

This time, they downloaded maps and rented a pallet sled to drive along the access tunnel, bypassing the residential areas until they came to the giant refinery that took up most of the tiny moon. Lin's pendulum jerked and bobbed on its chain, directing them to a dripping wet cavern whose walls were slick with slime. Max elected to stay back in the tunnel and keep the sled running. “Just call me the getaway driver,” he said.

Beside her, Rex took her hand. She squeezed his in return. The need to give him comfort overrode her own need to shut herself away from others. Maybe it was those liquid brown eyes of his.

She paused. “Rex,” she said quietly, hand clenched in the hip pocket of her coveralls.

“Uh-huh?”

She looked down at the slime-slickened ground, and back up again. “I just wanted...” sudden nerves twisted in her stomach, threatening to rise in her throat. “Here,” she said, and thrust her hand out towards him.

Rex took her clenched hand in his and she opened her fingers. She'd been squeezing the pendulum so hard that the edges had formed depressions in her hand. He looked up at her, a question in his eyes.

She licked her lips. “You said that you thought I was Diana, the first time you saw me on the parade float.” She couldn't blame him for the confused look on his face, so she rushed on. “I'm not. Her, I mean. I'm not your mistress. Nobody is.”

He stared down at the chip of precious stone she'd placed in his hand, then back up at her.

“Thank you,” he said. “I think.”

Behind her, Max said quietly, “You have to give up your mistress to gain your freedom, Little Brother. Think you can do that?”

Rex looked from her to Max and back again. “Let's go, Lin.”

She walked beside her young lover, picking her way through the uneven floor of the tunnel, with only the most basic metal gridwork holding her magnetic shoes. Next to her, Rex placed his feet with more surety. After a jog in the wall, the tunnel suddenly opened up to a cavern and she stopped just short of colliding with Rex.

Lin's mouth went dry again as she saw the pale, beautiful Goddess waiting in the shadows. The urge to go to her and disappear into those shadows was almost too powerful to fight. Only the grip of Rex's hand in hers controlled her motions.

She stepped forward. “My Lady, your Arrow has found her Target.”

Diana's gaze burned as it raked over her. “So you have,” she said, stepping lightly over the debris. “My Hound has been a naughty boy, hasn't he?” She pulled one of the arrows from her quiver and caressed the fletching.

“I kept up my end of the bargain,” Lin said. The Goddess radiated an odd, alien aura.

“So you have,” Diana repeated. The shadows behind her...slithered. Even for Deimos, the air seemed much too humid. Less like air, and more like...breath. Like being inside a giant mouth. Just like that? “What's going to happen to Rex?” she asked.

“Rex?” The Goddess laughed, the sound mocking. “You speak as if he has a name. As if he deserves an identity.”

A chill chased up Lin's spine. Hey, she thought. The Goddess she knew and worshipped didn't have such a streak of viciousness. The hand holding the arrow extended towards Rex and he dropped to his knees. The Goddess stripped the compulsion from him and Lin could see it like a thin mist floating upwards. “Leave now,” Diana said. “You and I are through.”

Lin tore her eyes away from Rex. “My miners?” she asked.

“They'll find egress to the surface through a point southeast of the Lunar Prime Meridian. If they stay alive long enough to find it.”

Her chest felt too tight. She tried to remember what Circles were like, before she'd lost so much of her faith. The Goddess she'd known then hadn't felt so cold and uncaring.

Diana pointed the arrow at Rex. “I can't have a Hound who refuses to heel. I can't hunt a Pack with anything less than absolute loyalty to my will.”

We let kids into our Circles, she thought. We tell them that the Moon Goddess loves us all. That she smiles on us when we put flowers on the offering table. We tell them that Moon cakes are the Goddess's way of making us happy, even if they do make your teeth ache if you're over seven. We tell little girls that Diana's a fierce and independent Goddess, and they can be just like her if they want.

With a swift swipe, Diana brought the arrow down in a slashing motion across Rex's torso. He cried out and hunched over, blood dripping from between his fingers where the arrow's head had cut. Then his body began to change.

Lin's eyes widened as Rex's spine lengthened and his legs shortened. Muscle and bone and sinew moved underneath skin, twisting and reforming. Rex stopped screaming and whimpered. His nose lengthened. His teeth burst out through a jaw reshaped as if a massive hand had grabbed it and squeezed. Yet through it all, his eyes—those liquid, dark, expressive eyes—remained the same.

A low keening sounded through the cavern, and she realized it came from her own throat. Rex fell to one side, his body shaking with great heaves.

We call her our Mother. Mothers don't do this.

“Stop it!” she shouted. “Stop, please!” As stupid moves went, it ranked high. But giving voice to the wrongness of it spurred her to more than words. She flung herself at the Goddess, between her and Rex.

The touch of Diana's flesh against her own sent cold washing through her. Frost formed on her hands where she touched the Moon Goddess. Diana's gaze met hers and dark, alien fire burned in her eyes. "You dare..." she bared her teeth. "An Arrow does not turn on the Huntress!" "No, ma'am," she said, stomach quivering. "I'm no longer your Arrow." Her throat clogged. *I'm no longer your worshipper.* "And you are not the Goddess I once loved." Diana's hair burst into blue flame. "Get out! Ungrateful wretch!" She clenched a fist and Lin felt that place in her midsection, just under her breastbone, collapse. She fought for breath as she fumbled for the radio clipped to her hip. "Ma..." she gasped out. Come on, Max. Cold despair seeped over her, both from without and within. The shard of industrial diamond hanging around her neck frosted over. The cold radiated from the Goddess, snaking out along the warm, damp floor of the cavern, and mist rose from the reaction, fogging her view.

* * * *

She didn't know how long she had lain there on the floor, her eyes holding Rex's, before a warm, broad hand touched her back. Life and feeling flooded back into her. The mist swirled around her face, beams of dusty gold shooting through the pale, blank greyness. A form crouched down beside her. "Lin!" Max's voice held urgency to it. "Come on, Precious. Get up." She made a feeble grab for his duster. "Don't...call me...Precious." "We can talk about it later," he said. "Just get up now. There's fireworks gonna start." She rolled to one side. "Rex," she said. "He's..." The mist swirled again, bisected by beams of golden light. Small flares ignited and died in seconds where mist met light. Rex lay on the floor, still shaking, but his features returning to man instead of beast. She pushed herself up and looked away from him to see Sonny Solaverde's broad-shouldered body between them and the mad Moon Goddess. "I thought they were beaming energy here, not Sonny." Max helped Rex to his feet and she stepped over to his other side to support him. "He comes with the energy," he said. In front of them, Sonny spoke softly. "My Lady, your humble servant wishes only to assist you." Diana turned her cold gaze on Sonny. Lin fought to keep from flinching. But the Goddess simply turned her head to one side. "Do I know you? Why do you thrust yourself into My presence?" She leaned forward. "You have the stink of harsh light on you. Begone from here, for our light is cool and soothes the beasts of darkness." "Lovely Diana," Sonny said. "The sickness from the poison arrows of betrayal darkens your heart. Let me heal you of this affliction." The Goddess bristled. "I have no afflictions." Her hair flared. "Leave at once!" "That will do, Diana." Sonny's voice hardened. "You dare..." "You're damn right I dare. And it's nowhere near as offensive as whatever you've been up to with

the Titans!”

Diana's fist clenched, and the heat was sucked from the room again. Lin's teeth chattered. Diana swept her arm out and a wall of cold air shoved them back. Lin lost her balance and crumpled backwards. She lay on her back and gasped for air again, her body cataloguing bruises, aches, and pains it wasn't going to let her forget about.

Cracks appeared in Sonny's skin, and light bled out from between them. Lin watched, at first in horror, and then through the insides of her eyelids with awe, as Sonny's skin burst entirely and the fiery visage of the sun God stepped out from his human shell. “I should have seen that one coming,” she muttered.

“Sister,” Sonny—hell, Apollo, because who was she kidding—said, reaching out a hand to the enraged Diana. “End this. Now.”

“This isn't your affair, Brother,” Diana hissed. “My Hounds have betrayed me, and they must suffer for defying me. I *will* be respected. I am an Olympian!”

“And as such are bound by the laws of justice,” Apollo replied. “And the laws of non-intervention outside your own bailiwick.”

“Does that mean she could do this if we were on the Moon?” Lin asked, peeking out from between her fingers.

The Sun God's hair flickered and waved like plasma flame as he shook his head. “Olympian justice forbids us to take direct vengeance on mortals who have wronged us. It's not our way.”

“Not so heavy on the smiting, huh?” That was a relief.

“Not heavy on the entire intervention thing, either. At least, not on Earth. Now that mankind has followed us into our exile, the laws are somewhat...fluid again.” Once again, he was the amicable project engineer, in spite of the change in appearance. His features shifted though, and his next words came unmistakably from the Sun God. “But the laws against intervention from the Titans are sacrosanct.” He clenched his fist and a ball of blinding light formed. Lin looked away. “And the insult given by a Titan's presumption to sully my sister with its presence shall not go unpunished.” The light grew until she was forced to turn away.

Light this bright held no shadow. There was no escape from it. Closing her eyes simply filtered the blaze through thin flesh membranes. Sonny leaned down close to Lin and murmured, “You might want to take your friends and get out of here for a bit.”

Eyes streaming, Lin nodded. “Thank you.” She searched for Rex and Max by touch, and when she found them, she grabbed onto whatever limbs she could get a grip on and started dragging. Just as she turned away from the two deities, the blinding afterimage on the backs of her eyes burned the form of Apollo, plunging his arm into his sister's luminous body and pulling forth something squirming.

Her muscles burned. Her eyes ached. Her heart pounded against her ribcage and she thought about nothing more than getting the hells out of there before things got really, really ugly. In the blinding light, she heard a high-pitched, inhuman squeal that seemed to stretch on and on, digging into her skull and squeezing her brain.

She found the sled by touch and sagged against it. She felt one of the men stir. “Lin?” Rex's voice

echoed in the blackness. “What happened?”

Her throat ached. “Sonny. He—he's fighting for his sister's honor.” It was as good a summary as any. “Can you help me get Max up into the sled? It's too dark and I can't find my glowstick.”

“Oh. Oh, Lin.” His voice sounded sympathetic. “Here,” he said, uncurling her fingers from what she assumed was Max's body. “Let me.”

“Is he...”

“No! No, he's alive.” She heard Rex scuffling, his movements echoing off the cavern walls. “He's just a heavy bastard when he's out cold.”

“How about you get the sled fired up so we can get some light in here, then,” she said. *Max is alive. Rex is alive. And I'm alive. Miracles do happen.*

“Um, Lin?”

“What?”

“Nevermind. Let me get you into the sled. I'll drive this time.” She felt his arms go underneath her legs and across her shoulders and he lifted her like a child. “Can you hold onto Max for me?”

“Sure,” she murmured. “Mmm. You smell nice.” She rested her head on his chest. “Is it okay if I keep you for awhile?” she asked. “I know you should probably find a girl your own age and everything, but until you do...” she trailed off.

“I think I'd like to stay with you,” he murmured, setting her down on the sled seat. “I think we both would.”

Both of them? Long term? Hells...why not? “I'll try not to be so bossy.”

“I kind of like being bossed around by you.”

“Then it's settled,” she said, sagging over Max's body. She'd never suspected how much tension she must have been carrying over him. Under her ass, the sled's anti-grav generator hummed to life. With the day she'd had, it wasn't hard to slip into an exhausted sleep in the velvet darkness that no longer threatened.

* * * *

In the old stories, humans who dare come too close to the Gods never do so without price. Lin awoke from her nap on the back of the sled to darkness; and Rex's gentle but firm hold around her shoulders when the medic informed her that her eyes had sustained too much damage to repair. There was a chance, the medic said, that her eyes would heal enough for surgery, if she was lucky.

After the medic left the room, Rex sat on the bed next to her and took her hand in his. She felt a weight on her other side, and a callused hand picked up her free one. “Max,” she said.

“That'd be me,” he said. “I'm sorry about your eyes.”

She shook her head. “No. It's right, I think. We're not meant to look upon the Gods, and something had to be traded.” She lowered her head and squeezed their hands. “But if I stumbled on Diana in the polar dome, and Apollo spends his spare time managing solar energy...” she trailed off. “Just who else is doing what?”

It was a question for another time. She reached out for the touch of her two lovers, finding

comfort in the warmth of human touch as it seeped into her, filling her even at the cold center where Diana's pull had once lodged. Replacing it with the warmth of connection.

The End

About the Author:

Xandra Gregory writes ultra-hot erotic romances about extraordinary lovers in exotic settings. When she's not galaxy-hopping through the Civilized Worlds, she lives in the American Midwest, in the middle of a cornfield, which everyone knows is the best place for starships to land without getting harassed by the government.

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