

Methuselah's Daughter: Part 3

Childhood's End

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

-Genesis 4:16

Prelude

Wisconsin Territory, November 1835 CE

Finding my way back along the trail was harder than I had anticipated, although I had done my best to note our path the day before. As morning progressed, the day failed to lighten, angry black clouds casting a shroud across the sky while the wind blew from the north, steadily rising. A light snow began to fall and swiftly increased to a heavy downfall, smothering all in sight with deadly beauty. I was suddenly grateful we had left the plains behind the week before; such a storm in open ground would be brutal beyond imagining. As it was I did pause to wrap myself in my heavy cloak and an extra blanket, and to rub the horse's legs.

Whatever marks there might have been for the trail were soon lost to me and I navigated by keeping the icy north wind to my back and attempting to discern some clearer path amongst the trees. By this time in my existence I had developed a sense of direction that I trusted intimately, but even so I found myself forced to backtrack more than once. As the snow fell harder I sometimes became confused, forced to guess what direction to take based on nothing more than intuition. For intuition was now my only hope.

The world began to slow. I had been on the trail for what felt like better than half a day and my stomach protested, but I was unwilling to stop. The aching fear that had driven me earlier was now a numbness creeping inward, my mind wandering, unfocused as the horse picked its own path amongst the trees. I wanted to stop, to just take a moment to rest, but I knew the danger of that and forced myself to press onward.

I abruptly noticed that I was gasping and that painful tears had frozen on my face. I angrily ground them from my cheeks and wrapped my scarf tighter around my face. Vainly, I had been watching ahead for any sign of smoke. If Jeremy were alive he would have kept the fire burning, and my eyes were desperate for that sight, but the north wind and the driving snow made such evidence impossible to discern. Sudden violent shivers threatened to throw me from my mount and I clung to the saddle in desperation even as I felt my hope fading like a physical thing within me.

More terrifying notions worked their way into the muddled flow of my thoughts. I had found myself in such winters before, losing my bearings and not finding my way to people before spring. I worried constantly that the horse might collapse and die in the cold, making me more likely to find myself lost in the wilderness—and knowing full well should that happen I would never see my Jeremy again.

This I would not, could not allow. Anger at that thought lent me some energy, refocusing my mind as I prodded the gelding forward once more. Yet I fell again into that almost dream like state of confusion, broken only by more violent shivering as the temperature seemed to plunge. Eventually all I could do was to cling tightly to the forward edge of the saddle, my body unable to muster the energy to move or even shiver any longer. A very small part of me cried out as I felt a curious sensation of warmth ooze through me, a kind of peaceful calm and comfort. A gentle urge to lie down and take my ease began to overcome me.

The horse suddenly stopped again, and I noted it with the calm detachment of the hopeless. I knew I could not make myself prod the animal further. Something wailed inside me, trying to break

through that thick fog of exhaustion and defeat, but I paid it no heed, instead focusing on the odd swirling of the snow as the wind pushed it before me. My vision, already blurred, began to contract until I was staring down a long dark tunnel to a brilliant white landscape of wind-driven snow piling up against... what?

The world snapped back into focus, my body wracked with pain. I had fallen from the saddle, landing upon my back. As I gazed up into the falling snow I realized my view was cut off by something. My thoughts were so slow... idly, I speculated. It could not be the horse, for it was too straight, and it came to a corner... the cabin roof.

All motion was pain and my body began to shake, forcing me to curl in upon myself, hugging the pain to me, letting it force energy into my limbs as I held the darkness at bay. My arms and legs screamed in protest such that I cried out, but I pulled myself to my feet and staggered towards the front of the cabin, plowing my way through snow drifts, some three feet deep, pulling the horse behind me, my wrist still wrapped up in the reins.

I cast my gaze upward. I saw no smoke from any fire. In that moment, I knew, I knew in my heart he was dead, my Jeremy was gone. I screamed in rage. I could not feel my hands or feet as I pulled at the door's lever. With another shriek at the sky I forced the door open, nearly falling through it as I struggled to free myself from the tangled reins. I left the shivering gelding standing in the doorway as I crawled, weeping in frustration and rage, toward the unmoving blanket-wrapped figure on the bed. But as I reached his side his eyes opened and focused slowly upon me.

I became dimly aware that the nearby fire was banked but glowing, though I could not feel its warmth. The world began closing into a tunnel surrounding Jeremy's face. He stared at me, and I stared at him.

"Elaine...?" he said, his voice unbelieving.

It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard in all my existence. I still could not feel anything, but I slowly pulled myself up onto the bed and buried my face in his chest. I hugged him fiercely.

"Never. I'll never let you go. Never..." I murmured it like a prayer.

"Elaine... my God you're so cold... how..."

"Foolish man," I whispered through chattering teeth as I drank in his smell and hugged him even tighter. "Don't you understand... you cannot die without me by your side?"

Chapter 16

—[Begin Journal entry]—

Pennsylvania, January 2005 CE

It was a hectic fortnight, first arriving at home to the mothering fuss of Edna's ministrations and dealing with Joshua's dismay over my injuries, then the sudden desire to host the family at the house for Christmas and the furious pace of preparations for that. Then the day itself, with so many people: it was with a sense of relief that I finally collapsed into the overstuffed chair by the fireplace in the smoking room.

The urge to abandon this mad desire to tell my story to the world was strong as I felt the reality of all that had transpired withdrawing from me as some weird fantasy that could not truly touch me. Only the aching of my left arm and the stiffness in my left knee gave the lie to those thoughts, but as I sat by the warmth of the fire it was easy to indulge myself. For a few precious hours I thrust the outer world aside.

I awoke with a start to find Edna perched in the matching chair across from me. A pillow and a blanket had appeared about me, the fire was but ashes in the hearth and sunlight streamed through the open doorway from the windows in the next room. I sat up straight as Edna laughed quietly.

"You are amused?" I asked.

"I don't think I've ever walked in on you when you were sleeping. You snore, did you know that?"

I shook my head, but I was not really listening. My mind was still in the grip of dreams: dreams of the sea, of longing and desperation. I pulled myself free of them and forced a grin.

"I like sleeping by the fire. What time is it?"

"Just after eight. Thought I'd come by and have breakfast—hardly expected to find you lying about..."

Edna had actually had the cook get started on breakfast, which was just as well since my belly was protesting loudly despite the gorging from the day before. Still, it was less insistent of late and I took some pleasure in that. I resent being a slave to my appetite.

The Breakfast Room was bright with morning sunshine and delightfully warm, the scent of pancakes, bacon, ham and eggs along with fresh coffee making it nearly irresistible. The furniture was all original, as Joshua had finally had it taken from storage and restored while I was away. I suppose a collector would be scandalized to see us actually *use* it to eat breakfast, but Edna and I both long ago sat about this table, in these very chairs, and it was good to use them again.

“Joshua won’t tell me a thing about that foundation of yours,” Edna sighed between picks at her scrambled eggs, “He treats it like some sort of Great Secret.”

“Well, it is, and it isn’t,” I said. “It’s a scholarship fund. I am setting up a relationship with the University to put selected students through undergraduate and graduate study programs.”

“You’re turning into a philanthropist?” she seemed both surprised and pleased at that thought.

“Yes... but it is more complex than that,” I sighed then, realizing I ought to explain myself, but not truly wishing to. Edna watched me through the small round lenses of her glasses, waiting. “I am trying to build a base of support. People who will know me, know of me, and perhaps have some small influence, either culturally or politically.”

“That’ll take some time...”

“Decades. I need to be careful how I proceed, choose my candidates with discretion. I’m planning on offering full scholarships through the Master’s level, Doctoral in some cases, and perhaps have some of the students live here in this house.”

“And you’re going to do what? Just drop it in their lap? ‘Oh, by the way, I thought you should know I’m immortal?’”

“For the last thirty or so years I’ve known I needed to do something, Edna. I’ve just been avoiding the inevitable. This modern world, with its identity cards, its birth certificates, its computer networks and such... I’ve felt it constricting about me like a noose. But I’ve only been working on this plan for about a year and am making it up as I go, as best I can. This latest accident only proves that... indeed if I’d had this accident only a few years ago instead of now I can’t imagine how much less prepared I would have...”

Suddenly I felt a bit dizzy, my pulse racing. My throat felt as if it had been filled with ocean water and I could not breathe. I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. Edna was looking at me owlshly through her glasses, her face impassive. She was used to me being flighty around her, as she was the only one I trusted to talk to me when I became distraught. But with as much iron as I could muster I forced myself to calm down.

“I am making this up as I go, I admit,” I said, “But I made a decision a year ago that I am going to make my stand, and these latest events only emphasize the fact that I’ll have to do so sooner or later. I would like that to be here, in this place. I do not wish to leave this house, this life. I’ve had my fill of that. At some point there will be questions. When they are asked, I shall answer them, fully and honestly. By that time I hope to have some people I can rely upon to help me.”

“So you’re basically planning to make a lot of friends?”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re writing a book?”

“Yes.”

She harrumphed and looked a bit put off, but did not say anything.

“Please, Edna, don’t be difficult.” I smiled cajolingly, “Your support would mean a great deal to me in fact.”

A faintly sardonic smile creased her face and she sat back a bit. “Three thousand five hundred years and that’s the best you could come up with?”

“If you have a suggestion I am quite willing to listen, but you have to look at this from my perspective: a long term approach really is the safest strategy, yes?”

“Oh I suppose so, but...” she paused, then heaved a slow, heavy sigh. “Oh, I just hate the idea of missing out on all that excitement.”

I was confused for a moment before it fully sank in what she was saying. But obviously, no, she would not be here for most of it. Suddenly, my throat closed again and the room became a blur.

I hate this. I hate feeling so weak, so helpless, but could think of nothing else to do or say.

My left hand was still ensconced in its plastic brace and, but suddenly I felt her gnarled right hand resting upon it. I put my right on top of hers, sandwiching it between the brace and my good hand. I blinked furiously until finally I could see again, and I found my voice.

“I’m sorry too, Edna. I wish you could be. I’ll share everything I can with you.”

“Oh I shouldn’t have said that, Jenny. It’s excitement enough just to know you. I always thought great-grandmother probably made you up as a fairy tale. Just knowing you’s been the cat’s pajamas. And if the world doesn’t like your plan, why you’ll just come up with a new one. If people don’t like that, they can stuff it.”

“You are so like your great-grandmother Catherine,” I said with a laugh.

“It’s a fine plan, Jenny, as fine as any plan could be. You’re going to lick this problem just like all the others and take on the world.”

I sighed. “I hope you’re right, Edna. I hope you’re right, although this business of my accident may render it moot. The world might well come crashing down on me sooner than I had hoped, and you may just see some excitement after all.”

I was caught in an emotional maelstrom, whipsawing between happiness, despair, anxiety and resolve. Events also conspired to complicate matters. Just after New Year’s Day Edna’s son, Joshua, called and asked if we could talk regarding some issues that had arisen of late. He seemed unwilling to discuss it on the phone so I made the trip into town to his office, having decided I needed to get out of the comfortable, seductively cloistered halls of my home.

His office was in an historical building near the center of town, one that I had had dealings in long ago, and it was with some stirring of the raging anxieties that had plagued me that I mounted the steps and made my way to his suite. The receptionist was new, but she had obviously been informed I was coming and ushered me straight into Joshua’s study. He was meeting with a client and would be delayed a short while.

The study itself brought more memories to the fore: in that very room, some one hundred seventy years earlier I had confronted Jeremy's sister over her suspicions surrounding her brother and me. That little drama had played out satisfactorily, so perhaps what was coming would as well? I took the time to peruse the books lining the shelves, mostly old law journals, encyclopedias and other reference materials, but also some interesting asides. For instance, he had an entire collection of Twain first editions that should have been in a museum under glass.

"Sorry for the delay, I had a mini-crisis to dispose of."

I turned from the books and smiled at him as he strode into the room. Joshua was semi-retired, still handling legal issues for the McAllister Trust and selected clients. One would think that in such circumstances he might be somewhat informal in his dealings, yet still he wore a suit and tie every day without fail. A tall man, he had a generous head of silver hair, neatly coiffed of course, and piercingly deep blue eyes. He was one of those ruggedly handsome types whom the passing of years served to make more dignified and beautiful, and he retained the vitality of his youthful days, his back straight and his stride purposeful. Combined with the warm resonance of his voice he was an imposing figure in any courtroom. He could have been a legal giant, yet he had been content to remain in this town, tending to family and friends.

I rather admired him for that.

"I apologize for being abrupt about this," he said after we had exchanged pleasantries and settled down at the table in the study, "but I need to ask you something. What happened in Denver?" I could immediately sense his anxiety in asking that question, as well as a sense of shame from him. Clearly he knew something that troubled him.

I deliberately fixed my gaze on his eyes and said, "I was injured in a traffic accident. I told you this. Why do you ask?"

He sighed and sat back in his chair, putting his hands together, elbows on his chair's arms and fingers steepled as he frowned slightly. I watched him as he made a decision, had second thoughts regarding it, then decided to forge ahead.

"You are an enigma, Mary Genevieve Baker."

I merely nodded. He gazed at me, clearly uncomfortable, but determined to proceed. Despite the sudden thudding of my heart I forced myself to relax, shifting my posture slightly, opening up in a non-verbal invitation for him to continue.

"My mother has some pretty odd notions regarding you. I've been ignoring them mostly, because she's getting far on in years and it seems harmless enough. But there are other things."

"You have had me investigated?" I asked. I knew the answer to that, but it seemed best to let him reassure me.

"No, not beyond the checking I did when you first arrived. I have to wonder, though. If I did, what would I find?"

I let that question sit for a moment as I regarded him. Joshua was a man of very rational motivations. He was so thoroughly un-superstitious that he might have been an atheist had his

religious upbringing not been so well rounded in his youth. Given those facts it was clear something drastic must have happened to bring us to this point.

“Were you thorough in your investigations you would find you had more questions than you had answers. What is prompting this?”

“I’ve been getting phone calls from Denver, a reporter named Sara Coles.”

“I don’t know that name,” I said, but my little internal alarm bell was clanging away to beat the band. A reporter could not be anything but bad.

“Well, she certainly knows yours. It seems there’s some political scandal in the making in Denver, and the father of the girl who hit your car may be right in the thick of it.”

“Interesting,” was the only response I offered.

“Now, at first I assumed she had to be mistaken. You see, she described an accident where the woman who was hit... well, she left half of her left leg in the car when they finally freed her. She was in critical condition. Double amputee, head injuries, comatose... really horrible.”

“You say ‘at first’. And now?”

“HIPAA rules are pretty strict about medical records, but you provided me power of attorney for matters related to the Trust, and you carry medical insurance through us...”

I let that statement just sit on the table as I read his face, his body and the motions of his hands. He was in a state of suspended disbelief and wondering if I were involved in some sort of fraud. He wanted me to give him something he could use to put this set of seemingly contradictory facts into a perspective that not only made sense, but preserved his understanding of what was possible and what was not.

“What has your mother told you about me?” I finally asked. His head drooped as I said it and for the first time I saw a hint of true unease in him. Up until now he had been looking for a logical explanation. My question told him that whatever he got from me was unlikely to make this any less unusual.

“My mother...” he sighed, “She hasn’t told me anything, but she’s implied a lot. I think she believes you are some kind of reincarnation of Elaine McAllister. I think she believes you were sent here to save the house, maybe even save the family, though from what I can’t hardly say.”

Another long silence ensued as I thought about what he had said. I considered lying, building a careful construct of half-truths to sate his curiosity and ease his concerns. He was old enough that I would need to keep up the façade for only a handful of decades at most. The idea was surprisingly distasteful.

“You are not entirely correct in your assessment of your mother’s beliefs. She does not believe me to be the reincarnation of Elaine McAllister.” I raised my hand and paused, as he had been about to say something, “Please, it is time for you to listen. Your mother is in possession of a bit of knowledge, a rather closely guarded secret. She believes that Elaine McAllister was an entity, ancient and immortal. This immortal creature touched your family for a brief span of years in the mid-

nineteenth century, and then moved on after the man she had loved passed away. Your mother believes I am that creature.”

Joshua’s eyes never wavered from my face. I saw him turn the words I had spoken over in his mind, parsing them carefully with his lawyer’s practiced eye to tease out what I had said and, more importantly from his viewpoint, what I had not said.

“You have... encouraged this belief?”

I laid my hands on the table in front of me, leaned forward a bit, and looked him in the eye, my face and voice calm.

“Joshua, your mother is correct.”

After I said that it took all the self-control I could muster not to break out in a nervous giggle, or simply get up and leave the room. I had not been prepared for this though in the back of my mind I had known it was a possibility. Joshua was a good man and an excellent lawyer. He had trusted me based on his personal instincts, but at some point his natural caution would have forced him to look more closely at my past. All the work with the Trust and setting up the Foundation had kept him occupied to the point of forestalling such a moment, but could not hold it off forever.

Joshua stood, still looking at me, and then he turned and walked to the window, gazing out at the street below with his hands clasped behind his back. He made a couple of abortive starts at saying something, each ending in a protracted sigh.

Finally, without turning to face me, he said, “You’ve placed me in a very awkward position. Legally and morally.”

“Explain, please.”

He turned to face me again, but he remained by the window and his demeanor had changed markedly. His eyes were now calculating: he looked upon me as a possible adversary and he chose his words with the caution of one long accustomed to avoiding providing his foes with anything of value.

“Legally, I am forced to consider what, if any, action I should take to have you removed as executrix of the McAllister Trust. Morally, I must decide if you are a danger to my mother and my family.”

I nodded in acknowledgement of those positions. He was waiting for me to protest or to retract, but I knew I had evidence on my side. At the moment he was ignoring the contradictions which had led him to ask the questions which in turn brought us to this point, but he could not do so for long. I would not permit it.

“Let me ask you this: have I done anything, *anything*, to lead you to believe I have any malicious intent?”

“Until this admission of... fantasy? No. You may have no malicious intent at all, but if I believe you to be... unstable...”

“Enough,” I interrupted him, “Joshua, you still have questions which have no easy answers. I suggest you tend to those, for the answers will help you to draw the proper conclusions.” I took one of the legal pads stacked neatly in the center of the table and drew a pen from my purse. I wrote down Dr. Omar’s name, address and phone number, then slid it across the table and stood.

“That is the name and number of the surgeon who cared for me in Denver. He in turn can put you into contact with my other doctors. You will need my written permission to gain full access to my files. You can fax any required forms to me at the house and I will gladly sign them. Do what you do best, Joshua. Gather your evidence, and then weigh it carefully. Then we shall speak again.”

—[*End Journal entry*]

Chapter 17

Ann Arbor, February 2005 CE

She'd switched to a new hotel when she came back in January. "To avoid attracting too much attention," she said. I didn't think much about it, but I did notice that we had some trouble working together. The first few days, whenever I'd ask her a direct question, she seemed agitated and she'd find a way to change the subject whenever we got to anything that seemed important. She acted like she wanted to talk about anything but herself. She'd chat about the weather, or the hotel staff, or business, or the technical issues in writing and organizing a book, or philosophy, or even about me. Her insights on politics and philosophy were especially interesting to me, and she was very seductive that way. More than once I went home after a day of very pleasant and entertaining conversation only to realize we really hadn't gotten any work done.

At first I figured she was paying so we'd talk about whatever she wanted. But finally I decided I'd better ask her about it. When hinting a few times didn't work I just asked her flat out: "We really aren't getting anywhere on the project. Is there a reason?"

She looked at me blankly for a moment, started to speak, then stopped. "You're right," she finally said. "I've been having conflicts with my family in Pennsylvania, and I've wanted to distract myself from stressful conversations. Talking about myself doesn't come naturally to me and it's especially difficult in these circumstances."

"Well, we don't have to..." I started, but she gestured gently with her hand. We both knew she didn't have to do this if she didn't want to.

"I suppose you should know that I have been telling you things I have very rarely told anyone. In some cases things I've never told anyone, not even... well, not anyone."

"Well, okay," I said. "Is that why you get combative with me sometimes?"

She surprised me by blushing a little, looking embarrassed. "Dwelling on the past has long been something I've viewed as a bad habit. It would be so easy to simply wish for what has been to be again." She stopped and shook her head. "My memories are very personal, very private things, and many of them are like treasures I bring out only now and then, to be handled carefully. They sometimes become faded and worn if I touch them too much, and there were times when I was younger when I would pine for them so much that..." She paused again. There was only a trace of sadness in her face, but her eyes were distant. Then she focused on me again. "I nearly chose not to return to this project. I cannot begin to express how painful this is, both the recollection and the telling."

Her voice was steady, her jaw set, but I finally started to feel like I understood her. "I guess I can relate," I said. "I love dogs, but... I still get choked up about one I had as a kid. He died a long time ago and I've lost a few since then." I said.

Her eyes narrowed and she stared at me for a minute. "Yes, and then you say things like that," she said evenly. "Is that how you suppose I see people?" she asked, an edge creeping into her voice. Anger suddenly glistened in the corners of her eyes.

I stammered a bit. "Hey, Princess, I didn't mean..." I started.

She suddenly gave a loud sigh, made a show of rubbing her face and stretching, and then smiled. "I understand," she said. Then she stood up. "It's getting late. I'll see you in the morning and I promise we'll get back to work first thing," she said. "But I'm tired now, if you don't mind."

Her change of expression was kind of startling, but I got up. "Sure thing," I said. "Hey I really didn't mean to..."

"I know," she said softly. "I'm just having my period and it has me edgy. We'll talk more tomorrow."

"Wait, you're on your...?"

She chuckled, and patted my arm gently. "Yes, I have them, but quite rarely. In any case... tomorrow, please?"

"Okay. Good night."

The next morning started off on an even odder foot. She answered the door slowly, talking on her cell phone. She was usually formal enough under those circumstances to at least put the phone down, but today she just opened the door with a small headset clipped to her ear, nodded at me, then turned and went back to the suite's large sofa to sit. As she kept talking, she picked up her revolver, absently loading and unloading it. I noticed she was using her left hand now, which was almost skeletal looking, but obviously working. She barely looked at me as she talked.

"And you told her what? Yes... All right. ... So then she...? Yes. Do you know anyone at her paper? I see." She went on like this for some time, mostly talking in monosyllables. She glanced over at me a couple of times, but mostly stared at the wall as she talked. Finally, she said she'd call back later and hung up. Then she just sat staring at the floor, fiddling with her gun.

"Getting ready to shoot someone?" I asked, laughing a little.

She looked up at me blankly and then down at her pistol. She slowly put it in the holster behind her back and flipped the tail of her blouse over it.

"No," she said. "That would probably just complicate things." She said it flatly with a distant look in her eyes. "Besides, I've rather come to like you people," she added, cryptically.

"What the heck happened?" I laughed, a little nervously.

She was almost staring through me as she responded. "A reporter has been calling my law offices, asking questions," she said, her voice still flat. "About my hospital stay and the man whose daughter struck my car. We had to tell her we had no comment, but apparently she's been asking questions around the hospital as well." She stopped a moment and then focused on me again. "That was Dennis... Professor Novak. She called him as well."

"Well, I thought you were kind of figuring on something like this, what with all the attention you drew to yourself."

Suddenly she came alive and looked annoyed. "All the attention I...? I was doing everything in my power to bury this!"

“Well, yeah, but in a pretty loud way.”

She made a disgusted noise. “Well, Dennis won’t talk to her and my people stonewalled her, but if she keeps calling I may have to deal with her more forcefully. In any case I suppose you’re right. This just emphasizes that if I’m not to flee, I must do my best to tell my tale in my own way, yes? I just....”

Her voice trailed off and she covered her forehead with her hand. “I know I said we’d work today, but it’s hard for me not to feel distracted. What with the calls from Edna every day, and the fighting with Joshua, and now Dennis being harassed by this reporter... I don’t know how much I can concentrate right now.”

“Who’s Edna and Joshua?” I asked.

“Edna... Edna is my niece.”

“Your...?”

“Well, after a fashion.” She smiled, and relaxed a little into a fond look. “Some time ago, I adopted her great-grandmother. I don’t usually do that since I don’t like to have children think of me as a relative, but this was different.” She paused. “Well in any case it feels silly to call her my great-great-granddaughter, so as a sort of a joke between us she sometimes calls herself my niece. I don’t mind.” She paused, and smiled a little wider. “No, I don’t mind a bit.” She almost whispered that last.

“So you’re fighting with her?”

“No, she’s fighting with her son, Joshua. Over me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Her son is an attorney. The family owns a trust which I now have partial control over. He also acts as my attorney, or has been. But because of this reporter... she’s been calling for three weeks.... Joshua started asking questions and, well, I was forced to confide in him. Up until now only Edna has known. He wants to resign as my attorney and wrest control of the family trust from me, but Edna won’t let him. Now he’s having genetic tests run on me, but otherwise thinks I’m a lunatic. Edna and he are having epic battles over it. That’s partly why I’m back here: Edna urged me to make myself scarce while she deals with her son.” She paused, and sighed again. “It’s good to have allies, though I wonder if I’m not simply hurting these people, mucking about in lives I shouldn’t be, all just so I can face my fear of mankind.” She stared at the floor, looking both guilty and sad.

“Hey, I don’t think you need to be as afraid as you are, Zsallia,” I said.

“I think...” she trailed off, then looked up at me. “You’re getting that look again,” she said suddenly. Oddly enough, she still looked guilty.

“What look?”

“You’re feeling sorry for me. I’ve been letting you get away with that for too long. You need to know what you’re dealing with in me.”

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea,” I said.

“No.” She sighed. “No, I’ve indulged my self-pity too much in talking to you. You think you know me but you don’t.”

“Okay. What don’t I know?”

She sighed again. “Where to begin?” She looked tense and uncomfortable. “I’m just not sure.”

“Well, how about we take a walk and stretch that leg of yours and you can think about it? How’s it doing anyway?”

“It’s aching. A walk would be nice. Do you know some place with trees? Not a lot of people?”

“Grab your jacket,” I said.

A standing joke in Michigan is that if you don’t like the weather, just wait a few minutes and it’ll change. Snow in April isn’t unusual, but neither are warm days in February. Today was a beautiful Spring-like day, barely sweater weather. There wasn’t even much snow on the ground, although a snowstorm was predicted for the weekend. Like I said, Michigan’s funny.

I’ve walked the Barton Park trails a few times. We weren’t the only people out that day, but it was the middle of a workday so it was still pretty deserted. Even though she still had her cane, she wasn’t much using it, and she set a brisk pace. I found myself constantly falling behind, which was funny since I’m a good bit taller than she. It was like she had all this pent up energy and needed to burn it off before she could slow down. When she finally slacked off I noticed that there wasn’t anyone else in sight. I figured that was maybe what she wanted because she finally relaxed. All the nervous energy in her seemed to evaporate. Then she was smiling and strolling, taking in the scenery.

“In the city too long?” I asked

“Yes, I’m not really fond of urban living, even in a city as beautiful as Ann Arbor. I resign myself to it out of convenience, but nothing can force me to truly enjoy it.”

“Well, a little walk in the park is good, then.”

“Absolutely. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“I haven’t had a real stretch in a while either, what with all the writing and traveling. Besides, it beats the hell out of sitting in that hotel pretending to work. And if you’re going to go for a walk it’s better not to be out here all alone.”

She grinned at me then, her right hand patting her backside. It made me a little uncomfortable, but I just nodded. Not that I’m afraid of guns, but she was very casual about carrying it, and the Ann Arbor PD would probably be a mite peeved if they caught her with it. But these were her choices.

“You worry too much,” she quipped, “and I’m not an easy one to intimidate, so most muggers and rapists would give me a pass.”

“Yeah, I believe it. But you’re not all armor-plated. I’ve seen you scared.”

“Really?”

I squinted up at the midday sun, “Well, you looked it a little on the phone today.”

She gave an incredulous look: raised eyebrow, expressionless face.

I laughed a little, shaking my head. “It’s kind of what we were talking about before: we’ve talked a lot about your past, your life. What was good, what was hard. You’ve never said anything about what scares you though. You keep hinting at all this darkness and badness, but you never talk about it. Whenever I see you getting close to anything like that you just bring the conversation to an end. And then, I get just a glimpse of it today and...”

“Yes, well, that is what I wanted to talk to you about.” She was quiet for a little bit, but I just waited. “You feel sorry for me, don’t you?” She was keeping her voice even, but it had an odd edge to it. I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure how to respond. She stopped in the middle of the trail and just looked at me, then smiled ruefully and said, “Can you smell the river? I’m pretty sure this trail will take us to it.”

Without another word she turned off the main trail, following a thinly worn track to the west. It obviously wasn’t maintained by the Parks Department. I shrugged and followed her. The little path drove through some trees and snaked through some underbrush. It was a little rough since there hadn’t been a lot of people down here, but it wasn’t too tough to follow. It opened out on the riverbank.

Water swept past some large granite boulders that jutted out into the riverbed, making a nice rushing noise. She stood there for a bit, shaking her head at a collection of empty beer cans and bottles on the ground, but something else was going on inside her. Then she looked up at me and gestured towards some big rocks. Together we scrambled up the one closest to the bank. She settled down on top of a flat rock, with her arms wrapped around her legs, chin on her knees, staring out across the river.

“It’s not really fear,” she finally offered. “It’s more akin to shame. It’s also been self-indulgence as I’ve been letting you try to sympathize with me. That’s a nice feeling. And you may not realize it, but I do care what you think of me. It’s not something that I worry over, but... in truth I’m no saint my friend, and no innocent.”

“You think I’ll stop liking you?” I asked, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice. After the past two months it seemed pretty juvenile, especially coming from her.

“Not quite,” she replied, turning her head to one side to look at me. It was almost pretty, except for the cold seriousness in her eyes. “What I am afraid of is that you’ll come to see me as dangerous. Wicked even. I don’t like that. But perhaps you should, and I don’t like that either. You might even come to fear me.”

“Fear you? I already do, at least a little. You’re something way beyond my experience. You’re rich and maybe even a little capricious. And,” I grinned, “you pack a wallop.”

She smiled faintly at that, but her eyes didn’t smile with her lips. For a second I wondered if she’d had more than one reason for bringing that pistol with her today. But as I thought it, she stiffened.

“You know you’re in no danger here, today. If you don’t know that, then... then we have little more to talk of now. Or ever.”

“It would help if you’d just tell me what’s on your mind. Why would I fear you?” As I said it I reached into my pocket and produced the recorder, deliberately turning it on.

She looked at it, then back at me, before turning her gaze out across the river again.

“I am a murderer,” she said, her voice expressionless.

“You’ve killed people. I can’t imagine living as long as you without being forced to do that at some point.”

“I’ve killed people out of convenience. I’ve killed... I’ve murdered because it felt good to kill, because I didn’t see any reason not to. I’ve killed men mostly, but also women... sometimes people whose only mistake was to encounter me when I just didn’t care...”

I didn’t say a word, just waited. Eventually she spoke again.

“The first time... the first time was in a place much like this.

“Her name was Saennuz. She was the mate of the patriarch of the clan and as is often the case in such things she was the real power in the group. Her man enforced the rules and kept order, but in the dark hours of the night he took her counsel and marked it well. She was very intelligent, beautiful by the standards of the time, and quite ruthless. She despised me.

“I suppose it may surprise you but in the years after finding a new family for Attuz, I slowly learned that life was still easiest for me as a slave. I was wise enough to leave him behind before he aged, as painful as that was for the both of us. As I could not allow myself to fall in love again, life as a valued, skilled property was generally easiest. Particularly if I were to stay among normal people.

“So it was many years later that I found myself among Saennuz’s people. Saennuz’s man bought me from a village in a valley near his own. He knew I was barren and in the simple calculus of power politics he thought I would make for a welcome diversion in a clan that was somewhat bereft of women. I had been in the previous clan for several years, keeping time with the old shaman. I’d learned all I ever would from him so I welcomed the chance to move on.

“Of course, he failed to consult with Saennuz on this. Mind you, she had nothing to fear from me. I couldn’t have babies and everyone knew it, but I was young, healthy, pretty and strong. Jealousy overrode her common sense.

“I did everything I could think of to mollify her. I deferred to her in all things. I took every nasty, filthy task she could hand out and acted grateful to have the work. But nothing satisfied her.

“It came to a head that first summer after there had been a gathering with some of the neighboring clans. A few matches were made and Saennuz concluded it was time to get rid of me.

“Her man would have sent me away if she’d told him to. He hated all the friction, but she never suggested it. Instead, after the gathering she became even more unbearable. She was pregnant again,

her sixth child, and it made her insufferable in general. Perhaps that's why I failed to understand what she had in mind."

Zsallia paused and stared out at the water. Her voice had been almost a monotone, though there was a tiny waver to it that might have been from the chill. Finally she went on.

"Saennuz told me one morning to follow her to the river. She'd been having good luck with a fish trap she'd set up near the bank and wanted me to spend the day there. It was light duty even if it would be all day—and we would be alone. We arrived at the trap and I saw she'd set it up just after the bend of the river. Some trees offered shade, which made it easier to see the fish when they came up against the barrier of rocks. It was a nice piece of work, but it was also a bit treacherous. The current picked up a quite bit there and the bank fell off into deep water if you stepped out too far.

"She asked me if I knew how to swim. I had my back to her, watching the fish trap, but something in her voice made me decide to lie so I told her 'no'.

"She must have used a rock because the next thing I knew I was floating downstream, choking on river water. My head was throbbing with pain.

"I managed to fight the current and make my way to the bank and once I caught my breath I realized I was not too far downstream. Strangely enough I wasn't even angry. I considered leaving. I could let her have her little victory, move on down the river, and find a new place, but something about that idea left me cold. I *liked* this clan.

"I made my way up the river. It wasn't far. I found Saennuz calmly working the fish trap and I stopped to watch her. She was just spearing fish and tossing them on the bank, humming a happy little tune, utterly unconcerned. Somehow that sight disturbed me far more than the idea that she had tried to kill me. I was over five hundred years old at that point, so she wasn't the first to try that. But the idea that she would do it and then just go about her business... it annoyed me.

"I fetched up a good sized stone and waited for her to crouch over the trap, knowing she would be quite still for several seconds, then I let fly. My aim was true, but she flinched. Perhaps she heard me as I threw, but in any case it just grazed the right side of her head. She cried out and spun around, then froze as she saw me.

"She smiled. Laughed, actually. 'You're tougher than I thought,' she said, 'now get back to work.'

"I walked towards her and her expression narrowed. She must have seen my intent. I'll give her credit: she didn't back down, but charged at me instead. The water slowed her, but as I struck out she shifted and threw her shoulder into me, forcing me to fall backwards as she scrambled up the bank. I reached out and caught her by her tunic, pulling myself up towards her. She lashed out with her foot and connected with my collar bone, and I felt it crack. My left arm went numb. She kicked again, aiming for my throat, but I grabbed her foot and slipped it to one side, and she slid down a bit. Her other foot caught my hip, and she shoved me back down the bank.

"She regained her feet and ran for the trees. I recovered and set after her. It wasn't too hard, as she only had a couple of steps on me, and I was taller. I tackled her just inside the trees. She hit hard and I felt her breath escape in a rush as she curled up in pain, her arms encircling her midsection, and she was still struggling as I forced her on to her back with my good hand and straddled her chest. Her eyes met mine and for the first time I could remember, I saw fear in her.

“My left arm was still numb, but I laid my left palm across her throat. She was trapped beneath me, my knees pinning her arms to the ground. My right hand settled on a rock, and seized it up as she finally drew a breath.

“*Wait...*’ was all she managed to say before I brought the rock down on her head.”

Zsallia stopped talking. She was kneading the palms of her hands and staring down at the river. I started to talk, but she just shook her head and gave me a quiet gesture with her hand. *No*, she seemed to say without words. *I’m not done*. Her voice when she spoke again was still dull, and flat.

“The rock.... it made a sound. A solid, sickening *‘thok!’* Then a high, thin squeal came out of her, like a whispered scream. But that stopped as I struck her again. And again. And again. And again...”

She stopped, drawing a deep, ragged breath that whistled as she exhaled. Her eyes were moist, but otherwise dead as she stared at the water.

“I would hit her... and her body would jerk underneath me, like spasms, or convulsions... there were pieces of bone... and so much blood...” she paused and her eyes turned towards me, almost pleading. But before I could react she shook herself, turned back to look out across the river and went on.

“I kept hitting her until I felt all the breath go out of her, then I stopped, staring down at the bloody ruin of her face and head. I was fascinated by what I had done. I’d never simply killed anyone before. I’d seen death countless times, killed once in self-defense in a way that was almost a blur. But this...”

“I was trembling as I crawled off her, my left arm and shoulder on fire, my right weak from exertion. I knelt by her body, my arms clutched together across my breasts as I shook and rocked, my belly churning with revulsion. She would twitch, a movement of an arm or a leg, and I would stop and stare, unsure if I could make myself strike her again should she resume breathing. But finally, I knew it was over.”

Zsallia was still not looking at me, almost like she was afraid to. She just hugged her knees and rocked a little. I couldn’t think what to say or do, so I just waited until she went on.

“I reached out and laid... laid my hand on the swelling of her belly. She had always had others, the women and the men, touch her like that, but she had never permitted me. I rested my right hand on it, and I felt it move.

“It was if my heart stopped and turned to ash in my chest.

“I wanted to scream then, but I could not breathe, could not move. I held my hand there, feeling Saennuz’s baby move less and less until, inevitably, it stopped.

“A tiny, precious piece of myself died there, under those trees, by that riverside.”

The light breeze whispered in my ears as we sat. I listened to it, and the gurgle and rush of the river, she staring at the water, me staring at her. Unmoving. Finally she sighed again.

“So then I did the only thing I could think to do: I dragged her back to the river and pushed her body in, forcing it out into the swift current. I followed it downstream a ways to make sure it didn’t come ashore or fetch up on anything. After that I washed up as best I could and returned to the village. I told them Saennuz and I had fought and she slipped in the water. That she’d struck her head and been swept away.”

She stopped again, still refusing to meet my eyes. I watched her, trying to gauge what she was feeling, but her face was like stone. I had no idea what to say. Could you try someone for a murder three thousand years ago, in a country that probably didn’t exist anymore? What kind of verdict could you bring to that? What court could judge it? What jury would know what to do with it?

“So they believed you?” I finally asked.

“Of course they did. By then I was an excellent liar. For that matter, how much of a lie was it, really?”

“She was pregnant.”

“Yes. The baby would have come in the late fall...” she turned her face away, craning her neck so I couldn’t see, and seemed to shrink in on herself. Then her shoulders shook, just once. “It probably would have died over the winter anyhow. At least that’s what I told myself.”

I found my voice. “She tried to kill you,” I offered.

“I could have walked away. I could have gone down river and found a new home. There were people a few days away; they knew me from the clan gatherings. I could have told them what happened.” She turned and looked at me finally. Her eyes were hollow, but whatever tears might have been there were gone. “I didn’t have to kill her. I wish I hadn’t.”

“You feel guilty? Even today?”

“Of course I do. I don’t lie awake at night agonizing over it, but...”

“What did they do to you?”

“To me? Nothing. At least, not right away. But it was not long after that that I learned...” She stopped. “I learned...” She stopped again. “I’d like to stop talking for a bit if you don’t mind,” she finally said, staring at the water. So we just sat and listened to the stream for a while. Then she asked me to take her back to her hotel.

Chapter 18

Circa 1000 BCE

After Saennuz was gone life continued fairly quietly, at least for a while. The chief, Manniz, was only mildly irritated at the turn of events, cementing my certainty that he had been looking to be rid of his overbearing mate and would not be inclined to question me too closely.

My own position within the clan was still somewhat precarious, however; I had some skills as a shaman, but the shaman woman, Oskuz, viewed me as a competitor in this area. She had also been close to Saennuz and I believe she suspected me.

Worse still, everyone—men and women alike—viewed game caught by a woman as an affront to the men of the tribe. Normally I would not mind for I still enjoyed gathering and preparing foods and tending to animals and the men in the tribe were kind to me. But it was challenging to make myself be seen as truly valuable and trusted and I found myself despondent again, wondering why I should care about anything.

As spring wore on into summer, things began to come apart. The women in the clan were busy trying to place either themselves or their daughters at Manniz's side. The men were maneuvering to replace him altogether, particularly his eldest son. And while all this was going on the day-to-day rhythms of clan life were being slowly eroded to the point where little was being done to prepare for the next winter. The factionalism grew fiercer, the rivalries more bitter, and Oskuz began to campaign against me, blaming me for all that had gone wrong since Saennuz's death. That she had success with this was simply more indication of how badly things were deteriorating.

Manniz retained his place as chief by taking Saennuz's youngest sister as his mate, but by then it was too late. The clan was in disarray and his mate was not half the power broker her sister had been. Instead of attempting to bring parties together to try to prepare for winter she instead joined with Oskuz against me. Manniz was not inclined to hear their plotting, but as winter bore down and famine loomed very large in the future he finally began to yield.

One morning the old Shaman bitch came for me and took me to see Manniz. They both led me out into the wild as the skies were growing an ugly slate gray. None of us had eaten since the day before and the air was cold and smelled of a coming storm. I had been expecting this turn of events and had done what I could to prepare against need, but I could sense something in the two of them that made me uneasy. I was prepared to run, but I was uncertain there was any real danger; it was merely Oskuz's unconcealed glee at her victory that had me on edge. At least, that was what I told myself.

"Far enough," Oskuz said, and I looked to Manniz, then gasped as Oskuz's wiry arms seized my own, drawing them up and back behind me, "It's time to be done with you and your ill luck!" she cackled in my ear.

"I don't understand!" I cried, but then I saw the blade. I looked into Manniz's eyes; saw his unhappiness, his determination as he reached for me, pulling open my cloak and my tunic to expose my chest.

I gasped slightly, then smiled at him. “Yes, it’s better this way,” I whispered. “Strike true.”

He paused a moment and I could see his confusion, so I nodded a little and looked to the sky. I could almost feel Oskuz’s disappointment, for she wanted to hear me beg for my life. Instead I merely trembled a little in fear and excitement. An intensely sexual thrill coursed through my body as I lifted my head, arching my spine to offer a clear target. I could feel the conflict rising in him, but Oskuz broke the spell.

“Do you expect me to hold her forever? Do it!”

“*Slekanam!*” he cried, and his fist lunged forward, plunging the blade into my chest, the edge perpendicular to my breastbone, entering inside the curve of my left breast, seeking and finding my heart in an expert stroke. It did not even hurt; rather it drove the breath from me, my chest collapsing inward from the force of the blow. Breath would not come and my knees buckled as Oskuz released me, letting me drop to my knees as Manniz stepped back, drawing the knife from my chest. Vision wavered as I saw crimson stained snow. Then I could support myself no longer, falling forward into the cold and darkness, a throbbing, pulsating roar filling my ears as their voices receded. I embraced the darkness, welcomed it, invited it to envelope and consume me, erase me, make an end to this, to everything...

And it was here that I learned the most horrid truth of all.

Cold, pain and aching pressure in my chest dragged me from the embrace of the nothingness I craved. My body shook and I could feel the thin stream of air torturously drawn into my lungs, slowly filling me with breath, then a wracking, agonized coughing exhalation; thick, vile goo spitting from my throat, fouling my mouth, forcing me to full awareness. Hands sought purchase, trembling arms lifted me and another breath entered me, much easier now that the clotted blood and mucus had been expelled, then made its exodus in a despairing sob. On my knees, I probed at my chest with numb fingers; the wound was barely perceptible.

Had I simply been fooling myself? I had been injured before in frightening ways. A fall once from a tree. A time when everyone who had eaten from a certain animal had sickened and died but me. A blow to the head with a hammer. But never once an injury so dramatic, something so obviously beyond surviving: a knife straight to the heart.

The wound was healing as I watched.

Still on my knees, I leaned backward, and a scream of rage tore from my lips. I hurled my fury at the gray, uncaring sky, my body shaking as I ached to destroy the Gods who had cursed me, for now I knew the full truth: It was not just that I did not age, it was not just that illness rarely touched me.

Truly, I could not die.

Cold, starving and betrayed I tried to stand, but slipped and fell back, landing across a frozen hump in the snow. Rolling over I struggled to my knees, feeling fur under my bare hands. Uncomprehending I swept aside the snow to reveal... Oskuz? She was on her back, but her head was twisted, her neck quite emphatically broken, shock frozen on her face. In my state I was unable to appreciate the irony of it all. I began tearing at her clothing, stripping the furs from her frozen body, wrapping myself in a desperate attempt to shelter myself from the biting cold. And through it all the gnawing ache in my belly grew stronger, more insistent, a scent touching my nostrils through the dry, frosty air: tantalizing, intoxicating. Raw meat.

“I don’t think so!” I shrieked into the coming darkness.

Forcing myself to my feet I sought my bearings and set out west... but stopped after only three steps. I could not think, could not force my feet to move, my body trembling violently as the hunger became like fire within me, warming me even as it sapped my strength further. I felt under my garments for the knife I had secreted there what felt like an age ago. I drew it out and turned.

I stared at Oskuz’s body as it lay stretched out in the snow. It was not that cannibalism was new to me: it happened, on occasion. With this weather the chances of finding food on my own were slight. But Oskuz, and uncooked?

But after all, what difference did it make? He had left us to be food for beasts. I sank to my knees beside the body. Once the decision was made I wasted no time. The knife bit into the frozen meat of the thigh, cutting, tearing at the tough flesh until a strip came free. The first mouthful was the hardest. The meat was grainy and tough, and so cold it was tasteless, at least at first. After that it did not matter what it tasted like: I fed like a starved animal...

After I calmed, as darkness surrounded me, a small cave came to mind. It would be easy to seal off from the wind, if not terribly roomy, and far enough from the village to avoid being detected. I dragged Oskuz’s carcass behind me, my mind fixed solely upon my destination. I finally reached it in moonlit darkness, the sky clearing enough to make the last leg of the trek possible, though the temperature plummeted.

The cave was southward facing, really just a depression in the hillside, but I had spied it during the summer and as was my habit by now I had marked it, as well as a few other random places, as a bolt hole. Any time I had had a chance I had done my best to prepare it against need: there was wood and flint and soon there was a fire.

Oskuz’s frozen, colorless eyes regarded me from the edge of the circle of firelight.

“You don’t know how lucky you are, old woman,” I told her. “And how did you wind up dead, anyhow? Did you gloat too much?”

I started going through what I had: Manniz hadn’t bothered to strip either of us and Oskuz had been carrying a very nice bronze knife as well as her medicine pouch. As I went through her things I could feel the glazed, sunken orbs of her eyes upon me.

“Don’t be jealous, you certainly have no need for these things... and winter is just beginning. Strange, isn’t it? Here you had it all figured out, but you didn’t see this coming, did you?”

The fire shifted as I poked at it before adding another good-sized log.

“I didn’t see it either and I’ve got no excuses. I’ll bet you just laughed a little too loud, and now there you are and here I am. Hardly seems fair, does it?”

In my cave I had enough long straight pieces to set up a roasting spit, so I got that together then took the bronze knife and started working it with the sharpening stone I’d found tucked in her pouch. I would have to butcher as much of the carcass as I could easily manage, then drag the rest

far from my camp. Being alone I could not afford to be attracting any predators. Once the knife was honed to perfection I moved over to the body and dragged it closer to the fire where the light was better.

“You know, if I could give you back your life and take your place, I’d do it. But since I can’t... if it’s any consolation, you taste terrible.”

The fire snapped and muttered at me, only just blunting the bitterness of the winter night. I was alone in a way I had never truly allowed myself to understand before. When Manniz had produced that knife I was so certain that finally, finally this would end. Oh, there had been other times, other injuries, but this time, this way... I should have finally had peace. Instead here I was, with only flames and the dead for company.

| I set to work with a will.

Chapter 19

Ann Arbor, February 2005 CE

“I’m not sure I could do something like that,” I said. She looked at me and then graced me with that all-knowing smile of hers.

“That’s your oh-so-civilized conditioning talking. Cannibalism for survival is not viable as a wide-scale strategy, but in smaller scale, and amongst people whose lives are nearly hand-to-mouth, it is sometimes unavoidable. Trust me, if you were faced with it you would likely choose to set aside your qualms. Dying due to squeamishness is likely the most foolish thing one can do.”

“I don’t think I could do it.”

“I am sure it’s rather comforting to believe that.”

She said it in a matter-of-fact tone that might have been a jab, but I didn’t see any point in arguing over it. If I ever had to consider roast leg-of-Larry for dinner I’d deal with it then.

“Yeah, anyhow . . . it sounds like you were kind of weirded out by that whole experience?”

“Hmm, and you accused me of avoiding uncomfortable subjects? Yes, well, I spent a pretty miserable winter in that cave, though I was able to improve things a bit here and there. By the time spring arrived I was ready to move on. I had to, actually, because I was still well within the territory of my old clan.”

“You found another clan to live with?”

“No . . . not right away. Really, for the first time I chose to remain on my own for a prolonged period. I’d had my fill of people. The murder . . . and its aftermath . . . they soured me on being with others.”

“How long were you alone?”

“Oh, fifteen years or so. It was appealing because I had no charade to maintain. Even after I joined up with people again it really was only temporary. As time went on I spent less and less time attached to any family or village. Eventually I was alone for very long stretches.”

“You preferred solitude? Yet here you are now . . .”

“Solitude is . . . seductive. It allowed me to explore who and what I believed I might be without the distraction of mundane interaction.”

“You didn’t get lonely?”

I wasn’t sure what she was feeling, but suddenly she reached for her purse and pulled out a new pack of cigarettes. She’d been smoking much less since coming back from Pennsylvania despite her ongoing worries about whatever was going on there. But now she tapped an unfiltered Camel into an ivory cigarette holder and snapped her Zippo to life.

“Not exactly, no. Enough solitude and it becomes easy to slide out of any truly rational relationship with reality.”

“You became irrational?” I asked, prodding for more information.

“You could say that, yes,” she sighed, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling. “It was not sudden. I spent a couple of centuries in and out of villages and families, mostly hanging on to the shaman or the smith, if they had one, but eventually I cut myself loose completely. After that I was on my own for more than six hundred years.”

“Six hundred...?” I couldn’t even imagine.

“You can’t even imagine can you?” she said, grinning faintly. “But yes. I wanted no more to do with people. It was during that time that things became rather... unsettled.”

“How so?”

“Oh, everyone carries on some sort of internal dialogue as they go through the day. Also one often has little delusions that can turn into bigger ones when no one else is around to bring you back to reality. So when you are alone for prolonged periods of time, and perhaps somewhat driven by grief, doubt and anger...”

She stopped then and just sat quietly smoking her cigarette as I tried to imagine being isolated for decades or centuries. She finished, tapping out the remnants of her cigarette into the ashtray, then fixed me with her eyes, waiting for me to ask her the obvious question.

“How bad did it get?”

“Very bad,” she replied. Then she reached for another cigarette.

Chapter 20

Circa 130 BCE

Communing in my dreams with the mother-goddess, Nerthō, I felt a slight breeze upon my face and heard her voice upon it. *Your people are calling you, sister*, she whispered in my ear. Stirring myself awake I heard a group of men in the distance chanting in the old tongue. My people, the Darrihardōz tribe, were calling to me.

With some irritation I noted they were once again mispronouncing my name. These young ones did not appreciate the old ways. I stood and stretched, realizing that I had been dozing for days again, and curious to see what they had brought. Feeling the ache in my muscles I wrapped my chest and took up my bow and quiver as I left my cave and headed for the altar clearing.

Unfortunately they were still there when I arrived. They had chosen to take a short meal there in communion. It was an option they were allowed, but it annoyed me nonetheless. I watched silently from the woods with only idle curiosity, waiting for them to depart as I was loath to meet with them.

They sat around the flat stone altar in a semicircle, eating and talking companionably, obviously not really expecting an appearance. A small bowl of leaves and herbs burning on the stones made a sweet smell in the air. Next to it was their main offering, a fat haunch from what was obviously an unusually large buck. I was not particularly hungry, but I had to admit it was generous.

There were seven men, six of them familiar to me. The seventh was a young man, fifteen or sixteen, unusually tall, grinning with the excitement of his first hunt, his hands and face bloody with the celebration of his first kill. That was common enough, but what caught my attention was a piece of jewelry he wore about his right arm: a torc of braided metal, leather and bone. I recognized it instantly and realized the timing would be right.

With a flash I felt drawn to the recent past. I could clearly remember the young woman who came to my altar some fifteen winters prior, laying out blankets and furs and a fine iron knife, along with some gathered foods and meat. Unlike others who came alone, she did not leave her offerings and depart. She simply remained at the altar, sitting on her calves, nursing a newborn, waiting and quietly singing a little now and then. I lurked nearby, having no intention of meeting her as I had grown tired of people in recent decades. But as nightfall approached it was clear she was not moving. I was a bit surprised as it soon would be dark, but still she did not leave.

Reluctantly I had returned to my cave and donned my most impressive attire: a long cape fashioned from the hides of two wolves, a tunic of fine cloth, soft and glowing, left as an offering by some passing clan, and buckskin boots with fur and feather tassels. I also fetched up every bit of decoration that was easily at hand, festooning my arms and neck with armlets, rings and necklaces.

Dusk was upon us when I returned and I was surprised that she had not started a fire for the sky was beginning to darken with a chill making itself felt. I approached quietly- it would be unseemly to simply crash out of the woods like some lumbering beast. I was rewarded by a gasp of surprise when she looked up and saw me standing not more than an arm's length from her.

"Juvunte matar kvi ken ert med tinom bharnoi?" I asked in the old tongue: "Young mother, why are you here with your child?" She was unlikely to fully understand the words, but could not mistake the tone or intent. She looked up at me, fear and hope mingling in her eyes.

"I've brought you many fine gifts," she whispered, "so that I might plead for your blessing on my son."

Now that was certainly different and more than a little brave. Most women were too timid to approach my altar, as well they should be. I squatted before her, my bow cradled in my arm as I regarded her. She lifted the child, extending him to me. I hesitated a moment, then set down the bow and took him from her. He squirmed and made a noise, sensing he had left his mother, but I made quieting sounds to him and stood.

"You presume much, mother," I said softly, in the newer tongue these young ones used. Then I snarled and bellowed: "I am Tiwazō the Huntress and care not for your womanly concerns! You are unwise to disturb me!"

The child squawked in fear as his mother put her face to the ground and begged forgiveness. I growled at them both, but then she looked up at me with pleading in her eyes. "Eidhaz, my husband, died in the hunt last week and I have only his brother to help care for us."

I looked at her infant and moved my fingers to the back of its neck, thinking it would be easy enough to snap, barely a little pressure and a twist. It was tempting, for it would surely avoid a repeat of such foolish requests. I turned my head sideways and looked down at her with a sadistic smile. She could clearly sense my intent and tears of fear sprang to her eyes as I glowered mercilessly at her. I raised his head, pinching at his neck while he squirmed.

"So this is part of your sacrifice to me? Perhaps I'll take him."

"Mercy! Please! His father died in the hunt!" she cried out and buried her face again in the ground.

"Be still, you little fool," I hissed, but for some reason I felt myself relenting. I stared at the infant who was surprisingly quiet, merely making little grunting noises there in the dimming light. Suddenly he looked me in the eye and gave a little smile. I gave him a sour one back. He was not easily impressed, this little one. Finally I looked down at his mother, her face still down, obviously struggling to stay quiet though she kept making annoying little whimpering noises.

"Gather wood for a fire," I finally snapped at her. "You'll both be staying the night."

With a small cry she leapt up and ran to begin her assigned task. I could sense her excitement and relief. I squatted down and leaned back, contemplating the child. It was the first I had seen up close in a very long time. He snuggled contentedly in my arms as his mother busied herself gathering fuel.

As she assembled a pyre of larger pieces and some kindling, I wondered what would she think were I to tell her she possessed a power I did not? As she produced a flint and a metal knife, I interrupted her. "No. Here, take your son," I said. With a look of relief, she reached for him, simpering and bowing a bit.

I relinquished the child and regained my feet, then dug in my belt pouch as I approached the gathered wood. From two pouches I gathered the powders of Thonaraz, the mixing of which a long-dead shaman had introduced me to long before either of these humans was born. I mixed them in my hand and poured them into the heart of the kindling, then took my own flint and knife and casually stuck them at the piled wood. It caught with a brilliant flash and I suppressed a smile as I heard the young mother gasp. I smirked and imperiously pointed to the ground at my feet near the fire. She scurried to the spot and sat obediently.

Surprisingly I found myself curious enough to talk to her. Cooking some of the food she had brought to my altar, I even deigned to share it with her. We spent that night together, talking, caring for her child and sharing company against the darkness. Her life was likely to be a hard one, married into a new clan, no family but her husband's, and he dead after a wound during a hunt earned him a fever that never broke. She was not well liked by her sisters-in-law. I knew the feeling well.

As night wore on she began to nod off, and I allowed it. As she slept, cradling her son in her arms, I foolishly allowed myself to feel a little kinship with her. As the hours wore on I heard the howling of wolves, and in them I heard a voice. Mortals would not understand the words, but I did: *show mercy little sister* the father-god was saying to me. At his words I found myself softening and kept my watch silently over them.

When dawn began to break the baby stirred, and in her sleep she put him to her breast. Watching, I decided to make gesture to her. I chose a torc fashioned of metal, leather and bone, drew it off my arm, and shook her awake. Startled, she looked up at me.

"He is to keep this with him always so I will know him when he hunts my woods." She smiled at me gratefully and thanked me.

"You are a beautiful and wonderful friend," she said, reverently.

Annoyed that she should be so presumptuous, I snarled at her and grabbed her by the throat. She squeaked as I squeezed and dug my nails in a little. "You are lucky, little fool, that I did not cut out both your hearts and eat them," I hissed. "Do you understand me? You earned my blessing once at my brother's request, but you will tell the other women that had it been another day I'd have built a new altar from your bones." Her face turned white and she whimpered and closed her eyes. "Tiwazō the Huntress is no friend to women and children. She is cruel and quick to anger. Remember this!"

She nodded, then cried out as I savagely drew a scratch across her face and pushed her head against the ground again. "Be gone and never return!" I bellowed, then turned and stalked off angrily, ignoring her mewling apologies. Little fool.

Snapping out of my reverie, I noted that apparently my words had been well heeded. I never saw her again nor had anyone else attempted such a stunt. Yet he still had my torc and seemed to have grown into quite a handsome young man. Yes, quite handsome, I thought as I stared silently.

Eventually they all got up to leave, but rather than collecting their sacrifice I took up my bow and set out after them. I knew where they were going for the Darrihardōz tribesmen would almost always camp in the same clearing on their way back from trips to my altar. In short order I was downwind from them, but concealed in the trees, still watching.

It was a welcoming sight, these seven men gathered about a fire to share tales and celebrate the accomplishments of the newest hunter. This was not as common as times past, for these men were farmers first and hunters second, but the ritual rite of passage was older than I, perhaps as old as man himself. I nearly decided to leave them be for I was still weary of humans and their tiny lives. Still, it had been many years since I had enjoyed the company of a man and that urge drew me closer. I crept stealthily through the trees and low brush as they drank some concoction and boasted to each other as men so often do.

I made my decision. There was still some time to go before darkness fell and that was just as well. I stood up and very casually unstrung my bow. One of the men, sitting directly across from where I stood, saw me and simply stopped talking, eyes wide and staring. After a moment his companions noticed and all eyes turned to me, silence falling over them like a blanket.

I regarded them coolly, looking each in the eyes one at a time as with measured steps I moved into their circle. They remained seated and silent, watching as I walked a sinuous path about them. I was pleased to sense no more than mild concern from them, for it had been some time since I had done this and I was not certain they would all remember the rite. But they all seemed excited and remained seated as was proper. All were smiling, and the young man's gaze was most confident of all, riding high on the thrill of his first successful hunt. I stepped in front of him and reached out to touch his face. He did not flinch, but his deep brown eyes focused on mine as I slid two fingers under his clean-shaven chin and lifted it. I graced him with a smile.

"I know you," I said, my voice low and quiet, "You are Slodhe, son of Eidhaz."

"Yes," he gasped in surprise, his spine straightening. I could hear the others' reactions as well. I squatted to look him in the eye and slid my fingers down his neck and across his muscular chest, then traced my hand up over his shoulder and down his arm. I squeezed the hard muscles of his arm, feeling a tiny thrill, then fingered the torc there. This close I could smell him, his masculine scent swirling in my head, filling my lungs.

"You bear my talisman," I whispered, then lifted my fingers to touch his lips, silencing him before he could speak. "Your mother brought you to me as an infant, seeking my blessing upon you." I stood again and turned to face the others. "Would you agree that he has proven himself a man and hunted well in my name?"

There were murmurs of agreement but one was somewhat muted. I turned my attention to that one. Stepping toward him, I spied a mark on his right shoulder, a circle split into three sections by curved lines radiating from the center. I had placed my mark on him many years before on a day much like this one. I recognized it, and recognized his aging face suddenly. I smiled a bit at the obvious jealousy in his eye.

Bending my lips to his ear I whispered, "Only strong men win my favor, and only once. You know that. But you remember what I gave *you*, yes?" His chest swelled and he smiled at me, remembering, and laughed a little.

Patting him in a gentle goodbye, I turned and walked back to Slodhe and extended my hand. He glanced at the others, then grinned, taking my hand as he stood. My heart skipped a beat as I realized just how tall he really was. Stepping close I laid my hands upon his shoulders and pulled myself up to press my lips hard upon his. He hesitated just long enough to tell me what I wanted to know.

Biting his lip hard enough to draw a bit of blood, I suddenly let myself drop to the ground and stepped away from him, turning towards the darkening woods. “Try to keep up little man!” I sneered, then sprinted away.

I heard the older one laugh suddenly. “Don’t just stand there, boy!” my previously chosen pretty cried. “Go get her!” I laughed again as I heard Slodhe take after me, the men around the fire bursting into cheers of encouragement.

I tested the boy, crashing ahead at a breakneck pace then fading quietly into the cover of the brush to double back and set off at an angle away from the clearing. He lost me for a moment, but simply began circling until he picked up my trail again. From then on he never faltered. I could have evaded him completely had I so desired, for I knew these paths far too well to let any hunter follow me against my will. But while I certainly did not make it easy, losing him was not my goal. On those occasions where I paused and let him come close enough for me to spy him, I could see that he was unconcerned, concentrating on his task yet aware of his surroundings. That he was enjoying himself immensely was unmistakable and all to the good.

Finally, I led him to one of my favorite spots where the major stream through the area took a large dip, rushing down a rocky basin to form a deep, clear pool before meandering off towards the lake two days walk further down. I had a shelter there on the far side of the pool, really nothing more than a lean-to with dry bedding, firewood and some basic tools and supplies. I did not live there, but I often spent time there, and it had everything we would need.

As I heard his approach, I stripped off my clothes and bundled them about my bow and knife, then plunged into the icy pool, holding my belongings high with one hand as I swiftly made my way across. The water was mountain runoff, clear and brisk, a gift from the mother-Goddess Nerthō. When I reached the far side I tossed my bundle upon the bank and sank back into the water, submerging myself fully, rinsing away the accumulated sweat and dust from my romp through the green. I surfaced again there in the shallows, letting my knees settle to the bottom and turning to face him. I felt my breasts harden a bit as they bobbed near the surface, my shoulders above the water line, just as Slodhe emerged from the trees.

“You can swim, yes?” I mocked him, though it seemed a safe bet as his people made their home on the shore of the very lake fed by this stream. He confirmed my suspicions by casually shedding his leggings and boots and plunging in. He crossed the pool swiftly using an oddly flailing stroke I had never seen before. I stood then, the water up to my hips, waiting for him as he made his way toward me. We were both shivering from the chill water, but the air was warm and the sun had not yet set fully. As he stood in the shallows near me it was clear the cold had done nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. I grabbed him in an embrace then, thrilling at the feel of his hardness against me as I dug my fingers into his back and bit at his chest.

Suddenly, I sensed awkwardness in him: he did not know exactly what to do, and I was frightening him a little—which I would not mind, except he began to sag, and that I could not have. So I relaxed a little, smiled up at him, and led him to my lean-to where we pulled out the rolled furs and blankets stored there, spreading them on the grass in the last remaining spot of sunlight. Pushing him down firmly, I told him to relax, and took his manhood in my mouth. I reveled in his pleasure as he gasped and climaxed within moments.

When I looked up he seemed embarrassed, but then I moved my face above his, looking down upon him. “Oh no, my fine young man. This was only the beginning. You are young and strong and

now that we have calmed your fire, we will light it again slowly, and I will teach you about a woman's body." He grinned nervously and I laughed.

And show him I did. Relighting his fire was no challenge at all.

Later we relaxed together in the twilight, our bodies quivering with the energy we had spent. We chatted amiably for a while. He mentioned some odd strangers who had been moving through the area whom he was very curious about. This made me curious as well, but other than knowing they were camped to the south, he knew little more. Growing irritated with his tangled locks, I took his head in my lap and began working a comb through his hair. I felt dim memories sparking as I did so, but forced them away. He yelped as I pulled a knot a bit too hard and I smirked at him. Running one hand idly over his shoulder as I continued teasing his hair, I decided to make more conversation.

"Tell me, boy, has your family chosen a mate for you?" I asked, not sure why I was asking.

"Yes. Her name is Thordiz. She is to be mine when we return from this hunt."

"Ahh. So many firsts for you." He pushed himself up from my lap and sat back. I smiled at him, sensing his unease.

"It's getting dark. We should build a fire," he said. He was glorious, his thick black mane spilling over his broad shoulders, framing his wide brown eyes in the dimming light. I reached out, taking his arm and sliding my other hand into his lap.

"*Later,*" I said. Then my mouth was hard on his and I felt his need rise again, delightfully.

He slept soundly as the fire began to gutter and die, but sleep eluded me. I sat up and moved carefully so as not to wake him, sliding over to the fire to add a few more sticks, sufficient to keep it going until dawn. Slodhe rolled away from the light and I idly fingered the scratches on his back, amused at how he twitched a bit in his sleep as I did so. Gazing on him I was taken with an urge to wake him, to shake him from his dreams and tell him to go, that we were done here. Instead I rose and walked to the pool where the rushing of the stream covered the sound as I dove in.

The moon was up and quite bright, but I had to exercise some care as I climbed the rocky face of the hill, picking and choosing my way until I reached a large, flat stone I often used as a perch. It was cold, the warmth of the sun having long since been drawn away by the spray from the stream, so I pulled my legs up and wrapped my arms around them, resting my chin upon my knees.

Below me a small campfire glowed next to the sleeping man. He was really no more than a boy despite his growth. Perhaps he knew enough to be a man. Perhaps he was strong enough. One thing was certain, come morning he would be going back to his people and taking up the mantle of manhood whether he was ready or not. Perhaps my having blessed him a second time would serve him well in the coming years.

I could keep him with me; it would be so simple to do. I could go back down there and wake him, talk to him, tell him I needed him. I could tell him I loved him for that would only be half a lie and he would believe me. He would toss aside family and the certainty of a life he knew in favor of a red-haired demon-lover. We would flee into the wild, my man and I, and make a place for ourselves in this lush and bountiful forest. We would share our time and our pleasures and I would teach him so many things he could not have even dreamed. Or I could return with him to his people, make of

him a god-man, a leader of wisdom and certainty whose counsel would be sought after by all who knew him. We could rule the many clans and villages that made these lands their home. He would be shaman-chief, and I, his totem and his trophy and the source of his power.

And he would grow old.

The day would come when he would look back and realize he had no sons, no daughters and no grandchildren to delight in. Would wisdom and power be enough? Would he be able to forgive me all I had stolen from him? Would my love be enough? Would he come to resent me for what I had taken from him?

In the burble and splash of the water, I heard the taunting of the demon Loghaz: *He is nothing. They are as dust and worth nothing.*

“Be gone, trickster,” I told him angrily. But I found myself wondering, why had I gone to that camp, taunted those men, drawn the boy here? Simply because my own hunger was so strong I had been unable to resist? Here we were, this boy, sleeping soundly by the fire, his day and night complete with accomplishments that filled him with excitement and joy; and I, curled upon my stone, suddenly feeling tears, taunted by the Gods. I hid my face in my knees and listened to Loghaz’s mocking voice burbling from the water, doing my best to ignore him as he urged me to kill the boy, to think how I would enjoy hearing his screams as I used my knife to....

I shook myself. “Quiet, demon, I cannot hear your lies!” I repeated it over and over, rocking back and forth until finally, finally, I heard only the water.

But when I looked up again, looked back at the boy, it was with different eyes, cold and hard. What right would he have to resent me? Such arrogance! That he might look upon all I might give him and call it poor recompense... but what else could he do, poor, miserable, short-lived creature that he was? How could I expect him to understand me when his view of the world was a narrow stretch of land, a lake and a girl named Thordiz who waited at home to be his wife? He had no grand vision, no way to grasp what I was beyond offering some pitiful sacrifice on an altar in hope that I might at least decline to cause mischief among his people. It would all be gone in a moment, just a brief interlude of struggle with perhaps some joy and a generous share of fear and uncertainty, all inserted into the miniscule space between that time before he lived and that time after. Were I inclined to mercy I might indeed do him the favor of quietly cutting his throat tonight. I could spare him all the fear and pain the future held and let his life end on a night of pleasure and happiness.

And would that be any more or less cruel than loving him?

Angrily, I leapt back into the water and swam to shore, returning to where he slept. As I walked back toward him, the fire shifted, launching a cloud of orange sparks skyward. I followed them as they ascended, my spirit dancing among them and laughing cruelly as I watched them slowly winking out, their energy spent. My spirit returned and my gaze fell to his sleeping form. The fire was warm on my backside as I knelt near him and found my knife.

I began sharpening it with the whetstone from my belt, moving the stone along the blade with slow, deliberate strokes as I contemplated his face, feeling the fire some more. The fire gave something to those who sat about it, even if it was no more than some light to hold back the darkness, and a circle of warmth against the chill. What had I to offer that the fire did not? What had I been given in return for being forever outside that circle? Fire warmed, and changed, and emboldened, and sometimes destroyed. I was nothing compared to the fire, merely starlight, cold,

unblinking, and changeless, perhaps lovely to behold, but beyond that... useless. Except perhaps to destroy.

Lost in these thoughts I barely noticed as the sky grayed with the coming dawn. The demon-God Loghaz' voice began taunting me again from the burbling water, and finally, angrily, I leapt upon the boy's sleeping form. He cried out as I let the weight of my knees slam into his arms. He struggled but for a moment, then froze as I showed him my knife. I pressed it into his neck, and then made my choice.

He at least did himself proud enough not to whimper as I removed the knife from his neck, turned the point toward his breast, cut a circle and made my mark in his flesh.

"Remember me and remember this night and what I have taught you, mortal," I said. "It is a gift you shall receive but once."

I then kissed his body a few more times, tasting his blood as it oozed from my mark gouged in his chest. Finally I caressed his cheek gingerly, and stood looking upon him one last time. Then, ignoring the demon's taunting and the boy's parting words, I left without another sound.

My appetite was sated for now. Slodhe had mentioned there were strangers camped to the south, and I intended to find out more about them.

Chapter 21

Ann Arbor, March 2005

[—begin Journal entry—]

It is not often that people manage to surprise me, but Edna has been doing so almost from the day we met. I was wary of her at first, then fascinated by her as I learned more and more of her life.

She once was a pilot, learning to fly when she was barely twenty years old, and she and her husband pursued that with a passion, barnstorming across Pennsylvania in an old Jenny bi-plane. She flew aerobatics and did wing walking in daredevil shows, always describing those as some of the best days of her life.

Eventually she settled down and had three children, Joshua the youngest having been born in 1940. When World War II enveloped the United States her husband enlisted immediately, being selected as a trainer for the Army Air Corps due to his extensive piloting experience. Not to be outdone, Edna dropped her children with her mother and sought out an opportunity to do her part, eventually becoming a member of the Women's Air Service Pilots ferrying bombers and fighters for the Army. She once confided to me that flying the twin-engine P-38 fighter was the "the most fun I ever had with my knickers on." More than once she was reprimanded for tearing up airfields to the delight of onlookers before bringing her plane in for delivery.

I wish I had known her back then. We would have had much fun together. Throughout her life she always faced things head-on and never looked back in regret, and it is to that she credits her long life. Battles are to be fought and won: that is her belief and her motto. Her son Joshua was learning just what that meant firsthand.

"Edna, I do wish you would let this be," I pleaded, knowing how useless it was. "Just let Joshua figure this out on his own. I hate the idea of causing so much strife between you."

"Oh, this is nothing," she laughed, and I could visualize the lines of her face crinkling as she chuckled. "You should've seen us back when my Henry died and he wanted me to move in with him so he could 'take care' of me. And he wonders why I spend time with my niece?"

I chuckled at that.

"Anyhow, he's still waiting on the results of those tests on the hair he found in that letter you sent to great-grandma. I think he was hoping they'd tell him they couldn't do it, not that I really understand it, but he thinks it's important..."

Edna went on at length about how Joshua had seen all the police reports and photos from the accident in Denver and admitted to her that he had no explanation for what they said versus what he saw when we met. So every day she called him and acerbically queried him as to when he was going to "pull his head from his hindquarters and admit that he had to accept the truth." I could only imagine Joshua's reaction to that kind of pressure, but there was no telling Edna to back down. She was on a mission.

I had to wonder if he might welcome a call from me at this point. I had left after he had approached me with a request to do a DNA test against a lock of hair found in a letter from Elaine McAllister to Catherine Tremblay. Catherine had been the last member of the family I had known before Edna- the letter was written in 1852. I remembered plucking those hairs and curling them up, wrapping them in a blue ribbon as a sort of keepsake for her. How could I have known how important that little gesture might be in the future?

After I had acquiesced only a little fearfully to Joshua's request—I am still unused to submitting myself to such scrutiny—Edna suggested I return to Ann Arbor.

“Let me deal with my son,” she'd insisted. “You don't need to be around all this foolishness while you're recovering. So you go relax and work on your book with that young man in Michigan.”

Still, it had been more than a month, and each day I considered again whether I should call Joshua. At worst he might refuse to speak with me, which in itself would be informative. I had never actually considered confiding in him and if he chose to be intransigent... I knew I could never bring myself to harm him or Edna. If things continued to be difficult, I resolved that I would find a graceful way to extract myself from the situation, although that would break Edna's heart.

And perhaps my own I confess. Which was part of my trepidation.

Finally I succumbed to my impulse and dialed up his office. The secretary answered and I asked if Joshua was available. She put me on hold and I counted the seconds until...

“Genevieve?” Voices over the phone are usually very hard to read, but his tone was unmistakable and I felt myself relax just a bit.

“Yes, Joshua, I'm wondering what you have discovered.” I strained myself not to sound anxious.

He sighed, then said, “It's like you said in my office, more questions than answers. At least, more questions than answers I know how to accept.”

“Tell me.”

“The DNA test was an absolute match. I thought I'd have the hair carbon dated, but that... hell, I remember seeing that letter and that hair back when I was a kid, when my mother took over the Historical Society in fifty-three. I've checked as much as I can without drawing too much attention. From what I can tell you're not a wanted criminal and your money is very, very old... investments that go back a century or more...”

“Which is what you would expect, were I telling the truth,” I finished for him. “What now?”

“I don't know as I need to believe you fully, but I'm still your attorney for what that's worth.”

“Joshua, that's worth a great deal to me. More important to me, though, is that you make peace with your mother. I hate the thought of her getting upset over all of this.”

“Upset? My mother? She hasn't been this happy in ages. Do you have any idea how much she enjoys having the upper hand?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do. Do you have time to discuss a few matters? I want to tell you what I am planning for the Foundation. It goes to the heart of why I returned to Pennsylvania.”

For the next hour I went over my plans with him, and it was somewhat of a relief. Joshua was the first truly skilled attorney I had ever confided in and I was somewhat surprised at how desperate I was to hear his opinion on my plans. He listened carefully, asked pointed questions and forced me to go into whatever detail I could.

“I think you need to accept that depending on how your story comes out, you may not be able to reasonably expect your civil rights to be respected. Hell, even under the best of circumstances you have problems. My investigation didn’t turn up any anomalies with your identity, but a criminal probe... how secure is it?”

“Not that secure, I am certain.”

“Okay, so a false identity, lots of money from sources that are not easily rationalized, and a history of frequent traveling. Any decent prosecutor who wanted to could get you locked up without bail, at least for a while. Everything you’re doing here could possibly help you out in the long run, but short term it’s pretty useless. You would be forced to prove in court that you are what you say you are.”

“You have amassed that kind of evidence...?”

“Not enough to satisfy a real court. The chain of evidence is compromised to say the least. We need to stop thinking in terms of Civil Rights. For you it’s not clear to what extent they exist and I’d hate to be the judge on that one. But I’d guess it’s worse if your cover is blown early. You’ll get a fair trial and all, but you’d possibly be charged with identity theft and fraud, maybe land in prison or a mental hospital.”

“I could wait that out if I had to, but...”

“I’d be a lousy attorney if I suggested that,” he laughed, “No, I have an idea how you can prepare to prove what you are and protect yourself at the same time...”

—[End Journal entry]—

Chapter 22

Circa 130 BCE

Rbumenk, Slodhe had called them. They were rumored to have killed and enslaved some of the tribes far to the south, but Slodhe said they were not hostile in their encounters with his people, merely sought trade and hunting. I was angry at that last, for if they were hunting in my woods they had yet to pay their respects to me.

I found them after only a half a day. They had obviously broken camp, and were headed north crashing loudly through my forest as if they had not a care or concern. There were so many of them, tens upon tens of them, most with extensive weaponry and some with oddly fitted bronze armor. Their garments were of a wide assortment, but all made from impressively finely knit cloth.

They were all men; all their faces were clean-shaven, like boys, with neat, short-cropped hair except for two elderly ones whom I recognized as local hunters. Some were clearly warriors, armed and armored, others were somewhat of a mystery as to their purpose or place. Several were unmistakably slaves. They seemed to be on the short side, yet all of them strode with a swagger, a confidence the likes of which I usually saw only in the most powerful of chiefs. Except for my two hunters, all exuded arrogance and power.

Anger warred with curiosity as I trailed them. They were so unlike anything I had ever encountered before that I felt some kinship with the moths that fluttered about my campfire at night. Fascinated, I watched them all afternoon and into the evening. I came to understand that they might all have the bearing of chiefs, but one amongst them was chief of all, expecting and receiving deference from all the others.

This one was shorter even than most of the others, yet he was compact and powerfully built. Indeed, I had never seen muscles so sharply cut and defined on a man. His bare legs and arms seemed almost like polished wood. His obvious ease at command made it clear he was accustomed to instant obedience. I was able to come close enough as they stopped for a meal to catch some bits of conversation, but the tongue was unknown to me and fell oddly upon the ear in sharp, clipped cadences. Still, one word, his name, did come through repeatedly: Rufus.

They finally stopped in one of the common campsites surrounding my altar. Hunting parties would customarily make their offering then spend the night nearby before journeying home. I wondered what sort of offering I could expect from such as these, as it could not be coincidence that brought them directly to this spot. I felt a certain warm satisfaction as four of them, three of the warriors and one of the old hunters, set out along the path to my altar.

I moved parallel to them, trying to stay close enough to catch the words they spoke, but unable to get a clear picture of what they were saying. One thing was clear, though, the old man was unhappy and that amused the other three. As they neared the altar the old man's distress mounted and I began to suspect something was badly amiss.

They entered the clearing. My altar consisted of a pillar of carefully placed stones with a large, flat slab at its top. It stood just thigh high to a normal man and was otherwise undecorated, but I enjoyed its simplicity as it stood in the center of a clearing devoid of other stones or stumps. It was

solitary and solid and as such it represented me in a way that gave me some satisfaction. The old hunter pointed to it and the other three approached it. They circled it, looked it up and down and peered closely. One of them said something in that odd tongue and then all three of them laughed. I could not understand their words, but I could understand their intent.

This is what you have been babbling about all the way out here? A pile of rocks?

I was stringing my bow even before they acted, but what they did next sealed their doom. The tallest of the three lifted his boot and set it to the altar. With a powerful shove he toppled the slab from the top and the pillar crumbled about it. As he did so I stepped clear of the trees and leveled my bow. They all laughed at the old hunter who nearly screamed in horror as his eyes locked on me. One of the three turned in his mirth to see what the hunter was looking at and my arrow took him in the throat.

The other two reacted instantly, crouching and drawing their blades, but I killed the second with two arrows to the chest before he could do any more. The last warrior turned and dove for the trees, finding cover before I could drop him. I sprinted into the clearing, trying to listen for his movement, but the old man was weeping too loudly for me to hear the running coward clearly. I silenced the old fool with my knife through his throat, fair punishment for bringing these interlopers into *my* woods to desecrate *my* altar. In the blessed silence that followed I could hear the last man attempting to move quietly around to the south, back towards his camp.

Fetching an arrow from my quiver I set out after him and soon had him in sight though he was unaware of me. I trailed him back to the camp, now brightly lit with two large fires and numerous torches. As we drew close he began to run, thinking himself safely away. I listened to him begin to cry out an alarm, watched as those in the camp reacted and then dropped him with an arrow through the left calf. He shrieked in pain again as I sent another shaft into his right calf, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Others rushed towards him, but stopped suddenly as three shafts struck the ground before them in rapid succession. I drew down on my whimpering victim again, this time piercing his left shoulder. I waited a moment, listening to the commotion in the camp, seeing several men head out into the woods, doubtless to attempt to circle around me. I loosed another arrow into my victim's other shoulder, fixing him to the earth at all four limbs. My last arrow struck him at the base of the skull, silencing his moaning.

The one who commanded, Rufus, came to the fore and stood just beyond where my three warning arrows had fallen. It would have been so very easy to kill him then and there, but I stayed my hand, taking his measure. He stood fearless with his arms crossed over his chest, staring into the deepening gloom of the forest, obviously intent on laying eyes upon the one responsible for this. I nocked an arrow and stepped clear of the tree line and out into the light. Our eyes met. His gaze was level as he regarded me in my loincloth, chest wrap and bare feet. A flurry of motion began behind him, but my eyes never left his as with a motion of his hand he brought his warriors to a halt. I pursed my lips, spat on the ground before me and certain that my point had been clearly made, turned my back upon him. I returned to the forest, striking out to the west, moving swiftly along hidden trails I knew well in order to avoid any skirmishers who might seek to annoy me.

I retreated deep into the forest avoiding all contact for two days. Despite my firm response to the disrespect I had suffered I was still somewhat disturbed by the episode. Who were these people that they should think to come to my land and behave as if I were of no consequence? I knew the old

hunters must have warned them, yet they had laughed and invited retribution. What kind of men would be so foolish?

I took up at one of my meditation spots, quiet and secluded, there to contemplate what had happened and how to ensure it would not happen again. The breeze carried the scent of storm and lightning the next morning and I approved, for a savage storm would be just the thing to reinforce my displeasure with these invaders. When the sky lit up and the thunder rippled across the land I laughed and cavorted in the rain, so very pleased that I had chosen this as my parting message to those fools who were doubtless even now beating a hasty retreat back to whence they had come.

On the third day, content that my storm had finished what I had begun, I set out to return to my normal haunts. However, as I made my way south there was uneasiness in the forest, a wrongness I could taste on the air. Moving with more care I slipped through the brush, following my nose and my ears.

Then I heard them off to my left and a bit behind me, dogs and men crashing through my forest with an obviously intentional and destructive racket. It was the interlopers I had encountered and there seemed to be more of them than I remembered. Worse luck, they sounded to be fairly tightly clustered and I realized I had only ten or so arrows. I did not think I could reliably kill them and their dogs in the thick of the trees, and they were between me and both my closest emergency cache and my main camp.

I attempted to circle around them, but as I did so the dogs began baying excitedly. I cursed quietly, realizing they were probably trained to follow scents, and that I had not retrieved the arrows I had shot into their camp. Habitually, I bound iron tips and feathers onto my arrows using my own hair, and it had been too long since I had considered the danger that might bring. Surely the dogs could now scent me from my own arrows.

A flock of birds took flight overhead and in their fluttering wings I heard a voice: "*Silly fool, run!*" the trickster-God Loghaz laughed. Cursing him silently, I turned and made all speed toward the nearest clearing in the opposite direction. This would perhaps give me a chance to see exactly how many there were, and might afford me an opportunity to thin their numbers. I believed I could outpace them for some time; however, if they spread out with the dogs it would be quite difficult to slip around them.

I crossed the clearing at a dead run, taking up a position on the far side a small distance into the trees. I counted my arrows: eleven. Listening, I tried to determine how many I faced. I could clearly make out eight different dogs but there could be more. They drew closer and I nocked an arrow, waiting, but no one entered the clearing. I could make out motion along the edge, men and dogs, but nothing I could take a clean shot at. Clearly, they were wary of my bow and suspected my presence.

Suddenly a man shouted and two dogs dashed into the clearing heading straight for me. I loosed two arrows in quick succession and was in motion even before I heard the dogs yelping in distress. It had been a foolish move on their part, for they should have waited until they were certain of my location and could move in closer before charging. On the other hand, I was now down two arrows and the chase was on in earnest.

The advantage of being tracked by dogs was that there was little point in attempting to be circuitous. I ran at the best pace I could maintain while trying to think of an escape route. There was a river ahead, but even at this pace it would be well towards evening when I reached it. I was not certain I could open my lead enough to use the river effectively. I could hear the demon laughing as

the wind rushed past my ears. *You are no goddess, you are nothing!* he hissed, but his taunts were nothing new and I ignored him.

Then I heard a dog charging upon me, nearly silently. Only the rapid thuds of footfalls warned me in time to seize my knife and turn. This dog was larger than the two I had dispatched, and yellow in color, thickly muscled with a wide jaw and a collar of sharp spikes protecting its throat. I feinted with my bow but he ignored it, lunging for my left leg as I leapt out of the way. He spun on his paws, spittle flying from his jaws as he came for me again, forcing me back towards the line of pursuers. I dodged again and this time threw down my bow as he lunged. I turned and leapt at his back. He snapped at my arm, but I was able to force him down and bring my weight to bear on the knife, sinking it into the beast's back as he struggled beneath me. He did not die easily, forcing me to hold him down and strike again and again with the blade. Through it all he made only eerily hoarse and quiet yelps and grunts; otherwise, no sound but my own breaths and the slick snicker of my knife plunging into his ribs again and again accompanied our struggle.

My anger was now mixed with an emotion I had not felt in a long, long time: doubt. I found that emotion even more infuriating, for how dare these mortals cause such feelings in one such as I? But these men and their beasts feared me not, and now I found myself having to kill a beast with my hands just to escape their clutches. How mortifying, how offensive!

As the beast's struggle ended beneath me I realized I had lost precious time and could afford no further emotional indulgences. As I scooped up my bow I spied one of my pursuers coming through the brush about 50 paces away. I loosed an arrow but he stopped and quickly raised a shield to catch it. Turning to run I heard a horn sound behind me and my left arm began to throb. The dog's collar had caught me and a long gash running along the inside of my forearm was welling blood.

I ran hard, seeking out some place where I could perhaps pause and strike at them. The land rose somewhat as I approached the crest of the hills and I began to calculate. It would have to be here, for beyond this point they would be above me. I skirted along the ridge, seeking the highest point where I could see what opportunities might present themselves.

The men swept towards the hill in a semicircle, very deliberate and methodical. They rightly concluded I might be perched on the high ground, because horns sounded and they stopped closing. Watching carefully as I tended my left arm I could make out some forty men, all wearing identical garments and armor. Towards the center of the line there were several men clustered together—and there he was, the one they called Rufus.

He wore gleaming armor and a helmet with a tall crimson crest. I could see him gesturing, the men about him reacting almost as if his very movements carried some physical force. The breeze carried his voice to me, deep, imperious and so very certain of himself, of his power and his purpose. He sent men running to the ends of his skirmish lines and they began to fan out, stretching the line as the center began to move forward. He turned and gazed along the ridgeline, his eyes passing over my hiding place and continuing on... then returning. With a look of determination, he pointed energetically. Four men immediately set out up the hill straight towards me. I cursed him even as I admired his ability to so quickly calculate where I must be.

I realized then that I wanted him to come closer. I wanted to watch this arrogant creature die. But the others below were spreading out. If I remained I would be encircled and would have to slip past the dogs to escape.

Watching the trees I gauged the wind for a moment, then drew three of my precious remaining arrows, setting two point-down in the earth and nocking the third. The men climbing the hill were getting close enough for me to hear them clearly. There was no more time.

I stood and drew the arrow back to my ear, aiming in a high arc out over the ground below. I loosed the arrow and then swiftly repeated the action, sending two shafts in a high arc toward the men below. The third I let fly at Rufus himself and with grim satisfaction as he missed with his shield and my arrow found the side of his calf. A confused commotion began below as I turned and sped down the reverse slope, hoping to disappear into the brush as I made for the river still far below.

It was growing dark when I reached the riverbank and plunged into the water making for the far bank. I had gained ground on my pursuers and had time to use the river to my advantage. I followed it far downstream, at times letting the current carry me as I rested my aching legs. I would be far south of them now, well beyond the skirmish line, and the dogs would have to scour both banks upstream and down to pick up my trail.

As the night grew deeper I came upon a familiar spot and left the river, heading up into the low hills where I had a regular camp. To the north I could see the glow of fires. They had given up the chase and settled in for the night. Oddly enough it saddened me that they had stopped. Despite the arrogance and foolishness of their pursuit, it had been... exhilarating.

Finding blankets and supplies where I had secreted them the season before, I settled down for the night but I set no fire. I could see their light and there was no need to permit them to see mine.

Sleep was elusive and light when it did come, but I managed to rest until the sky began to go gray with the coming dawn. Muscles ached but were otherwise cooperative and the wound to my arm was well on its way to healing as I broke camp. With a new quiver full of arrows I set out eastward, seeking to circle far behind the men who had pursued me. I was still angry and it was in my mind that punishment was in order as I made my way along familiar trails, listening to the wind in the trees and...

There was silence. Listen as I might, seeking the words of Nerthō, or even Loghaz, I heard nothing. Nerthō electing to remain silent I could understand, but Loghaz? That one never passed an opportunity to make merry at my expense, sewing his doubt in my heart with whispered words of fear, death and despair.

I slowed my pace. Had I missed something? What would silence the voices who had been my companions for so many winters? What would drive them from me? I stopped in my tracks, eyes closed, listening as I calmed my breathing and the beating of my heart. Settling down into a cross-legged sitting position I slowly shut out the sounds I knew, listening solely to the rustling of the breeze in the trees, the songs of birds... the quiet snapping of a twig.

Instantly alert I attuned myself to that sound. Men were moving in the woods toward me. There were at least two of them and they were close, but they likely had not seen me.

Angered by their persistence, I strung my bow and slipped off the trail.

Chapter 23

Ann Arbor, March 2005

I was getting kind of used to her patterns. Even after I told her it was counterproductive, we'd still lose a day here or there talking philosophy or politics or religion. She didn't seem to believe in God but did respect spirituality in others, and her take on politics was always wild. Then sometimes she'd just abruptly tell me to get lost for a few days because she wanted a break.

Once, she was out of touch for a whole week, then called me one morning out of the blue and asked me to come meet her for breakfast the next day at eight in the morning. So I was kind of confused when there was no answer to repeated knocks on her door.

Suddenly, the door burst open. She leaned against the doorjamb, rubbing her head and running her hand through her hair, which was a complete mess. She was in her bare feet and wearing nothing but an enormous blue and gold football jersey.

"Morning," she mumbled, her eyes half lidded and a dreamy smile on her lips. "Forgot you were coming, sorry," she mumbled, rubbing and scratching her head.

"Wow," I said, involuntarily.

She grinned sleepily, turned, and said, "Come on in." Then she looked at the clock on the wall and yelled. "Yo Beef! It's after eight!"

I heard a thump from her suite's bedroom and a deep grunt. I looked around the suite and said, "Dear Jesus." There was at least a case of beer cans, several empty whisky bottles, and some empty Chinese food and pizza boxes, along with what looked like mostly her clothes strewn all over the place. Some of the furniture was on its side and the coffee table was obviously broken. I just stared at her while she made her way to the kitchenette and poured out some juice.

"Thirsty?" she asked.

Suddenly a giant slab of football player came lumbering out of her bedroom wearing nothing but workout pants and hopping on one foot as it tried to put on its socks. "Hey, baby, I got a test this morning. If I'm gonna stay on the team I gotta get the hell out of here!" it rumbled.

"Oh don't you worry yourself too much darlin'," she said. I did a double-take as she spoke. "You're gonna be just fine. We're right near the campus and I'll talk to that little old teacher of yours if he gives you too much trouble. I have my ways you know." Her "r"s had all disappeared and she said "ah" instead of "I." She sounded like she'd fallen off the back of a honeysuckle wagon.

"Thanks baby, but I'm getting out of here," the stud said, slipping on his sneakers. "Am I gonna see you again?" he asked, lumbering up to her. He was more than a foot taller than she and looked

like he could crumple her like a rag doll. But she smiled, stood on tiptoe, put her hands on his shoulders, and he reached down so she could kiss him.

“Now, Beef, you’re just the sweetest thing, but y’all know I won’t be here in Michigan anymore and I have my husband back home. So you just go on and go back to that pretty little girlfriend of yours and we’ll just have us a naughty little memory of each other. Okay, sugar?”

He laughed and said, “Man you’re the greatest, Louise. I wish more girls were like you.” Then he looked at me. “Uh, hi,” he said. Then, “Uh, bye.”

She closed the door behind him, leaned against it and looked at me. Then she laughed.

I just stared at her until I found my voice. “Beef? You found a football player named Beef?”

“He was a veritable Adonis, wasn’t he? He’d be worth keeping a harem for. My God they grow them big these days,” she said. I did a double take again as I noticed she’d lost the Georgia Peach accent and was back to her usual vaguely aristocratic lilt.

Suddenly, the door banged behind her. Startled, she whirled and opened it. Beef was standing there, naked from the waist up.

“Uh, baby, can I get my shirt back?” She grinned, flipped off the Jersey and handed it to him. He whistled, gave her a squeeze and said, “Man you’re just too cool!” She laughed and closed the door.

Embarrassed, I looked away. “Hey I’m not a prude or anything but...” I began.

She just laughed again and walked into the suite bedroom. “I’ll be out directly. Why don’t you phone room service for some breakfast and we’ll talk? Just order lots of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon for me,” she called out. So I did.

After breakfast I pulled out the manuscript I’d been working on. It was the first draft of the first section of the book. She was eager to see it, and we spent most of the morning poring over it and discussing it. Finally, after a few hours, we decided to take a break.

“I spoke with Joshua last night,” she mentioned casually. I paused and focused on her carefully. She usually had a pretty roundabout way of asking for opinions, but I could tell she wanted to bounce something off me.

“Good news, I hope?” I asked, cautiously. She’d been sweating the drama in Pennsylvania for over a month. We’d been getting some work done when she wasn’t off partying or whatever she did when she didn’t feel like working. But whenever she got in a funk over Pennsylvania, whatever else we were doing got bogged down. So if she and Joshua were finally talking that could only be a good thing.

“He is... not entirely convinced of my story, but is enough so that he is treating it as real. That is the best I could reasonably hope for under the circumstances. It was somewhat of a relief.”

“I’m sure. What happens now? Are you going back?”

“Eventually, yes.” She paused then and looked at me almost quizzically before grinning. “You want me to go?”

“Hell, I want to go. There’s an awful lot of your story right there.” As I said it, I watched her eyes sink a little, the way they always did whenever I probed too close to that part of her life. That was another reason I wanted to go. This woman she kept talking about, Edna, was definitely someone I needed to talk to.

“Joshua has an odd notion he’s rather excited about,” she said, sounding uncertain.

“Oh?”

“He suggested that if I could find solid proof of my age I could avoid legal problems regarding my identity, but otherwise my best protection would be to form a corporation.”

“Corporation? For what?”

“To do research. To study me... to try to find out why I am the way I am. He feels that if I did that and found some investors, anything useful that was discovered the corporation could patent it and sell...”

It hit me like a load of bricks. “Holy shit!” I practically yelled. She jumped, then just stared at me. “I *have* to meet this guy, he’s a genius!” I said.

“You really think so?” she asked, looking doubtful.

“Of course! It’s so perfect. You’re worried about people treating you like a freak, locking you up, right? What better way to prevent that? And just think of the possibilities!”

Her eyes began turning flat. I sensed that she’d wanted me to shoot the idea down, but I didn’t know why. “Ridiculous,” she finally said.

The utter contempt in her voice really surprised me. “Well, no, it seems really smart to me, Zsallia,” I said. To my complete bewilderment, she actually looked betrayed. I was baffled. It was like she’d been hoping for my support on something and wasn’t getting it, but I didn’t know what “it” was.

“I believe you are frighteningly naïve,” she intoned. Her eyes fixed on me with an icy stare as she lifted her left arm and let her sleeve fall to reveal it, fully formed and almost indistinguishable from her right, except that the skin was somewhat paler. “Are you seriously suggesting that no one would be willing to bend, or even break the law in order to be able to do this, to discover how it is done, to control it? That does not even take into account what the lure of immortality might do to otherwise rational men and women.”

“Yeah, but this way you can help give people what they want without... without...” I groped for words, not sure where this was losing her. She went on before I could ask her anything else.

“I believe what you are suggesting,” she said, “is that I become a slave again. No. No, I will not put myself on an auction block again. I will never do that again.” Her voice was shaking. “Never. I am not that sort of creature anymore.”

“Well no, you don’t sell yourself. You sell knowledge about yourself. Well not really even about yourself, but about your physiology.”

“Money. Money. Why do I need more money? What good does it do me to sell myself?”

I just looked at her, lost for a minute. But then I thought I got it.

“No, listen, you’ve been worried that people would try to lock you up. Try to forcibly examine you... maybe even dissect you, right? And whether you could get the law to protect you? Well, hell, the law’s spotty when it comes to civil rights, but Princess, I gotta tell ya, intellectual property laws, all of America and half the world relies on those now. If you’re in the business of selling knowledge about yourself... hell, companies like Pfizer or Bristol-Myers would sure as hell rather pay you than try to lock you up- less mess, less hassle and probably more reliable. Half of corporate America would tear the government and each other limb from limb if they tried to hurt you or monopolize you.”

Now she looked angry, befuddled and stubborn all at once. “I don’t understand this at all. Now I’m just enslaved to everybody.”

“No you’re not!” I tried not to sound exasperated, but it all seemed so obvious to me. I took a breath and slowed down a bit. “No, look, the point is you’re getting studied, but you control it, you decide what you’ll put up with and what you won’t. If you want to give some knowledge away for free, that’s fine. If a company or the government wants something, they can’t relate to you if you just run and hide, but if you say, ‘Yes, we can negotiate,’ well everyone’s used to doing business that way.”

“I am not. I barely understand money. At times I think it’s an odd delusion you all have.”

I laughed. “Okay, but it’s functional. The point is this’ll work. Man, I’m telling you it would work.” She still looked doubtful and upset. So I said, “Besides, you could do a lot of good for mankind.”

I was shocked at her response. Her eyes turned into lumps of coal. “How would I help mankind?”

I was at a loss. “Well, I mean, you could help people.”

“Moreover, you are assuming that what I have is a gift. It is not.”

“I don’t know if that’s up to you to decide for everybody,” I said, then regretted the way it sounded. She stared at me and, if anything, just looked angrier. I kept trying. “I just mean... Look, I don’t know if the whole immortality thing is something they can figure out just looking at you, but I’m positive... I mean, I’ll bet they could spend years looking at your biology, finding ways to help people.”

She was still just staring at me, coldly. I was bewildered. “I thought you cared about people. Your friend Jackie who died last year... What if you really could have helped save her? Maybe given her a few more years?”

"That is enough!" she snapped, "You... you are quite cavalier in your assumptions, young man. And I am being kind in that statement. You assume there is a secret to be discovered, one that can be understood... and you assume you have some right to it, that you have the right to demand my cooperation." She looked disgusted and disappointed, and stared away from me. "You are no better than those I would fear."

I was speechless. Of all the things she could have said, that was absolutely the last I expected. It made me angry. I took a couple of breaths, just forcing the quick comebacks to stay put.

Her eyes snapped back at me and she looked me up and down. "That's right, keep your angry words to yourself. You don't understand. You *can't* understand. That is the gift of you and your ilk. You have the luxury of going to your graves and leaving your mistakes behind. I carry my misjudgments with me for centuries. You say I haven't the right to make this decision? I say I am the only one who can!"

I drew a breath and tried to calm down. I wasn't even sure why I was upset now, let alone her. "You're right; I don't understand how you can say something like that. So explain it to me."

She sat back and regarded me and I could see her anger subsiding, but in her eyes... suddenly for the very first time since we met, she looked ancient.

"It is clear that to whatever extent you can understand, you won't understand right now." She stood up. "It's time for you to leave," she said, flatly.

Chapter 24

Circa 130 BCE

Seven days. Seven days of running, hiding, backtracking and on occasion, killing. Seven days of knowing he was out there, relentless in his determination to bring me to heel. I could see it in him whenever I ventured close enough to spy him, see that this was not about punishment, nor about revenge. This was all about his honor and his power: he would not permit that I should stand against him.

His arrogance was as a God's and I thought, perhaps, he must be one. As frustrating and maddening as I found all this, there was comfort of a sort in that notion. Here was a worthy adversary, the first I had ever encountered since realizing my divine nature. There must be the spark of the divine within him as well, for that could be the only plausible explanation for his unshakable tenacity.

He was certainly as beautiful as any God. I watched one night when the chase had ground to a halt, the men exhausted, the dogs spent and confused by the pungent herbs and animal scat I had strewn about. I watched as he set aside his armor and his tunic and spent hours at pleasure with a young man who had been by his side throughout this long contest. He had marched no less than his men, and had had no more of food or rest or comfort, yet his appetites were strong and he did not stint in sating them.

The seventh morning found me skirting the ridge of the western side of the river valley. These were lands only familiar from long, long years ago and as the wide arc of hunters drove me further and further north I came to realize I would be driven from my lands, away from those people I called mine and everything that had become familiar and comforting. Rage seethed in me, but there was little I could do—my bow was lost days ago and my bag of tricks emptied. Rufus would not be dissuaded or eluded and even as I tasted the bitterness of those traitorous thoughts I felt a weariness setting in. The sun was not even half way along its journey across the sky and I was feeling spent.

This was hopeless.

Exhausted, I stumbled toward a great old tree that marked the westernmost border of my territory, of my divine sphere and home. The tree had marked this edge of it for as long as I had lived here. It would take six men clasping hands in a circle to surround it, and its gnarled, twisted branches held many crevices and even a water hole in a crevice about five arm lengths above. It was the thickest, most twisted, least handsome, yet most beautiful tree in my realm, and always had it guarded this border for me. I felt a kinship with it, for it had been here as long as I could remember, as long as even I myself had been here, and though it had grown and changed in all that time it still remained the same.

I suddenly realized I had not walked past it since I had left the company of mortals and began realizing my divine nature. I also understood I was unwilling to walk past it—not to be driven past it, in any case. Instead, I patted the rough bark on its side and put my head down, feeling the weight of exhaustion. I listened to their approach and resolved that if they were to capture me, I would kill as many as possible first. And what then? They could not kill me, this I knew, but what abuses would be forced upon my body? And what would it matter?

The wind shifted and interrupted my reverie. I could hear them again, my nose tasting the scent of the oil on their weapons, their sweat and exhaustion on the air. There were at least five of them and they were close, weary from a long night of searching, excited that their prey was in sight. Raising my head and turning toward them I drew my knife, then hesitated as I saw him: Rufus himself was staring at me from amidst his band of men, leading this party personally.

Holding my knife, I gazed levelly at him. He stopped, holding up his hand and returned my gaze. He spoke in those clipped words of his people and his men spread out to encircle me. One sounded a horn and others responded. They would rush to this spot to behold their prey, hoping to witness her destruction.

A smile came to my lips as I realized I had been a fool. No wonder the gods had abandoned me: I had failed to see the most simple, most direct avenue of escape. I dropped my belongings, just a belt and a small bag, and then moved five paces towards Rufus who remained motionless, his face as a stone visage gazing upon me. With deliberate scorn on my face and in my pose, I dragged my bare foot through the soft loam, scratching a line in the earth and then stepping back, prepared to defend myself.

Rufus spoke and several of his men laughed. Their mirth angered me and as I took in the scene I realized that Rufus was calmly stripping off his armor. He would take me down himself. I ached to taunt him, but did he know my tongue? His words were foreign to me.

“Gweme leudbe dewale en dbautun geuse par minaižon handiwōn,” I hissed in the old tongue, *Come little Godling, and taste death from my hands,* but there was no comprehension in his face. I tried again in the words of the seafaring peoples and this time he clearly understood me. His face darkened slightly, but then he laughed.

“You are rather tall, but too thin, and there is the stink of fear about you.” He finished stripping down to his tunic and drew a long, slim knife from his belt on the ground before stepping up to the line I had drawn in the earth. “Drop your weapon.”

It was a command, not a request. What a magnificent creature he was, his body so firm and muscular, yet moving with such supple grace and quickness it made me feel weak just to behold him. How could I think to stand against this?

He stepped across the line and I lunged forward, throwing my left leg out in a wide arc, sweeping low to take his feet out from under him. He dodged like a cat, but my right leg swept in the reverse and he fell with a sharp exhalation of breath, his arms rising only barely in time to catch me as I fell on him, my knife seeking his throat. I had the advantage, but only for that brief moment and I surged against him... then his strength overwhelmed me, throwing me easily off and away. I spun and regained my feet, turning to ward off his attack, but it did not come. He stood warily, grinning at me, but a line of blood welled from his right arm where my blade had kissed him.

“That was nicely done,” he said, grinning.

His words threatened to enrage me and I forced myself to step back, circling him as I waited. I could see the tension in him, the shifting of his face and his stance, betraying his moves a precious moment before he made them and as he lunged inward I slipped low and drove the knife against his ribs. He twisted, my blade raking against him rather than sinking home, leaving a bloody rent in the skin as he sought to entrap me with his left arm. That was the deadly embrace I had to avoid at all costs. I had felt his strength and I knew myself unequal to it.

Twice more we closed and each time I managed to touch him, but no more. Still, minor as they were, his wounds angered him and I laughed at him, taunting him wordlessly. I needed his rage, needed him intent upon murder rather than capture. This was my only hope.

As we closed yet again I sought to brush against him, slipping in and out of his grasp, but either a slip of footing, or perhaps a tremor of fatigue, slowed me just enough that his left fist closed about my right forearm, bringing me to a sudden halt. We stood there, frozen in that moment, faces so close I could taste his breath, and I saw triumph in his eyes.

I surged forward, driving my forehead against his face, but he slipped the blow, then pulled my arm high, twisting it behind my back as he pulled me close against him. His fist clenched hard as I struggled in his grasp and my heart sank as he dropped his knife. My knee surged upward, striking him hard in the groin and he shuddered, but if anything his grip tightened, my right hand going numb as he stripped the knife from my grasp. Desperate I sank my teeth into his neck, but he had both my wrists trapped in his left hand now and with his right he took me by the throat, closing my windpipe, peeling my mouth from his neck and forcing me to my knees. I tried to kick him again, but my body just trembled, refusing to obey my will as my lungs screamed for air and the world shrank into a dwindling tunnel of darkness and pain.