



TWILIGHT DREAMS

I live in a mental hospital. I'm not actually crazy; I just like it here. The Inward Care Center has a lot going for it. They give you clean clothes and neat foam slippers, feed you, and protect you, and nobody questions the bizarre. I can feel safe here. Sure, it's all low-grade construction, dull white walls, and linoleum. Everything smells like pine oil cleaner mixed with a hint of cigarettes, and the only breeze comes from sterile air-conditioning. But I don't live here for the scenery. I live here because it's the only place I have left in this world, the only place where they'll *believe* in me.

You see, I'm a god.

There you go again, thinking I'm crazy. I'm not, I swear. I go by Sara Vanadi. They used to call me something else entirely, of course, pious lips and tongues caressing the perfect syllables of my name alongside countless prayers, but that doesn't matter anymore.

They don't believe in the old titles any longer, so why should I keep them? All that's left of my heyday are scattered myths and a blur of faded memories. Don't trouble yourself wondering who I was. Today I'm just a girl who wants to stay safe and hold on to the last embers of belief that she can find.

"Hey, how are you?" a baritone voice asks, interrupting my daily pity party. It's the staff supervisor, Elliot Russom. He looms over me like a mountain—used to play football before he joined the Inward Care Center—but he's a softy at heart. "I'd like you to meet our newest psych tech."

I look up from the little house I'm building out of Uno cards and into a pair of bright blue eyes. They belong to a cheery guy with a shock of auburn hair he must've spent hours getting to look perfectly tousled. Or maybe he just woke up with it, in which case he has my sincerest envy. He also looks way too young to be chasing a career in a place like this. Wonder where his life went wrong. "Hi," he says in a bright voice. "Nathan Kence. So nice to meet you, um . . . ?"

He wants my name. For the briefest moment, I want to give him the true one. I want him to look at me with adoration and respect, to make me feel like the goddess I once was. *Was, was, was*. The longing surprises me. It's been a while since I've felt that ancient ache for what I've lost. But I'll never have it again, so I say "Sara. Nice to meet you, too, Nathan," and hold out my hand.

He shakes it, seeming perplexed. Elliot smiles—that disoriented look on Nathan's face is exactly what he wants. "You're wondering why she's here, aren't you?" he asks.

It's a common source of confusion. After all, I don't look like I

belong in a crazy house. I seem young and happy, like I should be out babysitting or studying for tomorrow's chemistry test. My clothes might be castoffs donated to the ward—a too-large T-shirt decorated with the message *Give Blood* and faded jeans—but there's a healthy body under all that. One might even think I'm a bit on the curvy side, but what can I say? They liked their ladies a little thicker back in the day, and I was supposed to embody that ideal. No one could have predicted the body-image apocalypse to come.

Now Nathan looks embarrassed, but he has no need to worry—there's a reason why Elliot brings new staff to meet me first. "It's okay, Nate," I say, smiling. "I'm an educational prop."

Elliot rolls his eyes; I'm trampling all over his script. "Sara is the nicest girl you'll ever meet," he says, pretending he hasn't heard me. "But she's here for a reason, so there are two things I want you to understand. First, not everybody who gets committed is an angry lunatic, and second, don't make assumptions about our clients based on how they look."

My smile widens and I laugh. "Aww, Elliot, am I that misleading?"

He gives me a happy bounce of his eyebrows. "Why don't you tell Nathan who you are?"

I clear my throat and fix my eyes on the new hire. Mine aren't the sharp, striking blues he lucked out on, but they're still a captivating forget-me-not hue. They go perfectly with my silky gold hair—almost as if someone planned it that way. "Well, Nate," I begin in a sunny, clear voice, "I'm over a thousand years old. I was born in mankind's dreams and empowered by his beliefs. I'm a goddess."

His eyes widen and he grins. "I've always wanted to meet a god. So, is Sara your real name? Would I know you?"

Oh, I like him. Most new hires give me a nervous look and say something along the lines of "That's nice!" when I tell them what I am. He actually has a sense of humor.

"You've probably heard of me, but I don't give out my true name anymore."

"Well, of course not," he says. "Don't want to get mobbed by the paparazzi wherever you go."

I love it when they play along. "If only," I say, heaving a dramatic sigh. "Belief gives me strength, and doubt takes it away. If I told you who I really am, you'd know exactly who to disbelieve in, and then I'd be just a bit weaker for it."

Nathan looks at Elliot, who shrugs. "She's never told me, either. As far as we're concerned, she's Sara."

"Sara it is. Well, whoever you really are, I'm glad we met," Nathan says.

I'm about to tell him something similar when Carolyn calls to us from the nurses' station. "Ms. Vanadi? You have a visitor."

"I—I *do*?" I never get visitors. Nobody knows I'm here. This must be a mistake. "Excuse me," I say to Nathan, who nods and follows Elliot on the rest of the tour.

I sidle away from my table in the dayroom, careful not to disturb my growing house of cards. As I head for the main room, I catch a bit of Nathan and Elliot's chatter from behind me and smirk at its content.

". . . just seems so young," Nathan is saying. "Happy, too. Fit right in at glee club, y'know?"

“Like you’re any older?” Elliot replies with a deep chuckle. “I think she’s at least eighteen. She has to be, otherwise she’d be on the juvenile ward.”

Ha. If they only knew, right?

I walk up to Carolyn with a spring in my step, pleased to hear the centuries have been good to me. She’s busy filling out patients’ charts but breaks into a smile as I get close. I tend to be on everyone’s good side. It’s kind of my thing. “There you are. You can head into the cafeteria. I’m so glad someone’s actually come to see you.”

“Um, me too,” I say, eyes flicking to the double doors on the other side of Carolyn’s station. My unexpected visitor lies just beyond, probably sitting patiently in one of the center’s cheap plastic chairs. “Do you know who it is?”

“No, sorry. Bill just stuck his head in to say there was someone here for you, that’s all.”

“Okay, thanks.” I give the doors a wary look, then square my shoulders and head toward them. Why do I feel so nervous all of a sudden? There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m a forgotten god in a hand-me-down T-shirt and foam shoes, after all. Who’s going to mess with *that* combination?

The moment I push through the doors, I spot my mystery guest. There are several visitors in the cafeteria today, friends and family occupying half a dozen wide tables, all chatting with loved ones of questionable mental health. Bill waves as I walk in, then goes back to his newspaper. There’s only one thing out of place, and I’m certain he’s here for me: a man in a dark gray suit, sitting at an otherwise-empty table.

He looks up, fixing me with his dark brown eyes, and I freeze.

It's not a conscious choice—I feel like a startled deer. He's . . . *dangerous*. A steady sense of menace rolls off him like a wave of heat, a lifetime of cruel experience at odds with the twenty-to-thirtyish years he looks to be around. Part of me wants to hide under a table, but I crush the impulse. Abandoned or not, I'm still a *god*. Who does he think he is, scaring me like that? I march right over to his table, pull out a chair, and sit in front of him.

"Hi there!" I say, sickly sweet.

A slow smile oozes onto his face. It's creepy on a calculated level, like he's spent a lot of time practicing it in front of a mirror. "Ms. Vanadi?" he asks smoothly.

I resist the urge to shudder. I swear, everything he does is unsettling. "That's me!" I say, keeping up the overly cheerful voice.

"Of course it is," he says. "But why deal in half-truths? After all, we're about to become close friends."

There is no earthly way I will *ever* become this man's friend. And this is coming from a god built around the concept of friendship, among other things. "Wonderful!" I say. "But I'm not quite following you on the 'half-truths' bit. I'm Sara."

"And yet you were committed here for claiming to be something . . . *more*."

I want to go. This guy freaks me out on so many levels. But I plow ahead, hoping he'll decide to leave if I play the vapid cheerleader just a bit longer. "Well, of course I'm something more! I'm a god of—"

"Love," he says, tongue darting between his lips as he draws out the word. The way he says it makes my skin crawl.

“Um, yeah. Been over my charts, huh? Are you a doctor?” I know he’s not. A real doctor would be talking to me in the day-room, or maybe one of the dormitories. A real doctor wouldn’t make people want to shriek if he reached out to touch them, either—and I know I will if this guy so much as lays a finger on me.

“Of course not, Ms. Vanadi. And feel free to drop the act anytime. I know who you really are. Or should I say *were*? My name is Mr. Garen. I’m here to extend an offer.”

Oh, crap.

Is he lying? I’m so bad at telling—a trusting girl by nature, in fact—that I just assume he is. He seems the deceitful sort, anyway. “This is new,” I say, trying not to let my worries show. “Most people have trouble believing they might be talking to a god!”

He sighs and reaches into his pocket. “I see you’d prefer to make this difficult. It’s so rare I need to prove myself,” he says as he searches. “You people tend to be chatterboxes. Are you afraid of me, sweet—ah!” He withdraws his hand, fingers closed tightly around something, and raises it over the table. He eyes me to make sure I’m paying attention, then opens his fist to release its contents. My brow furrows in confusion. It’s a crumpled ball of fabric, maybe satin. There are dark stains on it, as if someone used it to clean their hands after rummaging around in a bag of potato chips.

I give him a puzzled look. He motions at the ball, encouraging me to open it and examine its contents. I hesitate, then reach out with questing fingers, curious. Just before I’m about to touch it, I get a flash of hideous imagery, a split-second vision that sends my hand shooting back to clutch at my chest.

Blood. Cracked skin and suffering. Flesh caught between long teeth. Pain, dismemberment, and death, all inflicted with a sadistic glee that takes my breath away.

“It’s a piece of Ahriman,” the man explains, sweeping the ball of fabric off the table and back into his pocket. “A particularly foul Zoroastrian god we’re keeping under lock and key. He’s not a very big fish in this day and age, but he still has enough believers to make him quite the threat. Every part of him carries the taint of destruction, as you can see.”

I’m too shocked to say anything. I can’t remember the last time I’ve felt the presence of divinity. He’s not lying. He knows exactly what I am.

The oily smirk returns. “I represent an organization of . . . *concerned citizens*, let’s say. We deal in deities, Ms. Vanadi. We contain or destroy those who would do harm, and recruit the rest. You were once—”

“What I was is none of your concern,” I say, putting on my best angry face. “I don’t have a clue how you found me, but I have not meddled in your affairs, and I expect you to extend me the same courtesy.”

He spreads his hands and makes a token effort to look apologetic. It’s about as insincere as you can get. “I’m sorry, Ms. Vanadi, but you really are quite rare. I could go into all the nice perks you’ll receive, but let me break it down a bit more simply: Join us . . . or die.”

My mouth drops open. He’s threatening me. He knows who I am and he’s actually *threatening* me. I don’t think this has ever happened before.

“Spare me the vengeful-deity act,” he says, waving a hand to

dismiss my ire. "I've seen it all before. Here's the deal, 'Sara.' We're well aware there's precious little anyone can do to put you down permanently. You still have a handful of believers here and there, and they'll put you back together, won't they?"

I cross my arms and glare at him.

"Of course they will," he says, answering his own question. "So this is what will happen: Accept my offer, and we'll see to it you have all the believers you need. You'll be a true god again, not some stray begging for scraps. Deny me, and we will make the world disbelieve you out of existence."

My heart drops into my stomach. I dearly hope he's lying now. Is it even possible? Sure, disbelief hurts, but it would take the concentrated doubt of thousands to erase me entirely. That means convincing all those people I exist, and *then* getting them to think I *don't*. Sounds pretty damn hard to me. "How on earth do you plan to do *that*?" I say, aghast at the idea.

He chuckles, and my anger returns. I really wish I had something heavy to smash that grin off his face. "Oh, you of all people should know how cynical today's masses can be," he says. "I won't get into specifics, but do you honestly think we can't find a few skeptics out there to point at you?"

I have to kill this man.

He's right, of course. This is why I don't give out my true name. Nobody *believes* anymore, and if this little "organization" of his has the means, then it could be the death of me. I need to strike first. My options are limited, though. My power is low. All I can do at this point is meddle with body chemistry, and getting this scumbag to feel attracted to me is about as far as you can get from my goal.

“That’s it?” I say, deciding to stall for time. “I walk out of here with you for the vague promise of worshippers?”

He shrugs. “It’s usually all I need to say. You’re a rather desperate lot, these days.”

I have to fight to keep from wincing at that. Of course I miss the age of legends, when whole pantheons rose and flourished. I miss my friends, and I miss being loved. But not enough to turn my back on what *we* believed in. This man seems to be forgetting that my kind valued freedom and rebellion, that we were a rough-and-tumble bunch who would rather die than follow orders from smug bootlickers like him. If he thinks he can buy my servitude, he has another think coming.

“The world’s changed, and we can’t follow,” I say. “Look, I’ll level with you: I don’t want to work for you, and I don’t want to die, either. I just want to be left alone. My time is past. I’ve been in this hospital for . . .” I pause, trying to count. The Inward Care Center has been my life for so long I’ve seen the staff go from pagers to cell phones.

“Twenty-seven years, by our estimates,” the man says. “I assume the workforce hasn’t caught on thanks to your talent for emotional manipulation.”

“Whatever,” I say, reddening. He thinks he has all the answers. I really do hate this man. “I’m not going anywhere, Mr. Garen.”

He gives me a sour look, then sighs. “You don’t want to be on one of our teams? Fine. We have other uses for gods. But despite what you believe, you *are* coming with me. We’ll just have to go about it the hard way.”

He gets up and fishes around in his pocket again, but instead of

the little satin ball of nightmares, he retrieves a long, thin piece of metal. It flashes briefly in the light of the overhead fluorescents, and I see it's a large needle. Bill glances up from his paper and frowns when he notices the object. I can tell he's about to say something—shoelaces aren't even allowed on the unit, for safety reasons—but before he can open his mouth, Garen holds out his left index finger and stabs it.

Instantly, the room goes silent. Every client and visitor sprawls onto the tables, limbs askew. Bill slumps forward in his chair and begins snoring. Beyond the double doors, I can hear clatters as staff and patients alike tumble to the floor. Garen just smiles, pockets the needle, and sticks his finger in his mouth to keep it from bleeding on his nice suit.

He's just put the entire care center to sleep.

"Doesn't work on immortals, of course," he mumbles around his finger before pulling it out and looking it over.

"So what does that make you?" I ask when I find my voice. The calm in it surprises me.

"Oh, I'm no god." He gives me a nasty grin. "I *did* say we had other uses for you."

Okay, on *that* unbelievably sinister note, it's time to leave. *What's the plan, Sara?* I look him over, wondering if I can take him. Ordinarily, I'd assume I could. I can do more than hold my own in a fight, and like he said earlier, we gods are remarkably hard to kill. I get the feeling I might need a bit of an edge this time, though. He knows too much about me already, and I'm probably not the first god he's tried to recruit. I hate to admit it, but I know exactly what's needed here. It's painful, but in my weakened state, it's the only option.

Time for a little trip down misery lane.

See, I can't make people love me—not really. Love is as much a mental and emotional state as it is a physical one, and the latter is all I can touch: body chemistry and mood. Still, that's a rather fertile playground. This man strikes me as a fairly loveless individual, but even monsters can feel loss. So I concentrate, reaching out to him with the little spark of power I have left, and push at his brain chemistry. It's exhausting, but worse than that, it *hurts*—I'm supposed to inspire love and adoration, not despair. What I'm doing goes against the very core of my being.

Garen frowns and shakes his head, trying to clear it. His face loses its disturbing, superior cast, breaking down into confusion. "What are you—?" He puts a hand on the table to steady himself before staggering away from it. I think he's trying to glare, to reassert himself, but he keeps stumbling on the sadness I'm pouring into his brain.

Either he's hiding something or I'm weaker than I thought. Maybe it's both, because he should be on the ground right now, crying for his mother, instead of looking a little tipsy. There's no way I can keep this going much longer. Hell, *I'm* starting to tear up from the sheer effort of it all.

Luckily, my pantheon has a solution for problems like Garen: Hit them again, and *harder*. While he's distracted, I launch myself up, sending my chair clattering away. I leap onto the table and run across it, gathering what little speed I can in two footfalls before throwing myself into the air, pulling my legs up, and sending both knees crashing into the man's chest. The air goes out of him with a *whoosh* and he topples to the floor. He seems dazed, but I refuse to

give him the chance to retaliate. I lean back, grab one of the nearby plastic chairs, and bring it down on his head with a savage *crack*. His eyes roll and he goes limp.

This is the part where I'm supposed to run. The bad guy's unconscious, and everything's clear for me to make my getaway. Well, how stupid is *that*? I feel this is one of the many poor lessons Hollywood teaches today's young women. You don't leave an enemy behind, not when you have the upper hand.

I raise the chair high above and bring it down again, bouncing Garen's head off the floor with the strength of the blow. Blood spatters onto the dingy linoleum floor. Again. A grim smile begins working its way onto my lips. He's still breathing, but I figure another hit or two should be enough to—

Garen's body contracts, sucking into itself. Fabric, skin, muscle, and bone flow like water into a drain, spiraling down into nothingness. He's gone in an eyeblink, a blast of air rushing in to fill the void with a sound like a suction cup being torn off a window. There's nothing left of the man but a bloodstained floor and a dented chair.

That seat clatters to the linoleum, dropping from my nerveless fingers, and I lean against the table for support. Oh, this is *very* bad. He's been saved by some sort of contingency magic, his friends will no doubt be back in force to finish the job, and . . . and I have to be gone before they return. *Gone*. The thought stabs me, fills my heart with a thunderous jumble of grief and fury. This isn't *fair*. I've lost everything a hundred times over, been reduced to a shell of a goddess in an asylum, and now I'm about to fall even farther. What, I haven't been humiliated *enough*?

I scream and kick over the table where Garen made his offer,

where he changed everything, and stand there for a moment, seething. Then I shake my head. It's done. I want to sit and pout, to rage against the injustice of it all, but centuries of experience are screaming at me to leave, and I'm inclined to listen. I may be fickle, but I'm not stupid. I spare a moment to glare at the spot where Garen vanished, then dash over to Bill and unclip the keys from his belt. Around here, if you have keys, you can do anything.

I push out of the cafeteria and nearly trip over Nathan. He and Elliot must have been finishing up their tour beside the nurses' station. Lucky me; I'm not sure if I remember how to drive a car—twenty-seven years in a mental hospital!—so I'm going to need a chauffeur. Deciding whom to take is easy. I might be a lot stronger than I look, but Elliot's a giant, and there's no way I'm getting him out of here without a forklift, so I bend down and haul our newest psych tech off the floor. He groans as I toss him over my shoulder. I think Garen's sleep spell might be wearing off.

By the time I've made my way out of the Inward Care Center, fumbling with Nathan and more stupid locked doors than I can count, he's starting to wake up. Good, I was getting tired. This little journey has made me realize I'm nowhere near as strong as I used to be.

"Whazzit?" he mumbles as I jog into the parking lot.

"Which car is yours, Nate?" I say, pulling him off my shoulder and giving him a shake.

He rubs his head, trying to banish the last bits of sleep. "Silver Toyota Camry, why—wait, what's going on?"

I grab him by the shoulders, stare into his eyes, and give him my

best smile. “You’re about to rescue a god, Nate. Now, get me out of here!”

He frowns, fully awake now. “What, no, I’m—it’s Sara, right? What are we doing out here? No, we have to go back inside! I just started this job and—”

I flood his brain with as much happiness, love, and desire as I can manage. His look of confusion slips away into puppy love. It would be adorable if I weren’t so pressed for time. “Oh,” he murmurs, a dreamy expression returning to his face. “Kay.”

I hand him his keys and he wanders over to his car, unlocks the passenger side first (what a gentleman!), and lets me in. Then he enters, starts the engine, and pulls out of the lot. “Where to, Sara?” he asks with a silly smile.

The question stops me in my tracks. After twenty-seven years, the hospital has become my world. I’d never considered where else I might need to go, and now all I know is it’s the one place I can’t stay.

“I don’t know, Nathan,” I say, the words filling me with terror. “I really don’t know.”



THE NEW WORLD

We go to his apartment, of course.

It's the only idea I have. For almost thirty years, my only window to the outside has been a limited supply of television and movies, and they're quite clear on the first step: Everyone runs to the guy's apartment first, and *then* they make a plan. So that's where we go. I almost feel guilty for picking the clichéd choice.

The first thing Nathan does when we get inside is hug me. "You're *amazing!*" he says, still heady from a brain full of pheromones, dopamine, and serotonin. (You can learn a lot about the science of attraction if you hang around doctors for a few decades.)

I smile, but it's a sad one. He doesn't really love me—not with his heart. You'd think it wouldn't matter, but the empty adoration I've forced on him is against everything I stand for. I live for displays of true, genuine love, not this forgery, so I release my hold on

his mind and try to bring him back to normal. It doesn't take long. One moment he's bouncing off the walls, giddy at just being around me, and the next he's cooling down, steadying himself against his kitchen's Formica countertop. A frown replaces the inane grin, and he starts to realize what happened.

"Wait, why are we here?" he says, looking around. He turns to me, eyebrows shooting upward. "Oh, crap, we have to get back to the center! It's my first day!"

"Well, we kind of can't do that, Nate," I reply, hitching my shoulders in a bashful shrug. "Sorry."

"Oh god," he says, really seeing me for the first time, putting two and two together. "I kidnapped a patient. I am so fired. Oh, no no no, this is all kinds of fired and sued and arrested and—" He starts heading for the door, but I move to block him.

"Calm down," I say. "You're not in trouble. I kidnapped *you*."

"What?"

"And I really am a god." Might as well slip that one in. It's not like it's going to make him any *more* bewildered.

He laughs and holds up his hands. "Sure you are, um, Sara? It *is* Sara, isn't it? Why don't we get in my car and head . . . out?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not letting you bring me back to Inward, Nate. Now, look, what do I need to do to prove to you that I'm a god?"

He pauses for a moment. "Go back to the center with me?" He says it with such hope I can't help laughing.

"Nate, calm down. I'm not going anywhere until you start taking me seriously."

He begins to pace. I can see this isn't exactly what he was expecting when he went in to work today. "Sara, please," he says. "I need

this job, and it's going to look really bad when they find out I snuck a beautiful crazy person out of the facility, drove her home, and can't even remember how it all happened."

He doesn't realize it, but the little compliment he sneaks in next to "crazy person" really makes my day. It's hard to look nice in an old T-shirt and a pair of jeans, particularly after decades in a place where the "hairstylist" is more concerned with lice than style and the only makeup is already on the nurses' faces. I sigh and say, "Nate, I'm a goddess of love. The reason you can't remember what happened is because I was messing with your head."

He gives me "the look." I'm used to it by now—it's the one that says, *Aww, how sweet. You really believe all this, don't you?* To his credit, though, all he says is "I'm not sure how well that'll hold up in court, Sara."

That gets him another eye roll. I don't care how "creative" or "open-minded" people claim to be now. Time was, you could do something inexplicable and tell someone it was the result of divine power, and they'd believe it in a heartbeat. Now they just chalk it up to science and sleight of hand. Or drugs. "Back in my day . . ." I say under my breath. Well, those days are gone. I have to play the hand I've been dealt, and right now that hand thinks I'm adorably insane. I decide to try a different tack.

"Okay, Nate, how about this: I'm going to sit down on that chair"—I point at a metal folding chair next to a beat-up card table—"and you sit on your little futon over there, and I will make you fall in love with me. If you don't think I've done anything after five minutes, I'll go anywhere you like. Deal?"

He glances at the couch, then back to me. "Deal," he says, try-

ing very hard to keep his face neutral. It's clear he still thinks I'm nuts, but at least he's being nice about it.

He moves over to his futon, sits, and gives me an expectant look. I plop onto the metal chair, lean forward, and begin ratcheting up the affection between us. It takes a little longer than the fire hydrant of desire I unleashed in the parking lot, mostly because I want to leave him aware and in control this time and partly because I'm just plain exhausted.

His eyes widen in surprise and his mouth drops open. He looks at me with a delightful sense of perplexed attraction, and I can see he gets it. I stop what I'm doing to his head. "Apologies sound better with chocolate," I say, giving him a knowing smirk.

He laughs, seems like he's about to say something, then closes his mouth and marches into his little kitchen. There's some rustling, and after a moment he returns with—*Yes!*

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had one of these?" I exclaim, holding out my hands.

"I am very sorry I doubted you," he says, dropping a Toblerone chocolate bar into my eager grasp. I used to *love* these things. For some reason, the presence of almond nougat and honey folded into chocolate seems perfectly calibrated to strike at the joy centers of my brain.

"Apology accepted, mortal," I say with a grin, tearing open the bar and biting off a succulent triangle.

"So you're *really* a god?" Nathan asks. "Not just, I don't know . . . a psychic superhero or something?" He's not fully convinced, but at least he's not rushing to get me into a straitjacket anymore. I can work with that.

“You guys and your fantasies,” I say around a mouthful of chocolate. It’s just as good as I remember it. I decide to count it as an offering in my name, the first in a *very* long time. “Here, I’ll prove it to you. Get me a knife.”

“Um, pass?” he says with a frown. I wait a moment, then give him an unamused look when he stands his ground. Okay, he may be open to the idea that I’m telling the truth, but part of him is still clearly unwilling to arm someone he met in the loony bin.

“Worried I’m one of those teenybop serial killers you keep hearing about?” I ask, setting the chocolate down and heading for the kitchen.

“Well, no, but—wait. Seriously, you don’t need—!”

“Your skin does look *very* fashionable,” I say, rummaging through his knife block. “Ah, perfect.”

I pull out a large chef’s knife, noting it’s one of the few things in this apartment that isn’t a bargain brand. I add *Takes pride in his cooking?* to the short list of things I know about Nathan, then sit back down across from him, grinning as I see he’s gotten very still. “Don’t be a baby,” I say, giving the air a few lazy swipes with the knife. “You should see what I can do with a long sword.”

Before he can react, I draw the blade across the tip of my left thumb. He winces and holds up his hands, saying, “Hey, no! Stop. Don’t do that!”

I just smile and hold my thumb out at him. “I don’t have many believers left,” I say, directing his attention to the injured digit. “But the ones I *do* have don’t think of me as a goddess with a cut on her finger. So I change to match their beliefs. Watch.”

Hundreds of years ago, the wound would have started to heal

before I'd even finished making it. Now it takes almost a full minute. Still, for those who don't know any better, it probably seems very impressive. Bit by bit, the cut stitches itself closed, a few dainty drops of blood oozing out before it seals itself completely. There's not even the barest hint of a scar; it's like the gash was never there in the first place. I wipe the remaining blood on my T-shirt (an act I find vaguely ironic, considering the message on it) and raise an eyebrow at Nathan. "Well?"

"That's . . . that's incredible," he says, sounding suitably awed. "I mean, you could just be some *regenerating* psychic superhero, but still. Not something you see every day." He stares at me for another few seconds, then shrugs. "Okay, maybe you *are* a god. Whaddaya say we roll with it for now? Hot damn."

"You're taking this rather well."

He grins, eyes alight. "Are you kidding? This is just about every childhood daydream of my generation come to life. So which god are you, really? There's a *way* higher chance I'll believe you now, I promise."

I barely resist telling him—the urge to gain a new worshipper is so strong—but I can't yet. We're not safe here. It won't take a genius to figure out where I've gone and with whom, and telling Nathan all about myself is a long story that can wait for a safer place. I make a little hurt sound and shake my head. "Not now, Nate. I'm in danger. Actually, I think we both are."

"We?"

"Probably, yeah. Sorry." I really do feel bad about it; he seems like a nice guy, and not someone who deserves to be thrown into the middle of some supernatural struggle, but much like my past,

now is not the time to focus on this. “Someone’s hunting me, and since you helped me get here, I think pretty soon they’ll be after you, too.”

“Oh,” Nathan says, digesting this. Then he laughs, and it’s that crazed sort of sound you make when you’re not sure if you should be amused or appalled. He glances around the utilitarian apartment, at the ID clipped to his waistband, and shrugs. “I have to tell you, Sara, this is probably the best excuse I’ve ever had for taking a day off. The first day of my first grown-up job . . . and apparently also my last.”

I laugh with him. It *is* a bit ridiculous. “Glad I could help you play hooky.”

“So, who are you running from?”

No point in keeping him in the dark there. I quickly describe Garen and his nasty organization. When I’m done, Nathan nods and says, “Yeah, I don’t blame you for wanting to get the hell away from *that*.” He pauses for a moment, then bobs his head as if he’s made some internal decision. “Well, can’t let a nice goddess like you make a break for it on foot. Where do you want to go?”

It’s the question that’s been running through my head since we got here. I lean back in my chair and grab for the chocolate again. “Truth is, Nate, I have no idea. I’ve been at the Inward Care Center for twenty-seven years. I don’t have anywhere to run.”

“Twenty-seven?” he barks, surprised. “You don’t even look old enough to drink.”

“I *did* say I was over a thousand. Not bad for a millenarian, eh?” I say, gesturing at myself.

He taps his forehead. “Aah, right. Goddess. I guess you don’t

age.” He frowns as a thought hits him, then gives voice to it. “How come nobody at the center noticed? Your records must have admittance dates.”

I shrug. “I can tweak how people feel about me, like I did to you. Seriously, it’s not like I’m a hazard to myself or others; they wouldn’t normally keep me in a place like that. My butt has ‘outpatient care’ written all over it.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Nathan says. “So you’re on the run, you have no place to go, and, lemme guess, you have no friends to call, since all your contacts are twenty-seven years out of date.”

“Right in one.”

“I’ve got plenty of friends in town,” he says. “And family up in the Maryland-DC area.”

I shake my head. “Can’t be anyone connected to you, either. Nowhere they’ll know to go looking. I need a nice, permanent place to lie low.”

“Permanent, huh? That makes things difficult. I’m your classic starving artist, and something tells me you weren’t drawing a paycheck in the hospital.”

“No, and all my things, well . . .” It hurts to admit I have nothing left, not even my necklace. If it glitters, it calls to me. I adore bling of all types, the more unique and precious the better. Just a quirk of mine. I have a lot of them, too. As a figment of humanity’s imagination given form, my thoughts, desires, and motivations will always be a little larger than life. “I don’t even have proper clothes anymore,” I finish, looking down at my bedraggled cast-offs. He thinks I’m beautiful? In *this*?

Nathan frowns. “C’mon, you look great.”

Don't get me wrong, I still appreciate his words, but I want to *feel* great. How I *think* I look is just as important, and right now, outside the Inward Care Center, I'm starting to realize how unflattering this outfit really is.

I think he can tell I'm unconvinced, because the next thing he says is "Well, I can try to get you something on the way to wherever you're going. I wish I'd kept some of my ex's clothes, but I, um . . ."

He stops, and I cock my head, curious.

"Kinda burned them," he mumbles, embarrassed.

I laugh at that, and he seems grateful my reaction is one of amusement instead of criticism. I don't think he quite grasps the whole "god of love" thing just yet. I've seen every relationship, every kind of heartbreak and affection possible. Even if it didn't last, I'm just glad he had that kind of connection, that experience. It means there was love and passion there once, and I choose to focus on that. It's my nature.

"Anyway, you still need to figure out where to go," he says, clearly trying to steer the conversation elsewhere. And he's right—we're no closer to a plan of action.

"Okay, so clothes can wait," I say. "But money shouldn't be a problem. I might not have glittering riches anymore, but you still have banks, right?"

"Right . . ." Nathan says slowly.

"Then I'll just ask for some over-the-counter handouts. I can be *very* persuasive." I wink at him. "So that will give me the means to get wherever the hell it is I'm going."

"Sure is nice to be a god," he murmurs, thinking. "Money's no

object, then? We could always get you a hotel room somewhere far away.”

I shake my head at that. “Too public. Hotels have a pretty high turnover on guests, and I’d stick out soon enough. I need someplace more secluded.”

“Some kind of cabin-by-the-lake deal?”

This is the part where he finds out gods are rather particular. Oh well. Had to happen sooner or later. “No, no, I need to be somewhere I can interact with people, maybe even gain a new worshipper or two.”

“Wait, so it can’t have too many people because you’re worried you’ll get discovered, but it can’t be empty, either.” He pauses. “Is your true name Goldilocks?”

I like this guy. “Got the hair for it, don’t I?” I say, giving my blond tresses a fluff. “Sorry, but it’s just how I’m wired. If I didn’t care, I could bury myself underground and wait a few years for the heat to die down.”

“You don’t need to eat?”

“Or breathe, or any of that stuff. Immortality and all that. I enjoy doing both, though, so I’d really prefer not to go with the whole ‘shallow grave’ approach. It’s kind of like how you don’t *need* to have a job, listen to music, or fall in love, but you’d rather not go without.”

“Gotcha,” Nathan says, thinking. “Man, a mental hospital really *was* a good idea.”

“Thanks. They’ll probably be watching them now, though,” I say, feeling a little dejected. I’d been rather proud of the scheme, back when I committed myself. Now that path is closed to me. The next time I see Garen, a chair’s not going to be nearly enough to

satisfy my bloodlust. I eat another piece of chocolate and contemplate murder.

“Old folks’ home?”

“Boring.”

“Island resort?”

“Not bad, but dangerous if they find me—I’d have nowhere to run.”

He snaps his fingers. “Hey, are you against hotels because they get a lot of visitors, or because you’d get noticed more easily in a place like that?”

“Not following.”

“What I mean is, are you okay with getting lost in a crowd?”

“Oh. Well, yeah, of course I am. Gods are pretty social by nature. We like being around you little dreamers.”

“So a lot of people is a good thing, so long as you don’t get noticed?”

Where’s he going with this? “That’s what I’m saying, yeah.”

“Then how about a theme park?”

A what? Geez, when was the last time I went to one of those? Maybe that World’s Fair back in Chicago? How long ago was *that*? “You mean the places with roller coasters and rides and such?”

“Exactly,” Nathan says. I give him a puzzled stare, not feeling up to speed just yet. “This is Orlando,” he explains. “It’s practically the tourist capital of the world. Get a job working at one of the parks, and they’ll never find you.”

I like the “never being found” part, but I still feel like I’m missing the full picture. “Okay, but where would I live? They close eventually, right?”

“Employee housing.”

“Worshippers?”

“Several million starstruck, impressionable children a year.” He holds up his hand and begins ticking items off on his fingers. “Safety in numbers, anonymity like nowhere else, and believers aplenty. Beat that.”

I get it now, and he’s *right*. I love this idea. The only way Garen could have found me the last time was through my files; a patient who’s been claiming she’s a god would probably raise a few red flags. I can start all over in one of these parks—a new life in the most unlikely place.

“Nathan, it’s perfect,” I say. “Let’s do it.”

He shares in my joy for a moment, then something clicks behind his eyes. Slowly but surely, his smile fades. “Wait. ‘Let’s’ . . . as in let *us*?” he says in a wary voice.

I fight to hide a grimace as I realize just how much—intentional or not—I’ve asked of him with that little word. “Oh. Yes . . . ?” I say, feeling awkward.

“I mean, I want to help, but, um, *all* of it? Together?” he asks, clearly uncomfortable with the drastic pileup of change my presence will bring. “This isn’t just a road trip anymore, is it?”

I shake my head sadly. “It’s a new life, Nate.” I’m really starting to like this guy, but I don’t want to rip him out of everything he’s built here (not that it actually looks like much) or endanger him more than I already have. Seriously, divine follower isn’t the safest of career picks. “You don’t have to come with me, you know. It might not be too late to act like we never met. I could knock you out and leave you in the bushes back at the Inward Care Center. Tell them

I stole your car—I can probably teach myself to drive again—and that will be the end of it.”

Nathan considers this for a moment, looking around his rental apartment as he does. The place isn’t exactly a disaster, but it’s obvious a guy’s been living here alone. Mail is piled on the counter, plates are climbing their way out of the sink, and the carpet’s begun to gather a nice collection of stains. I can sense the conflict taking shape in his mind, fear of the unknown warring with the thrill of adventure, disenchantment with his current lot in life, and, to my embarrassment, a little leftover adoration for yours truly.

“Screw it,” he says at last. “You know why I needed that job? Because it’s the only one I could get. Nobody’s hiring Web designers fresh out of high school, and it’s not like a degree will do me any good. My girlfriend’s gone, my mom kicked me out as soon as I graduated, and my friends are all in college or busy getting jobs wherever they can, too.”

He looks me in the eyes and smiles. “Following a goddess . . . That’s pretty much like following your dreams, isn’t it?”

A silly grin creeps across my face. “The wildest ones, Nate. Bring whatever you need, and let’s start that new life.”

He nods and begins dashing around his apartment, gathering his most important possessions. It takes a depressingly short amount of time. Minutes later, we’re back in the car, pulling out of his complex’s parking lot and heading for the highway. As the place disappears behind us, I feel like I’m waking up. I should have done this years ago. Leaving Inward isn’t as scary as I thought it would be—it’s more like I’m coming out of retirement, shaking off three decades

of dust, and taking the first steps down a new path to glory. It's definitely not what either of us expected when we got up today, but somehow, I think we're both happier for it.

The future calls to me, and for the first time in years, I don't know what it holds.

3

FALSE LIVES

Getting a fresh start is just as easy as ever. The Social Security office isn't where it was back when I needed a new identity for Inward Care, but Nathan has one of those ridiculous smartphones with all the answers, including the new location. He seems a little sad he'll need to ditch it to keep my pursuers off our trail, but I assure him we'll get an even better one soon enough.

I know the idea of creating a brand-new life at the drop of a hat these days seems impossible. It's certainly gotten harder, I'll give you that. There was a time when it was as simple as walking to a new village and giving a different name to anyone who asked. Now society's managed to put all sorts of roadblocks in place. Forms, numbers, licenses, birth records—it's enough to make your head spin. I've never bothered to learn any of it. I just do what I've always done:

march straight into the place where they hand out those IDs and make a new friend who knows how to get me everything I need.

Nathan seems stunned by how simple it is. He still has all those roadblocks in his head, a lifetime of movies, books, and experiences telling him just how hard it is to disappear, how many hoops you have to jump through to bypass the system. What he doesn't realize is that all those obstacles were put in place by *people*. I understand technology has made things faster and more impersonal, but in the end, it all comes down to the decisions of another human being, and with a touch of my talents, any one of them would bend over backward to give me what I want.

The clerk lovingly slips me new Social Security cards, explaining the next steps we'll need to take to get driver's licenses and such. We spend the rest of the day racing all over town, collecting new forms of identification and forging new lives for ourselves. Nathan spends a while obsessing over what his new name will be, but I don't particularly care about mine. I still intend to go with Sara for those close to me; I've had this one for hundreds of years, and I'm not about to change it outright. Even so, I need to pick something, so I snag a set of names off some street signs: Amelia Robinson. That should be fine.

By the time we stop for the night in a luxury hotel downtown, I'm completely drained. I haven't had to push myself like this in ages. I barely have enough juice left to persuade the clerk at the front desk to set us up with a complimentary room, and even then it's something of a struggle.

"Couldn't get the suite," I mumble unhappily as we make our

way upstairs. I find myself leaning heavily on Nathan, concentrating on just putting one foot in front of the other.

He laughs and throws an arm around my shoulders, propping me up. "I think you did just fine, my goddess," he says with a cheesy grin. I'm too weary to elbow him for the silly line, though I dearly want to.

When we get to our room, I collapse onto the bed. Sure, I don't *need* sleep, but there's nothing like peaceful rest to recharge. I'm dimly aware of Nathan climbing into the other bed, and then I'm out like a light.

Glorious, vivid dreams come to me, like they always do. A charming doctor in Germany once told me they were expressions of my subconscious, filled with symbols he could interpret to reveal my innermost hopes and fears. What he couldn't know was that it'll never work like that for me. I *am* the dream. My kin and I, we're humanity's wishes and nightmares given form.

And so when I sleep, I dream of you. All of you.

In my dreams, I see what the human race thinks of love and beauty, fertility and magic, vanity and war. I see whole continents of insecurity and doubt, a world wrapped in worry. It's a strange development. The anger, the mistrust, the violence . . . of course they sadden me, but they've always been there; man has killed man since the beginning of time. It's the anxiety that's new, that sense of reservation.

Where is the confidence, the pride? At every turn, you underestimate yourselves. But I suppose it's not surprising, not if you consider what's happened to the world since my heyday. Now that you have a global audience, you can measure yourselves against the best

among you. The most beautiful people, the smartest scientists, the greatest musicians . . . all of them are just a news article away, ready to tell you that no matter how good you are, there will always be someone better.

I wish I could tell you it doesn't matter. I wish I could hold you close and tell you that you will be loved for what you do, that you are incredible and unique. I wish you knew how much you were needed, how much I miss you. I wish. You dream of desires and hopes, and that is why I dream of you—because you are *my* desire and hope.

I wake refreshed and wistful, the Florida sun streaming through cracks in the curtains. The ache has returned in full, that longing for worshippers and lovers, high priests and hopeful peasants. There's so much hurt out there, so many prayers I could answer, if only their owners believed someone was listening again. I cram a pillow over my head to shut out the light and sigh into the mattress. Things were stable back at Inward. I'd managed to find a way to balance my cravings with reality and shut out the pain of yearning for what once was. Now that I've left that little safety net behind, it's all creeping back. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Then again, it's not like I had much of a choice.

"Sounds like someone's awake!" Nathan's voice cuts into my musings. I don't care what time it is; he sounds far too chipper for any morning hour. "I guess you're ready to rise and shine at last."

There's a clink and a gurgle, and I crack open an eye as I recognize the sound of coffee being poured. The smell wafts through the room, and I groan and disentangle myself from the little nest I've

made of my blankets. I love coffee. It always perks me up, which I find a bit odd, considering my divine nature. I couldn't begin to tell you how it works.

"Lots of sugar, no cream," I mumble, rubbing one eye and stretching.

"Thy will be done," Nathan says after a moment, bringing a steaming cup to me. "I took advantage of room service, too. Want anything? Toast? Eggs? Waffles?"

It's been far too long since I've had breakfast in bed, not to mention having it hand-delivered by a cute guy. I could get used to this. "Yes to all three. Eggs, buttered toast, and definitely the waffles," I say, taking a sip of my coffee.

"Coming right up," Nathan says, moving to the tray. There's a buffet of food here, far more than either of us can eat. I get the feeling he's having a bit of fun with an unlimited budget. I watch as he puts my meal together. He's wearing a shirt and a pair of boxers, letting me get a better look at him. Just out of high school would put him in his late teens, though his high cheekbones and five-o'clock shadow could let him pass for a few years older. He's certainly no gym rat, but he has an athletic look that implies he at least attempts to exercise on a regular basis. Cute. Not exactly my type, but cute. I look down at myself and wonder who I am to judge anyone at this point: I'm still in the *Give Blood* T-shirt and ill-fitting jeans from Inward.

"So," Nathan says, bringing over a heaping platter of food, "you ready to tell me who you really are?"

I dive into the meal with gusto. I have no idea what happens to

the stuff inside my body, but just like sleep, it helps me recharge. “Sure, why not?” I say around a mouthful of eggs. I can’t imagine wolfing down several servings of food makes the most dignified participant for this sort of discussion, but now’s as good a time as any.

“Ready when you are,” Nathan says, plopping onto his bed and looking at me with curiosity.

I wash things down with a slurp of coffee, clear my throat, and turn to him. “Well, you understand the whole ‘god of love’ thing, right?”

“Yep,” he says, nodding. “So who does that make you? Aphrodite?”

I make a disgusted sound. “That simpering, oversexed tart? *Please*. Don’t make me vomit.”

“Okay, okay,” Nathan says, holding up his hands. “Then who are you?”

I draw myself up and straighten my back, trying to look at least halfway regal. It’s probably undercut by my ridiculous appearance (I don’t even want to *think* about how my hair looks right now!), but it’ll have to do. “I am the daughter of the wind and seas, the giver, the flaxen, the Lady of the Slain. Lover and warrior, wielder of the sacred mysteries of seidh, most glorious of all goddesses.” I pause, pleased by his rapt attention, then deliver the answer he’s been waiting for: “I am Freya.”

“Freya,” he repeats, nodding slowly. My high and mighty posture fades as I watch desperation race across his face. He’s clearly ransacking his memories, frantic to make a connection. “I—um, yeah! Freya! Huh!”

“You have no idea who I am, do you?” I ask, incredulous.

He at least has the good grace to look embarrassed. “It *sounds* familiar. I mean, I took a classical mythology class in college, but it was all Greek all the time.”

I roll my eyes. “I *hate* those guys. When did they hire a PR firm?” I sigh. I guess it’s not his fault—there’s a reason I don’t have worshippers, and I can tell he’s kicking himself for not knowing me. “Asgard?” I prompt. “Yggdrasil? Valhalla?”

“Oh!” he says, clearly thankful for the hints. “Norse! Okay, yeah! I totally know those myths. So you’re, uh . . .”

“I am of the Vanir,” I say with a wistful smile. “Love is my domain, yes, but so, too, are war and beauty, fertility and death, sex and gold. I might not have made the headlines like some of my kin, but I am the greatest of them, for in the world of men, what shapes life more keenly than the touch of a lover . . . or the edge of a blade?”

“Wow,” he whispers after a moment, looking suitably impressed. “You know, it’s going to sound like a pack of lies after I blanked on your name, but I really do know some stuff about Norse mythology. Always thought it was the coolest, too.”

A heartfelt grin immediately cracks my divine facade. “Well, thank you, Nathan. I’m glad you got a chance to find out you were exactly right.”

He returns my smile, and in that moment, I feel his belief spark to life within me. I know he’s had doubts ever since I told him I really was a goddess, but like all insidious thoughts, they were hidden on the edges of his mind. Now that he has a name, a cause to focus on and truly consider, he’s dragged those suspicions back into the light and found them wanting. Behind those bright blue eyes of his, I feel the last nagging shackles of disbelief crumble and rejoice

in their demise. He *accepts* me. It's a wondrous thrill, gaining his trust like this, one made all the more spectacular by the current scarcity of my worshippers. Whether he realizes it or not, Nathan has just joined the painfully exclusive ranks of my followers, and for that, I am endlessly grateful.

"So where are the rest of the gods?" he asks, clearly unaware how deeply he's just bound his fate to mine. "You know, Odin, Thor, Loki . . . all those guys?"

"Oh, so *those* you know?" I say with a laugh.

He gives me a nervous grin. "Marvel. You can't pick up a comic or hit the theater these days without running into one of them."

"Ah, yes," I say, remembering a few fun movie nights at Inward. "So how come *I* never got to be a superhero? Who do I talk to about that?" I wave a hand. "Never mind. You were asking about my kin?"

"Yeah, are they still around? I mean, if they're all famous, wouldn't that make them stronger?"

I give my head a forlorn shake. "Fame isn't always a blessing. Everyone thinks of those three first, but there are reasons for that . . . and, sadly, it's part of why they're gone." I frown as ancient memories bubble to the surface, some rather embarrassing. "Actually, I'm not all that broken up about Loki. I'm glad that slanderous little pest is dead."

"What happened to them?"

"Ragnarök," I say simply.

"The end of the world? Wait, that actually *happened*?" Nathan asks, eyes wide.

"No, no," I say with a giggle. "But their deaths were foretold, and people believed in those prophecies. Remember, we are what

you *make* of us, and, well, you decided some of us would die. Any god not mentioned by name in the telling of Ragnarök survived, but those unfortunate enough to get top billing—like my poor brother, Freyr, for instance—were disbelieved into oblivion.” I pause, thinking. “Well, ‘disbelieved’ isn’t the best word. More like ‘killed by conviction.’ The end result is the same, but there’s a difference in how it happened.”

“I think I get it. That still leaves a lot of gods, though.”

I nod. “Dozens. Many of them faded away completely, of course, overwhelmed by disbelief or injured badly without the worshippers needed to regenerate them. All my knowledge is decades out of date, but I know Frigg is still around. Nice lady—the ultimate mom. Used to be a midwife, then a nurse, but I think she runs a bakery now. Sif’s a marriage counselor. Bragi did a lot of poetry, and I think he became a newspaper columnist. Hel’s alive, too, I’m pretty sure. Used to be a nice girl, but the myths changed her in a bad way. Don’t know where she ended up. Baldur got resurrected—always liked that part—and I think he went into politics. There are probably others, too, but we all drifted apart after the believers dried up, so I can’t be certain who else is left.”

“Gods among us,” Nathan says softly. “How cool is that? There are others, too, right? Greek, Egyptian, Hindu . . . ?”

I shrug. “Sure. If they managed to hold on to their believers, they’re still around. Some of them are going to be *way* more powerful than me, too, since they actually have real religions and worshippers. Jerks.”

“Well, how many do you have left?”

"You don't want to know," I say with a grimace. "I'm a minor player at this point. Let's just leave it at that."

"Okay. So have you met gods from other pantheons? I mean, like, have you ever run into Shiva? Or Jesus?"

"Oh, absolutely," I say, smiling at the memory. "Incredibly kind man. I can see why he gets all the attention these days. Actually came to visit us, back when we were just starting to fade. Apologized for what was happening, said all he ever wanted was for people to be decent to one another. I get the impression he doesn't always approve of what others do in his name, you know?"

"Yeah. It's something of a running joke on the Internet," Nathan says, rolling his eyes. "Bump into any other big names?"

I sigh. "Well, I used to run into gods a lot more often back when my pantheon actually mattered. After our fall, I'd just hear snippets of news—so-and-so is mad about what Zeus did to their wife and such. Now I'm completely out of the loop."

"Huh," Nathan says, digesting this.

"Yeah . . . you haven't exactly hitched your wagon to a rising star," I admit, feeling a little uncomfortable as I do. Why did I just tell him that? I feel a stab of fear begin to work its way through my guts. Now that he knows what a joke I am, I'm worried he'll decide I'm not worth the trouble. It's not that I can't make it on my own, but to lose a new believer so soon . . .

"Sara, I couldn't care less how you rank in comparison to a bunch of random old gods," Nathan says, cutting into my thoughts. "Where are those other deities and what have they ever done for me? You're *here*, turning my life upside down, and I couldn't be happier about it."

Just like that, the fear vanishes, and I laugh at how much I've underestimated this guy. "Oh, I bet you say that to all the pretty goddesses."

"Just the ones in blood-donation T-shirts," he says, laughing with me.

"Argh," I groan, grabbing a pillow to cover myself. "After breakfast, you're taking me shopping."

"Actually," he says, pulling a hotel notepad off the nightstand, "we should really map out our day. We've got IDs now, so what's next?"

"Clothes, cash, a new car, and jobs," I say. "In that order."

"Sounds like a plan," Nathan replies, writing the items down on his little pad with a hotel pen and tearing off the sheet.

I finish my breakfast while he takes a shower and gets dressed. Once he's done, I switch with him, heading into the bathroom. It's annoying, laying out my ratty clothes and knowing I'll just have to get back into them again, but I tell myself this is the last time. The shower feels great. Inward wasn't bad by any means, but a white-tiled community bathroom and stall isn't my idea of luxury. They even have those fancy little shampoo and conditioner bottles here, which gives me a chance to do something about my hair. When I finally step out of the shower, I feel a thousand times better. Going back to my revolting rags (and those awful slippers! Ugh!) diminishes the feeling a little, but I refuse to let myself dwell on it. I have places to go and things to buy.

Nathan drives me around town to every fashion hot spot I can remember, gleefully racking up credit card debt on plastic he's going to abandon in a few hours. As soon as we begin our shopping in earnest, I'm struck by how out-of-touch I've gotten. The mall, for

instance, is like nothing I remember. I'm used to low-ceilinged, crowded shopping centers and dingy food courts. The Mall at Millenia soars, its two levels opening across beautiful halls cast in glossy marble, steel, and glass. The central atrium is ringed in digital monitors, broadcasting shots of fashionable people and beautiful scenery while hordes of well-dressed teens, tourists, and business-casuals dash in search of merchandise. Where are the skater punks and dead-eyed shoppers? There isn't even an arcade to be found, and the restaurants actually look appetizing.

Most of the government offices I visited yesterday didn't seem all that different from what I remember of the eighties, but outside the public sector, things have gotten *slick*. I'm liking this modern world. Now I need to up my style game to match it.

Unfortunately, my first few attempts aren't . . . well informed. Apparently, oversize tops, leggings, off-the-shoulder sweaters, and acid-washed jeans are no longer in vogue. Not yet in the loop on that, I plow ahead with misguided stubbornness, managing to cobble together some truly hideous outfits and marveling all the while at the small selections available. Nathan doesn't even say anything about them at first, the traitor. We make it through a few stores before he finally cracks.

"How about this one?" I say, modeling another too-big shirt. "I think it needs a lot more jewelry to really shine, but—what?"

"I'm sorry," he says, clearly holding back laughter. "I thought you might be going for ironic at first, but I really should have said something sooner."

"Ironic? What's wrong with this?" I say. "The jeans are even preripped! How cool is that?"

He tries to say something else, but it comes out as some kind of gargle-snort.

I make a frustrated sound and turn to a well-dressed guy going through a nearby rack of clothes. "Excuse me? Sir?" I say, getting his attention. I gesture at my new outfit. "What's your take?"

He looks me up and down. "It's not Throwback Thursday, hon," he says at last, then returns to his own shopping.

My mouth drops open. I return to Nathan, who's sporting a rather telling shade of red. "How much has changed?" I ask. "Is it my hair? I know it needs volume, but once you tease it out—"

"Oh god," he chokes. "No, no, I can't do that to you. Big hair is over. Like, *way* over. Haven't you been watching television? Movies?"

"It was a mental hospital, not a hotel," I snap. "Sure, we got some new releases, but there were just as many reruns from the library. Do you have any idea how many times I've seen *Flashdance*?"

"You poor thing," he says, trying to compose himself. "C'mon, let's get you some fashion magazines or something."

He leads me out of the store—*after* we return most of my purchases—and I spend the next hour or so flipping through a half-dozen issues of the latest magazines, pausing every now and then to glare at him over the tops of the pages.

"All right, *fine*," I say at last. "I think I get it now."

"Ready to try again?"

"Yes," I say, a sullen teenager. Then my smile returns. "But you're going shopping, too. I've seen what trendy guys are wearing. Graphic T-shirts and unfitted jeans from Old Navy aren't exactly hot, either. Get yourself something nice. *Hon*."

He looks down at himself. "I, but . . ."

“You let me buy scrunchies, Nathan! *Scrunchies!*”

He fakes a wince at that and holds up his hands. “Too cruel. All right, fine. I guess that’s fair. Meet you at the food court in an hour?”

“Make it two,” I say. “I have three decades of fashion horror to unlearn.”

He laughs at that, then waves as he heads off, making a beeline for J. Crew. I suppose there are worse places to start. As I go from store to store, it strikes me that there’s a bit of a gender gap in terms of outfit difficulty here. Nathan doesn’t seem like he’ll have much trouble finding something decent, but is it just me, or is everything that’s halfway stylish these days meant for starving stick-girls? It’s surprisingly difficult to find something that looks good and actually fits my hips. If I weren’t the divine embodiment of beauty, I might start thinking my hourglass figure wasn’t attractive. As it is, I just feel a little flabbergasted at the lack of good selections.

My foam shoes are long gone, but I supplement the pale rose flats I used to replace them with a variety of heels, wedges, and sandals. I eventually gather a halfway decent selection of jeans, skirts, and dresses, as well as sweaters and shirts that actually stay on my shoulders. I even pick out a few upscale pieces in case I need to class it up, and once I’ve finished spending a king’s ransom on new outfits, I decide to show off a little and change into one of them.

It was a real relief when I ditched my awful Inward clothes a few stores ago, but as good as getting rid of those hideous castoffs felt, there’s something even better about slipping into designer labels and date-night makeup. I choose tight jeans with a creamy off-white top, using the women’s restroom as my changing closet and applying some lipstick in the mirror. *There, much better.* I think it might

come off as a little *too* nice for a random day at the mall (especially on someone who looks like they might still have to ask their parents' permission to stay out late), but considering how long it's been since I've worn anything approaching "decent," it feels right.

Nathan's eyes pop when we meet in the mall's food court. I do a little twirl for him as I walk up. "Actually look the part now, don't I?" I say, flashing him a winning smile.

"I'll say," he murmurs, looking me over with obvious glee. I get the feeling I'm drawing eyes from all corners, and that suits me just fine. After all, vanity's part of my portfolio, too, and centuries of human hope, desire, and lust have crafted me into a rather fitting package for it. I feel bad for the mortal women with similar measurements, though. The bras alone cost a fortune.

Next, we hit a series of banks on the outskirts of the city. I cover my hair with a scarf and put on an enormous pair of dark sunglasses before heading into each one. With a touch of my gift, nobody will question the outfit—it's for the cameras, and the people watching their footage whom I can't affect. Nathan waits off-property in the car while I go inside, make senior management fall madly in love with me, then ask for a donation. Minutes later, I'm walking out with wads of cash. It's never a lot, just a few thousand each time, but it all adds up. I'm a little concerned Nathan may be having second thoughts about all this blatant thievery, but because we're in a bind and gods don't do cheap, there seem to be few legal solutions. Hopefully, it's not weighing too heavily on his conscience.

After a few hours of highly compliant robbery, we have more than enough to buy a new car. While I could charm a salesman at any dealership and get him to give one to me for free, that's some-

thing that gets recorded. Someone will eventually realize an entire car just got handed away. Since Garen's probably smart enough to look for reports of big-ticket items being turned into party favors, I don't want to link Nathan or myself to a four-wheeled red flag.

We end up getting a Honda CR-V, which is almost entirely Nathan's decision since I don't have a clue about cars and he's always wanted that particular type, apparently. We get a *very* good deal on it, and any surprise the dealer might have at being paid in full—and in cash—is banished by his overwhelming affection for me. It's getting late in the day as we begin transferring our purchases to the new car, and I'm definitely feeling the strain from all the romantic manipulation I've had to perform. Still, things are a lot better than they were a day ago, when I was reeling from having to torment Garen to distraction. I think the strength of Nathan's belief is really helping. The confidence I feel from my new look probably has something to do with it, too.

Once we're done loading up the CR-V, the sun is beginning to set. "They'll be closed for the night," Nathan says, looking at our list. Everything's crossed out but the *New jobs* entry.

"That's okay. It's been a pretty full day anyway," I say, glad to put this last task off until tomorrow.

"We need to hit the DMV and get a new license plate for our car, too."

"Sounds good," I say. He nods and adds the task to the list. "For now, though . . . dinner?"

"Thought you'd never ask. I'm starving," Nathan says, holding a hand to his stomach in mock pain.

We settle on an upscale steakhouse. I immediately focus on the

filet mignon, my mouth watering at the thought of high-quality beef for the first time in decades. Nathan's wavering between a burger or pork chops when I give him a troubled glance. "What?" he asks, noticing the look on my face.

"Go with the burger," I say in a neutral tone.

He sets his menu down and looks at me. "I've got another lesson in the care and feeding of deities coming, don't I?"

I smile. "Sorry. Pigs are sacred to me."

"No kidding?"

"I used to ride into battle on an enormous boar. He had golden bristles." I sigh. "I miss him."

Nathan's quiet for a moment—awed, I assume, at the image of a beautiful Norse warrior goddess charging enemy lines atop a massive battle-pig. Then: "Wait . . . does this mean *no bacon*?"

He seems so appalled at the idea I feel like I've just stolen his puppy. "Um, if it helps, that wasn't exactly a big menu item back in the day," I say, trying to smooth things over a little.

"Eesh. Talk about your sacrifices. Okay, well, burger's on the menu for tonight, then. Anything else I should know?"

"Hmm. I'm a fan of cats, but I don't see them showing up in restaurants very often, so you're probably in the clear there."

"Don't hurt pigs, pet cats," he says to himself. "I guess I can work with that."

"Glad to hear it," I reply. The waiter arrives soon after, and we place our order. We chat absentmindedly for a bit as we wait for the food to arrive, until I decide to turn the question back on him. "So what do I need to know about *you*, Nate? What's your story?"

"Me?" he says, seeming surprised that I'm asking.

“Well, yeah. If we’re going to start this new life together, I’d like to learn more about you.”

“Okay.” He smiles. I think he likes the fact that I’m interested in hearing more. “Only child. Grew up an army brat, so we moved around a lot. Didn’t have many friends, but it gave me a chance to focus on computers. Went to high school here in Orlando, graduated a year ago, and took about that long to realize the freelancing gigs I can get don’t quite pay the bills, and nobody’s hiring full time.”

“Which is why you started at Inward.”

“You got it. Between that and making websites on the side, I figured I could start paying bills and, y’know, eat. Not perfect, of course, but it would only be until I built up my portfolio and finally got a job somewhere permanent.”

“Makes sense. And you said you were a military kid, right? I approve. Which of your parents was in the army?”

Nathan hesitates, and it seems like he’s having a small internal debate. Then he sighs. “My dad.”

“Not a happy subject?”

“Well, no, I mean—my dad was awesome. I stuck with him after my parents split up. Mom was a flake. Still is. But my dad, it was like he was trying to win Father of the Year every second. We did everything together, when we could. He was away a lot, but when he came home . . . it was really good, Sara,” he says with a distant look in his eyes.

“Past tense,” I say softly.

“Yeah,” he says, leaning back in his seat and looking gloomy. “He went out on deployment, didn’t come back. Well, we got him back, but . . . you know what I mean.”

I nod, saying nothing. I know all too well what he means. War never changes.

“It happened back in high school, and it’s just . . . it’s like I never got a chance to know him. Hell, I didn’t even get a chance to say *good-bye*. I wanted to grow up and make him proud, make him laugh, but I’d . . . have settled for good-bye.”

“Oh, Nathan,” I say, reaching across the table for his hands. He clasps mine, and I look into his eyes. They dart away, but not before I notice them shining in the dim light of the restaurant. Poor guy. I know his loss—I’d seen it countless times before and been just as powerless to do anything about it.

But that’s not quite true anymore. He’s a worshipper of mine now, and that *means* something. I don’t want to give him false hope, but he seems so dejected I feel I have to say something. “Nathan, I need you to understand I can’t do anything yet,” I say, lowering my voice. “I’m far too weak. So take this with a grain of salt . . . but your father was a warrior, and that matters a great deal.”

He looks back at me, confused.

“I’m the Lady of the Slain, Nathan. Half of those who die in battle belong to me.”

There’s a moment where he just frowns, and I worry I’ve offended him. Then a look of comprehension dawns, and he fixes me with this fantastic expression of joyful hope. I glance over his shoulder and notice the waiter heading toward us, bearing our food. I smile, both for Nathan’s sake and my stomach’s, and I’m about to continue telling him exactly what I can offer when fear rips through me like a knife.

Just over the waiter’s shoulder, I can see a man standing in the

entrance of the restaurant, scanning the crowd. The dark gray suit is the same. His patrician features, seemingly locked in a self-confident sneer, show no signs of the damage I inflicted a day ago. I can even make out those frightening, intense brown eyes of his as they dart back and forth incessantly, searching for *me*.

Garen is here.

4

RAZOR'S EDGE

“What? What is it?” Nathan asks. The terror engulfing my body has obviously registered on my face in some way.

Garen moves a little farther into the restaurant, and his eyes slide down to some device in his hands. It looks like an oversize version of Nathan’s cell phone. Is that what he’s using to track me? But how—

I gasp and glance back at Nathan. *The phone*. Of course. He hasn’t gotten rid of it yet—used it to find this restaurant, even. I want to be annoyed at him for not being careful enough, but first I need to figure out what to do about my gray-suited stalker. I look up again, and my jaw drops in dismay. I’m too taken aback to be certain, but I think I might’ve even released a small squeak of alarm.

Garen’s looking right at me, that oily grin of his creeping across

his face as he moves forward. The waiter stops by my table, and even half a restaurant away, I can see Garen glancing at our order, appraising it, and then looking back at me with a smug expression, as if to say, *The filet? Nice choice.* Then, while the waiter moves to set Nathan's plate down in front of him, I watch as Garen smoothly extracts a long sliver of metal from his pocket.

The needle. He's about to put the restaurant to sleep. *I can't let that happen.*

I lunge up, bolting out of my seat. My stomach screams in outrage as I wrench the serving platter from the waiter's upraised hand, hurling my dinner away. With one smooth motion, I whip the metal disk around and send it tearing through the air on a tight arc.

Garen's expression changes in an instant to one of surprise as the platter crashes into him, knocking him back and sending the needle clattering to the floor. I don't waste a second, snatching my steak knife from the table and dashing across the restaurant. Dumbfounded waiters and shocked patrons blur past me, screaming and shouting as I pick up speed.

I leap into the air at Garen, knife upraised, closing the last fifteen feet between us in one giant bound. I'm literally an eyeblink from plunging my blade into the man's heart when he brings up his wrists, locking them together in an X. I catch a moment's glimpse of metal bands covered in delicate silver filigrees on his forearms before there's a staggering flare of light. A brilliant golden explosion catches me in midair and sends me flying away like a piece of paper in a gale. There's a brief flash of the entire restaurant as I rocket backward before colliding with the far wall with enough force to

splinter it. I topple to the floor, dazed and winded, hair spreading onto the tiles around me like a golden net. The steakhouse is spinning; I can barely roll myself onto my back.

Distantly, I'm aware of more screams and stamping feet as the restaurant's patrons panic and run. Glass litters the floor from shattered windows and drinks, crunching under panicked footsteps. There's a ringing in my ears, and I can't seem to get my bearings. Then Garen looms over me, looking down with that awful smile of his. "Fool me once, shame on you," he says, kneeling and flicking me in the head, right between my eyes.

I moan and try to bring up an arm to bat him away, but succeed only in flopping around like an infant. Garen chuckles and extracts a syringe from his jacket, an antique thing of brass scrollwork and handblown glass. He holds it up to the light, and I see it's filled with some sort of pale milky fluid. He taps it, then looks back at me. "Fool me twice, shame on—"

There's a resounding *clang* that cuts him off midsentence, his head shuddering as if he's just experienced a very brief and personal earthquake. I have the perfect view as his eyes cross and he tumbles to the floor beside me, unconscious. Nathan's standing there, panting, a dented serving tray clutched in his hands.

I smile, still dazed, and manage to cough out, "Get me a knife."

By the time Nathan returns with another steak knife, I've managed to pull myself up to a kneeling position. He places the weapon in my hand, and I feel my fingers wrap themselves tightly around its handle. No more messing around with chairs and bludgeoning. I am going to stab this evil freak right between the eyes, split his skull open, and make confetti out of his—

His limbs twitch and lurch inward, spiraling around his torso for the briefest moment before his body folds in on itself and disappears. My knife crashes into the tile right where his head used to be. Garen's gone again, his form compacting into a pinprick before winking out. I toss the blade away from myself in a fury, unleashing a litany of Nordic curses as I do.

"Damn, was that him?" Nathan asks.

The question brings me out of my rage, and I bite off the rest of the insults as I turn to look at my savior. "Yeah," I grate, still angry. I take a breath and compose myself. "Yeah, that's Garen—and you just saved me from him. Nathan, I could kiss you." Part of me thrashes to the surface, obviously energized by the recent battle, saying *Oh yes please do you realize how patiently I've waited*, and bathes the room in desire before I can cram it back down.

He grins, clearly pleased with himself, and, in a stroke of brilliance I suspect isn't entirely his own, says, "What's stopping you?"

I laugh at that and find my footing, levering myself back to a standing position. The warrior goddess in me screams that we should be running, that this isn't the time for romance. The urges of beauty, vanity, and love call to me as well, though, telling me just how long it's been, just how pathetic my available dating pool has been lately. They win out in the end.

"Not a damn thing," I reply, throwing my arms around him and covering his lips with mine. I clutch him tightly, pressing our bodies together for several warm, wonderful seconds before I pull away. Nathan has a faraway, almost mournful look on his face, as if he's just been rudely awakened from a rather pleasant dream.

I feel a sense of delight bubbling within me and realize I've just

had my first real kiss in almost thirty years. And I call myself a god of *love*? I'm about to kiss him again and start making up for lost time when I finally manage to get a hold of myself. We need to get out of here. Garen recovered far too quickly from our last encounter, and I handed him a much worse beating that time. The sooner we make our way onto the open road and toss that stupid phone of Nathan's, the better. I glance at him and see the dreamy look has faded along with my unanticipated wave of desire, bringing him back to the reality of the shattered restaurant. He looks confused, anxious, and—surprisingly—embarrassed. I think he wouldn't normally have kissed me out of the blue like that, and now he's wondering if he's made things awkward. Well, no time to worry about that now.

I grab Nathan by the hand, and I'm about to lead him outside to join the panicked crowd of fleeing diners and staff when I notice a glimmer at my feet. The syringe. I waver between leaving it, destroying it, and taking it, before finally deciding on the latter. If Garen thinks it can put down a god, it might be useful. I scoop it up with my free hand, drop it into my bag, and hightail it out of the building, joining the crowd of shocked onlookers and staff.

From the chatter around us, most of them seem worried about bombs, gas leaks, and so on, but a few begin darting glances my way, no doubt recognizing the girl who got launched over their heads in the initial blast. I start edging Nathan through the swarm, taking care not to look too suspicious, but when I spot the flash of police lights in the distance, I drop that approach, grab his hand, and make a dash for our car.

"How did he find us?" Nathan asks as we peel out of the restau-

rant's parking lot and onto a back road before the cops can cordon the place off.

The question brings my annoyance back in full force. "Your stupid phone is how. I told you to get rid of that thing."

He pulls it out of his pocket, cradling the glossy rectangle of metal and glass in one hand as he keeps the other on the steering wheel. Seeing him so obsessed with the trinket simply irritates me even more. "It's just a *phone*. Destroy it now, or I will."

Nathan sighs. "But I have all my contacts on here. Let's hit a store first so I can at least transfer them to a new one."

"No!" I shout, thumping the dashboard. "Do you realize how quickly he found us before? And now you want to go and make a record of the transfer? Get. Rid. Of. It."

He hesitates again, so I grab it out of his hands. "Hey!" he barks.

But it's too late. I start lowering the window, ready to chuck the thing onto the pavement.

"Okay, okay! Stop!" he says, slowing down the car. "We need to get it wiped, whatever we do. They might be able to recover stuff from it that'll lead them to us."

That halts me. I raise the window with a reluctant tap of my finger. "Fine. How do we do that?"

He shrugs. "Take it to a store?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "We can't just mangle it beyond repair?" This is, incidentally, the traditional method of solving problems in my pantheon.

Nathan stops the car and looks at the phone in my hands, then at me. "All right, yeah. That ought to do it, too."

I glance out the window. Strip malls and occasional houses. "Great. Find me an empty lot," I say, still holding on to the phone.

In a few minutes, we drive up to a sandy parcel of land with a sign proclaiming it to be the planned site of a sprawling mixed-use commercial and residential complex. Considering the weathered look of the place, I get the impression that some economic issues have put a prolonged hold on the construction. I get out of the car and stalk into the undeveloped land, looking around.

"Here we go," I say, spotting what I've come for and moving toward it.

"What are you doing?" Nathan calls out, following me.

"Putting an end to this device," I reply, showing him the large rock I've found. It's not the cinder block I was hoping for, but it'll do.

"Well, just make it quick," Nathan says. "Don't want the poor thing to suffer, after all."

I roll my eyes at that, then turn and place the phone on the ground. I raise the hunk of rock over my head and bring it down onto the gadget with crushing force. The screen cracks. It takes a few tries, but eventually I manage to bash the thing into oblivion, pieces of circuitry and glass flying everywhere. All the while, I imagine what I'm really hitting is Garen's face. It's surprisingly cathartic. A field of splintered phone fragments surrounds me when I'm done. I toss the rock away and stand back up.

"Better?" Nathan asks beside me.

"Much," I say. "Now, let's get something to eat. Killing phones is hungry work."

We head back to the car. "Can we risk staying in this city?" I ask as we get in, concerned that Garen's finding us at a restaurant

instead of, say, an international airport might lead him to assume we're not fleeing for safety in foreign lands.

Nathan shrugs. "I don't think he's seen anything so far that would tip him off about our plans. Plus it doesn't seem like the government's on his side or anything—it's not like he can put your picture in front of cops and federal agents. The first time he found you, it was probably because of a whole bunch of research. Just now it was a cell phone. A poor, innocent cell phone."

I stare at him.

"Okay, not ready to joke about that just yet," he murmurs. "Point is, Garen strikes me as a reactive sort—he probably has a lot of gods to deal with and limited resources. He'll follow up on a lead when he comes across it, but canvassing an entire city doesn't seem his speed."

That makes sense. If he really had a bottomless budget and government connections, after all, he'd have brought a SWAT team to the restaurant, not a pair of magic bracers. "All right," I say, nodding. "Orlando it is."

We end up hitting a late-night taco place with a giant mustache for a sign in the heart of the downtown area. If there's the slightest chance Garen is canvassing upscale steakhouses, this should be as far as we can get from one. Nathan gets a giant quesadilla, I settle for an assortment of fish tacos, and we split an order of nachos. It's not my poor lost filet, but it's still quite delicious. Our conversation is casual, focusing on the things we purchased and our plans for the next day. Subjects like his father, Garen, and even our kiss are set aside. On that note, I'm pretty certain I prompted that moment; my powers can get away from me when I'm keyed up. At least he's not

taking it badly—things don't feel awkward. I wonder if I should apologize, or at least try to explain what happened, but it seems like we're already past it and I don't want to be the one to bring it up.

We spend the evening in another free hotel room and then head out bright and early the next day on our errands. Nathan's credit cards, old driver's license, and phone have been destroyed. With his Camry abandoned in a parking lot, everything tying him to his old life is gone. Our first stop is the DMV, where we find out we'll need to wait forty-five days for a new license plate for the car—and it needs to be mailed to our home. Our current IDs only have a fake address on them, but we manage to persuade them to mail the plate to a PO box we set up at the downtown post office the day before.

That just leaves the job. Nathan and I pull up outside the Walt Disney World Casting Center in the early afternoon. There had been some discussion on which park to go with, but Nathan assures me my ideal career is here, not at Universal. I take his word for it. That, and I have encyclopedic knowledge of Disney's entire archive—the Inward Care Center didn't allow R-rated movies, so family-friendly films were on almost every day. I saw a *lot* of Disney, let me tell you, and I liked pretty much all of it, except maybe the one about Hercules. Talk about whitewashing the past. *None* of the Greek gods were that nice, not even Hades.

The obstacles arise as soon as we walk through the doors. It's quickly made clear that becoming a face character is normally a difficult task. They hold mass auditions for roles like that; I need references, relevant experience, blah, blah. I barrel through it with overflowing amounts of love and adoration. It seems like I have to charm a *lot* of people, too. There's a pretty extensive bureaucracy at

work here, and as soon as I have one level completely convinced I'm the most deliriously amazing hire they could ever hope for, I need to move up to their manager so I can get something on such short notice.

The process takes the whole day, and along the way, we learn that Nathan was wrong about the employee housing—it's only available to college interns. My new friends at the casting center are only too happy to inform us that there are apartment rentals that cater directly to Disney's workforce, however, so Nathan takes the CR-V and leaves partway through to get us a place.

By the time he returns a few hours later, I have just about everything squared away except our mailing address, which he provides. He informs me he's put down a security deposit and paid a month in advance at one of the nicer apartment complexes in the area, right near a central bus line to the parks. I start training in a few days as a face character—a princess, of course—and from everything they've said so far, I'm cheating. *A lot*. There's no way a brand-new addition like myself would be allowed anywhere near such a prestigious role, as they're usually reserved for professionals and longtime cast members. Everyone wants to be one, and vacancies are incredibly rare.

Pulling this off has taken a lot out of me. I might be feeling better since my "escape" from Inward, but I'm still far too weak, especially considering how much I've been relying on these meager powers. Abusing my birthright is just as effective here as it was elsewhere around town, and it's really becoming clear to me just how hard it would be to get anywhere in this society without it. I need to get stronger, and fast. If you think about it, my only marketable

skill is getting people to fall madly in love with me. Without it, I have a hunch that the battle between my hunger for belief and need for safety would end up getting me in a lot of trouble.

Well, more than it already has, I guess.

In the end, the final stumbling block is, like most of life's challenges, clothing-related. Princess dresses only go up so many sizes, and I'm hovering right around the cut-off point. I'm also pushing five seven, which is the upper height requirement. My new friends here assure me it'll be no trouble at all, but I have a feeling their wardrobe department is going to hate me soon enough. After signing a huge stack of documents and confirming my training session times, I'm finally done. Nathan and I walk out, carting a pile of documentation and pamphlets to the car.

"So what do you think?" he asks as we drive to the new apartment.

"Seems like they're dead set on preserving the 'magic'—if I didn't look like a princess already, well . . ."

"All the love bullets in the world wouldn't keep the heat off you?"

"That's about the size of it, yeah," I say before silently mouthing his turn of phrase to myself. *Love bullets?* "I'd probably have had to spend a good chunk of each day 'convincing' people that I should be allowed to work there. Yech."

"Good thing that won't be a problem. And you're much prettier than any princess I've ever seen."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I say, grinning.

"Oh, I'm counting on it," he replies.

You know, I think he has a bit more self-confidence than I gave

him credit for. Of course, I might just be rubbing off on him. I tend to have a variety of interesting effects on people if they're around me long enough. Think of it as a bit of "divine overflow"—aspects of my personality tend to bleed into my surroundings, particularly when I'm using my abilities.

"That's the spirit," I say. "I might make you my high priest." That meant he'd be her chief worshipper and expand her power by his belief alone.

Nathan laughs, and I can't help but join him. I'm in a good mood. This new job feels like it'll be a breath of fresh air, and the danger posed by Garen and his organization seems a thing of the past. "So how's the pay for your priests?" he asks.

"Terrible, but the benefits? *Spectacular.*"

"Any chance of a little immortality in that package?"

Kid, give me the worshippers I deserve, and you'd be amazed at what I can do. "There might be a taste," I say in an even tone. I'm still wary of getting his hopes up, so I decide to change the subject. "In the meantime, though, what are you going to do? I don't think I can rush you through casting as easily, especially with my powers as weak as they are."

"I thought about that. We're not really short on cash right now, and it seems like you can just get us more whenever you feel like as long as we're careful. With that and the small paycheck you'll be drawing, I figure I can focus on Web design."

"Fine by me," I say. "Just remember, gods of love and beauty have expensive tastes."

"I seem to recall they're also very good at getting free stuff."

"True enough," I say, hiding my discontent. I won't say anything

yet, but eventually, I'd prefer not to have to use my gifts to weasel complimentary goods and services out of people. It's not because it feels immoral, either—it's more that the deific side of me rebels against the notion I am somehow undeserving of such gifts in the first place. The idea that I have to use my powers to trick mortals into giving me what I desire is an insulting one. Centuries of abandonment have muffled those urges, but every now and then, the ancient, battle-scarred goddess within me stirs. I'm smart enough to repress those feelings, to keep them from meddling with the reality of my situation and making things worse, but each time I'm forced to act as if I'm not the god I am, it rankles.

So for now, I keep it to myself and do what I must to persuade those around me to give what I want . . . all while knowing it should be mine by rights.

The apartment Nathan has chosen is prefurnished, and it's not half bad. Certainly better than Inward. "We'll need to have the cable and Internet hooked up," Nathan says as we get situated. "And get ourselves a phone plan together. But it's pretty nice, isn't it?"

"It is," I admit. "Let's try to keep it that way, too. Can you arrange some sort of local maid service to come by every week or so?"

He gives me a questioning look. "I saw your last home," I explain. "We're not living like that. I might be adrift in the modern world, but I'm still a goddess. We don't do chores."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says, giving the only right answer. Smart boy.

We settle into a comfortable routine over the following days, putting things in order so we can begin our new lives. My thoughts of

Garen grow distant as it seems our precautions have finally given us a measure of peace. Nathan gets himself a replacement phone and a new computer, dumping all his important files onto it from an external hard drive he brought with him. I end up with a phone, too, but it takes hours before Nathan's able to teach me the ins and outs of the little gadget. It helps when he does some research on Norse mythology, then comes back and has me think of it as a digital Mimir. Odin once enchanted the head of a decapitated seer of the same name to whisper wisdom and counsel to him. It all clicks into place after that.

And suddenly my phone, my "Mim," becomes a link to the sprawling knowledge of the Internet. I've heard about this vast information network from the television at Inward, but nothing has really prepared me for the sheer scale of the thing. It's all available here, anything and everything. Whatever I desire is instantly at my fingertips, a schizophrenic world of facts and entertainment, education and debauchery. I'm addicted in a heartbeat, to the point where I have Nathan get me a computer of my own so I can browse without the constraints of my Mim's tiny screen and keyboard.

The days left until my first training session pass in an eyeblink. Through the Internet, I can see the latest fashions, learn what the world thinks of my kin and me (not much, unfortunately, beyond comic books and fantasies), and stare openmouthed at the incredible diversity—and perversity—of its pornographic archives. No wonder we've been left to rot in the past. The Internet is the new god of humanity, and why not? It can provide anything for anyone. Why pray to me in the name of beauty and fertility when millions of websites with enticing ads can promise all you'd ever want and more?

They seek you out, after all, while I sit here and wait for you to come to me.

It's troubling, what I'm beginning to understand here. I see now why we've faded. Our pride, our power, our distant strength—they've all been twisted over the years into crippling flaws. Humanity created us to answer its prayers, to protect bodies and souls alike. Now you've grown up, put us away like old toys, and built our successor. Worse, it's our better by far, because it's something you can see and touch and identify with. This realization of mine is a sobering one, but I'm no fool—I can smell the opportunity here, the chance to claw my way back on top. I can offer *real* magic—true power amid a downpour of deception. With my gifts and the global audience the Internet could give me, I might just be able to turn the world on its head.

It's food for thought, anyway. For now, I have a job to get to.

The training materials and classes are downright adorable. I was more concerned with just being a princess in general, so I left it to my friends at the casting center to pick which one I'd be. They chose Cinderella on account of my blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin, and an opening at the Magic Kingdom, and while I suppose I could be a little annoyed they didn't give me Elsa (I mean, a Scandinavian princess? *Come on!*), at this point I'm just happy to have a role.

With my character decided, all my time goes into studying how to act like a proper handmaid-turned-princess for boys and girls of all ages. I learn how to write her signature, interact with kids, stay on message, deal with unruly guests, and, in general, keep the magic alive. It's absolutely spellbinding, to be honest. A thousand years ago, you people were praying to me for victory in battle, strong boys, and fertile wives. Now you've created these elaborate fantasy

worlds and built an empire around them. I'm hooked and can't help wanting to learn more. The whole process takes several days, and at the end of the Traditions class, I get my cast ID, which gives me free access to the parks. Spectacular.

Finally, there's the on-site costume fitting. I enter the park through one of its hidden employee entrances after Nathan drops me off. The entire place was built over a network of tunnels, loading docks, warehouses, and utility rooms, turning what was once the ground level into a subterranean city. It's all in the service of immersion, a clever bit of engineering, and foresight to hide the machinations of the park from its guests. I'm given a brief spiel about the ins and outs of the corridors, then sent to get fitted. I soon find I was right about the costume—I narrowly manage to fit into Cinderella's biggest gown, and even then it's uncomfortably tight on me. Luckily, I get it into the heads of the staff that they should take pity on me and have some special alterations made, setting aside a dress that'll be all mine.

There's a bit more training, more costume and makeup tests, and even a few short character quizzes. Finally, the day comes when Nathan drops me off at the park and I'm actually going to go out there and perform in public. My heart is pounding. Adrenaline sings in my veins, and it feels like I'm about to go into battle, not sign autographs and smile. I'm sent to the dressing room to get ready. As soon as I arrive, I'm ushered in front of a long mirror, where dozens of princesses and face characters are transforming themselves from cast members into living legends. I'm soon stuffed into my outfit, long white gloves are pulled past my elbows, my hair gets bundled up underneath a wig and light blue headband, makeup's applied, and I'm ready to go.

As I make my way out of the dressing room, I'm paired with a character host who'll assist me with visitors and make sure I can focus on my job. I'm giddy with excitement, all set to begin my first day in earnest. We're both sent topside, emerging in the bright Florida sunlight. A beautiful castle that's apparently mine looms in the distance. Brilliant flowers bloom in carefully manicured beds, children and families dash over freshly cleaned paths, and bright colors and enticing architecture call to my eyes from every direction. I follow my guide in a daze, ready to begin winning hearts and spreading magic. I have a brilliant smile plastered on my face—one I intend to hold all day. From listening to some of the chatter back in the dressing room, the constant grinning begins to sting after a while, though I doubt it'll ever be an issue for me. Who knew I'd be using my superhuman stamina and pain threshold to play the perfect Disney princess? Considering how hot it is outside, it's even better that I don't sweat.

It's a short distance to the character-meeting site in the courtyard of my castle, but as I walk, I notice something odd about the park. There's a crackle of energy in the air, and an odd tickle begins to run up my spine. My smile almost slips as I realize with a shock what I'm sensing: it's the unmistakable scent of divinity.

There's a god here, somewhere.

He's powerful, too. I'm positive it's a "he"—there's a vibrant sense of masculinity to the aura, a certain distinctive charge that pulses on the underside of reality. I'm trespassing in someone's domain. Would he even consider a gnat like me a threat? I need to find this god and let him know who I am, and soon. Maybe he can

tell me more about Garen, or at the very least, tell me how he got so damn powerful in the dry, faithless desert our world has become.

I give my head a little shake, trying to focus on the task at hand. There'll be time later; I can return as soon as my workday has ended and snoop around. I carefully arrange my character and her background in my head as I settle in. In no time at all, my host begins shepherding eager families into a line to meet me.

"Cinderella!" a young girl in braids shouts as she gets close. She can't be older than six. She's clutching an autograph book to her chest and giving me this gleeful, breathless look.

"Well, hello there!" I say happily. I notice her parents just beyond, standing at the front of the line. Their faces carry an odd blend of hope and worry—this is obviously something their daughter has been looking forward to, and I understand they dearly want it to go well.

The girl beams at me, then gets a hesitant look. She's not sure what she should do next. I kneel in front of her and hold out my arms. Excited, she rushes forward and wraps me up in a hug. I feel a rush of confidence stir inside her mind, mixed with—

"I love you," she whispers, holding me tight. And she *does*. This girl has formed a bond with this character as strong as any parent or caregiver could hope for, and here I am, in the flesh, justifying its existence for her. But that's nothing compared to what happens next, because just like that, a tiny flare of energy hums to life in my body, and I realize this girl actually *believes* in me.

For the second time in minutes, the integrity of my smile is threatened by a staggering realization. The only difference is that,

this time, it's coming from within. How is this possible? She's never heard the name Sara, let alone *Freya*. What prayers for a Norse goddess could she have unleashed by thinking about *Cinderella*, of all things?

"I love you, too," I reply softly. Then I draw back and look at her. I search for clues, some sign behind her eyes that could point to how she knows who I truly am, and find nothing. "Are you having a good day?" I ask, at a loss.

"Mm-hm!" she hums through a smile, closemouthed. Then she seems to remember the autograph book in her hand and thrusts it out at me. I unclip the retractable Sharpie from the book, open it to the first blank page, and sign my character's name with a flourish.

I raise myself back to my full height and hand the pen and pad to my assistant, who brings it to the girl's mother at the front of the line. Her father pulls out a large digital camera, and I pose for pictures with the little girl, who happily clutches my side the entire time. The belief she has for me is real—I can feel it. But *how*? She just thinks I'm a Disney princess. *That's* who she loves, not some ancient goddess from the howling North.

Then it hits me.

The girl loves *me*. She believes in *me*. I've never thought about it like this before, never considered that someone's direct belief in me, no matter the guise, could count. It seems like it shouldn't work. *She* clearly thinks she's hugging Cinderella, after all. But whatever mystical scales balance the fortunes of the gods, they don't see a difference. Her belief is strong, and it's currently being channeled straight at me, a creature born to catch it. The spark is small, of course; she obviously hasn't dedicated herself to a lifetime of worship.

What's important, though—incredibly, insanely important—is that there's *something* there.

The next child is a little older, maybe eleven, and while she's obviously happy to see me, the belief is missing. The same is true for the following three kids, but the fourth, a little boy, has that same glimmering spark of adoration the first girl did. My mind whirls with the possibilities. Sure, they're not all would-be followers, and even when they are, it's just a distant flicker of belief. But it all adds up, and it's not like I'm in a hurry. Every day I'm here, I'm going to get just a little bit stronger. I can feel it.

I'm going to be a god again.

5

A LOVELY WAR

I close the door to our apartment behind me and lean against it, breathless with delight.

“And she’s back!” Nathan says from the kitchen. Something sizzles under his care, and I realize he’s cooking dinner. “How was work?”

“*Incredible*,” I squeak.

He comes out into the hall to meet me, and I see he’s wearing an apron designed to look like a tuxedo. I shoot a puzzled look at it, my earth-shattering discovery momentarily forgotten. “As long as you’re bringing home the bacon, so to speak, I figured that left me to deal with dinner,” he explains, gesturing with a spatula at his outfit.

“You’ll spoil me,” I say, pushing off from the door and giving him a friendly hug. “Good plan.”

“Well, try it first,” he says over my shoulder. “Worse comes to

worst, there's always takeout. You're in a good mood—everything go well at the park?”

“Better than well,” I say, pulling back to look at him and grin. “Ridiculously, wonderfully better.”

“That's great!” he says, breaking into a big smile. “Let me finish this stir-fry and you can tell me all about it.”

“A stir-fry?”

“Yeah,” he says, heading back to the kitchen. “They had buy-one-get-one on mushrooms at the store.”

“I can't remember if I've ever had a stir-fry.” My diet at the Inward Care Center was always pretty bland—burgers, pasta, lasagna, that sort of thing. Before that, I tended to stick with the foods from my homeland. Fresh fish and savory meats, sharp dairy and sweet-and-sour jams. I'm making myself hungry just thinking about them. Still, no harm in trying something new. “But there's a first time for everything.”

In a few minutes, we're sitting at our dining room table, munching on a serving of vegetables, chicken, and rice. It's not bad. I find myself liking the sauce he's made more than the actual food he's put it on, though—reminds me of some of the marinades we'd pair with fish. I can tell that what he's made isn't the effort of an amateur, though. There's talent here, whether I'm the best person to appreciate it or not. “This is good,” I say. “Where did you learn to cook?”

He gives a halfhearted laugh. “My dad.”

“Of course,” I murmur.

There's a moment's pause, and I'm worried we're about to sink into silence. Then he speaks up again, obviously trying to move the conversation to happier places. “So tell me your big news!”

I snap my fingers. “Yes, thank you. Almost forgot!” I put down my fork and a gleeful look settles onto my face. “It’s the kids—they believe in me!”

“Of course they do! I’d buy you as a princess any day.”

“No, no, you don’t understand. They *believe*. It’s like I’m this kind of living proof their hopes and dreams are real, and when they realize that—when they have me standing there in front of them, *proving* them right—there’s this surge of reassurance and conviction from them. It empowers me, Nathan. It’s like gaining a tiny piece of a worshipper every time.”

“Well, go, you. But how does that even work?” Nathan asks. “They can’t know you’re actually Freya, so how—”

“I have no idea,” I say, shrugging. “She wasn’t praying; I know that. As long as it’s heartfelt, I can hear any prayer in my name, no matter the source, so it must be something else. I never really thought about how we get our powers, to be honest. All I ever knew was that the more believers I had, the stronger I’d be. You people . . . you’re magic on a very fundamental level, so deep you can’t even tell, but I know we wouldn’t exist without you.”

“Wild.”

“I just wish I knew more about it. How it works, why it makes us thrive or wither.” I pause. This line of thinking is leading somewhere I’ve never even cared to go, and I’m not entirely sure why. It’s the most obvious question, now that I think of it, yet it’s taken this long for me to bring it up? “How it gave me life,” I say, feeling my curiosity grow by the second.

“Hm. We need an instruction manual,” Nathan mumbles, thinking. “Well, here: What’s your first memory?”

“Now, *that* is going back a ways,” I say, screwing my eyes closed and trying to remember. After a minute of effort, I open them, sighing in frustration. “Nothing there. It’s all too ancient. When my strength fled, most of my memories went with it. I can barely recall what I was doing a few centuries ago, much less the moment of my birth.”

“Worth a shot,” Nathan says, nodding as if he didn’t expect me to remember. I get the feeling he can’t recall much about his first days, either. “Then let’s think about it from a different angle. People have to believe first. And it’s obviously not just about believing something is real even when it’s not. Cinderella’s not a god, after all.”

“Right,” I say, bobbing my head. “I’m with you so far.”

“So something in *how* they worship you matters. Whatever it is, it gives you the edge you need to survive, to fortify yourself—and that something is missing from other fictional creatures. For some reason, you and your kind are made to grow, to feed on our belief and—”

“*Catch* it,” I say. “That’s what I did today. They sent it out to me, and I caught a piece, kept it for myself.”

“It’s like you’re stealing the mail.”

“What?”

“Silly expression,” Nathan says, waving a hand. “It’s like they’re mailing care packages to someone they love—like Cinderella—and you’re opening them and nabbing a few cookies.”

“Pretty much.”

And those cookies, oh, how delicious they are. Even the vaguest promise of belief fills me with a ravenous hunger. We pause, digesting this analogy of Nathan’s, and I eat a few more forkfuls of the

stir-fry. Maybe it's just the vegetables he used. I'm more of a beet-root, carrots, and cabbage kind of girl, and there are water chestnuts and snap peas and all kinds of weird stuff in here. It makes me wonder what his background is—what kind of heritage he calls his own. Then my thoughts bounce from there to something far more interesting to me, and because gods are nosy things, I don't stop to wonder if it's a topic he'd rather avoid.

"Hey, Nathan?" I ask. He looks up, curious. "That ex of yours—what happened there?"

He blinks at my directness, then sets his fork down. "Uh, well, we broke up . . ."

"And some fire was involved. . ." I add.

"Ha, yeah, that—not my finest moment," he says, looking uncomfortable. "She just—ugh, do you really want the whole story?"

I give him a look. It says, *Duh. God of love, remember? I eat this stuff up.*

He sighs. "All right, here goes. Her name was Hannah. We met in high school. She was also into design, and she was really, really good at it. We hit it off, turned serious, were together for a while." He turns wistful as he speaks, and I get the sense the memories he's unearthing are happy ones. "Then we graduated. She stuck with me, even though her parents would've sent her to college. Knew there was no way I could afford it and didn't want to separate us. We both started freelancing, looking for work."

Regret starts replacing the pleasure in his mind. "Remember how I said she was good? Well, she kept getting better. Got a *great* job in no time. Yay, right?"

"I'm guessing there was a catch."

"Had to be." He picks up his fork again, gives his food a half-hearted stir. "It was in another state. Dream job, of course. Couldn't be anything less, could it? So there was no way I was standing in the way of that. I wanted her to take it, wanted her to kick ass and rule the world . . . but I had friends and job leads and an apartment and a life. I wasn't ready to leave."

"Long-distance relationship?"

He snorts. "For something like three months. All those leads fell through, friends got jobs or moved away, and here I am, with absolutely no good reason to stay."

"Why did you?"

He makes a helpless gesture with his hands. "Right?" he says, exasperated. "I guess I wanted to make it on my own, just like she did. What, was I going to follow her to an even bigger city and fail there, too? What was she going to see in *that*?"

Ah, there's a classic for you. "Felt like you wouldn't be equal? Worried things would always feel off?" I ask.

"I loved her," he says, and the quivering spear of pain that lances his mind in that moment tells me a part of him still does. "I couldn't take the . . . the *risk*." He groans. "Stupid. I didn't want to risk losing her, so I lost her. *So stupid*. Couldn't pick myself up, walk out the door, and take a chance."

"She broke it off, or . . . ?"

He frowns. "Sort of. I'm still not sure. There was a huge fight. Surprised the webcam didn't melt. She didn't get it, I didn't get it, and we were both *really mad about it*. In the end, I convinced myself

it was better for her if we weren't together. She caught on, got furious I'd made that kind of decision for her. Told me I was treating her like a child."

He looks up at me, embarrassed as I've ever seen him. "That was around where I burned her clothes. On camera."

I wince. "Seemed like a good idea at the time?"

His eyes widen and he shakes his head. "I don't know if there's *ever* a time where that's a good idea. I think I was riffing off the 'child' comment. 'You want childish? Here's—'" He rubs his face with his hands. "It went downhill after that."

"I'll bet."

He gives his bowl an idle tap. "I hope she's happy. I mean, the whole thing would hurt a lot less if she'd been a bitch and I hated her, but you can't always be that lucky, I guess."

I nod. "There's always next time," I say, smiling. Then a thought occurs to me. "Is that why you were so eager to toss it all away and follow some random goddess out the door?"

He laughs. "I'd like to think I played a *little* hard to get."

"Really? I've had longer arguments with you over pizza toppings."

That just gets me more laughter, and I'm glad for it. I'd hate to think I ruined a perfectly nice dinner with my prying.

"You might be right," he says at last. "I spent so long beating myself up about the whole thing maybe I was primed to take a chance." He looks me in the eyes, and I see the gratitude there. "Whatever the real reason, Sara, I'm glad I did."

Aw. Corny little sweet-talker. I hope I'm not blushing. "Me too, Nate," I say, and we return to our meals. The conversation drifts

back to idle thoughts and pleasantries for a few minutes, until I realize there's another bit of important news I haven't shared.

"Oh! Hey!" I say, brightening up. "Totally slipped my mind—got another bombshell for you."

"What's that?"

"When I was in the park today, I felt the presence of another god."

He gets an impressed look on his face. "You get all the adventures! Could you tell who it was?"

I shake my head. "No, but he's strong. I'm going back to look for him on my days off."

"Are you going to try to team up?" he asks.

"I doubt it. Unless they're from the same pantheon, gods don't tend to ally with one another. We don't play nice."

He shrugs. "All competing for the same believers, I guess," he says.

"Yeah, exactly," I reply. "It's literally life or death for us. But this god might know something. He's clearly managed to hold on to his power all the way into the present day, so it would be a good idea to at least talk to him. Besides, I want him on my side. If he decides I'm a nuisance, well, I don't want him to blow my cover and force us to move again."

"Hell no," Nathan says, seeming indignant at the thought. "Not after all our hard work. Plus there's all that new belief you just found."

"Absolutely! I had a handful of hour-long shifts today, and from those alone I feel like I managed to gain more strength than I did in *years* at Inward."

"That's great, Sara!" Nathan says, sounding pleased. "I wish I

had some news of my own on that level, but all I've done so far is update my website and begin working on a few new designs for my portfolio."

"You, my high priest, are doing everything I could hope for and more," I say gratefully, pointing at him with my fork.

He grins at the compliment. Then the smile slides away, replaced by a rather serious expression. "Hey, Sara?" he says softly.

"Mm?" I say around a mouthful of stir-fry.

"That, um, kiss back at the restaurant? I'm sorry about that. I think I might've given you the wrong impression. I mean, I like you, but I'm not the kind of guy who tries to get into the pants of every woman he meets."

I frown. "It *does* take two, Nathan."

"Right, yeah, but it's just—" He sighs, clearly trying to find the right words, and I decide to help him out.

"Look, Nathan, I'm over a thousand years old," I say. "I'm not a pampered teenager, regardless of how I look. I actually *did* like the kiss, too. It's been a *really* long time. But you're right; it probably wasn't exactly your decision."

He gives me a calculating look. "You're going to be trouble, aren't you?" he asks, smiling.

I offer a halfhearted shrug. "Comes with the territory. Look, it was a charged moment and that part of my brain was feeling frisky. I probably short-circuited your sense of restraint. Was nice at the time, but we *are* on the run and we did just meet—I know you didn't mean for anything to come out of it, and neither did I. I'd been meaning to bring it up, but then there was that thing with the phone and getting this job and . . . it kind of got lost in the shuffle."

“So it’s okay,” he says, seeming relieved.

“Absolutely,” I say, a little taken aback. “What kind of cheesy romantic comedy do you think this is? ‘God of love’ does not mean ‘needs a date now.’”

“Can’t stand those movies,” he says. “I’m glad I don’t have to live one, either.”

“Careful, priest,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “Just because I don’t live by the rules of awful chick flicks doesn’t mean they’re not a guilty pleasure of mine.”

He quirks an eyebrow at that, then laughs. “Fair enough,” he says, still smiling. “You know what? I’m just going to wing it.”

“Most sensible thing you’ve said all night,” I say, eating some more of his stir-fry.

We both chew a few more bites in silence before he speaks up again. “I researched you, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Read everything I could about you online.”

Oh geez. I’ve been through a few of those sites myself. As you’d expect, they all get a few things right, but nobody has the whole picture. People seem to like thinking of gods as people with superpowers, but we act in some decidedly inhuman ways, and each of us is just a bit different in how we do it. Far too many, however, appear to dwell on the fact that I have a reputation for being beautiful and promiscuous. Really, Loki, thank you *so much* for that one. “Please tell me you didn’t spend much time on the more . . . risqué sites,” I say.

He pauses, then picks the safest—if unlikeliest—option. “Can’t say I found any.”

“Mm-hm. Well, what *did* you find?”

“All sorts of stuff. It’s hard to tell what’s real and what’s not.”

“Big things are usually true,” I say, “but they tend to get the details wrong.”

“Actually, the big things were what I was curious about,” he says. “You’re the god of love, beauty, fertility, magic, and war, right? Those are the main things you cover?”

“Yes. Add vanity to the list, too, actually.”

“All right.” He stops, thinking that one over. I see a look of understanding in his eyes that tells me he realizes that particular specialization of mine is probably going to bite him in the ass one of these days, but then he shakes his head and dismisses the thought. “So two questions, then,” he continues. “First, what does ‘magic’ mean? I’ve read the myths, but what can you do with it?”

“Right now, not a whole lot,” I say, feeling embarrassed to admit it. “But in my heyday, I could enchant entire armies, raise the dead, bring down castles, invoke prophecies, curse my enemies . . . you name it. I’m a master of seidh, which is a kind of Nordic sorcery. Taught it to Odin, actually. He got more into the divination side of things—foresight, scrying, prophetic visions—but I was always the best at charms and enchantments.”

“Except you’ve been weakened over centuries, so you can’t use it as well,” he says, looking as if he sympathizes with my plight. I think he might be starting to get the barest inkling of what I’ve lost.

“Don’t remind me,” I say miserably, digging around in my stir-fry for more meat. “The only thing I have left is the concept to which I’m closest: love.”

“Lucky thing, too. I doubt we would’ve accomplished much otherwise.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” I say. “You’ve done a great job driving the car.”

“Should add that to my résumé,” he says, laughing.

I smile, glad to be reminded he has a sense of humor. It’s something of a requirement for spending time around gods (we tend to be jerks). “So what was your second question?”

“Oh, right,” he says. “Well, there are other gods out there who cover things like love, beauty, war, and so on. What do you do when you meet them? How do you divide things up?”

“We usually try to kill each other,” I say matter-of-factly. His eyes widen, and he seems a little taken aback by that. “I’m serious—gods from separate pantheons don’t really get along, but ones who share portfolios are instant rivals.”

“Have you ever—”

“Infuriating pretenders,” I hiss, mashing my stir-fry. Just the thought of it is bringing back all sorts of unpleasant memories. “I swear, I will wring Aphrodite’s scrawny, powdered neck if I ever see—”

“Okay, question answered,” Nathan says, holding up his hands. “Forget I asked.”

“Sorry,” I say, shaking myself. “Touchy subject.”

“I can see that,” Nathan says, a curious look on his face.

“What?” I ask. “What are you thinking?”

“Oh, just kind of interesting to watch the warrior side of you surface,” he explains. “Same thing happened back in the restaurant, with Garen. One moment you’re all sweetness and light, and the next you’re flying through the air with a steak knife.”

“You’ll probably see shifts like that happen a lot,” I say. “We’re

all bad at regulating our emotions, though some gods are worse than others. Besides, the bastard made me throw away a perfectly good dinner. How else was I supposed to react?"

"Well, what do you say we make up for it, then?" he asks, leaning back in his chair. "Actually finish that dinner properly."

"Nathan, are you asking me out on a date?" I ask, pretending to be coy. After our conversation a few minutes ago, I know he's not, but it's fun to try to push buttons.

"Believe it or not, two people of opposite genders *are* allowed to eat at a restaurant together and not be in a relationship," he says, lowering his voice as if it's confidential information.

"Teach me more of this modern land, oh great and worldly Web designer," I say, chuckling.

"All good things in time," he says, affecting a haughty tone. "So where do you want to go?"

"Actually, let me handle that one," I say, a place immediately popping into my head.

"Got something in mind?"

"Well, there's a steakhouse at Epcot that's supposed to be amazing. Heard some cast members talking about it."

"The universe *does* owe you a filet mignon."

"Damn right it does," I say with a fierce nod. "I should be able to get us both into the park pretty easily, but for the restaurant, you're supposed to have reservations six months in advance."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Leave it to me."

"Oh, I've got faith," Nathan says, polishing off the last of his stir-fry.

I think back to the flare of belief he gave me the instant I told him who I really was, and smile. “I know, Nathan,” I say softly.

The next day, we head to Epcot late in the late afternoon, intent on doing some sightseeing while we’re there. The scent of divinity is here, too, and I think it might be even stronger than it was back at the Magic Kingdom. I’m immensely curious about this god. What could he be doing here? After spending a few hours touring the park, we arrive at Le Cellier Steakhouse, just in time for our seven o’clock dinner reservation. We were almost late, and would have been if Nathan hadn’t managed to drag me away from the Norway Pavilion. I’d been begging for just five more minutes, but he insisted, telling me the Canada Pavilion was still a good walk away. I swear I could spend the entire day in that little slice of Scandinavia; it’s just so delightfully *kitschy*. You have all these adorable shops and bakeries, a replica stave church, and even a cute little *Frozen*-themed ride in Viking longships, all of it staffed by Norwegians in charming folk costumes. I couldn’t stop grinning the entire time. Imagine if someone took your centuries-old home, added some of the most memorable aspects of its culture—aspects you had a direct hand in creating—and then made a theme park attraction out of them. I’m honestly flattered. Just thinking about it makes me want to go back. It’s great.

Le Cellier, however, has filet mignon, which is an attraction of a different sort. It’s been twenty-seven years since I had one of these, and I refuse to wait even one more day. The restaurant’s interior feels warm and inviting. It’s decorated to appear like an old wine cellar, with pale stone arches stretching between wood-paneled

columns and low chandeliers hung beneath pine ceiling beams, all bathed in a dusky candlelit glow. We introduce ourselves to the hostess, who takes my name and, after a moment's wait, has a server usher us to our table. I don't even need to "persuade" her to do it; at this point, the magic's already been done.

Heady from my discovery of new believers the day before, I decided to see if I was capable of a minor spell or two. It wasn't anything fancy—just a little tweak to the restaurant's reservation list for the following evening. The effort put me down for the night, too. If I was being honest with myself, I'd admit I'm probably not ready for witchcraft just yet, but I was far too excited to listen to any voices of reason. Even gods are allowed to lie to themselves, after all. Besides, poor decision or not, it worked.

We soak in the atmosphere at our table, perusing our menus while we wait for our waiter to return. There it is, front and center. Mushroom filet mignon. Done. I return my menu to the table with a defiant slap, immensely pleased with myself.

Nathan chuckles. "Hard decision?"

"Oh, just the *worst*," I say, scrunching up my nose.

"You look beautiful, by the way," he says, setting his menu aside for a moment to look at me.

"And you look quite handsome," I reply. "If you were a god of dapper, we'd be a matched set."

He looks pleased with himself, glancing at his charcoal-gray jacket and the pale purple dress shirt underneath, its top button artfully undone. "If only. Think of the great and mysterious gifts I could grant to the well-heeled," he says.

"Never misplace your cuff links again," I say.

“Wrinkled suits will be a thing of the past.”

“Shoes always shiny,” I add.

He grins, then makes a face. “God, I’m the lamest deity ever. Good thing I’ve got you around to make me look cool.”

I laugh, enjoying the comparison. In my new outfit, with this fancy atmosphere, my ego is only too happy to agree. I’m in a strapless pale pink dress cinched at the waist by a black satin sash. Judging by the way his eyes keep slipping, the combination works on me.

The waiter shows up before I have a chance to do more than beam at the compliment. He takes our requests quickly—the filet for me and the medallions of beef tenderloin for Nathan. “Now, where were we?” I ask as the man heads off to put in our order.

“I think we were busy praising each other’s good looks.”

“I think you’re right. Does that make us shallow?”

He shrugs. “You’re a god of vanity and beauty. Pretty sure it’s required.”

I’m about to respond when I’m unexpectedly cast in shadow. “A god of beauty?” a high, mirthful voice exclaims from above. “Well, who else would use magic to make a reservation? But you are not Aphrodite, I see.”

I turn and look up to take in this strange interruption. It’s a tall, young man in a crisp, tailored white suit with matching shoes that practically gleam with polish. His entire outfit is slick; besides a vivid red tie, it’s all various shades of white and cream that somehow work to draw your attention up to his face. His skin is pale and glossy and his features have a sharpened, almost feminine beauty that seems at once alluring and treacherous. His long black hair is set in luxurious curls, neatly gathered in a wide ponytail that spills

down his back. Rich brown eyes flash with good humor and a touch of euphoric madness.

In short, he's the boy you warn your daughters about.

"What's this? House wines? We can't have that," he says, seeming aghast at our selection of drinks. He snaps his fingers and our glasses instantly go bone-dry. Then he reaches over the table, moving his hands as if he's cradling something, and suddenly there's an ancient bottle of wine between them, a deep red liquid spilling from its mouth into the empty glasses. He pours our new drinks with practiced ease, then nods with a predatory smile. "Much better," he says, more to himself. Then he fixes me with those insane eyes, taking me in as if I'm a drink to be guzzled. "Mmm, very nice, but if not my dear Lady of Cyprus, then who are you?"

I'd like to think I'm pretty sharp, but even a complete idiot could tell you this is my god. The air practically shimmers with his divinity, and the strength of that trick he performed with our drinks sent shivers racing down my spine. I decide there's no point in playing dumb. "I have many names," I say in my best warrior-goddess voice. "But you may know me as Freya."

"My lady," he says, snatching my hand off the table and bending fluidly at the waist to plant a kiss on my skin. His lips tingle with the promise of endless—and mindless—pleasure. I decide in that moment that this is an incredibly dangerous man. "And you, dear sir?" he asks, turning his head away from my hand to look at Nathan. The way he's bent over my fingers as he says it, along with the feral grin that pulls back his girlish lips, makes it seem like he's a savanna predator hunched over a kill.

"Nathan Kence," my companion says flatly, not offering a hand.

"A pleasure," the man says, drawing back and straightening. "But where are my manners? I have not yet introduced myself." He puts a hand on his chest and strikes what is possibly the most self-involved pose I've ever seen. "I am the Liberator, the undying source of epiphany and *ecstasy*"—he gives me a meaningful look as he draws out the word—"of wine and merriment, laughter and madness. I am and will always be your most devoted servant, Lady Freya, for I am Dionysus, and what is happiness without love? Bliss without beauty?"

He pulls a chair over to our table and sits down in one smooth, catlike motion. "Long has it been since a fellow immortal graced me with their presence, and longer still since one of such exquisite loveliness *entered* my domain," he says, raising a hand to summon a waiter. I don't like the way he emphasized the word *entered*—it's perverted, and leaves nothing to the imagination. There's no subtlety to this man.

Nathan rolls his eyes. I'm glad we're on the same page.

Our waiter arrives quickly, chest heaving as if he's dashed across the restaurant to make it to our table. "What can I get for you, Mr. Nyce?" he asks breathlessly.

Dionysus fixes the man with a snakelike stare, and those chiselled lips part to hiss a single word: "*Everything.*"

The waiter backs away at once, leaving for the kitchens. Dionysus turns to me, ignoring Nathan completely. I give my friend a look that pleads for patience. I hope he realizes I'd like nothing more than to snub this shameful man and return to our lighthearted conversation. I can't do anything overt, though; I must tread very carefully here, because this is not only a powerful god, but a perilous one.

"So how shall I address you, then?" I ask, trying to maintain my

sense of dignity and power. “These mortals obviously do not know you as Dionysus, and there are appearances to maintain.”

“Feh,” he says, giving a lazy wave with one manicured hand. “Right now, the only appearance I care to discuss is yours . . . but I would never dream of denying the request of one so attractive. Save ‘Dionysus,’ then, for more *private* surroundings. Here, I am known as David Nyce.”

“Of course you are,” I say, wishing I could roll my eyes at him, too. At least the fact that he’s ignoring Nathan has given my companion free rein to poke fun. “Sara Vanadi. And you’ve already met Nathan, my high priest and most trusted companion.”

“Sara. Such a sweet name,” he says, not even looking at Nathan.

Okay, I officially hate everything about this: Dionysus, the situation he’s put us in, the “conversation” he’s leading . . . It’s all incredibly uncomfortable and hazardous. He’s taking everything I say as an excuse to flirt, and the pitiless chaos that squirms beneath his perfect suit is giving me some really dark suspicions about how he treats rejection. I need answers, and I need him to think of me as more than a love puppet.

“Indeed, Mr. Nyce,” I say. “I am honored by your presence and grateful for your company. We have much to discuss, however, for I have been without the companionship of a god for far too long.” I tap Nathan’s foot as I say all this, hoping he gets the message that I’m doing my best to wrangle this bundle of off-kilter divinity and lust beside us, and to just stay calm.

“Ooh, too true,” Dionysus says. “What a sad, empty world it is without the presence of fellow gods. Everything’s better when it’s *filled* with the divine.”

I suppress a shudder. “On that note, Mr. Nyce—how did you get here? And how have you become so strong in this doubtful world?”

He laughs a high, crazed titter. “You wish to know my secrets? Well, why not? But I assure you, I have far juicier ones I can share. Perhaps in a more . . . intimate setting?”

“Perhaps,” I say. *Ew, ew, ew!*

“I can only hope—ah, wonderful!” he says with manic glee as our waiter sets down a few appetizer dishes on the table. He reaches for a platter of cheeses and fruits, grabs a handful, and stuffs them into his mouth. “*Mmmf*,” he says, rolling his eyes in delight. Nathan and I take the opportunity to exchange a look. The silent message that passes between us is clear: *What. The. Hell.*

After Dionysus finishes chewing, he turns back to me and clasps his chin in one hand. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes—secrets. Well, I discovered these delightful parks by chance one day. Imagine my shock when I noticed the magic in the air, the *fun* to be had. These places cannot, of course, hold the most meager candle to the festivities of my forgotten cults, but those are sadly long gone from this world. Even still, the merriment, the laughter, the excitement—it’s always here, every day of every year, bubbling up from millions of dear little mortals. I had to take part. So I invested all my energy, wealth, and time, climbed their ridiculous corporate ladder, and insinuated myself into their system.” He pauses to demolish a plate of ravioli. I notice that no matter how ferociously he eats, he never seems to stain his lips, drip something onto his clothes, or put even one hair out of place.

“Spectacular,” he says, smacking his lips. He drains his glass of wine—a glass I didn’t even realize was on the table until he reached out and took it—and continues his story. “You see, I recognized long

ago that I didn't need worshippers. Filthy things, really. No, what I needed was *strength*. They're not one and the same, you know. More worshippers will keep you whole, keep you in whatever form they decide is most pleasing to them, but more *belief*. . . aaah . . . that will give you power, raw and pure."

"But worshippers believe. That's what they give you."

"*Anyone* can believe," he snaps, his eyes glinting. "Worshippers, they're like . . . like *shareholders*." He says the word with utter disdain. "Sooth, they'll give you money, but they want to control you, to shape your beauty to match *their* vision. No! I won't have it. I am *perfect* as I am—and how could they presume to improve on perfection?"

I have a few ideas on where to start, I think, wanting so badly to say it. But I manage to hold my tongue. He's on a roll now, anyway. I think he likes the sound of his voice.

"Ages past, I realized I could draw strength from any sort of gaiety or celebration, and all I had to do was have a hand in it. Whatever mystic force empowers us, it sees such events as offerings in my name and grants me a small measure of strength for it. So *what* if those revelers aren't cavorting with the word 'Dionysus' on their tongues? Why would I want their worthless praise? Or their pathetic ideas of what I should be to them?"

I think I get it. Merrymaking has the same effect on him as the belief of the kids when I'm in costume. "So you made sure you'd have a hand in running the parks, and when people have fun in them, you get a little bit stronger for it?"

"Intelligent *and* beautiful," he says, sighing. "How could anyone ask for more? Yes, that's it exactly. It's the barest fraction of a drop every time, of course. Each of these 'tourists,' they offer a mere pit-

tance of strength, a grain of sand, if you will, but when they come in their millions—ah, how it does add up—power enough to fill the oceans.”

“And you say you haven’t seen another god in years?”

He shrugs and tosses a few pieces of steak tartare into his mouth. “Can’t say I’ve gone looking for them, really,” he says, chewing. “Then again, if I knew *you* were out there, my dear, I’d never have stopped searching.”

Ugh. Sure, once he actually *starts* talking about a subject, he never shuts up, but getting him to focus on one is like herding cats. Hungry, perverted cats. Still, maybe I can use his seemingly unstoppable needs to my advantage.

“I’m so glad to hear it,” I say, looking at him with wide, appreciative eyes, “because I’m in trouble, and I think you’re the only one who can help.”

“I am yours to command, my lady,” Dionysus says. He downs another glass of wine, then flashes a gleaming smile at me.

My lady? Where does he think he is? Actually, I don’t care at this point. He can say whatever he wants, as long as he’s on my side. “Good,” I say, thinking about how to phrase this next part. “You see, I’m being chased.”

Nathan gives me an amused look. I think he’s both impressed by how I’ve decided to handle our recent problems and pleased by how quickly Dionysus is falling for it.

“Unwanted suitors? I can understand why men would dog your every step.”

Stop it with the flirting! I want to scream. Instead, I suppress it and just say, “Not quite.”

"Then you are being hunted? There are true villains who wish to harm you?"

"Yes, that's it exactly."

Dionysus frowns, and I can see the madness flicker in his eyes. "I won't have it. Tell me who your pursuer is, and I will see to it that their screams echo in your ears for as long as you desire."

Gotcha. "There's an organization obsessed with gods," I say softly. "And one of its members is tracking me. I've had to start a new life here to escape him. Kill him for me, and I will . . . *reward* you."

"Give me a name," Dionysus croons. "And very, *very* shortly, all that will be left to do is enjoy your *abundant* rewards."

I pause, then spit it out like a curse. "Garen."

His frown deepens and, for a moment, I fear I've said something wrong. Then he lets out another high-pitched laugh, and I realize he's just committed the name to memory, like pinning an insect to a specimen case.

"It will be done," he says softly.