

INTO THE MADNESS BOOK ONE



COMING UNHINGED

HANNAH WOODS

Coming Unhinged

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Chapter 01

Jackie Shore woke to sunlight. She smiled and stretched her arms, then snuggled back down into the blankets. The edges of the room—along the dresser and the table edges—glowed with amber light. Her smile became secret and fuller. She never woke to sunlight. Never.

Not ever ...

And then she was flying out of bed late—at least an hour late with the sunup—and deciding she didn't need a shower. In her closet she tossed clothing around, looking for something comfortable but nice. Something that said: *"I know this is your big opus in anthropology, and you've been busting your ass to achieve this for years, and I know you are counting on me to show up on time, and it could look like I don't care at all, but I do. Sincerely."*

Nothing in her closet said that.

How could *nothing* in her closet say that? What the heck was she spending her money on?

What money? her inner accountant fired back at her.

Right.

She decided on a pink UCSD t-shirt, with a white bunny on the back, and blue jeans, grabbed her cross-trainer shoes and looked over to her alarm clock to give it the finger. But it wasn't there.

Sitting up, alert, poised on the edge of her bed, she studied the blank spot on her nightstand where that alarm clock had sat for four years, narrowing her eyes as the stubborn flip clock face continued not to manifest. Where could it be? She touched her nose with her right finger and narrowed her eyes a little more.

It wasn't something you left in your other jacket, or maybe washed because you didn't check the pockets, again. It was a *flip-face alarm clock*. Bold. Red. Likely cancerous. One of the big ones from the 1980s. It had the industrial bedlam wail with extra snarl to get her out of bed on time. She touched her lip and looked around the room. Hoping it didn't leave her.

It worked too. One of the few things in her life which did, until it went AWOL this morning.

Where could it have gone? How did it get there? Would it come back if she asked nicely? She still had two more years of college to do. It was worth every penny of the 50 cents she paid at the garage sale her first weekend in San Diego.

She spied the wall clock out in the living-room: *fifteen minutes past nine*. She should have been in the lab working on the inventory an hour ago at the very latest. This was a new very latest—or her last. The mystery of the *alarmed clock who ran away* would have to wait.

Snatching her backpack up, she checked for the essentials—keys, bus pass, wallet, hairbrush, phone—then snagged two apples and two Cokes from the fridge before leaving for the Anthropology lab on campus.

She didn't consider the possibility that someone came into her apartment and *took* the clock. That didn't make any sense. She suspected her roommate. Not the redhead, the blond. Terry. It was such a *Terry* thing to do. She probably took it out to clean or something.

Or—and her heart floated a bit with the thought—the alarm clock might have been *magicked* away. With an impish grin, she pondered that possibility. The possibility that her alarm-clock had gotten caught up in some sort of *Wild Hunt* of appliances and was having an adventure.

For almost a year, magic had been reported. Sights and events from everywhere. There were rumors now of men and women who could control or utilize magic in various, though narrow, ways. So far, magic didn't seem to collect or gather close to large cities or populated areas. But weirdness was afoot. Odd events were being attributed to the magic being wild and misgiven. Still, she should report it to the *Magic Watch website*, a project being done at the university. It was being run in the sociology department and yes, she was anthropology, but still, support your team, right?

If Terry didn't take it.

Right. If Terry didn't take it. Jackie slumped back in her seat on the bus. It was such a Terry thing to do.

The bus took her from Pacific Beach to the UCSD campus in La Jolla, and then she hiked across the wide grass areas to the lab in the Anthropology building. She knew this building and this lab intimately. She reflected for a moment as she

slipped in the door that it was quite possible with her track,
that she would retire from this same lab someday.

If today wasn't her last day.

Meep.

Chapter 02

“Professor?” Jackie called as she poked her head in and then stepped into the lab area through the double doors. No one answered, and she didn’t see anyone in the offices across the back or to the side. No sounds from the areas upstairs. The place was empty. Did she make it? On the table beside the door was a chess game in progress, but that could be from last Friday, or Thursday. ”Professor?”

At her work area she found her tools and the research she had been working with on Friday. Everything looked in order. At least it didn’t run off with the alarm clock.

“Professor?” she called again, not truly believing her luck. This whole incident might just slide by and under a rug. Could it?

The Professor didn’t come into the office until ten or eleven some days. She wondered, however, if he ever quit working. He tended to be focused, all the time. She didn’t mind thinking of ways to let him relax for a while. And while those were

delicious fantasies, they didn't fit their reality. At least, not now. Still, they were tasty side trips during her day.

The lab door banged open, and the Professor came in carrying a large box. "There you are. I was about to send Alice to your house to see if you were still alive." His rich baritone voice could not be mistaken, nor could the way he always bumped into the table beside the door.

"Hey, watch it pal."

"What?" she asked, turning around.

"Nothing, nothing," the Professor told her. "You were about to explain why you're late. On Monday, no less."

So much for not being noticed. "I slept through my alarm. It won't happen again."

"Sure, it will. As long as there are alarms and mornings and people who don't like either."

That was typical Professor humor, which should not be encouraged. That came straight from sociology.

Professor Steven Cunningham strode by with a relaxed sort of confidence, accentuated by a taut body which he hid under henleys and chinos. He earned his professorship a year ago, which had him at thirty years old—damn young—especially in a field as competitive as the Sumerians had become. But he knew his stuff and had out-thought and out-published just about everyone in the field.

He set the box he carried in down on the lab bench next to hers.

“What’s that? she asked, leaning to look around him, eyeing the box with aroused suspicion. Because it looked suspiciously like filing.

“Last of the field notes from the site. I believe they go with your artifacts. By the way, have you seen a metal, probably bronze, cylinder about ten centimeters wide and about sixty centimeters tall? Should be carved or etched with cuneiform.”

“I actually did, Friday.” She turned and studied her work area. “No idea where it is at the moment.” *Maybe her clock and his cylinder were magicked off together? Could that happen to people?* She flushed a little at the thought of her and the Professor being *magicked* off together, and cleared her throat while finding composure once more.

“When you come across it again, bring it to me. It could be important. But no rush today for it. I know it’s here somewhere. Just need to be aware that I believe it has been mislabeled.”

“Why? What is it?”

“I think it might be a *Me*. Well, a container for one of the *Mes*. But I need a closer look. There are no descriptions of the *Mes*. No catalog, or scheduled rituals. All we can be certain about was that they existed, and they could be displayed to the crowd from a chariot.”

There were few objects from the ancient world which held as much interest to Jackie as the *Mes*.

Me—pronounced like the month, May—were basic elements or divine decrees for the reality of the universe. For the people of Sumer, the Me existed as *fundamentals*. or *instantiations*. There were more than a hundred Me believed to be required for civilization as the Sumerian's saw civilization to exist.

One of these was **Law**, another, **Art**.

The Mes did not teach **Law**, or describe **ART**. They did not write laws or measure the quality of art. They *were*, at the primordial level of the universe, **LAW** and **ART**.

Without the *Me of Law*, you could not have laws, of any type. How could you have laws, if the universe were *lawless*? With the *Me of Law*, all laws could exist. Leaders were still obligated to write the individual laws, to approve laws and veto laws as required by the day-to-day business of civilized living.

The Me wasn't a spell that conjured a Law into being, either. Spells and written conjurations were called *Nam Shub*, one of the most important of those being the *Nam Shub of Enki*.

According to the stories told on the clay tablets, the Mes were originally collected by *Enlil*, the leader of the gods. Enlil was associated with wind, air, earth, and storms. Enlil gave this collection over to the guardianship of *Enki*, who was to broker them out to the various Sumerian centers, beginning with his own city of *Eridu*.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “A real one? But I thought Enki destroyed them.”

“The record only describes Enki as adding ‘*contention*’ to their language,” he said. “This contention infected language and afterward the Mes could not be understood by humans or used by them. They still existed. They had to exist. The Mes are existence itself. Besides, that may not have been the story at all. There are other versions in which Enki is asked to unite all of the languages.”

Jackie nodded in agreement, recalling the same information. Returning to the object at hand, she said, “With magic returning, a Me could be a significant find. Perhaps the *most significant* find.” The focus of her eyes turned inward.

“Maybe.” Her Professor looked around the area, his voice sounded tired, breathy, and lacking any excitement. “Either way, when you see it again, snatch it up and bring it to my office, please.”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“Not currently. Oh, this box is yours ... I hope.” he said, pointing at the box he already explained.

She expected him to leave now. That didn’t happen, and he continued to stand there, looking at the box, and narrowing his eyes.

“Something wrong with the way the box is just sitting there?” she asked with a careful voice.

He straightened his shoulders, ‘No, nothing. But ...’ he paused, ‘be careful of what you say and even what you listen to about the magic returning. That is not exactly good news for many powerful forces.’

‘Huh. I’ve never thought of you as the paranoid kind.’

‘It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you.’

She smiled and then noticed his eyes, ‘Hey, you’re kinda serious aren’t you. Sit down, talk to me. What’s going on? Who is out to get you?’

He nodded and took a seat on a bench stool near her. ‘Not *out to get me*, but they’re all over the place. I suspect they’ll be in here soon.’

‘Who? Who’s going to be in here?’ His hair was messy. He’s already been running his fingers through it, worrying about this, she decided. It took an effort not to run her own fingers through it, to fix it for him. To pull it back from his eyes.

‘Military, CIA, FBI, the *alphabet soup* people. They’re looking for people who know about magic.’

‘Then you’re right, they should be here soon. I’m surprised they didn’t come here first.’

He offered a wry smile, ‘One of my thoughts as well.’

She enjoyed his smile for a touch too long before asking, ‘But what are you worried about? They aren’t going to haul you off, are they?’

“No, nothing like that, but they are cornering teachers and professors for days at a time for questioning sessions.”

“What? Like criminals?”

“No, like people who know things that they needed to know last year.”

She laughed, “You had me seriously worried about you.” Slapping him lightly on the shoulder, she turned back to her workbench. “What are you worried about?”

“I’m worried about losing three or four days to a meaningless waste of time.”

Still smiling, she said, “You had me thinking about the McCarthy hearings and the Red Scare. I’m surprised they are so panicked, though. Didn’t the CIA keep up on such things?”

Who could be worried enough about the magic returning to the world to be threatening? It wasn’t like she made it happen. No one understood why it was moving through dense forest areas, like aurora borealis ribbons woven through the trunks and boughs.

“Just be careful. Alright?” he asked. His voice came low, close, personal. “I know religious people and scientists ... and both of them are churning on this news. Besides, maybe it’s not magic. Maybe it is some other weirdness. I don’t believe anyone has confirmed it to be *magical*.”

That was true, she conceded. Signs of the energy they were calling magic were being reported everywhere. Along coasts,

near volcanoes, mixing with the gaseous hazes of swamps. Weird stuff happened. Very weird stuff.

He stepped closer, causing her to inhale and brace herself, “Anyone showing adept knowledge or control of that stuff, is going to be in a great deal of danger.” He paused once more, but then nodded his head and walked off, his thumb and forefinger flexed and nervously stroking his chin as he pondered the severity of the situation.

Chapter 03

Jackie watched her Professor as he walked to his office and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He was a good man, she believed, although he hid it behind a brooding exterior. Still, better than most. Bookishly handsome. Tall and strong enough to envelop her in his presence. Focused and brilliant, but patient and understanding with those who were not.

When he ran his fingers through his hair, sometimes a lock would fall into a hook above his brow; a question, a come-hither finger, which she had bitten her lip to keep from answering more than once. And the scent of him was always spice, leather, and old woods. She had no idea what soap or lotion or *whatever* it was which presented that evocative scent, but she wanted them blessed.

The Social Sciences Building for Anthropology at UCSD La Jolla, was four stories high, and took up more than a city block of space out of the widespread grass fields between buildings. Inside the lab area, it felt like a large warehouse

when she experienced it alone. Soon, other students and interns would file in, and begin working on their projects—their bodies and activity removing the reverb from the concrete walls and the feel of empty space.

Inside the door, there were nine workstations, each a large counter made of pliable wood tops and metal structures for strength in order to withstand the large stone and heavy brick samples tossed up on the surface to be brushed with mink fur or hammered and broken with chisels and mallets. Three rows of three. Workbench stools were positioned around the room and were first come first serve. Thick rubber mats protected their feet and shins and hips from standing on the concrete all day.

Each of the nine workstations were portioned off to offer three work areas at each bench. Hers was the middle back station, at the work area closest to the door.

She glanced at the office door but didn't see him in there, which meant he sat at his desk. With all of the maps, posters, planning sheets, and memes taped, stuck, glued, and wedged up on the office windows, unless he was standing, there was not much chance of getting a line on him anyway.

Inside the lab, during academic hours, Jackie wasn't prone to allowing her thoughts to wander. At home, or anywhere else, she was happy to unleash the restraints on her visual and creative aspects to explore relationships, test ideas, and even engage in conversations. Often, if no other obligations were

pressing, she would slip into her inner world and test the boundaries of the possible.

This separation of space and place, between professional and personal, had important ramifications to her. Her father was a shipbuilder down at 32nd street—the San Diego docks. He raised her to have a hard-line view between work and play. “Don’t shit where you eat,” was a common proverb around her house while growing up.

One day, about three months after she started as his assistant, the Professor asked her into the office, and asked her about being available to travel to Iran. He wanted to visit the city of Ur, the ruins, and talk with three archeologists who were on site about a theory the four of them had been working on from different angles. The trip would be for two weeks. Did she have her passport and shot records?

The memory was not so much of the offer, but the hat he was wearing. A safari helmet. Great white hunter motif. It was so not him and at the same time, he made it look good. It wasn’t something that she would let him wear around in public, and thankfully he never tried—but for Halloween, ooh, that had potential.

The topic of the trip never came up again, but in her fantasy world, he could leave his hat on.

Turning back to her workbench, she looked over the various stones, tablets, and figures. They say the reason we have myths is because the magic left the world. Before that, the

myths were HOWTOs; introductions, and warnings for dealing with creatures and beings of magical orientation.

Did the magic returning also suggest that *the gods* were returning as well? Maybe it was like a migration. A cycle of ... what? Five thousand years?

Five thousand years ago: there were Sumerians. Our oldest evidence of writing comes from these people. Written language, mathematics, first laws, first public schools, and social control. *They invented the wheel.*

Were the Sumerians the last to use magic? No one knew, but five thousand years ago, magic vanished—and so did the Sumerians. They vanished so quickly that their language vanished with them. It became an Extinct language.

A language went extinct if it was no longer growing and was not used by others. That included people of other countries using borrowed or derived words from the language in question; like how Americans borrowed words like *taco*, *casa*, *la jolla*, and *mesa* from the Spanish language.

For Sumerian, enough of their writing had been found to decipher their intents and words. But no one had any idea of what those words sounded like, or how they were pronounced. But the grammar and the syntax had been decoded.

During the rest of the morning, the Professor came out of his office several times, though always deep in thought and unapproachable. A few of his students attempted to get in with him, but they were firmly dismissed and asked to use the

normal office hours. After one o'clock, she took her backpack and went outside to find a tree to read under.

His activity wasn't odd really, though today he did feel more pressured than normal. It couldn't be the *alphabet-soup people* bothering him, could it?

After finishing her apple and a chapter in her book, she packed up and went back to the lab. The cylinder that the Professor was looking for this morning percolated up from the depths of her mind. The memory rose from the shadows, bringing a pang of guilt because she hadn't looked for it at all.

Now felt like it would be a good time to get on that.

Where to start? She recalled seeing the thing, or something like it, last night before she left to go home. But now, she couldn't recall when she left. Pausing, she discovered she didn't recall leaving last night at all. No ride on the bus. No walking in the dark with her phone in her hand. No encounters with her roommates.

"Must have been seriously tired," she decided with wonder, opening her eyes." Maybe I tossed the alarm out the window."

That sounded like something she would do.

She concentrated, attempting to pierce the dark curtain that obscured her memories. It was worse than trying to recall her night after a party. Not that this had been an issue. The issue came from not being very good at going to parties.

She did have high marks in recalling her research. In fact, she excelled in that area—an area which remained dark and

blank right now.

The thing wasn't a small object either. It had weight to it. Heavy. But above all, *noticeable*.

She had opened up one of the crates to look inside when the Professor came out of his office in a rush, with his jacket half on and half choking him.

"I have to run downtown. There's an issue with the import papers on one of the crates. I won't be back today. Lock up when you leave?"

His hair still had that messy look it got when he's been frustrated. *Mushed up*. It was impossible to look at him in this state and not wonder about running her own fingers through his hair. In fact, that was a pleasant enough distraction that it lasted long after she got home.

Chapter 04

Neither of her roommates were home. She tossed her keys into the basket beside the door. Brandy had that idea—for the key basket. She was a self-proclaimed *Life Ninja*. Life hacks and minimalist designs were her thing. Brandy also was the oldest of them, by three years. Terry—the tall blonde you were *never ever* inviting to your wedding or allowing in the same zip code as your boyfriend—she organized. Terry could organize anything.

Anyway, to the key basket, it eliminated the weekly key hunt desperation, and it also subtly let you know who was home. That way you would know that the bedroom might be better than the sofa. Or at least, not to walk around nude or in a towel. Not that she ever did. Briefly she wondered if anyone, not making a porn movie, walked around nude in their house—Walked around casually watering plants and seeing to the mail in the buff.

She didn't feel hung up about her nudity, but there was something off about—just being nude—no reason, no purpose.

Just happened to be nude instead of in shorts and a t-shirt. Maybe if it were her house, instead of a shared rental. Shared with someone other than the Professor.

Jackie hadn't been able to take advantage of the covert benefits as of yet. Too busy. She couldn't figure out exactly how those two roommates of hers could maintain relationships and dating with full time academic schedules.

Then it hit her ... oh yeah, *Life Ninja*, and *Can Organize Anything*—a phrase whose meaning became stretched out of shape on that one, but it didn't tear.

She tossed her keys, and they landed in the debris that had gathered in the basket over the years. The keys landed perfectly inside the woven reeds. Walking away she pulled in a fisted celebration, "Nice."

"Yeah, you are."

She froze.

The voice was male. Low. Clear, without any rasp or defect. It had in the timbre an element of command. Of power, and physical strength.

She couldn't move. Tears threatened but she clamped down on that response and shifted into practical thinking. She didn't jump or scream, at least. If he meant to rob her, then he could have anything he wanted. Everything else she would negotiate.

Still, she couldn't move. Whimpering, she turned her head, and looked over to the door.

Nothing.

Well, no man. No attacker.

Relaxing enough to turn, but keeping her guard up, she cautiously stepped toward the door. Was it cracked open? Maybe what she heard came from outside?

She managed to walk to the door and found it closed and the deadbolt turned. She unlocked it and then secured it once more.

Past the little table with the key basket stood the laundry room. But there were no doors or anything to hide behind over there. The machines were snuggled up to the walls and each other.

Jackie bit her lip, and then stepped toward the laundry room and clicked on the ceiling bulb light. It spread warm yellow light across the off-white surfaces and blue bottles.

No stranger. No man waiting ... no one hiding.

Relaxing a little more, she clicked off the light. When the shadows all hung back in place, she decided it was better with the light on, for now. She clicked the switch back on.

There was a voice. She heard the voice. She could still hear his voice. The variable of volume she could question. Was it as loud as she thought?

The possibility that the voice came from outside felt even more viable now. Perhaps there was an open window? And sure, it made sense that such a comment connecting coherently with her own, would grab her full attention.

Maybe it felt so loud because it should not have been at all.

In her bedroom she set her backpack on the overstuffed chair she bought from a garage sale three blocks away. For a moment she just remained there, beside the chair, listening to the house and the sounds coming from outside. No repeat performance came through.

Relaxing a bit more, she began to take her shirt off, but stopped, feeling a gritty unease. After closing her bedroom door and turning the knob lock, she took off her top and then her bra.

For several more moments she simply stood, enjoying the feeling of being unbound and listening for any comment from the universe. The universe appeared to be minding its own business.

Tossing her shirt and bra on the bedspread, she found a fresh shirt from her closet, a blue UCSD shirt with white lettering, but basically the same shirt. She had several of them.

A key turned the lock of the front door and then it opened. “Hello?”

It was Brandy’s voice, her eloquent ginger roommate. Jackie smiled, feeling an embarrassing amount of relief.

“In my room if you need me,” she called in return.

A short soft burst of wrapping knocks fluttered on her bedroom door and then the handle was tried and found locked.

“Hey baby,” Brandy said. “You alright? You’ve never locked the door before. I missed my tit flash.”

Jackie grinned, finished putting on her shirt, then opened the door letting Brandy in, “Yeah, everything is fine, why wouldn’t it be? Fine is good. A lot of people like it fine.”

“Do you have a man in here? Finally?” Brandy asked while pantomiming an eager search of the room from the doorway.

“No, no men. Stop being a jealous bitch.”

“I said ‘*man*’, singular. You’re the one jumping into the Olympic games with multiple partners on the field.”

“I wish.” She stopped, thought about that, and then said, “Maybe. Not sure about that. Ask me when I’m sober.”

“You’re *always* sober, that’s your problem.”

“My problem is *zero-time*—school is my life.”

Jackie dreamily leaned against the wall, a sudden flash of something-that-wasn’t-QUITE-school-related reflecting in her eyes. Brandy, having known Jackie on a personal level, and for a very long time, knowingly picked up on this and flashed her bestie a smirk.

“And what a lover he turns out to be—if you’d ever give him a sign. He’s wonderful, remember?”

“Is he though?” Jackie asked, drawing her words out into an exaggerated sigh. “Or is he just the only man in my proximity all day?” she added with a snap.

Brandy stopped and then asked, “You’re not losing faith, are you?”

“Faith in what, Brandy? I’ve never seen him *seeing* me. He doesn’t flirt with me, at all. There is nothing there, except what I keep throwing in there.”

“Well, I only met him that once, but I never questioned your taste in men since. So, yeah, I guess it is your problem.”

Jackie released a long, exasperated sigh. Was it a problem though? Or was it something more? Maybe it was the universe trying to convince her that Steven was her soulmate and that they were destined to be together. He was, after all, almost constantly on her mind, that had to mean something, right? But that line of thought was even more confusing than the magic crap that was creating chaos in the world now.

“There are more urgent problems to worry over than my love life, Brandy. Like the magic. Magic can change our perspective on everything we knew about life ... and the universe.”

“Yeah, crazy, huh? I keep trying to find something to compare that to,” Jackie admitted, jumping at the chance to talk about the magic returning. “But there is nothing. This is the single most game changing event in our history.”

Brandy sat on the edge of the bed. “Don’t sound so excited. You’ve seen what these assclowns do with mere guns. The thought of some of these people with magic in their hands ...” she performed an elaborate shiver at the thought.

“We still have no idea how to use it or if any of the tales are true, or if it can be used at all. It could be fuzzy colored lights in the trees and nothing more.”

Brandy shook her head. “That would be the unkindest blow of all, but you may be closer to the truth than we suspect.”

Jackie turned from her dresser, her eyebrow raised, “What do you know?”

Brandy combed her fingers through her hair, “What? Nothing. No, just a thought. An ugly little thought that this world could be so much uglier with the right eye-of-newt added.”

“Ah, that’s the way forward; *Witches*,” Jackie said, backing off the subject. “We should at least practice our cackling. Just because we’re amateurs doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep up appearances.”

But Brandy seemed to have tired of the banter. Glancing over her shoulder from her dresser Jackie said, “So, Red, what’s actually going on? You haven’t seen my alarm clock, have you?”

Brandy turned to the nightstand and pointed, “Voila!”

Jackie followed Brandy’s pointing hand ... to her alarm clock sitting on the nightstand with an innocent look on its 6:32pm face. She felt a rising vertigo, reaching out she put her hand on the dresser to steady herself. “Did you put that there?”

“Me? No, I’m the jealous one, Terry is the personal organization Nazi. Why? Seriously, you look a little pale. Are you alright?”

Jackie studied the clock from where she sat. She looked at the event from outside herself. From a “witness only”

perspective. What could she say? She overslept, panicked, and confused some details as she rushed out the door.

Jackie sat down on the chair at her small vanity. “Maybe not ‘alright’ but not harmed.”

Brandy looked back at the alarm clock and then back to Jackie, with an inquisitive glint in her eyes. “OK, Squeaker, what’s going on? What’s with the clock?”

Squeaker. The childhood nickname that would never die. Only Brandy ever used it anymore. Of course she would be the one to remember how Jackie squeaked with excitement whenever she played with her dolls and tease her about it for eternity. Jackie shook her head. There was nothing here to worry about. Three weeks before finals, priorities had to remain clear. They had some of the most unique artifacts from Iran on loan in their lab. Oh, and a possibly priceless artifact that came in under her own signature was missing.

“Stress,” she said, her shoulders slumping. “In large doses. That’s all it is. I’m more involved with high-level—as in *wars are fought over shit like this*—responsibilities, at levels I imagined I might experience after the Ph.D. After the Nobel prize, maybe? And I have finals, and I’m sexually frustrated—and I’ve had two Cokes and two apples to eat all day.”

“Ice cream night it is.”

“No, we need pizza. At this point protein is required.”

“Protein?”

“Yeah, that stuff pineapple has.”

“Pineapple doesn’t have any protein, weirdo.”

“Then why do we put that nasty stuff on our pizza?”

Chapter 05

“No pineapple?” Terry called from the kitchen.

“In the oven, dear,” Jackie called back, and adjusted herself on the sofa next to Brandy, watching *Labyrinth* with David Bowie, for the ninety-ninth time this year.

“Maybe the Goblin King is real again.”

“Who the fuck cares about a goblin king?” Brandy said, then touched her teeth with her tongue. “I want Bowie.”

“He’s old in this,” Terry said, then took another bite of her slice while standing at the dining room divider. Her eyes closed, and she offered a subtle moan of gratitude. “Bless you for this. I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Wake up late?”

“No, just stupid, I guess. How are you?”

“Stressed out, hearing voices, losing priceless artifacts for fun.”

“Sounds progressive.”

“You would seriously be concerned about his age?” Brandy asked, her voice suggesting this attitude was incorrigible.

“He’s like fifty years old in this,” Terry fired back.

“He’s one of our age’s greatest creatives—I don’t want to raise children with the man. I want to raise consciousness.”

“Raising daisies, he’s dead.”

“He’s like Zeus with glitter.”

“Did you just say, *Zeus with glitter?*”

Brandy cringed, “Maybe.”

“Well, he’s definitely not. You just have daddy issues.”

“Ew.” Brandy said, her mouth twisted in disgust. “Have you seen my dad? He’s four hundred pounds with purple feet.”

“Diabetes?” Jackie asked, voicing the question with care and familiarity, white flags tossed on the field.

The father in question gave Brandy a constant source of sorrow and concern. He had been a hardworking man, one who now refused to believe anything a doctor said or might say, which smothered his once sage advice with a wide blanket of disbelief in any conversation on nearly any topic.

Terry nodded, and then bowed out of the conversation, heading back to the kitchen.

Brandy *hrmf’d* and turned back to the movie. The girl was just telling Bowie, “... *you have no power over me.*”

On the moment of the shattering magic globe, a knock wrapped against their front door.

“Shit, sounds like the cops.” Brandy laughed, as she lunged out of the sofa, hurrying to answer the summons.

But Terry opened the door at that moment, which made Brandy hurry faster, while huffing a locomotive breath.

“Yes, can I help you?” Terry asked, sounding very adult in a way never seen around the house.

“Good evening, I’m looking for Jackie Shore?”

Jackie meeped, and sat forward on the sofa, out of sight of the door, “Professor?”

She bounded off of the sofa, tripping over her comforter, and knocking her empty pizza plate on the floor.

Looking wildly around, there was no escape or delaying—he was right there. Right there. Right behind the divider wall.

“Jackie?” Terry called.

“Yes?” she squeaked.

“Come in please, um, Professor,” Terry said, smoothly transforming from university co-ed to corporate CEO of the future world.

“Thank you,” he said. “Apologies for the hour.”

“Nonsense, we’re coeds, we can take it.” Brandy said as she walked up, positioning herself in support of Terry, with an air of light challenge.

Jackie was wearing her UCSD shirt with blue, soft cotton shorts. More intimate than she wanted him to see. Unless it was lingerie, it should have always been *appropriate attire*.

What was the point of a secret crush if things like this were going to bring reality into the illusion?

“Yes?” she repeated as she turned the corner for the front door.

Terry had already allowed him passage across their threshold, obviously not worried about him being a vampire. Brandy’s approving eyes expressed her boundless faith.

When his eyes met hers, she felt the beginning of a moment, like that weird building sensation you feel right before the first kiss. It started like that, but then Brandy and Terry began miming compromising positions behind his back, causing Jackie to shoot them a horrified look. He looked away, following her gaze back to her roommates just as they gained their composure.

The full weight of his attention crashed back on her. With a slight smile to offset his tone, he commanded, “I need to speak with you. Now.” He eyed the roommates again and then shifted his gaze back to her. “In private.”

They were out of sync. She could feel it. She tried to flick that feeling away, but it hung on. For appearances, she kept her back straight. There was an air of wrongness surrounding his presence in her space that made her apprehensive, though she couldn’t pinpoint its origin. His new dominant tone spread

a dark stain through her fantasies, leading to new images of her submission.

His hair was now brushed through, no longer finger-tousled from his burdened thoughts. She let slip a disappointed sigh. “Sure, we can sit in my room if you don’t mind.”

“Perfect.”

She met the eyes of her roommates one by one as they continued their filthy miming, and then led him to her room. Once inside, she closed the door, leaving it unlocked.

“I didn’t know you had a tattoo,” he said, looking at her left ankle. “Brilliant colors. Is it new?”

She glanced down at the inked butterfly an inch above her ankle bone. “Six years old. I got it on my eighteenth birthday.”

“Rite of passage?”

“Something like that. What can I help you with?”

“Ah, yes I ... need ... your ... what is *that* doing here?”

“What?” she asked, and then looked to her nightstand, which looked much as it had all day, sans alarm clock, with the replacement of, if she was remembering correctly, the only existing Me cylinder now standing in its place. “What the actual fuck?”

“Yes,” the Professor agreed. “What the actual fuck would cause you to bring that home?” He stepped to it with such authority and challenge that she just watched him pick it up,

half expecting it to turn to smoke and drift away—much like her career had just done.

He examined it briefly, and then raised hard eyes stiff with crow's feet, and older than she had ever seen them turn before.

“Professor, I ...”

“Please come in early tomorrow,” he said, stiffly interrupting her. “And clean out your personal items before anyone else arrives. I’m not sure where this is going to take us, but I’m certain that the conversation we were about to have is no longer appropriate. Good night, Ms. Shore.”

His voice hurt the most. Inside its vibration were the cracks of age and pain. She had never heard him so controlled. It hurt to hear those flaws marring his clear, beautiful voice because of her. She watched him leave, devastated. How could this happen?

She stood in her room, frozen to the spot he cursed her to live in for the rest of eternity. How could he just believe she took that without question or challenge? Was it that simple to step on her and go home?

Her roommates rushed into the room, their eyes wide with alarm and worry. What could she tell them? What was there to say? *The magic is back, and it hates me.*

Chapter 06

At seven thirty on Thursday morning, exactly a year after magic was first reported, Jackie approached the Anthropology department's main door. Pulling the barrier open, the door felt heavier than before, as if it were practicing barring her entry, already knowing about her exile. Her failure.

How did this happen? It started out as such a good day, with golden sunlight around her. Ending with a ring of fire and destruction burning all around her.

Other students and staff would begin to arrive at eight-thirty. The main staff came in at nine. She normally arrived at eight. She enjoyed the feeling of the lab first thing in the morning before anything desperate began; when histories were mostly known and comfortably held. When the potential hummed with tension.

It didn't feel the same this morning. This morning the building, and empty offices—it just felt dim and cold.

Opening the door into the lab, she noticed the light on inside the Professor's office. How sweet her crush had been with him. So innocent and effortless, but now darkened and complicated by the accusations of last night. She didn't feel like he reciprocated her feelings, anyway. Any chance it did stand had now been shot point blank.

She consoled herself with thoughts of his disinterest, how he rarely noticed her in the room. Not that he didn't appreciate her. He did. Or *he did*. He knew she was valuable. Or *he did*. She just wished he would have appreciated her in other ways, outside academia.

With desperation motivating her feet, she stepped with a halting gait toward his office. It wasn't just her crush that was crushed. Her whole life ended last night. Even if she didn't go to prison for twenty years, she would never work in the field or publish or procure grants of her own. No one would ever care what her opinion might be on any subject that mattered to her.

Oh, and her credit was trashed now as well. It would be decades of work before she could qualify for a home. Her student loans would close. Her grants would demand repayment.

Any field she qualified to work in she would be given a pariah's welcome.

Last night, hugging her pillow, she decided she could deal—with all of it—the unemployment, the exile, the shame, but she would not allow it to happen with her consent. She didn't take

the Me cylinder. She didn't do this thing. She didn't know how it found its way into her room, but Brandy saw the alarm clock earlier and was with her the whole time after. She had a witness.

Just because she didn't know how it was done didn't make her the one who did it. The idea itself wept with nonsense.

His shadow stood up from his chair in the office and he walked to the front of his desk. There he paused, as if waiting for her to make up her mind. His shadow projected a bent man, no longer tall or composed. Did she break him as well?

The thought brought the first slash of unfairness across her heart. It hurt. It was so much stronger than she expected. It opened her eyes. She didn't know enough to know what to expect. Pain would come from unexpected vectors, both with and without malice.

With that thought, she wondered at the wisdom of what she meant to tell him. She recalled his agitated state yesterday when he warned her to be careful about what she said, and what she listened to.

She was too wrapped up in her own morning madness to really take note of his body language then. Was he afraid of something specific? She had no specific thoughts about the magic returning. The whole premise was outstanding in her life. Nothing in her experience had reference for approaching what really would be a new age. It had the sense of the unreal.

It was news right now. It *might be* a fact, and there were places where people felt effects and others who had

experiences. But so far, magic hadn't done much since it returned.

From what she gathered, they referred to an appearance of a multi-colored energy which could be seen in most of its manifestations, which changed expressions often and shifted through various altered states. Altering the states of some of the objects it passed near or through. Most of the reports were consistent in visual description. Bugs became tiny bells. Birds fell to the ground, breaking into swarms of cockroaches. Food reverted to seed and components. Blindness caused, and blindness cured. Ice on summertime beaches. Flames burning out on the waters of Lake Michigan.

So far none of this had happened to a human. Not directly. Humans had felt the effects of many of the sudden changes—smashed by falling salmon for example. Several deaths had been reported. But so far, nobody had been struck dead by magic directly. Nearly a full year now.

She saw her hand hovering above the doorknob of the office, just hanging there, shaking with barely visible tremors. Then she became aware of how long she had been standing there. She didn't know exactly how long—but long enough to feel awkward.

“Are you going to come in or sulk off back home for more pizza?”

That angered her. Motivated, she snatched the handle and turned, pulling the door open and entered the room ready to confront ... no one.

But, how? She saw his shadow. She watched him—*she heard him!* He said that rude thing. Where did he go?

Disarmed, she looked back and forth, but the office simply wasn't big enough to hold all of his books and notes and hide him too. There wasn't room.

Then she heard the lab's main door open and close. It was him. She could feel him. She heard his keys, the sound of his step, the grunt he makes when he bumps into that first worktable. Closing her eyes, she remained where she was. He could think what he liked about her being in his office. What could he do to her at this point? Fire her?

He opened the door behind her, then paused for a long, tension-growing moment before coming into his office, storming past her to his desk.

“Are you done cleaning your personal items out?” The hostility in his voice seemed to seep into his flexed muscles as he walked, the tension reverberating out and into the room. A lump lodged in her throat from the conflicting reactions within her.

She swallowed it away. “Haven't started.”

He sighed, sat down in his chair, and met her doleful gaze with one of anger, contempt.

. “Well, you obviously have something to say. Say it, and leave.”

“Not into innocent until proven guilty, then?”

He leaned back, feigning composure. “First off, that is a court directive, not a phrase to be taken at face value. Second, why would we arrest innocent people? Lastly, this isn’t a court, but if you wish it to be one, we can have the light of the law shine down. Though my preference is for you to just leave. Anthropology is obviously not your thing. You have a lovely career in black market activity ahead of you. Good luck.”

“I didn’t take it.” She blurted it out, an attack to defend herself from his serrated stoic memes. “I didn’t take it home. I have a witness.”

“Good for you, you can prove a negative. The Logic department will be ecstatic. And your roommate likes you enough to lie. I would hope that is true, for most people. But for you, I simply don’t care.”

Tears and anger mounted, building pressure behind her eyes, pressing against her brain. Her fist clenched. “I didn’t *take* it.”

He sprang forward in his chair, demanding eye contact. “I don’t care. I’m not going to report it or mention it. Now. Leave.”

“I’ll fail the year.”

“Oh yes. You’ve definitely failed this year.”

“You know what that means. It hardly matters if there’s a clear reason or not. I’m finished.”

“Yes.” His callous tone was unrelenting.

She bit her lip and squeezed her fist, then looked away and unclenched. There had to be a way. Something. Anything to get him to listen.

“What can I do?” she asked, her voice low, humble, but not broken.

“Do? Look, you were the best assistant I’ve ever had, right up to the point you decided to end my career and have me arrested by the Iranian government. I’ve heard their prison system is progressive.”

She hadn’t thought through the ramifications others might be facing because of this, but that was mainly because she hadn’t done anything. She didn’t take the thing, and she didn’t want it.

Jackie visibly shivered as there was an unexpected shift in energy: something didn’t *feel* right, and it caused her a sudden onset of nervous anxiety. The Professor flexed his fingers against the edge of his desk, and leaned forward, towering over her. Like a predator to prey, his dark orbs fixated on her lips. His own furrowed upward into an eager smirk “Besides, what could you possibly offer in comparison?”

“There has to be something.” she whimpered, feeling hope drain from her body, and the collapse of the husk left behind. “I’ll do anything.”

“*Does there* have to be something?” His voice was deep, full of provocation. “*Must* there be something? His eyes dragged their way down her body. “Well, if you insist ... get on your knees. And lose that top.”

The backlash of his command slapped her so hard she nearly stumbled from the shock.

“What did you say?” Her voice came out an airy whisper of disbelief.

He continued to hold eye contact with her, his whole being telling her she heard him just fine. The set of his jaw goading her to defy his order. There was no negotiating, no room for discussion, considering the malice glinting in his eyes.

Was it several minutes or did it just feel like that, before he said, “Well? People will arrive soon and wonder what you are doing in here. Don’t want to give them the wrong impression.” He sneered.

Her lower lip trembled as she lifted her hands to the buttons of her blouse. How could she do this? But what else was there to do? Maybe he would listen, after. Listen to Brandy. Brandy saw the alarm clock. *It was there*. She finished unbuttoning her blouse. She slipped out of it and laid it on the arm of the small couch. Then she turned to him and took off her bra.

As she did this, he leaned forward to observe. He didn’t smile or gloat or make any comment at all. When she finished, he stood and came to the front of the desk, just as she had seen his shadow do a few moments ago. Watching him follow his shadow felt surreal, as if he were “*catching up,*” as if he were chasing his shadow or underneath his shade, rather than the principle moving in the light.

His attention lingered on the floor as he came around the desk, his movements unhurried. Her body flushed as the

distance between them closed. She could feel him, feel his heat, feel him coming closer—knowing he meant to come even closer. The light from the ceiling deepened the shadows around the well of his eyes, veiling any expression which might have shone through to her.

“On your knees,” he said. The timbre of his speech filled the space between them, resonating against her pulse. His voice felt overloaded—on the verge—a rough fervor rasping down its core—a thin fry of emotion serrating his vowels under the otherwise strong tones, causing her nipples to harden, giving his voice tiny *booms*. A shiver touched the back of her neck. He reached the front of the desk, and sat back onto the edge, waiting.

She had never experienced the end of a conversation as an object of war slammed in her face, rather than natural resolution.

Jackie felt her head begin to spin, and she forced her eyes to close momentarily. She felt trapped, like being helpless in a dark alley at night, and up against a wall without escape. She envisioned being confronted by unwanted attention: like being forced to orally please an assailant while kneeling on the grime-infested concrete. She couldn't gain control of her situation; there was a bug in her system, and sickening curiosity began rising among the feelings of fear and helplessness, and all were in agreement for her to continue.

Opening her eyes then, Jackie continued, haltingly stepping forward, her mind shackled, unable to squirm out of the

bindings. She kept her eyes down as she bent her knees, the mind-forged chains holding her fast. This wasn't how this was supposed to happen. Every time her imagination brought her here, it never felt like this. She sank down to the floor, her mind blanked by wonder as her knees became her pedestal. *God*, she cried inside her mind, *yesterday I would have been wild if he wanted this from me. But now, like this?* Was she really going to do this?

The Professor's impressive cock sprung forward, answering the question for her.

"Open," he commanded, his tone dripping with an intensity that dared her to disobey.

"Now." He towered above her kneeled form, hands on hips, remaining cool, calm, and collected despite his obvious lust, his back leaning against the side of his desk.

Struggling to exhale, her eyelids flickered shut as she forced her mouth to slowly open, lips soft, full, and painted with a shade called "Queen-of-Hearts." She couldn't watch. She wasn't going to give him the pleasure of forcing ALL her senses to partake in the act.

Sound: There was the audible clink of his belt buckle striking the tile floor as his well ironed trousers fell to his ankles, an indication of the act that was to follow.

Smell: HIS scent, that familiar old woods, spice, and leather. Due to his proximity, she was forced to inhale deeply, and thus became consumed by the intoxicating aroma.

Touch: His strong, firm hand moved to the back of her head, pushing her slightly forward and causing her lips to graze the tip.

Taste: a slight drop of pre-cum squeezed onto her lips. Her curiosity got the best of her as her tongue automatically darted out to lap up the white substance ... she paused, wondering if she enjoyed this new flavor. Like a fine royal delicacy, she let the salty morsel linger on her palate, savoring its creamy texture and uniqueness.

Sight: NO! This was the only sense that was within HER control. She wouldn't open her eyes. She wouldn't look up at him. She wouldn't let him see the heat in her eyes. She wouldn't let him see the passion that's been building for him for quite some time. She wouldn't let him derive pleasure from making eye contact in these heated moments.

She refused to completely submit.

She wouldn't give him THAT satisfaction.

She felt empowered! With newfound determination, she was able to muster all her focus and energy into pleasuring him, hopeful that he'd cum sooner rather than later, so this could be over with.

Her tongue involuntarily darted, danced, swirled, frolicked, and played against his cock's head. She ignored his moans, which led to pants and eventually grunts, at which point he slipped the length of his heavy shaft between her lips, gliding more fully into her.

He thrust repeatedly and she gagged, sucking in her cheeks, and causing a pleasurable, warm, soft velvety nest around his manhood. She felt the Professor swell then, and as he did, he released a low guttural growl, erupting like a volcano inside her mouth. She was unprepared for this, and his cum leaked from the sides and spewed out of her mouth and onto her face, breasts, and floor.

He frowned in displeasure, his breathing rugged as he slipped his glistening cock from her mouth and slapped her cheek with it.

“Maybe someday you’ll learn not to make a mess.”

There was a numbing moment of silence as she wondered what he meant by that and if he was going to have his way with her again.

She felt his finger scoop some of the cum from her right breast and slip it between her lips. He held his index finger inside her mouth until she began to suckle on it, tongue lapping the digit until he was satisfied.

“Finish cleaning up this mess and get out of my office.”



image-placeholder

She cataloged artifacts at her workbench for the rest of the day. She spoke to no one. She didn't care about the magic.

Why would he do that? To humiliate her? Obviously. He didn't even act like he enjoyed it.

Maybe he didn't.

Chapter 07

At nine o'clock on Thursday morning, exactly a year after magic had been first reported, Steven Cunningham, Professor of Anthropology at UCSD, walked onto the hospital floor, just as he has done for the last three days. After signing in at the nurse's station, he walked down the hall to room 312. It was a double room, but no one occupied the other bed. Inside, he took off his windbreaker and draped it across the back of the visitor chair. Then he moved the chair closer to the bed and sat down.

Jackie Shore, his assistant for the last year, lay comatose in the bed, just as she has done for the last three days. All of the signs—the non-responsive pupils, the uneven breathing, the CAT scans—told them she was in a coma.

Monday, she had come to the lab, as scheduled. She arrived before he did, as was her habit. The artifacts from Iran had arrived and she was excited to begin cataloging them. She even danced a quick step as she moved around her workbench. She was happy.

Then, just before lunch, he heard a crash out there. He called to her, to see if she was alright. When she didn't answer, he went out and found her on the floor. When he couldn't wake her, he called for assistance and an ambulance.

It was only after the ambulance left with her, and he came back to grab his keys and wallet, that he discovered the *Me cylinder* beside her workbench. He recognized it and understood what happened to her instantly. That was three days ago now.

Three days could be a long time trapped inside your own mind with a Pneuma. It could be forever. There is another world inside our minds, and it's not always a happy space.

“Alright, Jackie, would you like to start with the news or the novel? I peeked on the way over, and I don't believe there is anything newsworthy about the magic. It's still showing up and turning things into other things.”

Steven waited, studying her face, then picked up the novel from his pack, and opened to where they left off yesterday. Since she didn't answer, he began to read. As he read, he glanced at her periodically to see if she might respond. She didn't. He sipped water and continued to read.

Right on time, at ten o'clock, two nurses came into the room for vitals and to change the bed. They moved with professional ease, lifting Jackie, changing the sheets on the bed, and settling her back down, her head on the pillows, her face expressionless.

They talked quietly as they worked. Both of them offered him wan smiles. They knew who he was, and that he would stay until three o'clock. Their mood toward him was one of general approval. From what he's overheard, their endorsement of him came from his dedication to Jackie, although they were certain he was sleeping with her, which he felt was droll.

Once the nurses left, he set the novel aside, and bent his head. He listened carefully to Jackie's breathing. There were other sounds of course, and he didn't fight them. He listened to these too, until he could identify each note. Each sound belonged to a singular event. Every shoe step, every voice, every bang. He listened to them, identified them, and then dismissed them into the background. Each vibration, every tone, he listened, identified the source, and then let it pass. Letting it fade from his notice. Each one. Until all that he heard was Jackie's breathing, and her heart. He listened until he could match her breaths with his own. He listened to her heart. He listened and matched his heartbeat to hers.

The synchrony took close to half an hour of effort.

Despite all of the signs and diagnostics, he understood that Jackie did not suffer from a coma. She was in fact, not asleep at all. Her mind was overwhelmed. Her brain raced with stimulates. She was, in fact, exhausted. For three days her mind had been on tilt, with an overload so dense that it would soon kill her. Jackie was running out of time. Today? Tomorrow?

Soon.

Steven listened to her breathing, and her heart. Matching his body to hers. Synchronizing to her. In order to help her, he had to enter her mind. It was a bit invasive, and he would prefer to have another way to accomplish the task, but there wasn't one. Not that he knew of, and there was no time for experiments.

Once connected, he would find the creature inside her.

While he felt sure about there being a possessing pneuma at the core of the problem, he wasn't sure about the creature's sentience. Or anything about them, really. They were myths five thousand years ago, and they were forgotten now or tossed into the pile of specters and ghosts.

When the resonance between him and Jackie began it caught him off guard, and he nearly broke the fragile connection he made. The feeling of their bodies harmonizing—their vibrancy at first came through his teeth; like lightning touched his molars. Then it spread. It spread down through his jaw, down his spine. His skin crawled with shivers, with the vibrations, their bodies resonating—building between them.

Then he felt her, her core inside—she warred—and he gasped as it hit with a thunder strike.

Her struggle, it immersed her, and threatened to drown him. Clasp ing his hands with practiced skill, he began knotting his fingers together, causing his focus to grow. Keeping focus was the only way to push through. Distraction would break the spell. His eyebrows knotted with effort. A whining hum built inside his ears, like distortion or feedback.

It was only moments after his connection that the struggle became his as well. A sudden scent of burnt citrus fogged his nostrils. A stabbing pain pierced his thigh. Then it drifted past. At first, his focus rested on her alone. Once connected, however, the other, the Pneuma, the being possessing her rushed at him. An impact happened, and then another. Sweat rolled down his back as the impacts became more tangible.

An eerie lullaby filled the space before a voice silenced everything.

“You’re Professor Cunningham, aren’t you?”

The connection broke. The jarring fracture caused him to bite back a curse. He relaxed his hands, and his eyes fluttered open. He shook himself a little. Turning he found a young woman sitting in the room. A redhead. He recognized her.

“It’s Brandy, isn’t it? You’re one of Jackie’s roommates?”

She smiled as she sat in the chair, like she had been there this whole time, observing. “I’m surprised you know me. I don’t recall us ever being introduced.”

“Yes, but Jackie talks about you all the time.”

“Ooo, that could be bad.” She said this with mock concern and a bright smile that looked like it had been brushed on. “Do you mind if I sit with her for a while? I mean, with you too, of course.”

He did mind. He minded quite a bit. “No, pull your chair over. I was just reading to her. Conversation might be better. I probably sound like the TV or something.”

Brandy moved her chair closer to them. There was nothing he could do, really. He couldn't chase her out—not if he wished to remain in the room himself. And he didn't want her to know he could accomplish what the doctors could not. That would start a long list of questions and curiosities he didn't wish to suffer.

“Actually, I'm glad you're here, professor. Because no one will tell us anything. Because we're not family. I mean, I've lived with her forever. We can't know what's wrong with her, we can't help?”

He adjusted himself in his chair. At least they had something in common. “I don't know if I can help much, because they're keeping me in the dark and feeding me shit too. Just like a mushroom.”

Brandy studied him with those startlingly round eyes, but her smirk didn't stay hidden. “She's mentioned you're an odd one?”

“Because I'm fed shit?”

She wrinkled her nose, then shook her head. “But you were with her, weren't you? When this happened? You were there.”

He relaxed back into the chair with a sigh. “Well, she was in the lab, and I was in my office. I couldn't see her from there. I heard her fall, or rather, I heard *something* fall. Since the only things able to fall were Jackie, and priceless artifacts on loan from Iran, I called out to see if she needed help or something. When she didn't answer, I went out and found her on the floor.”

“That’s it?” Her eyes squinted with disdain. “She just *fell down*? She just *fell into a coma*?” The suspicion in her voice rang drunk with discord, matching the slight snarl she suppressed in her upper lip.

Steven folded his hands together, then shrugged. “I thought maybe she got electrocuted. But no. There didn’t appear to be anything she could have fallen off of either. Well, her bench stool, but no reason to be standing on it. She’s not that short. I’ve gone over the area many times now.” He sighed. “ Fuck, I’m a little surprised I even heard her. I mean, that I heard her from my office, because I think she simply fainted or lost consciousness standing by her workbench.”

Brandy’s unblinking eyes never left him. He studied her a moment; the way the light shone off her poreless face, the gleaming fire-red hair setting unrealistic beauty standards. She sat stock-still, waiting for him to continue the conversation. She was being polite, but her right hand kept forming into a fist. Her frustration level had obviously been building since Monday. He didn’t help it by keeping quiet. Which was fine by him. Maybe she would get pissed off and leave. The dying sounds of a lullaby filtered through his mind as they continued to sit there in silence.

Chapter 08

Last year, Iran brought in an international archeologist team. From that new dig, reported to be close to the ancient city Uruk, eighteen crates of artifacts from the excavation are collected. Fourteen of those crates came to UCSD. Four of those crates now sat in the Anthropology lab, under Jackie's name as the first researcher.

The Professor's breadth of knowledge, as well as his insight and ability to find and use meaningful contrasts and comparisons, made him highly sought after. If you had a dig anywhere in that area expanding into the Mediterranean, you wanted his input. Especially if you believed the find had cultural significance.

This lab in general, and the Professor specifically, were truly *world renown*. The Professor was the Rock Star of Anthropology. Of course Jackie wanted to intern with him, though she didn't really expect she would be chosen.

After a grueling two weeks filled with interviews and tests, the Professor accepted her application. After all of that, his

acceptance conversation with her lasted less than two minutes. He met her out on the wide walk approaching the lab. But at the end of that confluence, she was his research assistant. That short, surprisingly beautiful exchange would reverberate throughout the rest of her life. Every aspect of her world, now and into her nineties would be touched by him, often. Daily.

While she stood out on the wide path, washed in bright sunlight, and watched him walk back to the Anthropology building, she glowed. That moment, that whole little bit there, she believed *that moment* was the best. *Best of everything*. Nothing came close to bathing her in sunlight, while she glowed.

She carried that short, perfect engagement around with her for the next year, gently swathed, and near her heart. The next morning, Jackie threw herself into the work with relinquished restraint.

Maybe she should have held back a little. Now, a year later, and on this side of the telescope, there were so many gauntlets, challenges, and minor wars with no chance of getting a fair fight or empathy for the new girl. She had the position closest to him. The position they all envied. The prize they all sought. Everyone in the department craved that internship. She wasn't even in the department yet!

As her father often said, when describing rough times at the shipyard, "*There were feelings*".

She had the position. Now, they would test her. Find out if she could defend what she achieved. Responding in kind, she

accepted the *No Quarter policy*. No quarter asked, and no quarter given. Academics can be incredibly vicious in their challenges. And their pranks.

Most of the students were in their doctorate tracks, for various areas of anthropology. The search for ancient and new civilizations extended out across the globe and she was hopelessly outgunned at first. This, she expected. Each day she would come in early, search her work area for traps and pranks, then deal with the “feelings,” both real and imagined.

The lion’s share of those early challenges honestly had nothing to do with the department or the staff. They were just things that happened. They didn’t happen before, because she didn’t live where those events occurred. Now she did. Events that straight up ambushed her. No warning. No background. No idea they existed until they were biting her ass.

Perhaps hesitating more often, in small things to keep her focus, would have pressed the road a bit smoother for travel. She didn’t. And it didn’t shock her that she didn’t. She enjoyed the free fall of a good charge.

And it didn’t shock her when she fell in love with her professor, either.

Recognizing her flutters and flushes, which were happening with increasing tempo—recognizing that they were silly and mired in pedestrian details—did not actually help. She turned into a distracted, floating flower puff. Not at the lab, no. But as soon as she stepped off campus, she bathed in the banal. More soap opera than soap operas.

Jackie clamped down on it, hard. She didn't need rumors of her sleeping her way to the top. To guard against them, she made it a point to leave at the end of the day. She didn't offer to stay late, and she started coming in early, so others couldn't suggest that she didn't pull her share of the hours.

She took lunch outside, in plain view.

Now it seemed a great deal of extra effort to guard against the rumors about an act she would have run to, if offered. If his hair was mushed up, *oh yeah*. These thoughts still ran through her, despite the fact it wasn't offered, but in actuality, commanded ... She struggled to fit the pieces of her fantasies together with the reality of the act.

As it happened, the rumors rose from the mirk anyway. They rose, then faded, then rose again ...

Someone giggled behind her, the sound cutting through her nostalgic musings.

Jackie turned, startled, and found the lab empty. Not even a mouse or spider for her to scream about. The voice she had heard, the giggle, was male. A young male. Not college age, she didn't believe. *Someone brought their kid in for some reason*. Except there were no kids allowed in the lab. And none here now. No gigglers of any shape, height, or size.

"I'm hearing voices." This came out much more deadpan and serious than she intended. She was trying for a light half-joke to counter her jumpiness. Instead, her subconscious fired back, "*Yeah, no shit.*"

She scanned the room again, then glanced at the Professor's office door. Somehow, that way didn't feel safe any longer. Not after this morning.

She growled under her breath and sat down at her workbench.

"You sure look pretty with something in your mouth."

She leapt from her chair, spinning around, horrified.

Again, *no one*.

A cold shudder of mortification chilled her arms, stiffening the hairs on the back of her neck.

The lab continued to be empty of other living beings. "Who's there?" she demanded.

She heard what he said. She heard it clear. Shivers dithered across her skin at the thought of being observed while being humiliated. *Why did he say that? Did he see me on my knees?*

Still, nothing moved. She heard nothing further, and she could see no one.

"Where are you?" She walked out from her workbench, searching down the rows of desks and chairs. "Where are you!"

The anger in her voice felt good. There was no tremble, even though she was trembling. She didn't sound terrified.

"Show yourself, coward!"

"What are you yelling about?" The Professor stood in his doorway, his hard eyes inspecting her.

She stiffened and lowered her eyes before she met his. “There’s someone in here. Someone playing games.”

“Is there?” The timbre of his voice suggested doubt.

Was it him? Was the Professor doing this to her?

She turned away, pushing that thought away and walked back to her workbench, where her box of things was waiting. “Sorry to disturb you. I guess it was nothing.” There were already plenty of things going wrong today, she didn’t need to make up more.

She didn’t want to look at him, and besides, it hurt. It was like he died or worse, that he was never the man she thought he was. It hurt in her gut. A twisting hurt, the kind that threatens to cramp up and bring you to your knees. The memory of earlier, in the office, on her knees for him threatened her, but she pushed it away, biting her lip, and focused on putting the last of her personal belongings in the box.

“What are you doing?” the Professor demanded from behind her. She could feel his breath on her neck, but she never heard him approach. His voice startled her thoughts and they fled, though the feel of his breath caressing her neck sent apprehension of a different sort coursing through her. Almost toe-curling, and at complete odds with her racing heartbeat.

He leaned the weight of his tall, solid form against her workbench, positioning himself between her and the door. His eyes, the force of his vision had mass, and she felt his attention

like a weight on her neck. His focus had color, deep blue. His arousal vibrated like a voice unafraid to whisper or scream.

“After all that, you are trying to leave, now?” He scoffed. “What happened to that degree you were so worried about? You seemed *very eager* to hold on to it in my office ... as you held onto something else.” He grazed his knuckles along her cheek, then roughly tapped her chin up so her eyes would reach his. “You are a *very* dedicated assistant.”

Jackie flinched as her eyes met his. They were practically glowing with frustration. Before she could think, she said, “I paid the fare, but it wasn’t worth it.”

She sucked in a breath as he pushed himself off the bench and back to his full height, his whole body dwarfing hers. For a moment, he only stood there, staring down at her. Then his arm moved so quickly in her direction she thought he was about to strike her. But as she cowered, no blow came. Instead, he swiped her keys from beside the box and walked away, toward the door to the lab.

“Isn’t worth it. Hmm. Well, let’s see if I can make it *worth it* for you.”

The distinct sound of the deadbolt lock clicking into place reverberated throughout the empty lab.

Cold shock and disbelief doused her. *Did he just lock me inside?*

Even if she did make a mistake, even if she did take it home, there was no reason for this. The repercussions of her

alleged mistake had now mutated into something else. Something grotesque. And yet, there was still a heated anticipation inside her. She had never seen him act this way. What did he mean to do with her now?

She stayed pressed against her bench as her eyes followed him around the room. Pocketing her keys, he meandered his way through the workbenches, as if toying with his prey. Her breaths came out ragged as she waited. Waiting for him to find his way back to her, to come in for the kill.

Many times, over the last year, she wondered if she meant anything to him. Did he care about her? Would he notice if she weren't around? That answer now seemed apparent. If he didn't care, he wouldn't have barred her escape. However perverse his showing was, it was clear she meant *something*.

Then, he was upon her once more. He tipped over the box, the last sign of her resignation, its contents spilling across the table. "You're staying."

Jackie's breath shuddered out as he firmly grabbed her hips with both hands. "First, you steal from me. Then, you attempt to slip out, leaving me without an assistant. Something must be done about your insubordination."

Before she could get out a word, he spun her around by her hips and pressed against the workbench. His hands firmly repositioned against her hips from behind.

"Please, can we at least go in your office?" she managed to get out in a pant. *Why am I panting?* She was appalled by the devote persistence of her fantasies even in this current state of

depravity. Rationally, she was afraid. Afraid of this sudden force and malice from the Professor. Afraid, and humiliated by the events of the day, and the risk of anyone discovering them in such a state.

He pushed himself against her backside, releasing a hand from one hip. His mouth pressed against her ear as he jingled her keys beside them. “Not to worry—only my assistant and I have the keys. No one will be going in ... or out. The lab is closed today.”

His hand slithered down her chest and torso on its way to deposit the keys back into his pocket. Her body betrayed her as her nipples hardened at his touch.

“Now, someone has been a bad girl. I think a punishment is in order.”

She steadied herself for whatever was to come. She had no idea who he was anymore, if there were any limits to the lengths he would go. His hands pressed their way toward her most sensitive area, lingering between her thighs before continuing their path to the button and zipper of her pants. He took his time releasing her from their binding, his weight still heavy against her, his mouth still against her ear, then took hold of the fabric separating her from the cold workbench, and lowered all of it to just below her hips.

Like a crack of a whip, his hand imprinted onto the curve of her ass, causing a mortifying moan to escape her lips on instinct. The brand of his palm and fingertips stung and lingered much longer than his touch.

With one more whisper in her ear, he responded. “Get back to work.”

Chapter 09

Jackie sat by the window in the middle of the bus, her bag in her lap. Leaning her forehead against the cool glass, she searched the eyes of her own reflection. A perfectly still pond to anyone's observation, while inside her mind spun with abandon through a gauntlet of questions, and dystopian future-trips rolled through her like thunder chasing the wind.

Her daily travel route took her home an hour before peak congestion choked the spaces. The bus turned a corner, putting her side into the shade of trees lining the roadside, darkening the window, enhancing her reflection. It was then that she saw a man staring at her from a seat back across the aisle and behind her.

People watched her all the time. She knew she had attractive features. For most men, all she had to be was younger than thirty, and that was enough to warrant attention. Besides, what else were they going to do? Most of them didn't read.

What disturbed her—and it was disturbing—was the intensity of his expression. His stare wasn't simply mild

amusement, as if perhaps wondering about her bra size. His features were saturated with intent. His eyes had teeth. His lust accented his hollow eyes and crude expression. He was engrossed with her.

Tired of this sexist shit, she turned on the man, and found the seat empty. She looked back at the window, and he was gone from the reflection too.

What the hell is going on?

Straightening up, she adjusted herself on the seat, and spotted him near the front of the bus. He sat in a seat, turned around, sitting sideways, watching her. He didn't look away when she met his eyes. He didn't do anything at all. Just continued to watch her, a slight quirk at the corner of his lips. The quirk didn't go any further than his lips, as if his concentration on her forbade it—it pushed past his ability. His interest had been invested in.

She jerked her eyes away from him, then steeled herself to scream at him, and jerked her eyes back—to find him no longer there.

Taken aback and slightly panicked, she shifted in her seat, looking around, while wondering what she expected? That he would pop into another seat? Actually, that was *exactly* what she expected.

For the rest of her trip home, she searched the bus for his return. She watched for him to board at stops. She used the window reflection, attempting to give him a sense of false security. But he didn't appear again, and she left the bus at her

normal stop, five blocks from the house she rented with her roommates.

Walking up to her front door, Jackie noticed an orange tabby cat up on the roof edge above her door. The cat perched there in a crouch, and stared at the ground, as if wondering how it fell so far away. The scene caused her to simper.

“Are you stuck? Do you need help?”

“I’m just waiting for the perfect moment to make my move,” the cat said.

She jumped back, her mouth agape. “What are you?” her voice hissed out of her throat.

“I’m a cat.” The cat rose from his crouch to a sitting position, and looked down at her.

Mentally, she shook herself. Then the last few weeks of news came to mind. “You’ve been magicked, haven’t you?” Her nerdy side pushed her to step forward, and kicked her fear to the curb. Taking another, more cautious step, she studied the cat. It seemed to be a normal, average, even mongrel example of an orange tabby. They were said to originate from ancient Egypt.

“That’s very disturbing.”

“What?”

“Staring at me like that, like I’m a specimen in a jar.”

She remembered what it felt like on the bus, “Oh, sorry.” She softened her eyes, and then looked around. “Well, I want

to go inside, do you need help or not?”

The cat made a motion to speak, but then pulled its volition back in. Hunkering back down to peer over the edge, it said, “I think maybe I do. That’s a long way down.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed, feeling a little surprised at having a conversation with a cat. He had a good voice too; it wasn’t growly or raspy like she would have imagined it to be. He sounded as if his chest were five times larger. She thought about his situation, and then said, “There’s a long board on the side of the house. I’ll get it and lean it against the roof for you.”

The cat’s head tilted to the left, “Why would you do that?”

“So you can walk down it.”

“No, why do it at all?”

“I don’t know. If you make me think about it, I might discover I don’t really want to help you and just go inside.”

The cat straightened its neck and looked around, “I withdraw the question.”

“You speak very well for a cat.”

“That was seriously speciesist. What do you know about how we speak?”

“Huh,” she grunted. “I guess it was. I apologize.”

Its tail flicked twice. “Accepted. Do you want me to meet you over on the side of the house?”

“That’s a good idea. Sure.”

Jackie turned and walked around to the side gate, and went into the back yard, where a wheelbarrow, and a short stack of red bricks shared space with three long scaffolding boards, which had been there when they moved into the house. The wheelbarrow was Terry's.

She looked up to the roof and in a moment the cat peered over the edge. The board had more weight to it than expected. She broke a sweat standing it up and then positioning the make-shift ramp. Once stable, she waited for the cat to come down. After a minute of exchanging glances between the board and the tabby, and watching him do the same, she said, "Are you coming down or what?"

"What's the hurry, the board is there. I can see a lot from up here. Like that man who followed you home, I can see him standing across the street."

"Ok, I'm not sure what's freakier—that I have an aggressive stalker or that you recognize him. How? Can he see us?"

"No. He just arrived. He doesn't know you are back here. Climb up the board and we can watch him together."

"Um, I'll pass, but maybe later."

"As you wish."

"Now, how do you know about him? Were you on the bus?"

"You thought about him as you walked up to the house. Like you flashed on being spanked by your professor. . Which is a rather strange activity, if you ask me."

Jackie felt heat rush to her cheeks, flushing crimson. Her embarrassment was accompanied by shock from the cat's blunt manner, and horror that he was aware of the act to begin with. "Actually, I agree," she said, her words soft and unfocused. In a stronger voice she asked, "You can read minds?"

"Can't you?"

"No, and apparently you can't read *all of the mind*, or you would have known that. Do you remember being magicked?"

He stood, stretched his back up into a high arch, then settled back down on the edge of the roof again. "Not much. I felt my fur stand up and this odd vibration made me howl. I felt confused for a long time, then it passed, and I learned how to curse."

She studied him again, but shifted her eyes away before her examination got weird. "Look, I've had a day, a real day, and I'm going inside and getting something to eat. If you would like to join me, you're welcome. I believe I have some tuna fish. By the way, what's your name?"

"I'm not sure," the cat admitted. "I don't remember much from before this happened."

She gave this some thought, and said, "May I call you Malkin, then? Malkin is an old expression, which means cat."

"Malkin," he said, trying the name out with his tongue. "I approve. The word has a regal quality to it."

This made her reflect on something Mark Twain once said, *“In ancient times cats were worshiped as gods; they have not forgotten this.”* Malkin’s whole demeanor suggested there was more to it, but Twain had the gist of the message.

“Well, will you join me?”

Malkin stood up, his attention shifted quickly to the front of the house, where he watched with his whole body for a moment, and then he said, “Sure, but let’s go in the back door.”

She glanced toward the front of the house, but couldn’t see past the side gate. “Sounds like a wise suggestion.”

Chapter 10

Malkin showed no sign of adjustment from outside to inside. Once he decided he would enter, her home became his domain through the law of *eminent entitlement*, which was global so no need to point that out. Tail high, the tip capped with white, and crooked to nearly a right angle for the last two inches. He came in with a quick stepping gait, zipping him across the living room, and unerringly toward the kitchen.

Won't have to invite him to "feel at home" she thought. He does, he will. She followed without comment. After all, she invited him.

Pets were not something in her life. She had a goldfish for about two weeks when she was twelve, but nothing else haplessly fell into her grasp since. It wasn't that she didn't like animals, she did. They gave her joy when she visited friends who had them. Animals felt simple and direct—open to *being* and being with her. Her friend Barbara had a golden retriever who followed Jackie around every time she went to their house. She loved that dog.

Her fascination with the return of magic added a level of curiosity with Malkin, and when would she be given another chance like this one? She paused as her brows came together around several points which suggested that with these occurrences it might happen sooner than she thought—and arrive more often than she wanted.

“Have you met others who have been magicked? Others like you?”

“Other cats?” Malkin asked, as he leapt from the floor, just high enough to clear the edge of the cabinet and land with grace and ease on the countertop. Her reflex was to shoo him back off, but again, she did invite him.

Did I invite the Professor? Did I manifest this obscene dynamic with him? Why the universe would manipulate her fantasies into manifesting in such a manner, she couldn't begin to understand.

The questions turned in her mind, spreading out, covering more area than she wanted to deal with so she gently closed her query and opened the side counter by the fridge to get a can of tuna fish.

“Sure,” she said, “other cats or any other non-language speaking furry out there you might have come across.”

Malkin began to purr. The sound of his chest humming with a steady growl felt good. It felt like *appreciation* to Jackie—something she felt from her professor regularly—back before he hated her.

Pulling the can opener over, she set the lip of the can to the blade, locked it in and started it turning. Malkin became excited when the electric motor spun the can, and jumped off the counter to rub his body against her legs as she reached for a bowl and found a fork.

He paused his affectionate urgings for a moment, “No, no others. But then I didn’t ask any of them either.”

She nodded with a shrug of accord. Made sense. She didn’t walk down the street asking if others could speak—human or otherwise.

After dishing up the tuna, she set it down for him, and then retrieved a diet coke from the fridge.

Sitting down at the little table none of them ever used to eat at, she drank her soda. Then she turned her full attention to the two moments of her day she had not allowed to speak or be seen until now.

Surprised that she didn’t feel victimized or angry about them, she tried another sip of her soda. Her crush on him was so strong at times over the last year, she would have squeed if he asked her to do that—but that would have been different.

Why? a part of her asked, with honest interest. The answer was simple. A week ago, he would have been *invited*. Instead of asking or becoming invited, he chose to kick her door down and put her on her knees. It wasn’t the same thing at all. In fact the notion it *could be* the same or resemble the other was infantile.

Even the people of Sumer knew that much, five thousand years ago. They wrote about it. Did Inanna, after waking to find that some man had fucked her while she had been deep asleep under a tree, sluff it off? Her domain included sex. She was the patron deity for all of the sex spells. She was the goddess of sex.

Living inside of Inanna's temple back in the day were women who served her as priestesses. These women offered their bodies, their imaginations and avid attention to men as if they adored and harbored only devotion for them. Women who went to great efforts to lavish visitors and worshipers with pleasures authored for kings and generals. Women whose impetus would drive them to explore and invent tantalizing entertainments of diverse interest and fetish.

The answer for Inanna when she woke up under that tree, was to charge back and forth across the land at wild speeds, seeking out the one who would dare to insult her like that. She sought him out with the intent of eating his heart, fresh from his chest, directly from the blade of her spear while it was still warm.

It was one of Jackie's favorite stories about the Sumerian goddess Inanna, *Queen of Heaven*. She was also the goddess of war.

"She sounds sassy," Malkin said, as he alighted on the table in front of her.

Reflexively she pet his back and then scratched his ears, and then snatched her hand back with an aggressive jerk, "I'm

sorry. I didn't even think about it." Embarrassment flushed her face.

"Why would you?" Malkin asked. "Besides, I like it. Also, hell, it's been our only form of communication for the last five thousand years. That's not a habit you kick upon learning about mere things like sentience or personhood."

Her left eyebrow lifted and crooked, "*Personhood?* I am still amazed at the breath of your language."

"Huh," he grunted. "Now that I consider it—it is interesting. I mean, it's magic, right? So I could have been endowed with a lisp or a stutter. Or all the words with wrong meanings." He nuzzled her hand, and she scratched his ears again.

"I wonder if that is true."

"What?"

"Could it? Could the magic have endowed you with the words but wrong meanings? That would not be endowing you with *language*. Right? A language implies communication. Otherwise, words are just noises. Grunts and barks, and you already had those. If the magic were compelled to endow you with language, wouldn't that require being able to successfully use that language?"

Malkin looked at the window across the kitchen, "I see where you're going with that, but aren't there thousands of stories, and even more scenes within other stories, warning us against being vague with spells or haphazard when directing magic?"

He had a point there. “I’m going to lose you to the first witch that comes along needing a familiar.”

“Hmm ...” Malkin began, but then switched to cleaning the outside of his left thigh.

She watched for a time, but felt herself wanting to return to the issue at hand. “Would you like to hang out for a while? Do you have a home?”

He glanced at her, then gave his thigh two more quick licks, before sitting up, “Home? No. I don’t think I had one before.” He pondered that a moment, and then shook his head, “Too jumbled. But, yes, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, I think I like the idea, actually. Magic seems to be growing much more active around here. In fact I’ve never seen it at all, not until these last few days.”

“Maybe you haven’t looked in the right places.”

“Maybe,” she admitted. “Maybe we can only see it when it’s colored, but that’s a talk for another time. I’m not really in the mood right now.”

Malkin went back to cleaning his fur, switching to his belly now. She watched, idly desiring to run her fingers through his lovely belly fur. It looked so soft, and warm. All white and pretty.

The big question, bigger than any question she’d had about her life yet: what was she going to do about the Professor?

After exploring the two events, letting them fill her mind, and digging out of her memory anything that wouldn’t

willingly answer, she decided that the base of her problem was a loss of status.

This loss of status didn't affect much of her life outside the Anthropology building, or with herself. But with the Professor she lost a great deal. And he was making a point about it. Right now that loss only affected her interactions with him. So it followed that it only affected her life in areas where he had control.

A smile creased her lips, and she took a drink from the soda. "Those are the only places, huh? Brilliant. I *don't have* a life outside the Anthropology department," she complained.

Malkin sat up abruptly, his eyes focused on the front door, his pupils expanding until the green of his iris disappeared into the black.

"Relax, tiger," she told him. "It's probably one of my roommates."

"No," Malkin said, his voice low. "Don't move."

Chapter 11

Steven glanced at the clock on the wall of Jackie's hospital room. Brandy still sat in the chair next to him. She sat forward on the chair with impossible posture, her legs bent at the knees and feet firmly planted on the floor. Using this posture, she maintained a clear and expressive voice, which she exploited as a performance instrument.

She was a superb reader. The mastery she enjoyed with her voice suggested serious training and dedication. She couldn't be much older than twenty-five. He didn't know anyone who presented with the fervor and focus she demonstrated as she sat there, her back pin straight as she read to Jackie for over an hour. Having experienced recently what reading for that long required from a body, Steven had solid respect.

Maybe she wasn't unique, but the experience she crafted from the literature into a narrative which captured the imagination and immersed her listeners deep into the world of her design, was certainly unique to him. He felt entranced, and the haunting melody from earlier began to coincide with the

cadence of her words. Only as a boy did he experience anything as powerful and disarming.

She paused her reading at the end of the chapter, then set her mark, and placed the reader on the nightstand next to her chair.

Feeling something like decompression, he said, “You have an excellent reading voice.”

Her expression brightened, rosy circles warming her cheeks while her lips briefly offered a plastic smile, which she delivered framed under suspicious, searching eyes.

“What?” he asked, his humor candid across his cheeks and lips. “Don’t believe me?”

She blurted a bark of laughter, which bounded from her as if attempting to escape.

“How long do you stay?” she asked, changing the subject.

“So far? Until three. I leave before the rushers pour congestion into the streets.”

She stared at him, her jaw slightly slack, until she noticed and snapped herself together again. “That’s not a visit,” she said with her eyes still wide from her reaction, “that’s a siege.”

“No,” he said, a shade of wariness creeping into his words, “it’s just a good visit.”

“Don’t you have classes to teach or something,” she asked, her diction weighing her words down with accusatory tones.

He shook his head *no* with a soft, controlled movement. “Put in for a *leave of absence* on Monday. The day she came in here, after they confirmed her coma state. I knew I would be camping out here.”

Brandy tucked a lock of her silken hair behind her right ear, then stood up and walked around the bed to the window. Her posture and the closeness she held herself with felt suddenly guarded. Her eyes in a distant stare, and the set of her lips suggesting she was unsettled. Unbalanced.

“Is something wrong?”

She crossed her arms under her breasts, hugging herself, while continuing to search the outside world, beyond the glass, out past the parking lots stuffed with cars, and beyond the collection of all the pain and illness housed in this building. She took in the sunny weather setting the summer bright colors, “No, nothing’s wrong. It just felt ... that’s a lot of time, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” he returned, allowing his smile to fade and his expression to close. “By what measure?”

“Any measure. I mean, it’s not like you’re dating or anything, right? She’s your intern. Jackie and I are seriously close, we talk all the time, and she’s told me several times that you are not like that with her.”

“You mean, not like a boyfriend. “

“Right.”

“Well,” he said, “Boyfriends don’t visit the hospital at all these days. Hell, getting them to pick you up at the airport is becoming a chore.”

She grunted when a burst of mirth blew out of her lips, before she could cover her mouth with her fist, as if she burped. “I apologize, I might be acting rude, but she’s like a sister to me. Why are you this ... *dedicated?*”

He didn’t answer right away, letting the quiet build for a moment, as he tried to attach words to a new and powerful emotion whose name he had yet to divine. After a minute, she turned from studying her ghostly reflection in the tinted windows, her expression wary.

Frustration caused him to give up searching for an articulate response and just hand her the complicated sticky mess, as it was thrust onto him on Monday. “I’m not sure I can answer that clearly. But I don’t think it can be called an honest dedication if you’re compelled.”

Turning slowly as if projecting her mistrust, “Compelled?”

He questioned his choice of words, and then nodded his head in concurrence, “I don’t know what you’ve heard about me or what she’s told you, but I’m kind of a big thing around campus. At least in my little section of campus.”

She nodded with an attentive expression, but remained pulled in, and guarded.

“I guess it’s been a bit more than a year now that she’s been my assistant. Before that, however, and I mean right before

that—before I met her—life was *crap*. I had a professorship. I had a full ticket and an embarrassingly large budget granting me my choice in projects or activity. I could travel, go on location. I could bring experts to me of any devotion—*women* to me with varying levels of devotion as well—and yet something was missing. I was going through the motions, each day bleeding into the next with nothing to stimulate me deeper than a physical level.

Her expression closed as she listened, her eyes softened by a shared understanding of the daily monotony brought by a spiritual rock-bottom. How one can have *things* and still feel poor without purpose.

When he saw this, he nodded, “Yes, it sucked that bad. Nothing had any flavor or appeal. All of it felt like dust; irrelevant and meaningless. All of it. The knot in my gut called me a fraud, on good days.”

He turned his attention to Jackie, who remained unmoved—detached from his emotional mire. “It sounds melodramatic, but I had been around too long, seen too much, to find my meaning in the day to day anymore. I seemed fine and did well for myself, but subconsciously I was waiting for something to wake me up, make me feel *something*.”

Brandy didn’t understand why he was speaking like he was ancient; he looked to be in his prime. But he offered no further musings on that. Instead he leaned back, his attention on Jackie, his eyes softer, open. “Then she came into my office. She wasn’t even supposed to be there. I forgot to put down on

the description that applicants needed to be already part of the department. Since the error was mine, I decided to let her finish her first interview.”

“She told me that interview lasted over two hours,” Brandy injected, as she slowly came back across the room, to sit perfectly in her chair.

His smile was little more than a convex turn of his lips, the warmth of it made it an expression of relief. “I missed a department meeting because of that, a meeting with the dean and Professor Rothrock. They were actually upset about that. Cost me a bottle of scotch. But I couldn’t let her leave, and I had nothing to offer her to stay.”

He adjusted his position, “Now, don’t get this twisted believing I was saved by beauty and filled with romantic ideations concluding love was all I needed. Nothing like that. If I could convey the loathing I felt at more frivolous dating or casual relationships, it would make you physically ill. It wasn’t that.”

He felt around in his skull for that feeling of tedium and detachment and found nothing. “She was interested in the world and its people, in a way that was not simply compelling but contagious. I was infected by her raw need to discover, to understand, and to bring that understanding back into the world, today.”

He laughed so suddenly she jumped, and his raw openness caused her arms to stiffen, which she rubbed to bring the life back to them.

“Jackie was naïve. Innocent. Idealistic. A couple of ideas she shared were so far off center, they didn’t hold enough value to be marked as *wrong*—which turned out to be because of a very poor translation she had been working with.”

He drifted into that past, his eyes relaxing, his jaw unclenching. After a moment his attention came back to today, and inside this room with Jackie. He glanced at his accuser. “You don’t look appeased.”

She was stiff in her chair, “Well, you just admitted that she didn’t qualify for the internship, and yet you granted it to her.”

“Yes?”

Her posture shifted, bringing more authority to her presence. “Isn’t that a bit unethical? Not to mention, unfair?”

His smile disarmed her. His expression could only be described as predatory, and amused. “If you mean bringing her inside the lab unarmed, and defenseless—into a hostile environment where everyone—both staff and student—believed that she slept with me to get the position, and avidly set out to discredit her as a sham? Yes, it was unfair to them. As for ethics: *my* budget, *my* assistant. Both of them have only one relevant qualification?”

“What’s that?”

“To assist my efforts in promoting the university, of course. As long as my academic needs are met and I can produce results for the university, there are no ethical conflicts.”

“Wait, you said it was unfair to—*them*? You mean *to the others*; the *wolves* you threw her to?”

His smile curled lupine, now saturated with satisfaction. “It’s a shame there’s not a highlight reel to show you, like they have for the football players. It would be worth watching—it would be an educational study in inner departmental conquest.”

“So she did alright.”

“No,” he corrected. “She slammed every challenger so hard they now come to her for research advice. She walked into their midst as the incarnation of Inanna herself. In six years, she’ll be running that department, if the Dean doesn’t become a heroin addict or something equally devastating to his mental faculties.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, “Where will you be?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Probably Pakistan.”

He sat in a light meditative state, his eyes and senses holding her, swaddling her. “Do you understand?” he asked. “Do you understand why I’m going to be here until she wakes?”

Chapter 12

Malkin had his fur up. Literally. From his nose to the tail, a strip of fur down the middle stood as stiff as a punk rock mohawk for the length of his body.

“Malkin, calm down. It’s probably one of my roommates.” Jackie reached to give him a calming stroke and he backed away with a hiss full of fang.

“That’s not human,” he growled. “It’s not even alive.”

The doorknob turned. Malkin’s growl rose to crescendo, but before any motion could begin the door swung open ... Brandy walked in, and tossed her keys into the basket by the door.

“Oh, hello. Something wrong?” Brandy asked.

“Nope,” Jackie said, while leaning back in the chair and taking a sip of her soda. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re at the table,” Brandy said, while closing the door behind her. and setting her bag on the narrow table

beside the door. “We never sit at the table. It’s like an unwritten custom.”

“True, but I have a guest.”

Brandy froze, her ears attentive, her mind focused. “Yes?” Her grin contagious. “Where?”

Grinning back at her, knowing she was hoping the visitor was a man, Jackie looked to her side and found Malkin wasn’t there. “Malkin?”

He faded into view. Then began cleaning his thigh fur.

Brandy was the first to recover. “A cat?”

“Yes, and a magicked cat as well. Say hello to Brandy, Malkin. She’s my roommate.”

Malkin stopped cleaning and turned to Brandy, “Hello.”

“And a good day to you as well,” Brandy said, her voice full of restrained curiosity. “You were magicked? How strange. You are probably the largest one to be magicked, according to the news.”

Jackie scratched behind his ears with gentle fingers, “He’s going to stay with us for a couple of days. I’m going to need to go to the store here shortly to pick up some things for his visit.”

“Visit? Not ... um, full time?” Brandy asked.

“Well, he’s a cat, and from what I’ve gathered, sort of a free spirit.”

“Oh, well, right. I could run up for you, and fetch a few things. We had cats at my house. I know what they need for ... visiting.” As she said this her whole being seemed to glow.

The air chilled suddenly and a vaporous figure began to form in the living area. Brandy yipped and moved quickly into the dining room with the others, “What the fuck is that!”

“Oh shit!” Jackie squeaked.

“I told you they were out there,” Malkin growled as the thing came into being.

“What is that?” Brandy asked again, as she hurried to the other side of the table.

The shape coalesced into a semi-human form, with arms and legs and a foggy head. It was—blurry, Jackie thought.

Malkin jumped from the table, landing in front of the thing.

“Malkin!” Jackie cried in horror.

“Nin me car -ra ud dalla ed-a!” Malkin roared with a voice four times his size.

The thing roared back a defiant inarticulate cry. The room shook, pictures fell from the walls. A cup fell into the sink and broke.

“*Bi-lu-lu ug-ga **dinana!** ib-da-sa u-lil-la **dinana-kam!***” Malkin responded, his voice gathering the sound of victory and triumph, rising in volume enough to shake the glass of the windows. “sa u-lil-la ***dinana-kam!***”

The thing flashed into flame with a wail of pain, and then becoming smaller, faded from existence.

Jackie burst forward, snatched up Malkin, and scurried back behind the table with him to Brandy's side. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit."

"Is it gone?"

"What were you thinking, Malkin?"

"I don't see it, is it gone? What was that?"

"It's gone. Calm yourselves, you're freaking me out," Malkin told them.

Malkin squirmed out of her grasp, as the two of them continued to ask questions they didn't seem to want answers for.

"Malkin, seriously," Jackie asked as she descended from panic, "what was that? Is it coming back?"

Malkin licked his shoulders a couple of times, just to make sure she was ready to listen, and then said, "Collectively they are called the *lili*. Demons of the wind. A spirit of discord. Minor spirit."

"Ok, ok, so what the heck did you do there? You said some things, *a lot* of some things. What was that?" She asked as she slid into her chair and set him on the table. Her voice, breathy, but calming down from panting.

"Spirits of discord or strife, any of the chaos kinds, don't like the spirits of order. So, I named Inanna and summoned her

will.”

Glancing back at where the thing had manifested, Jackie asked, “You can do that? I mean you can just *summon Inanna*? Are we talking about Inanna, *the Queen of Heaven*, Inanna? Sumerian Goddess? Because that is really wild if you are.”

“No, no, it is more of an invoking. More like saying ‘*are you crazy? Do you know who watches over this place*’ kind of thing.”

“It burst into flames, Malkin. I think you did a bit more than a *calling-out*.”

Malkin licked his shoulder. After a moment he said. “It really isn’t.”

She sat back. Brandy slid into another chair, as she said, “Ok, but you used another language to call it out with. What was that?”

“Sumerian, it’s the oldest language.”

“Why?” Jackie asked.

“So it would understand me, of course.”

“Why—*how*—do you know Sumerian?” Jackie asked, her hands splaying her fingers out with urgent frustration.

“How would I know English?”

Her eyes widened, and then narrowed as she sat back with a huff of release. “Fair enough.”

“Is it coming back?” Brandy asked.

The door opened and all three of them jumped. Malkin landed in Jackie's arms.

"Hello," Terry said, then after tossing her keys into the basket and spotting them at the table, "Who died?"

"No one?" Jackie squeaked. Malkin squirmed and she let him step out onto the table from her arms. "That we know of."

"Do we have a cat now?"

"This is Malkin."

"You named him." Terry's voice fell, close to resignation except for the low growl of derision.

"Um, yes? Only because I got tired of calling him, cat."

"You named him, *cat*."

"He likes it," Jackie objected.

"Yes, I do." Malkin's voice fit him even if it did seem a bit large.

Terry's head tilted to the left. "Did you know it means *cat*? It's just an Old English word."

"Yes, I did," Malkin replied.

"Fair enough," Terry said, turning to close the door and set down her bag.

"You're not surprised?" Brandy asked.

"Well, I had thought that if we were going to get a pet that we would talk about it beforehand." She turned, and gave

Malkin a polite smile. “And now it would be a bit rude to talk about it as if he weren’t here. So, welcome.”

Terry took off her navy blue blazer and draped over the front chair of the table, then walked into the kitchen to the fridge.

“You’re upset.” Jackie said, then pet Malkin’s back. He laid down for easier access.

“I’m ... not upset about having a pet or even that Malkin is the choice. Just ambushed by the exclusion.”

“You’re not surprised he can talk?” Brandy asked.

Terry came out of the fridge with a diet Coke, and popped the top to take a long drink. “Do you know how much weird shit is going on out there? It’s nuts. Things are popping into existence, towers of flame, falling frogs. I’m happy that he talks. I can handle talking.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, and he’s polite. Having a polite male around the house might be nice.”

“Daryl didn’t call?” Brandy asked.

Terry lifted an eyebrow of warning at her, and sat down on the chair with her jacket. “This is a nice table. Why don’t we sit here?”

“Doesn’t have a TV,” Jackie said. “You should know, by the way, that we were just invaded by a ... what did you call it, Malkin? A lili?”

“Lili,” he answered.

“A lili, a spirit. A mean spirit.”

“How did you know he was mean?”

“He followed me home looking at me ... *meanly*.”

“Oh.”

“I guess we didn’t but since it *invaded* I didn’t wait for further evidence. I ran.”

Terry took another drink. “Likely a wise choice. If you ran, where did it go?”

“Malkin banished it from the house.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, I believe that’s accurate.”

“From the house ... you can do that? What about wards to keep it all outside. I mean, I have to deal with it all day long. It’s even part of our classes now. Subheadings of *Dealing with the Unknown*, in business management. It would be nice to have a safe place to be at night.” Terry said. “What do you know about magic?”

“For the most part, magic is dealt with using language and symbols, which is language as well. I seem to know quite a bit about language.”

“Can you help?” Terry asked.

“Against the lili? Yes. Against it all? I don’t know.”

Chapter 13

Jackie arrived in the lab at seven-thirty in the morning, having had her keys returned to her. She clicked on the main lights, without a thought of why she had even returned. None of the offices were lit. The place had the feel of after-hours-empty she could never define, but somehow resonated with. Once the lights were on, the place warmed a little. It was all piles of rock most of the time, with the occasional item that could be called art or significant.

She looked to the Professor's office, with its darkened windows, and felt a huge pang of hurt in her chest. But now, with what she learned from Malkin, maybe they could figure it out between them—give them something besides each other to focus on. As she thought about this, the pang in her chest lightened and then faded.

Her and her roommates had worked all night with Malkin making wards and talismans, objects which proclaimed the protection of Inanna and Enki. Of the West Wind and the

North. Brandy asked about Celtic beliefs and made two: one for *the Morrigan* and the other for *Bridgette*.

“The importance is on your beliefs. You can use just about any of the gods, but you must be able to believe that god has your back,” Malkin explained.

She did. She witnessed what Inanna, *what just the name of Inanna* could do to these beings hounding her.

Now, in the lab, she began pulling out her notes and the pages and began preparing them for her area and the building in general. Maybe they would keep her *giggler with the rude mouth* out of here. She had just finished imbuing her first talisman when the Professor came into the lab.

“Good, you’re here,” he said.

“I found out some amazing things last night. This is going to be seriously important for us to get a handle on,” she said, her voice rising in excitement, and urgency. “For the whole campus. This magic is going to get out of hand if we don’t take this seriously. I learned a Sumerian banishment spell last night. And *saw it work!* I learned how to say it *in Sumerian!* Can you believe it?”

“I believe I will listen to you much better after some time in the office.”

“What? Didn’t you hear what I said?” she asked, and it touched her in his expression, that it was the *who*, that was the problem, not the *what*. “Really? This is serious. I don’t really know what has been going on with us, but until now, I

somehow felt responsible, or needy or something. But this isn't about us. This is about everyone else."

"*This* is about you doing as you're told." His voice was cold, direct.

It was like a slap, but not from him. From herself. How could she have believed they could work as a team? That he would care what she had to say anymore?

"*You* can go in your office—alone." She turned to him, her feet slightly further apart; solid, unmoving.

"Excuse me?"

"Not likely. If you were looking for a victim, you missed. There are no victims here. Only volunteers. I don't volunteer any longer." Her voice rose in strength and force as she spoke and adrenaline raced through her veins, hardening her eyes and her emotions. A spear of thought raced up from her memory, and she shouted, "sa u-lil-la dinana-kam!"

The Professor stopped walking toward her, and his head tilted to the right. "What was that?"

"*Inanna shows she is his equal,*" she translated for him.

"Was that supposed to banish me or something?" he asked.

"If you wish me harm, then yes. I am your equal in this. I don't know what possessed you to think otherwise and lash out as you have. You may think you have the right to something from me, so *here* is something from me, fucker." Jackie held out the talisman and began marking wards into the air around her.

“You think this *bippity-boppity* nonsense is doing something.” he said wryly.

“That’s right,” she said, and grinned. “So, I’m going to be at home, working on a personal project—which you are going to give me an A for, and we will never speak again. Ever.”

His features all seemed to turn bland at the same time; a featureless expression. Then from this state of entropy he laughed, and it sent chills of warning down her spine at a primal level. There was a *wrongness* to him. She couldn’t understand what was wrong, but he was *not right*.

He lunged at her. She yipped and dodged to the left, putting a workbench between them, and then ducked and scurried over to the next workbench, then turned right.

The lab door burst open, and Malkin called out, “Where are you?”

She turned her head and saw the Professor coming at her. “I’m running! Get out. He’s trying to hurt me!”

She made the turns around the benches faster than him, and now only had a sprint to make the lab door and outside where people were witness.

The Professor has gone crazy!

As if in reply to her thoughts, Malkin yelled, “That’s not the professor!”

She ran for the doors, and they wouldn’t open. Something held them closed. She pulled at the handle. “Malkin! I’m locked in.”

She turned. He reached for her. He was almost on her. She screamed.

A force, like a bass tone reverberating to the bone, hit the Professor. An impenetrable wall between him and her. As if through a looking glass, she saw his features distort, become deranged—*mad*. A shrieking beast; a livid ruler screaming *off with her head!*

Actions began to separate from reality; inanimate beings beginning to wake. Artifacts rattled and groaned, whispering their tragic histories. From a workbench beside her, chess pieces cracked limbs out of their frozen states and escaped the confines of their board, leaping past her onto the floor.

“Attack!” howled the pawns, rushing the rippling border between them and the Professor. A knight stopped to bow at Jackie before following its brethren.

That was so cool.

Then she tried the door with more zeal. “I’m still stuck!”

She stopped and stepped back, “*bi-lu-lu ug-[ga] dinana ib-da sa u-lil-la dinana-kam!*” Trying the doors again, they opened, “Sweet! We’re out of here Malkin, come on!”

Malkin went between her legs, “Way ahead of you sister.”

Malkin scurried across the floor of the main hallway, toward the triple door entry to the right. “Nice work, keep moving. Where can we go? Quickly?”

She had her pack and she put her hand on her wallet with a sigh of relief. “There’s a café over here that is animal friendly.

At least, they don't mind dogs. What are we going to do about the Professor?"

"Sorry, kid, that isn't the professor. He's Divi. And Divi are a bit more powerful than the lili are. In fact, the lili work for him. Or Divi like him."

"So he's like a stronger spirit thing?"

"No, he's more like a god. A minor god, but an immortal aspect for certain."

She stopped. "He's a god? What the hell is he messing with me for? Has he seen Terry? No, wait ... I didn't mean that. But I kind of did. But not like that, that. *What the hell?*"

"Look, kid, you're frustrated, I get it. But until two maybe three days ago I was just a cat, alright? Now I'm here with you, and I like you, and I'm into it, but I'm just a cat alright? And I'm not sure how that Divi is going to react and it could go bad. So, we need to get some place and I need to know how you met him."

"The Professor?"

"Stop calling him that! His name. What is his name?"

His name is ... she couldn't remember. She smiled. That was silly. How could she forget his name? She was in love with the man. His name ...

"Why? Why can't I remember?"

"Let's take cover first. THEN we can talk. Alright?"

She nodded, "Alright."

Try as she might, his name wouldn't come to her. It was as if she had never heard it before. She couldn't even guess. *The Professor* was all that came to mind, like that character on *Gilligan's Island*.

The coffee place had chairs outdoors on the side of the shop. They took one of the two-seater tables and she purchased a short coffee and a short cup of crème for him. "I don't know if you like it. I could get some water if you want."

"No, no, crème is good."

"How long has he not been ... *god why can't I remember?*"

"Listen, very carefully—alright? His name is . "

"I couldn't hear you."

"That's what I was checking. You can't even hear his name. That's part of the binding on you."

"He hasn't always been this, though, right?"

"What? Oh, no, he's only been on you for a couple of days. Look. This is not going to sound sane, but it's the *rabbit hole* you are in. You are in a hospital room. The doctors are saying you are in a coma. But you aren't. You're being attacked by this Divi. I don't know why. I haven't a clue. But I'm betting you do. When did it start going wrong with him?"

"That's easy. Monday. When my alarm clock disappeared. And then that Me cylinder showed up."

"Me? Did you say a *Me* cylinder? Where? What? How?"

“It came in the shipment from Iran. Their new find, from the city of Uruk. It’s a cylinder, about two feet long and five inches across. It’s covered in cuneiform writing.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t get to translate it yet.”

“Alright, but who said it was a Me?”

“The Professor.”

“Of course he did.”

“Then it showed up at my house when he came over that evening ... or was that the next evening? I think it was the next, and he saw it. He thought I stole it. He took it and he left.”

“And where is it now?”

“I assume it’s in his office ... but that next morning, I think I remember that he couldn’t find it. He asked me where it was, I think. I’m not sure, I had a lot on my mind at the time.”

“You’re doing good.” Malkin looked around.

“Couldn’t we break his bond like I broke the hold on the doors?”

“Summon Inanna?” Malkin continued to search around them. “An invoking may not be enough. He is a god, if a tiny aspect god. Still, you either are or you aren’t and he is. On top of that, with magic being back to add to the problem ...”

“Yes, but that’s on our side as well, isn’t it? I mean you seem to know ...”

“Now hold on a minute. I just told you he’s a god. And I’m not. I’m a cat ...”

“Cats were once worshiped.”

“Uh-huh. Look, the easiest way is for you to remember his name. Second easiest is for you to go to sleep.”

“I slept last night?”

“Did you?”

“Sure I ... I ... I don’t remember going to bed. We made the wards for the house, right? And ... When did I go to bed?”

“Well, from my perspective, we made all of the wards, and then you vanished. I had to find you. When I did, it was morning, and you were in the lab being chased around the benches.”

“Like dreaming.” She turned thoughtful. “Like the way scenes shift in dreams.”

“Only this is his dream. You need to get into your own.”

Chapter 14

Back at her house, with the door closed, locked, and
warded, Jackie paced in the dining area, calming herself
and trying to remember his name. How many times has she
written it down, like some misty-eyed schoolgirl?

She stopped, reflecting over her past behavior which soured
her lips, “I *was* a misty-eyed school girl. *Ugh.*”

“This is how you prepare for sleep?” Malkin asked. His
orange fur was up, but not bristled. His tail was up and
straight, except for the last white inch which was crooked to
the side.

“How do cats prepare?” she asked, as she turned to re-cross
the dining area.

He sat, and looked up at her as she paced. “Cats don’t
prepare for sleep. We just sleep. That’s it. Humans appear to
have rituals.”

“Do you watch people sleep much?”

“Every chance I get.”

“OK, *that's not* creepy.”

“Oh, come on, at least lay down and try. Your body is tired. You've been running on high octane for days.”

With teeth clenched, she growled, “Why can't I remember his name? It is without reason!”

“That doesn't sound like you are trying.”

“Fine. I'll lay down. I'll try.”

“Hey, don't put yourself out, it's only your life we're trying to save here.”

“I know, I know, but this is so maddening.” She walked to her bedroom, waited for Malkin to run in after her, and then closed the door. Malkin jumped up on her bed. “But, hey, what about you?” she asked.

“What? You mean *what happens* to me? Don't fret. I'm an inside magic job. I'm you, basically. Part of you or something. A voice in your head, which you've given to a cat.”

“I don't know how to speak Sumerian.”

“Then I probably don't either, but it worked. Don't question it too hard or shit might stop working.”

She let that logic work in her mind for a moment, and then nodded her agreement. “Good point. So just lay here and go to sleep? What will you be doing?”

“I got your back. Just relax.”

She closed her eyes. Took in a deep breath, and then exhaled. After that, she deepened her breathing, letting herself

relax. After a time, she tried a yawn. “I don’t think this is working ...”

There was no sound. Nothing. It was as if the world turned off, as abruptly as a switch. Poof. Gone. She opened her eyes and for a moment thought she had gone blind. Everything was a uniform shade of gray. The gray was a lighter shade than the blackness behind her eyelids, relieving her of the fear of blindness.

The bed had melded with the rest of the world, and was now no more than a raised mound, in a vast ocean of gray. How vast she couldn’t guess, but not too much further. “Malkin?”

Wired from a high sense of caution, she stood. She was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, but not the ones she had been wearing. No scent touched her tongue, the place was the temperature of dream. “Malkin? I’m ... not in a good place.”

There came from the vast empty space around her, a chuckle. She recognized the timbre and cadence and the sardonic overtones from the child laughter in the lab. The voice was deeper now, adult aged and it felt like it was coming from everywhere, from every direction, wherever she focused. “Where did you think you were going?”

“Away from you.”

The voice of the Professor came from her right and she turned quickly to face him.

“There is no *away* from me.”

“Who are you?”

“Ub.”

“You are one of the Mes.”

“I am Ub!” The rage in his voice caused serrations of bumps across the skin of her arms.

“I am honored to meet you. I am Jackie.”

“You will obey me—kneel before me and worship me like the god I am.”

She crossed her arms, and let her weight fall a little to her left hip. “Um, no. That’s not what is going to happen. I don’t serve you. You need serious help, maybe try some therapy.”

Something moved out there in the nothing. The size of that something felt like it might take up a great deal of space. She heard breathing as it walked around her, clockwise. “You obey him, so it is not on moral grounds you refuse.”

“It *is* on moral grounds. You’re *not* him. You might as well say that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe!’”

She still couldn’t see him. There was just the sense of him out in the grayness that expanded out as far as she could divine. She raised an eyebrow and decided that logic and proportion had fallen sloppy dead. She was meddling where chessmen fear to tread.

“He is nothing. His wholeness, the greatest he can become is a blip inside a speck of dust against the vastness of time and space.”

“Well, I’m on that same blip, inside that same speck of dust. What do you need me for?”

“You will connect me to this world.”

“What? Like an anchor? I don’t think I like the looks of the anchor job.”

It moved again. Circling. It felt so huge. Like, *whale* huge. And angry. It felt very angry right now. Then it rushed at her, screaming, “I will link to your world and take control of the lesser beings, as it is meant to be. You will be my way in. You will obey!”

A sudden, violent gust of wind tousled her hair, the voice booming. Demanding. Jackie fought hard against her fear. Every muscle quivered, yet somewhere from deep within her soul, a strength emerged. She cried out at the being, “You have no power over me!” and, in that very instant, something clicked; like chains being released. She remembered. His name ... it was ... it was ... “Steven! Help!” she screamed, and when she did, she felt a hand grab ahold of hers and yank her up and out and awake into a hospital room sitting up in bed.

“Gotcha!” Steven said, and sunlight was around him, setting off his light brown hair, which was all messed up from him combing his fingers through the thick locks.

Chapter 15

Jackie lifted her hand to knock, but then noticed the door bell and rang it instead. In a moment she heard someone approaching the door and then it opened.

Steven looked her over. "Hello."

"They said you were still on your *leave of absence*," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, and then opened the door wider. "Come in, please."

"Thanks," she said, as she took off her backpack and set it down by the door.

The place was a lovely quaint house, in East La Jolla. The door opened into an entryway that fell into the living room, complete with a rustic stone fireplace. Up a flight of stairs there was a loft, and to the right a bedroom and a bath. Behind the living room was a dining space, and then the kitchen. The front wall had large windows that went from floor to ceiling. The loft had a skylight.

A large, tall plant with long emerald spire leaves stood by the window, with what looked like a spear thrust into the pot to help the plant remain erect. Other than this splash of green, the rest of the place was colored on the scale of various tans and light browns, with some gold glinting from things like lamps and handles.

It smelled clean, and looked comfortable, if a little spartan. Most men seemed to live like bears with furniture. Not here. There wasn't much, but what there was had thought behind its choosing.

There was some pleasant artwork along on the walls, but beside the door were framed photos of various faces, from various time periods. A young mother holding her daughter in sepia tone, a small boy in a weathered black and white photo, its edges fraying in the frame. A beautiful young woman dancing in full color print.

“Is it here?” she asked.

“What?”

She stopped and looked at the ground. “Just, don't. Ok? And never mind, I can feel that it's here.”

He looked her over. She looked ... withdrawn, as if a narcotic withdrawal was racking her body. The dark under her eyes looked like goth makeup. “I didn't realize your condition. I'm surprised they let you out of the hospital so soon.” He guided her to the L-sectional couch in the middle of the room. “I wasn't trying to play games. Sit down and let me get you something to drink.”

“Only if it has alcohol.”

“Scotch?”

“Sure.”

“I have wine as well.”

“Why choose? You left quickly. They released me today. Nothing more to look at. My doctor admitted that he wasn’t convinced I was in a coma.”

“Can you describe what you’re feeling?” Handing her a tumbler half full of amber liquid, he said, “Here, do you want water or something to chase it with?”

She shook her head, her hair falling in her face. Sipping the scotch, she gasped and then took a slower, deeper sip. “I feel achy. My joints. My fingers. My whole body, all of my muscles have a deep, aching pain.”

Realizing that she was hunching forward and folding in her shoulders, she tried to sit back a little. “I feel needy. Like I *need* something, and that *something* will take all of this pain away.”

Staring into her glass she glanced at him, and then sighed. “I feel like it’s getting worse.”

He sat next to her. Not too close. She could have stood him being a little closer. “And you believe the Me cylinder is that *something*. What do you feel you need to do with it?”

“I don’t know.” Her words snapped out, cracking like a lash, “It’s too wide to be a usable phallic symbol.”

“Indeed.”

Her shoulders folded in again. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be crude. But I can’t think of a thing, except to find it.”

“Grasping it might be enough then.”

“Yes, but I’m sure that’s enough to doom me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She shrugged, “Just because it feels like there is a promise there, or relief or release, doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“You fear the false face. Can’t say I blame you.” He took a sip from his own drink, a scotch neat, and she set hers down. “You look like you are going through withdrawal, hooked on some heavy drugs. Which might be the case.”

She met his eyes, “Promise you it’s not. Just weed and the occasional drink. Nothing else.”

“I was thinking dopamine, and endorphins. Both of those would have been on high during your struggle.”

“My *struggle*? Is that what you call it?” She laughed, and then took a gulp of her scotch. Setting the glass back down she relaxed her shoulders. Looking back to him, she said, “What? Are you going to get me heroin?”

“I would be tempted if it wasn’t so addicting.”

A wry grin of amusement curved her lips. “Escaped the god but now I’m in rehab?”

“Something like that, yes.” He paused for a moment, and then became more alert. “God?”

“*Ub*, the god inside the cylinder,” she clarified.

“*Ub*? That is the name of the corrupted *Me* given to Inanna from Enki in the story about that little drinking visit she shared with him.”

“She didn’t go there with subterfuge on her mind.”

“Perhaps, but she did go there with intent and succeeded in manifesting that intent. Opportunity knocked, and she kicked the door in.” He said this with a soft look of pride or approval.

It was one of the oldest stories discovered, and the first in-depth view of the *Mes*, as being something more than objects of wealth and politics. *Mes* were both abstract metaphor and pure physical proof of the powers which transcended life, and even the gods.

Enlil, the god of the sky and leader of the gods in their heaven, was said to have gathered the *Mes* from the vastness of the universe. Each *Me* is a singularity, a perfection of its subject matter. These *Mes* he turned over to Enki, who was then to distribute them to the gods of the Sumerian cities. Enki’s city was Eridu. Inanna’s city, and location of her main temple, was Uruk.

The story begins with Inanna complaining to her assistant that her uncle, Enki, has not been fair with the distribution of the *Mes*. That because of her position, she should be responsible for more than she has been given. She decides to make a social call, without announcement, and talk with Enki.

Enki is a great wizard and has many powers. One of these is *foresight*—seeing into the near future to divine the actions of others. His power is able to see all of humanity, the kings and even the actions and intentions of the gods themselves. Thus, when he looks out across the lands of Sumer that morning, he sees Inanna coming to visit, and understands her intentions in doing so.

Enki tells his assistant to welcome Inanna when she arrives, to make her comfortable, “*make her feel like she is in her girlfriend’s house*”, and then he goes off to make himself ready to seduce the goddess of sex.

Enki’s plan, as it unfolds, is to get Inanna comfortable, relaxed and drunk on beer. As it turned out, the goddess of conflict and war got Enki relaxed, and comfortable and drunk on beer, and then talked him out of all of the Mes.

The story of Inanna going to Enki and receiving the Me is often interpreted as a tale of female empowerment and the triumph of the goddess Inanna over the god Enki. It is also seen as a representation of the changing power dynamics between the cities of Uruk and Eridu, which were major centers of trade, culture, and religion in ancient Mesopotamia.

Those cities, and the country itself, lasted and thrived for thousands of years. We have nothing close to them in existence now. Our most successful examples pale in comparison.

“You want to try to tough it out?” he asked her. “You weren’t under the influence for long. I would guess that your

system would be back to normal within a couple of days.”

“I think it is a better choice than bending my knee to the god of a tin can.”

“Bronze.”

“Bronze can.” She looked at her glass, swirled the amber liquid and then downed the last shot. “I don’t think I can do it at home. It will freak Terry. She’s already out of her mind with worry.”

“You can stay here then. Do we need to get anything for you? From home maybe?”

“Here? Seriously?” she asked. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“I have my toothbrush in my bag. I’m good for the night. Even have a sleeping shirt.”

Chapter 16

When she arrived it was still early, not quite ten thirty. He made her a second scotch and she drank half, but set the rest aside. The aches and joint pain persisted. Steven brought out his laptop and they made a grocery order through the Internet. He purchased several vitamins and supplements. Orange juice—two full gallons.

“Should we get vodka too?” she asked, as he added the last to the cart.

“What? Oh, no, those are for you. The vitamin C and other supplements will help with your aches and pains.”

“Not as good as alcohol does.”

“Much better, in fact. All that’s going to do is cause more tomorrow, and dehydrate you today.”

“Huh,” she said. “Then why did you give it to me?”

“Because I didn’t want to argue with you.”

He was treating her with *kid gloves* and that wouldn't do. She felt the need to be cared for, but not babied. A partner, not a child. She glanced toward the pictures lining the wall near the door. A collection of young faces and families throughout history. Was she just another one of his collected people? Or was that giving herself too much credit? She supposed there were worse things to be in life, than a collector's item for a professor of humanity. Like becoming the *'dorphin* strung-out slave to a Ub god cylinder, who linked him to the world to destroy all of mankind—for example.

While the pain, in and around her joints, had come down from the crags and peaks to the sharp rocks and broken glass running down the alleyway of the first home she could remember—she couldn't shake the mood withdrawing put her in. She felt anger at everything. Yet needy of everything as well. She would soon rage out or burst into tears.

Jackie wasn't sure which to lunge into when the time came.

From the kitchen area she heard something plastic, or rubber perhaps, flap back into place. She turned and spotted a door on the back wall she hadn't noticed before, which had a pet door cut in its bottom panel. An orange tabby cat had just come through and was crossing the kitchen tiles.

"I'm back," the cat said, with a voice that was low for a cat, and tired or perhaps a bit down. Then the cat spotted her sitting on the couch, and froze. "Oh, um ... *meow?*"

"Malkin? How? I mean, hello!" she said, and beamed a wild smile at him.

Malkin turned and came across the floor to her. “You do remember.” He leapt up on the couch between them, accepting pets with a deep purr.

Rubbing behind his ears, she asked, “So, did you ask to help or were you asked?”

Malkin sat, then laid down. “He asked. He didn’t know if I could do anything. Honestly, I didn’t know either. And once I was in your dream with you, there was no way to tell him anything or get a message to him. So, it was hit and miss there for that whole bit.”

“I didn’t know, but at that point I walked around unnerved.” Steven admitted. “I was happy to see he made it back out as well.”

“Unnerved?” she asked, sliding a little forward until Malkin’s body was touching her leg.

Malkin rolled onto his back. “He’s trying to describe himself pacing around this sectional, running his hands through his hair, babbling everything he could think of that you might be experiencing.”

“Thank you, Malkin, I can lampoon myself quite nicely.”

Malkin rolled back to his side, facing Steven. “Well, then do so.”

Jackie leaned forward, “Are you worried I might not like what I hear? I’m a grown woman—currently addicted to an ancient god named Ub. Is that right? *Ub*? Yes, that’s his name.

I keep getting *Uruk and Ub* mixed up—that might be who I am now too—but please don't treat me like that.”

“Who is *Uruk*, again?” Malkin asked.

“*Uruk!*” she said, her voice cracking as she sounded like she was gagging. Then narrowed her eyes.

Great, now she was gross. That wasn't sassy. That was just gross.

“Ah, right. That tells me all I might need to know about Ub, doesn't it?” Steven responded.

She softened her voice, “I wouldn't mind telling you a little more. We could trade stories, right?”

“Well, the dancing-skipping-pacing around the room was exactly what it sounds like: not flattering or dignified. And yes, I've worn some gray into the sides by my ears. Nothing a trim won't hide though.”

There was a moment of silence, and then the pitter patter as soft, gentle raindrops plopped against the windowpane. Steven extended his hand and gently cupped Jackie's cheek: and in that second, she felt her heart race, because this was the moment she'd spent so much time daydreaming of. No longer was it just a part of her fantasy world.

His voice whispered then, soft, deep, and centered; heartfelt. “I was worried about you. I still am. What am I supposed to feel like? I feel as though I'm responsible for you. Not only that: you're important to me.”

His hand moved from cupping her cheek to sliding beneath her chin, and gently tilted her head upward, so she was able to gaze into his eyes: those intense yet gentle orbs which radiated an incredible tenderness and made her realize that no words were necessary in this moment.

A dark storm rolled in from the west. Winds foretold its coming. Surges and pressures began building up in the stratosphere, lining up about a mile off the coast of the Pacific Ocean like a wave of impending doom. Strips of ghostly pitch and tattered sheets of rain hung in the skies under the billowing thick clouds. Within the hour, the advancing armada filled in, and all that could be seen of the ocean were thunderheads sailing black sheets to the shore.

Jackie nearly jumped as the thunderous boom nearby shook the earth. This prompted Steven to pull her fully in his arms, and she felt him holding her, and then his fingers were in her hair, reassuringly stroking the soft, long strands. It was comforting, while at the same time protective: A striking contrast to the possessive and selfish way she had experienced with that ridiculous bronze god.

“Steven, I—” she started, but then there was the final flicker of light, and then ... power ... gone. She inhaled deeply, slowly, and exhaled. She wasn’t fond of the darkness. Even with the warm orange glow of the gently crackling fireplace, she felt a bit edgy with the absence of artificial lighting. Still, she was able to see him, and he was able to see her, and that brought some manner of reassurance.

“We’ve got enough wood to last through the night,” he reassured, though she was unable to fully relax and remained unnerved. She paused, took a step back, and glanced him over, admiring his strength despite the darkness. She couldn’t help but let her eyes wander, from his chest, upward to those eyes, eventually settling on his lips, where they lingered. How she wanted to kiss those lips. Every inch of her was screaming to just let go and give in to her impulse. Before she could though, his lips were on hers, as if he could read her mind.

A fire ignited in her belly; it started off as a small spark, and with every breathless sigh, every flicker of his tongue against hers, and every caress of his hand against the back of her soft, supple neck, it ignited like uncontained wildfire on a dry California dawn. Her chest raised and lowered with each struggling breath, and she could feel his hands on her neck, shoulders ... his long, strong index finger trailing between the dip in her breasts, threatening and teasing to wander off to one pointed, hardened pink nipple or the other.

“Listen to me,” he whispered, his voice soft and low, with a gentle strength that was meant to captivate her.

She held her breath, eager for his command.

Her heart raced.

“Take off your clothes.”

She then dropped every piece of clothing she had on because every part of her was wanting him, just as much as every part of him was wanting every part of her. Immediately she was rewarded with another deep, passionate kiss. His

tongue intertwined with hers, preparing her for what was to come next.

Steven's hand moved south over her belly, pausing briefly to caress her abdomen affectionately— his thumb glided against the soft tautness of her femininity, causing her to feel like one of the fertile Greek goddesses she had learned of in Anthropology 101, with flowers, and wine, and scents of jasmine and lavender, clothed only in a scantily clad toga, and prepared to offer her beautiful, stunning body to her lover for the purpose of procreation.

She felt his fingers exploring her further, testing out the shape of her womanhood: the perfectly trimmed region, the wetness, the little rounded rosy clit, and the beautiful way her private parts bloomed like a rose as he spread her lips gently.

In one deep, breathless gasp, she felt the tip of his index finger enter her soft, velvety folds. Not in a hurried, forced kind of way, but in a smooth, gentle, gliding kind of way. A way that felt incredible. It entered easily as her excitement by this point had been obvious; the ample amount of wetness that coated his digit as he slid slightly more of it into her body. He realized she was new at this. Which is why he was taking things slow, and watching her expression for pleasure vs pain, and gently ... lovingly ... continuing to caress her belly with the other hand. The softly emitted moans indicated it was pure pleasure. Once fully inside, she felt his finger arch inside of her, curling upward, stiff, and he held this position for a moment. She gasped, struggling to exhale, his thumb making its way to lightly circle her clit. Jackie moaned, and

responsively spread her legs, allowing him more access, more leverage. Slowly, he began to move, to thrust the finger that was inside, causing her to breathe a little harder.

Her face flushed, and he knew that she was getting closer.

“Not yet,” he commanded, and just as she was about to feel the intensity of her first finger-lovemaking-orgasm ever, he backed off, to her dismay.

“What—why ...?” she pouted, not understanding why now it was back to just the tip of his finger inside her.

He waited, not bothering to explain his reason behind it, because he knew she'd realize his intent soon enough. He listened to her breathing, turning from slow and labored, to deep and intentional, knowing when it got to the latter that she was ready. He thrust his finger in once more, moving it in more rapid pulses, her pleasure once more building ... but this time, stronger, deeper, and even more pleasurable than the first. He brought her on the edge.

“Please,” she whimpered.

He smiled, his eyes glancing adoringly at her.

“Yes, you may. Now,” he commanded.

She howled, his dominating tone taking control of her mind and body and sending her over the edge. She was unable to resist any longer.

She came then, crying out his name, feeling her walls tighten snugly around his digit and releasing into a frenzied, wet wave of passion.

Her hips rocked and bucked.

He smiled in satisfaction, letting her ride out her heated orgasm, and then whispered delightfully. “Good girl.”

It was then he guided her to the bed and pulled her into his arms, letting her settle there, relaxed, content, satisfied, and loved. He held her like this, in her beautiful nakedness, and for several hours she was in a sort of blissful daze, completely oblivious to the thundering battle outside his window.

Chapter 17

Lightning flickered through the thunderheads, flashing from one to the next, illuminating the streets below in brief bursts. The bolts ignited in the clouds then burst into prismatic color clones, striking the same area multiple times. Causing much more damage.

The thunder boom from this onslaught came first as a blip of *absolute* silence, as if the tone overwhelmed the mind, then it rolled in crashing whitewater percussion out from the storm, rolling across the sky with a regal alarm that sent serrated goose flesh across her arms.

She clutched for and found Steven clutching for her. Malkin jumped from the couch and bolted up the stairs, which was his area.

Flicking on the news with a remote, and giving voice commands to his home assistant, Steven had the news projected from four different large screens, including his PC and wall assistant screen.

As the storm moved in below them and to the south, people ran for nearby shelters. Strangers opened their homes and offered cover to passersby caught out in the sweeping sheets of rain.

The wind picked up force and speed, howling through the streets and rattling windows—catching detritus up in its wings and hurtling all nature of bottle, can, drum, trash containers and shopping carts through the air to bludgeon the walls of homes and malls. It was a keening sound. A wail, like that of the banshee. The cry of an innocent, an unstained soul trapped within the walls of hell.

High on the hills east and above the beach, the view from his living room offered them the full show. Three main formations striking land, from downtown Pacific Beach, to Downtown San Diego.

Steven stood at the big front window looking down, out to the storms, studying the way they were working toward land and pressing south. “Looks like story time weather to me. Do you want to start, or should I?”

“To be fair, I probably have the most to say. I guess it began on Monday, when my alarm-clock escaped ...”

Once she started, with the morning she woke up late, and her missing alarm, she couldn't stop talking. It just kept pouring out of her. She was able to keep the indecent parts hidden, though. Maybe he would understand, maybe he wouldn't. He didn't show any sign that he knew what she was holding back, leading her to conclude he couldn't read minds

like Malkin. Which she was happy about. It all basically happened inside her head, anyway. In a neighborhood not of her making.

That intrusion bothered her more than anything else. That Ub was able to *move into* her like that. To create a whole different skin on her internal living space.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Hey, I put myself out there, because you made it feel safe. Say something or kiss me or something.”

He chose to kiss her. Deeply. His hand caressed her scalp, tugging her hair, turning the kiss a bit rough., A low growl sounded—but that might have been from her.

She responded and reciprocated in kind, pushing her hands through his hair with a tug, and fell further into his arms.

Now, kissing, standing in the middle of his living room with a raging storm at her back, and a wave of energy flowing out of her from desires—held back, pent up, iced—now flamed. She felt wild and dizzy, like when she spun around looking up at the sky as a girl. Fanned and churned, her desires and emotions boiled and threatened with credible leers, to spill. To break the levee and overwhelm them both.

She felt *impulsive*. She hadn’t experienced it as such a strong emotion before. Impulsiveness as a state of mind, or a mood? Sure. Everyone has the instinct to react—being forced to move out of danger, out of fear. A knee-jerk response to the fear of losing what we have, or of not getting what we want.

But this was different. It wasn't just instinct; she was driven by desire. Going after what she wanted, caution thrown to the wind. She felt exhorted. Compelled to follow her wild heart, no holds barred.

“Steven?” she asked, after breaking their kiss and leaning back.

“Yes?”

“How do I know I'm out? Out of his head and only inside my head?”

“You mean, how do you know you're not inside another of his constructs?”

“Right. Like, look at that storm. Anything weird or *off in* the ... construct? Nice word. Inside the *construct*, any mistake or oddness could be credibly blamed on the magic field.”

Undirected but urgent; a need to act before ... before ... *before it's washed away in the storm.*

Before he could answer, a heavy knock came at the door making her jump and nearly bite her tongue—or his. She noticed right away that her stoic professor Steven had a hard, edgy side to him as he moved to answer the summons. His whole body language changed in an instant. For a flash he felt taller, stronger, and far more powerful.

It turned out to be their grocery order. The driver was running back out into the rain and the open door of his truck. By the time Steven had waved and called a “*thanks,*” the

driver's engine was coming to life and the truck was moving on to its next stop.

When he opened the door, she had worked her way behind him and peered around his side to see what had hailed.

Even being careful, her shoes were soaked from helping to bring in the bags and put their purchases away. She took them off and her socks, and put them in the outer bathroom under a wall warmer.

She was still flush from their kissing, which quickly and easily had become passionate, all consuming. She did have her hands in his hair, finally. It was thick, perfect for running a hand through, and strong enough to tug in moments of ecstasy. It was no wonder it wouldn't keep its shape.

"Are you hungry yet?" he asked as he closed the fridge door after putting away the last of the order.

"I could eat. I could help cook, too."

"You can help me make an omelet then," he decided. "I have a great cast iron skillet."

"Skillet? Did you say, *cast iron skillet*? Oh no, that is way past my skill level. I can scramble some eggs and scrape them off of a pan. I don't need to ruin your fancy pan, chef."

"Cast iron is not as scary as you're making it out to be," he said, as he cleared the kitchen island. "You just need to caress it with oil and whisper sweet nothings to it. And *never* use soap."

“Sounds like me and your iron pan have some things in common,” she quipped.

“So, you don’t use any soap either?” he gave her a smirk that turned her knees to jello.

At the outer kitchen counter there stood two bar stools. She climbed into one and watched him clear the island counter. “I’m sorry, that *came out a little bitchy* I think.”

He paused, then gave a thoughtful nod, which gave way to a smirk in her direction. “More than normal, I believe,” he replied, then finished what he was doing.

She hugged herself. “This is miserable. This withdrawal?” Hopping back off the stool, she went to the fridge and poured herself a glass of orange juice. “I’m going to sit this one out.”

“Sure. You could try for a nap if you’re feeling tired.”

“No, I’m good. I’m just going to drink my OJ, and watch you make an omelet.”

“Hrm,” he grunted as he opened the fridge and pulled out several small containers. As he set these on the island counter, he told her, “I make omelets often. Most mornings actually. I’ve gotten in the habit of prepping the ingredients, so this won’t actually take very long.” Then he turned and flipped the burner on.

As she watched, she wondered about the question she asked before the delivery man pounded on the door. How could she, with any surety, know that this reality wasn’t one of Ub’s reality. “How do we know that Ub is a god?”

He thought about that as he pulled some containers out of the fridge, one with cheese, another with sliced veggies. “There is the *dingir* by his name of course, in the lists of Mes,” he said with a thoughtful tone. “Is there a reason you might be questioning his bona fides?”

She studied him, watching him skillfully crack the eggs with his large, strong hands. As she watched she remembered how skilled he was with his fingers alone.

His hands worked with the grace of long practice. When she didn't answer, he said, “*The Ub* is also a musical instrument—some of which were Mes, and some particular instruments were gods, and some—I believe five or six—were both gods and personifications of an instrument. I've found it a matter of some puzzlement as to what Me were gods and what were only Me. But really the Mes, each one, was a power beyond the gods. The gods used magic. They gathered Me. They could access the Mes to add power to their own. But the Mes were the pillars of the universe. They were life itself. The Mes, if you looked at them in one way, summoned the gods into existence, as they were needed and for the houses needed.”

The *dingir*, she knew, was a cuneiform mark that the Sumerians used to denote a deity or subject of significant religious importance. Four cuneiform marks intersecting, crossing each other, in a circular pattern forming an eight pointed star. So, in their writing, Inanna would have the *dingir* mark, and then her name.

“How did you know what I needed while I was inside his illusion? It doesn’t seem very intuitive.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, the whole *fall asleep to wake up*, thing.”

For a long moment, she wasn’t sure he meant to answer.

Then he stopped as if he ran out of energy and now leaned on the counter, his palms down, his arms bracing, while he recovered. “There is no way forward without this ...” he said, as if quietly reciting this lesson learned, *again*, and still it made a jagged bitter pill to swallow. He made this remark, this quiet thing, and then silent again, waited for an answer—but not on her. She felt she had left the room and only now had just returned.

He stood straighter, coming up off the counter as if woken from dormancy. “I was first born into the class of scribes. My father was an important member of the class. It was obvious my life would be as his. I don’t recall minding, or being bitter that this turned out to be my fate. I don’t remember complaining and in doing so, tempting demons to wreck me or witches to torment.”

She didn’t know what to say. His words felt non-sequitur. She had no context, no direction to follow his subject change. The tone of his voice would have been suitable for confession. What was he saying? It made no sense.

“I was born in Eridu, where Enki had his temple, *E-Abzu*. I was trained and showed fine skills into my adulthood, when I

joined the writers of the Nam-shub. Then I was chosen to take on the duties of the *ashipu*. The king's magicians and wizards. At my first death, I was taken by Enki and brought into the ranks of the *Seven Sages*.”

“Wait,” she said, the word blurring out of her lips, unintended. “You are one of the *Seven Sages, of Sumer*? Is that what you are saying?” There were so many other questions—like “first death?” What the heck did that mean?

“Yes.”

She adjusted herself on the stool. “Then that means you aren't human.”

Chapter 18

The storm whipped, smacking lashes of rain against the side of the house, but the electric show had ended. At least the colored lights version— *ultra-violet lightning bolts were awesome*, Jackie decided, if a bit scary. “No matter how you look, you’re still not human.” She stood at the front windows looking out into a mass of watery gray sheets of rain. She had her arms crossed under her breasts, feeling as closed off as her posture suggested.

“This is my only form now.”

“Your only *form*? Do you hear yourself? That’s not human. Talking like that? *That’s* not human.”

She turned back from the windows in the living-room, which were now deluged by so much rain, they looked like the house was being pulled through a carwash, “I don’t mean that I hate you or that it disgusts me. Or anything of the kind.”

“Of course.”

“But I’m not sure about *being* with you.”

“You’ll still be my assistant?”

“Well,” she said, and then looked at the floor. “I’m not sure this is the time for that discussion.”

“I think it is.” He crossed his arms, but his voice remained calm and clear. “In fact, I’m sure that if we *don’t* have it now, we never will. And I would hate to lose you without a try.”

She glanced at the rain. She wasn’t going anywhere. Not in this weather. Could he affect the weather? *Did he cause this storm?*

But he lived when the Sumerians walked and wrote and planted. He was there when they invented the wheel!

Turning her attention to him, she said, “Your job, or the Abgal’s *raison d’être*—their *reason for being*—is to help fend off magic, isn’t it?”

He sat on the arm of the couch. His arms folded against his chest as he slowly nodded, fully looking at her, unashamed of his recent confession or state of being. He fully accepted his role, and she could too. “Isn’t that a lot of magic out there in that storm right now, pounding the crap out of Pacific Beach?”

Again, he nodded in agreement. “Before you ask, no, I’m not going to do anything about it, and neither are the others.”

“Others?”

His head tilted to the left. “We are called the *Seven Sages*.”

“Right, I knew that,” she defended, and once again he patiently bobbed his head.

Seeing this, she turned to face him. “Why would you want me? I probably damaged the Me container. I nearly died. Got myself trapped by an ancient god who hasn’t even been around for five thousand years or so. Could not even recognize that something was wrong when I was inside the trap. What do you need from me? Everyone in the lab is better qualified than I am. Did you just want to sleep with me, and then changed your mind or something?”

He met her eyes the moment she looked back at him, then spoke. “There’s quite a bit in that to unpack. I’m not sure we’ll have time to get into all of it.”

“You want them one at a time?”

“No, I’ll manage, somehow.” His gaze never left hers, and she felt touched by him. Felt that he was listening to her, and that he hoped to be understood. “The only one of those questions I’m interested in, however, is the first. ‘Why would I want you?’ And my answer is, *because life before you was crap.*” He straightened with a slight adjustment. “Well, not all of it, only the last millennia or so of watching humanity become their absolute worst and then brag about it and be rewarded for it—it takes a toll.”

He unfolded his arms, opening his body language toward her. . “As for the near death experience, being trapped and completely taken-in by a clearly out of touch minor deity, and everyone being more experienced than you—those are not really decision-altering events. Most of that is irrelevant. You had a NDE because no one has done what you did before,

ever. You were inside your own mind, and your mind was used to furnish the trap. How could you possibly feel something was wrong, when it all came from you? And of course everyone has more experience—*They are working on their doctorates*. You are finishing your masters. All of them will have moved on by Fall semester as well, leaving me too soon to benefit my goals. Thus, looking back, you were the only choice.”

The questions were just off the top of her head, but still—those were pretty good answers. Lowering her own eyes, she said, “You’re right. They are all irrelevant. *Strawman* concerns. The thing that matters is that you *aren’t human*. I don’t know what you are, and I like my own species for family planning or bond-mating.”

He raised an eyebrow at her and tried to contain his amusement. “Bond-mating, eh?”

“What? You just said you were one of the *Seven Sages*. Enki made the Seven Sages using *Nam-Shubs*.”

“He made humans the same way. In fact, that’s his *modus operandi* across the board.”

“Yeah, but ...” She stopped, biting off her words just in time, before she said something too far. But really, what was too far? How far was too far? *What if he has gills?*

His focus never wavered from her face. She had his unchallenged heed. His eyes, after a time of silence, narrowed, challenging her, but he made no motion of leaving this spot, figuratively or physically, until she finished her sentence.

Shit.

She bit the tip of her thumb, then she turned and faced him. Lowering her voice, but keeping her words clear, she said, “There’s not much detail about the Sages.”

“At least you said, Sages, instead of *Seven Sages*, like that’s all there were. The ones referred to as the Seven Sages were a group who helped rebuild after the flood. They then moved on to other works, adventures, and tales. They traveled to other countries, and became part of their tales.”

“After the flood? I suppose then that being a fish was convenient.” She said that. *Sure as shit she said that*, after making sure that she knew that would be rude. It could even be hurtful. She had no idea, really, what she was talking about, but she couldn’t help it.

The *Abgal* were created to help build civilization. They created and helped to maintain culture, science, medicine, arts and building. They were also described by several sources as being “half-fish,” and not the bottom half, but rather the *back half* of these beings were fish bodies, from the back of their heads to the back of their legs.

“A what?” he said, holding back a grin. “A fish?” Then he laughed, and the burst of mirth felt genuine and warm. “Is that what is bothering you? You think I’m a fish?”

“I don’t know. *Are you?* You know what I have to work with. Are those pictures of fish-men or not?”

“No, those are men wearing helmets and cloaks depicting fish. When depicted as full fish, they are down in Enki’s world, which is a water world, underground. They are an artist’s rendition of a world no human will ever see.”

She blushed, but didn’t apologize. “It’s a valid concern, Steven. Don’t look at me like that. I would flip out if I woke up next to a huge fish in my bed. I would probably beat you to death with my alarm clock. Which reminds me, I need to get a new one. It is definitely gone. I checked when I got home from the hospital. No sign of it. I even checked the garage, and that’s a scary place to be alone.”

“Are we good, then?” he asked.

“If you are not a fish. If that’s certain.”

“There were other kinds of Sages, as well,” he said. “There are the eagle kind. The bull kind. And also, a *man kind*. I’m one of these last, a man kind. I have no other shape or form. No wings, no horns, no tail.”

“Just a normal man then,” she said with a dubious tone. “I mean, if you’re not sure, I think it would be best to part ways, than to risk being bludgeoned to death one morning.”

“I’m sure enough to risk certain devastation and injury, yes.”

Chapter 19

They finished making the omelets, which turned out to be amazing. Tastes of spice and sauce with veggies and cheese filled her mouth with pleasure. “That was the best omelet I’ve ever had,” she told him after breakfast, while sitting in the living room among a pile of ancient texts.

The news report in the background was calling the storm a bomb cyclone. Winds reached 90 miles per hour, with gusts up to 110 miles per hour. The beaches of southern California were smashed by the storm, which compressed and intensified due to the atmospheric pressure dropping twenty-four millibars since dawn. Many coastal cities reported flooding and damage from hurricane-level winds. Waves reached twenty feet along the coast, breaking through beach walls and flooding streets.

“You agreed that the storm was more than natural,” she said, as she leaned against his side while he pored over leather bound books that looked like they would turn to dust if even one wind gust reached them.

A grunt of agreement was his only response, his finger whipping back and forth as he scoured for information.

She watched the large viewing screens on the walls change scenes. “But you said you weren’t going to do anything about it, and others wouldn’t either. Why?”

He finally looked up at her, using his finger as a place marker on the page. “Because it’s a storm. Natural enough. Nothing was out there driving it, or building it higher than nature would normally allow. So, if it could be passed off as ‘normal,’ why intervene?” He pulled another book out of the pile. “Besides, we still have more serious matters to attend to.”

That’s right. *Ub*. Curled up here beside him, she almost forgot about her harrowing ordeal with the minor god. But her body still hurt from the withdrawal. She took the pills he handed her. She drank the juice. She downed the scotch, the immediate warmth in her belly spreading and causing her to feel pleasurable sensations throughout. He sensed this and moved close, abandoning his research, his arms enveloping her before pulling her in again and letting his lips brush tenderly against hers. His hand slipped lightly to her shoulder, pausing to gently caress, before sliding into her shirt and kneading against her chest.

His fingers flexed, playing against the fabric of her bra. His lips curled into a slight smile. “Mmm, lace,” he whispered, his lips lightly grazing her earlobe as he unhooked her bra and let the black lacey thing fall to the floor.

She exhaled deeply—that mix of his deep voice, mingled with the freedom of no longer being contained in the lace was driving her wild with need and lust. Her heavy, warm globes heaved slightly as she felt his attention to them, her nipples responding by transitioning into soft, pointed, little pink nubs. Having watched his hands in action in the kitchen earlier had some building effects as well. Rising. She was very much aware of him, in every aspect of “rising.”

“How’s the storm doing?” she asked, pulling back from him when it felt like she would burst into flame any moment. “Sounds like the rain has stopped.”

“Need to go somewhere?”

“Just thought it would be nice to go for a short walk and cool off a touch.”

Steven looked pensive, then changed the subject. “Would you like to stay here tonight?”

“Does that mean you can’t get me home, if I say no?” It was a test question, handed down from father to daughter. “*Never say yes to something you don’t believe you could say no to.*”

He smiled. “Life isn’t that hard. If you want to go home or stay, it’s up to you, but you can’t use the storm as an excuse. I can get you there. Storm or no storm.”

“Immortality has its privileges, huh?” His answer sent a relief through her she didn’t realize she needed. She believed him. The fact that she wanted to believe him, she hoped, was not too much a part of the equation. No, it was his manner. He

was steady, honest, very matter of fact in his words. If that was what she chose, he would take her home, bomb cyclone or not.

“There are a few perks, yeah. Actually, a walk sounds good. The storm broke a while ago. I need a break from all of these ancient texts to get my head right anyway.”

She sat up and studied him. “Have you found anything we can use to contain him?”

“Maybe.” His expression darkened as he drifted further into his thoughts.

Seeing his face made thoughts of her own experience bubble too close to the surface for her comfort. She grabbed his glass of scotch and drained it too. The clink of the empty glass on the table broke him from his rumination.

“So, you’re staying? I want you to stay.” He tightened his grip on her, but only so he could pull her in and press a kiss to her hair.

She knew what would happen if she stayed. Her body ached for it, her mind begged ... and it terrified her. “Let me check my shoes to see if they are dry enough for a walk yet.”

She escaped from view toward the shoes, with no real intention of even looking at them. She just needed space to breathe for a moment. It wasn’t like things were moving too fast. She had been praying to any god who would listen for this to happen. Even though, reflecting on that, it seemed the wrong one answered—she wanted this. It didn’t matter what Ub, masquerading as the Professor, might have done to her in

her mind; she wasn't going to let it take this from her. But she needed more now than she would have before, she couldn't ignore that. She was more vulnerable now. And all of this felt so much more serious than just sex. She shook herself out of her spiral. *I'm going to spend the night with the man I adore, and it's going to be amazing.*

When she came back out into the living room, she said, "They're still soaked in the soles. I don't like to squish when I walk."

"Glad to hear you're staying." He flashed her that smile, and it was no longer up for discussion. There was no way she was leaving this man tonight.

She climbed back onto the couch, stepping around piles of books on her way. Curling up against him, she resisted the urge to continue the foreplay from earlier. They needed to focus. Whether in her head or not, she could feel the cylinder calling out to her from somewhere within the walls of Steven's otherwise comfortable home. It set her teeth to grinding. Of course he would bring it here; logically it would be the safest place for it, here with an immortal sage—lest someone else touch it and become the anchor of a controlling, sexually frustrated god.

Steven began scribbling in what looked like another language, muttering to himself; lost to her for the time being. Without his focus on her, the pull of the cylinder was stronger.

"Heading to the bathroom," she called out, even though he hadn't even noticed she was no longer on the couch. She

padded down the hall toward the bathroom, but the pull came from an unassuming door right before it. She knew it wasn't the bedroom—she had been there already—and had just assumed it to be a linen closet. Scanning the dark hall, she found herself alone, and at the mercy of her still-fragile mind. She told herself she just wanted to see where it was; to know that it was still intact despite its cracked exterior.

The doorknob turned without so much as a click. She envisioned towels, washcloths, maybe extra soaps lining shelves, Ub tucked somewhere in between, waiting for Steven to rehome him. The image was innocent enough that she breathed out a chuckle. The closet door pulled open easily, and she was instead greeted by another door.

What the hell?

This door inside the plain closet door was ornate, carved with swirls and symbols from another time. It was also distinctively smaller, leading her to wonder if there was yet a smaller door beyond this one; the nesting dolls of doors inside his hallway walls.

She turned the handle of the elaborately carved door and a narrow stairway leading down toward a cellar appeared behind it.

The rickety stairs creaked despite her attempts to tread lightly. The dank, earthy smell of underground greeted her before she reached the bottom. She took out her phone flashlight, wielding it like a weapon. As if a string was wrapped around her sternum, she felt pulled forward, the air

thick with foreboding. Standing shelves sat pressed against the stone walls, stocked with vials fitted with cork stoppers and tags. She imagined at least one of them would insist, “drink me.” On a large chest, now directly in front of her, stood three cylinders.

Without hesitating, she knew which one housed Ub. Her brain screamed as her body lurched nearer. *Yes, that’s it* urged the air around her.

Jackie was not convinced the finger extended out toward the bronzed nightmare was hers.

Closer ...

Lights flicked on overhead, casting a harsh fluorescent glow over the cellar, effectively dousing the fire in her brain.

“How did you get down here.”

The words were not so much a question, but a chastisement. Jackie felt her cheeks grow hot as Steven descended the stairs, approaching her. His beautiful lips now pressed in a scowl.

“I felt it ... I followed ... I just wanted to make sure it was still contained ... and then, I don’t know I—”

Thankfully, he cut off her blabbering. “The door was locked. All of the doors were locked.”

She froze in horror as realization dawned. She had heard its voice; *it had paved her way.*

“It still has its claws in you. We may have pulled you out, but the connection is still there, somehow. He’s likely

embedded a piece of himself in your brain like a homing device.”

Jackie was frozen by the grave look in his eyes as they met hers. “We can no longer simply repair the cylinder, or transfer him to another. As long as he exists, you will suffer. Ub must be destroyed.”

Chapter 20

Steven wasted not a moment. Rifling through vials and parchment, he palmed fistfuls of supplies before carving out his workspace on the damp cellar floor.

Vials were portioned, mixed, and drank; herbs and salt rings were drawn intricately on the ground. He appeared to hum with energy, like a magnet beckoning the mystical toward him. He motioned for Jackie to get back. Then he stepped toward the cylinder.

Jackie couldn't bear to just stand back and watch without some idea of his intentions. "What is your plan? You're not going to touch it barehanded like that, are you?"

He was solemn in his response. "He wants an anchor, I'll give him one."

With that, Steven grasped the cylinder firmly and without hesitation. Lights flickered and the shelves wavered, vials threatening to fall and smash to shards around them. Steven's muscles strained, every bit of sinew seemingly visible at the

surface ... but he did not go down like Jackie did. He was powerful, more so than his beautifully sculpted body let on. The shadows on the wall before them grew larger, a faint grin splitting them in the middle. Then, a shadow began to mold around the Cheshire grin, to separate itself from the wall, taking form like a grotesque reflection of Steven. The Professor was gangly, hunched like a barren willow tree, its limbs much too long.

The resemblance to Steven was a poorly constructed dupe. Jackie silently chided herself for never realizing. Every inch of *the Professor* oozed malice, contempt, a yearning for control. His shadow form became more solid, more inhuman and grotesque. She gasped at the sight of him.

The Professor heard her ... maybe even smelled her ... turned his attention from Steven and locked it on Jackie, cowering by the stairs. His daggered fingers reached out for her, growing with the urge to capture and control her once more.

Jackie watched as they reached for her throat, ready to succumb to her fate. A flash of orange made contact first, slicing through the spindly fingers.

Ub, the Professor, released an unnatural howl in response to Malkin's attack. The distraction allowed Steven to regain control—rolling his shoulders back, arms at his sides, palms raised, eyes to the ceiling—he inhaled a full breath before casting glowing eyes onto Ub. He began chanting.

*“ib-da-sa u-lil-la **dinana-kam!** ib-su de-ib-su **dinana-kam!**”*

Ub’s solid Professor form began reverting back to shadow as he writhed and howled. Steven’s glowing eyes ripped holes into him, shredding the shadow of a minor god with his mystical glare and invocations.

The howling grew weaker until all that was left was the sound of Steven’s chanting. Then silence blanketed the cellar.



image-placeholder

Jackie and Steven sat upstairs in his bedroom in a comfortable silence, both quietly processing the events in the cellar. Jackie no longer felt restless, no longer suffering from aches and addiction. Steven's body language was stoic but inside he was reassuring himself of Jackie's safety, of her beautiful body sitting on the bed next to him. He decided to be the one to break the silence.

“Have you let Brandy know you won't be home tonight?”

She stared at him quizzically. “My ... doll? Is that something you think girls do?”

He shook his head, frowning. “You have a doll named after your roommate?”

“I don't have a doll named Terry.”

Confusion was steering this conversation. He tried again, “I don't know who Terry is, but I met Brandy in the hospital. She told me she has lived with you forever, she even read to you for over two hours.”

Jackie stared back at him, wide-eyed. “I can't even begin to unpack that right now.”

Another silent moment passed between them before she spoke. “Thank you for saving me. I mean, you *destroyed a god* because it was haunting me. I don't know how I could even begin to repay you.”

He stared at her captivating face, knowing there was nothing he wouldn't have done to protect her. His eyes

traveled down her neck, her full breasts still unbound beneath her shirt. He didn't need repayment from her, he just needed *her*.

Without warning, Steven swooped her off her spot and on top of him in one swift motion. His hands became lost in her hair as he pulled her face down to meet his. As their lips connected, he leaned further back, pulling her down with him. He untangled a hand from her hair, stroking down her neck, grabbing all his palm could hold of one perfect breast, then sliding further down till his fingers found her.

There was no need for talking or being coy, they had survived, together, and their relief played out in the needy, passionate handling of one another. He teased her clit through her jeans, then flipped her so he was now on top, now in control. Her surprised squeal melted into moans as his hands and lips worshiped her. Stripping her of blue jeans, panties, and shirt, he exposed all of her to him. His fingers found their spot once again, sliding in and out of her as his mouth nipped at her breasts then traveled back up her throat.

Jackie groaned in anticipation, ripping impatiently at the button of his jeans, trying to shimmy them down his hips as his smile broke out against her lips.

Steven pulled away and smirked, "I'm not finished with you yet." Then he lowered his mouth between her legs, taking his time, tormenting her with waiting as he enjoyed every second of it. The desperation and need on her face almost sent him

over the edge, and he dove in hungrily, his tongue flicking as his fingers entered and exited in rhythm.

A thrumming began inside Jackie. A rhythm of syncopated beats and tidal currents built until she was an inch from release and begging for Steven to keep going. Her whole body vibrated and tensed, before releasing in a stream of endorphins and euphoria.

Jackie had barely caught her breath before he took it away again by stripping himself bare and climbing over her. His hands grabbed at her in a way that was all at once possessive and protected. She was his now, and he was hers.

Between her thighs he entered her, her body arching up toward him before he gripped her cheeks for leverage, thrusting into her. With a feral joy she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him into her, squeezing with every muscle she had to squeeze him with. Her head against the bed, her back lifted off, she looked up into his eyes and saw primitive rapture cracking his calm. Her moan was liquid victory.

Chapter 21

She woke to her alarm. *Her* alarm. Her noisy, angry, snarling alarm clock and her hand flew out from the covers and snatched it off the nightstand. “Gotcha,” she hissed with a victorious whisper, as she turned off the alarm.

Making as little noise as possible, and shaking the mattress as little as possible, she slipped out of bed. The alarm clock wasn’t plugged into the wall.

“Are you really trying not to wake me up after that *fiend from hell* called you from the nether world? You’re adorable.”

She blushed. “Sorry.”

She hurried out the door and into the living room. After setting the alarm clock on the couch, she closed the bedroom door, and then returned to her clock. “I’m very happy you came back. I feel I owe you an apology. I thought you abandoned me, and here you were trying to wake me up.”

The alarm clock said nothing.

The day outside was changing from purples and dark clouds to blues and fluffy streams of vapor. She pondered her clock. “You must be able to understand on some level. Right? I mean, you acted. And you came back, which I’m grateful for. I would not want to try the next two years relying on some new gadget or phone app. I need you.”

“I might be able to help,” Malkin said from beside her feet. “If you’ll use your thumbs to open a breakfast can for me, I’d be happy to try.”

“You speak *alarm clock*?” Jackie raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“I speak everything.”

She got up from the couch, after patting her alarm clock softly. “I suppose I’m glad you don’t have thumbs then, Malkin.” She turned toward the kitchen, and the cat feast waiting to manifest.

“Why’s that?” Malkin asked, quick stepping beside her; eyes and ears piqued from her story, legs snipping like scissors.

“Because you’d probably rule the world by now, and I’d never get to see you. You’d be off all the time attending important matters of state; buying all of Madagascar and moving it to Brazil. Maybe I would see you on TV.” She was in a good mood. No, it was threatening to be a great mood. Even if a bit fairytale-ish, what with the over-protective appliances and talking, vanishing cat. She expected an animated blue bird or white rabbit to come darting across the scene next.

“Why would I buy Madagascar?” he asked from beside her; looking up with serious intention.

“I’m just thinking big for you Malkin,” Jackie teased.

Seeming appeased with that, he landed with a casual leap on the counter. “Over here, in this one,” he said, standing and pawing at a counter door. “The chicken please.”

“You got it. Did you sleep well after slashing a vengeful god for me?” Jackie brought his bowl to the counter and filled it with the can of cat food.

“Pretty good. I came down earlier, but you were in the bedroom.”

Jackie felt her face redden. “We should find a method of doling out snacks when that happens.” *Any moment that animated flock of birds is gonna come smashing through the windows. I just know it.*

“You think it will happen often?”

She washed and tossed the empty can in the recycling, then set his bowl on the ground. Straightening up, she leaned back against the counter, her eyes dreamy with the memories of last night.

Malkin sat beside his bowl, still focused on her, waiting for an answer.

She sighed, and bent to give him a scruff behind the ears, “I think so, Malkin. I hope you don’t mind rooming with my, apparently, very talkative doll.”

He made a noise that might have been the feline version of “*huh*.” Then bent to begin his breakfast. After a few bites he added, “As long as you don’t bring any more creepy gods around, I’d be happy to.”

Briefly, she panicked over the idea that it couldn’t be that easy. What if she was being naïve and overly expectant? Giving someone rolling orgasms didn’t automatically qualify them to move into your house.

But what did Steven tell her last night, that “*Life wasn’t that hard*.” Was life that hard? He told her to stay. Did it need to be harder than that? Previous experience screamed an astounding, *yes*. But in all the ways those relations were incompatible, he fit.

The bedroom door opened, and Steven walked into the kitchen. Immediately he wrapped Jackie in his arms and greeted her with a gentle kiss.

Her previous trepidation disappeared with his assuring manner. He was hers, and she was his. It didn’t need to be more complicated than that.