

Fifty Shades of Green



Edited by
Cheri Colburn

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Greenwoman Publishing
Colorado Springs, Colorado, U. S. A.

*I hope you
have fun reading
these stories!*

XX4

*Sandra
Kraus*

GREENWOMAN BOOKS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead is entirely coincidental.



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From the Publisher

The seed for this book would not have germinated and grown to maturity without the humor, talent, and enthusiasm of talented writers and good friends. One of these friends is our esteemed editor, Cheri Colburn. Thank you, lusty ladies and men (the others know who they are), for cheering me on during yet another unique publishing venture.

It is often thankless work to be a writer, no less a writer who is daring enough to put their talents and energies into erotic literature. I started this project knowing little about the genre. I studied and thought deeply about this project and even tried writing a few stories myself, as it was only fitting, as a writer, to try out the form (something I would *highly* recommend to every writer out there). What I have found, of course, is that erotica writers are a brave, brazen, romantic, imaginative, and full-of-heart group. In other words, exactly like writers in any other genre. I greatly admire your stories and feel honored to publish them here.

Sandra Knauf
Greenwoman Publishing

Introduction

Good day, reader, and welcome to our garden of naughty delights. I feel certain that a walk through these pages—like a walk through any garden—will tantalize and inspire.

Who of us does not remember our first? Our first love. Our first germinating seeds. Let us begin in the freshness of new beginnings, with germination stories. “Phallus Impudicus” by Rebekah leads the way. In this story, a woman hoping for a new lover finds a divine way to reinvigorate her sex life and her garden.

Many people find that erotic experiences inspire creativity in other areas. (For example, we hope that the eroticism of this collection will inspire your gardening efforts.) See what happens when an artist takes up residence next to a community garden in “Seed” by Michael Bracken.

Our early experiences, both gardening and erotic, can be quite formative. But can a sexual adventure at a university garden overcome a young man’s cynicism and inspire his future? Step into Simone Martel’s story “First Take Off the Hoodie” to find out.

Another tale of initiation—the creation of a gardener—comes to the collection via Becky Trachsel in “The Education of a French Gardener.” In this story, an earthy older woman initiates a college-age neighbor using sensuous gardening secrets.

Once new love has taken root, we often find ourselves struggling with nature in ways both sweet and anything but. In “Lady Sally Rudston-Chichester and the Walled Garden” by Slave Nano, a patch of land is reclaimed even as a young man’s peculiar sexual appetites are cultivated. Power, humiliation, seduction: discover more behind the wall.

As you emerge, behold “The Judgment of Eric” by Andrew Peters, an erotic encounter involving competing gods and their puzzled, mortal judge. How does one decide which of two lovers is “better”? Explore this question—and apply your mind to a bit of a riddle along the way.

The ultimate struggle is between life and death. Gardeners participate in this drama when they remove old growth to make room for new. Such is the undertaking of a virile young man in the next story, "Love Lies Bleeding" by Janine Ashbless.

In our struggle with nature, sometimes we triumph. In "Lavished" by R. R. S., which takes place in 1700s England, a misogynist academician seems to control everything—his own impulses, his wife's behavior, even his new greenhouse. But nature's eroticism may be more than one man can tame.

Some of our most satisfying human experiences stem from working with, not against, natural forces. The power of this collaboration comes through in our next story, "The Pulse of the Earth" by Evey Brett. In this tale, set in Spanish Colonial America, a wise priest uses plant knowledge to help an injured traveler.

In our next two selections, inflamed young lovers seek herbal potions. See what a young man discovers in "The Rosewitch" by T. C. Mill. Then compare his results with those of a young woman on a similar mission in "Sunlight and Water" by Colleen Chen. You might come away with magical insights of your own.

When we are lucky, the hot summer ends with harvest. See how the bounty plays out in our last story, "Exploding Alfalfa," by Gloria Holden. This one might inspire you toward a quick roll in the hay, or it might plant seeds for next season.

A line from Becky Trachsel's "The Education of a French Gardener" seems particularly insightful now: "The chopped vine of one summer becomes the mulch of winter and the food of lettuce in spring. . . ." I hope the stories in *Fifty Shades of Green* nourish your connection with the sensuous, creative forces that propel us into the next season and the next erotic encounter.

Cheri Colburn

Dedication

To all the lusty gardeners.



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A flower's fragrance declares to all the world that it is fertile, available, and desirable, its sex organs oozing with nectar. Its smell reminds us in vestigial ways of fertility, vigor, life-force, all the optimism, expectancy, and passionate bloom of youth. We inhale its ardent aroma and, no matter what our ages, we feel young and nubile in a world aflame with desire.

—Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*

Phallus Impudicus



"There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."

—Oscar Wilde

It began innocently in a guise that was not innocent at all.

Carol woke from a vaguely erotic dream—strange lips nuzzling a stranger's stiffening nipples—to screaming blue jays. Looking out for the source of the ruckus, she gasped at the revelation. A multitude of large, knobby-tipped mushrooms had sprouted overnight in her backyard, embarrassing in their likeness to phalluses.

"Oh my god, Janice, you won't believe what I am looking at," she left a message on a friend's phone. "I've got a field of penises. Wild penises. Well, are there any other kinds? I'll send you a photo from my phone."

Gingerly she stepped around them, chortling with amazement at the spectacle. Like the real thing, they even had an odor. She learned from Google that they would depart as inexplicably as they arrived. In the meantime she took them to be more than a botanical surprise—an omen perhaps?

Phallus impudicus, known colloquially as the common stinkhorn, is a widespread fungus recognizable for its foul odor and long white shafts when mature, the latter feature giving rise to several names in 17th-century England . . . Botanist John Gerard called it the "pricke mushroom". . . Impudicus is derived from the Latin for "shameless" or "immodest."

Reading further, she learned that Charles Darwin's sister was appalled by the fungi. Darwin's granddaughter wrote,

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"Aunt Etty . . . armed with a basket and a pointed stick, and wearing a special hunting cloak and gloves" would set out to search for the mushrooms. After collecting them, she brought them home where she "burned them in the deepest secrecy on the drawing room fire, with the door locked—because of the morals of the maids."

July

The garden languished, drooping in a spell of spiteful drought. She watered dawn and dusk, but nothing planted by her hand seemed happy to live. The once boisterously fertile front yard garden withered before her red-rimmed eyes, an illustration of her own flagging vitality.

It was minutes after she poured herself a rum and cola in the middle of a Saturday afternoon that she heard the wind rummage wildly through her backyard. Lightning crackled and ended in a boom that made her jump. She peered out the patio door to see it had split the little jockey statue in two. Don had left it behind when he abandoned her for a younger honey; and she had hauled it to the 'unwanted pile' out back. "Racist bastard," she murmured with satisfaction at the sight. Rain followed, sizzling with a vengeance.

Carol then felt oddly horny. Her thoughts strayed to the little Moroccan sex toy an ancient aunt brought back from travels, completely innocent to its purpose (she had used it as a paperweight) when she gifted it to her niece. Carol kept the thing beneath the pillow on Don's side of the bed for easy access. It was thick white porcelain with blue raised scrawl of exotic letters around its side, rounded and pouty as a young breast, even ending in a red tip. Amazing in the way its sides hugged the inner labia, its point aimed for her own hard tip, eager to meet the keen intruder . . .

A rapping at the front door startled her. She usually checked before she opened it, but this time, flustered by the storm's recent vandalism and her inexplicable fantasy, she rushed to open it.

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A dark man loomed before her; at least 6 feet 4 inches, imposingly strong, black eyes staring confidently into her widening ones.

"You called me."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm the one you need."

"Look, I know the house looks bad right now, but I don't want any roofing."

"Your garden?" His round soft lips curled in derision as he turned to peer back at the sad mess.

It occurred to her that she could use someone with muscle to take some things out and put others in. And that he was getting drenched yet didn't seem to care. "Why don't you come round to the patio before you drown?"

The rain was making a racket on the patio's metal awning. He headed instead straight for the detached mud room before she could get his attention. She followed him breathlessly into the doorless shanty.

"This is good," he said peering around the shadowy, spider-webbed structure. He seemed most interested in the old chaise longue in a neglected corner. "I can stay here."

Before she could protest his presumption she had to ask, "What is that smell?" It wasn't exactly unpleasant; definitely musky. Earth, absolutely, but also sky, the salt of a slow-moving river, and something darker. Nothing in the mud room could have smelled so rich and dense, so vital you could plant dirty thoughts in it and they would become a screaming jungle.

It was him.

Without answering, he took her in with his penetrating gaze. He took in the awkward silence around her, the helpless way she opened her door to him and how she now stood with her back against the tool bench, frightened mouth agape. He sniffed the air and smelled her too: the warm juices of her awakened muff.

He smiled slowly, deeply, in return.

"What is your name?" she mouthed the words.

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His mouth made the sound of a cry, half-wolf, half-elk, and the hair rose on her arms and the back of her neck. Then he said to elaborate, "Pan."

"Pan? The god of Nature?"

"I am here for you," he said by way of explanation in a voice like the deep echo of waterfalls. "Everything is going to change."

A few days later she found him in the back flowerbeds crying. It was a Sunday morning when you could hear singing from the church down the street.

"I guess Christianity upsets you?" she asked carefully. He was, after all, a pagan deity.

He shook the massive head and came close to speak to her. "It reminds me."

"Of what?"

"A time long before this one when the virgins sang to me."

His tears fell again. Wild poppies immediately sprang up where they landed.

"Stop, I don't want those growing here," she said. "Tell me: why did they sing?"

"They wanted the honor of Pan deflowering them and no mortal man. Their singing drew me like your desire drew me. I became their Lover and nothing was ever the same again."

Carol led him to the mud room and he followed her every silent desire, reading it as easily as he did the roots of plants, the flocks of geese, and the bark of trees.

Straddling him on the chaise longue, she felt it break under their combined reckless weight. She didn't care. His hands were like warm earth on her quivering body. His lips and tongue were as persistent and focused on her sex as a wild boar's snout in a hillock of black truffles.

She peeled off his pants. Carol's mind reeled at It. His cock wasn't any garden variety (pun intended). It started as one cock but its head was dual, each as large as a lily bulb. Her mind could not take it in.

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But her pussy could. So ready she was that she nearly sucked it inside. The sensation was indescribable. The two heads were of the width to perfectly fill the entrance and rock her waiting clitoris from below and from the inside. As one head dove deeper, the other remained at that shallow precipice of desire, stroking against her secret head, a diabolical prison of constant arousal and insatiable satisfaction.

What was it that Don had snidely written her in his last email? *I hope you overcome that frigidity of yours.* Just needed the right lover, she thought, grinning.

Now she was not Carol, 49-year-old divorcee worried about her future; now she was a mortal woman moving beneath a man who uncovered in her a wildness that surprised even her. She had become the Earth, its valleys and mountains rushing to life at the breath of Pan, his Magic still evident in every stone and cloud and bird.

Lust was replaced with an ancient and primal joy that could not be contained. With a voice like a hundred virgins from another time, she cried . . . a kind of song.

August

Janice had to come by. She had noticed her friend's frequent laughter, sly innuendos, and slowed, relaxed breathing on the phone.

"You met someone," she intuited during a call.

"You could say that."

"I just did. So give it up. Is it that brother-in-law of the nerdy woman at work? The one whose wife died?"

"Heavens, no. That guy's an accountant or something. This man is, well, a little more physical."

"Okay, I have to see him. I am coming over. Today."

Carol chuckled. "Knock yourself out."

Driving down the crab-treed street to her friend's home, Janice noticed something strange. All the women on the

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street were outside. Some were digging in the earth or watering, others were sweeping driveways, and a few just sat on the front steps staring into space. In the direction of Carol's house.

All had bemused dreamy looks on their empty faces.

"Oh my God!" Janice cried when she pulled up in Carol's driveway. She did not recognize at first the emerald glade before her. Flowers tumbled over vines of vegetables over tassels of corn over sunflowers and on and on. "Honey, is that an azalea?" she pointed to a huge flowering bush near the door. "They don't grow here, and if they did, it would be the wrong season."

Carol hugged her friend. "I know, I know. Things are a little wild here. I had to pull out bleeding hearts today that sprung up wild. Wild! Can you believe it? It's an embarrassment of riches."

"I've never seen you looking so good. And your garden! Who helped you? This man? Oh, I see." What she saw was his massive naked back tapering to a small waist, the shaggy dark hair of his head lying about his great shoulders as he worked, kneeling, in a side bed. "Can he work in my bed?" Janice deadpanned.

Carol whispered. "He's unbelievable. He's been in a few beds beside mine, but who cares? I couldn't possibly keep him satisfied. Not more than three times a day."

"Get out! What's his name? Where does he come from?"

At this he stood up, his animal ears hearing everything behind him. Janice stared shamelessly at his flat stomach, its dark fur curling above the gaping buttoned trousers, tight against an insistent bulge that threatened to break out from its leather confinement.

"I am Pan," he boomed.

"Pan—cho," Carol quickly explained. "To friends, he goes by—just Pan."

"Oh," Janice giggled like a schoolgirl. "How stereotypical of you, Carol, a Mexican gardener. But so tall."

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"I am from everywhere," he continued. "I live in all places at all times."

"He's a drifter. Just came up to the door one day. Isn't that right, Pan. I mean, Pan-cho?"

He was staring into Janice's eyes. "Do you have a garden?"

"Me? Not me, no, just a lot of grass, and, actually, a big bush that needs some work," she rambled, reddening. "Well, not *that* kind of bush—it's outdoors, some kind of wild bush, but it puts out these pretty pink flowers and I, uh, never have really taken good care of it, you know what I mean?"

He continued to stare. A trail of sweat meandered down his browned pectorals toward the inviting gap below. "I would like to smell your wild bush," he offered.

"Okay, folks, this party's over. Janice, I am so sorry but I am waiting for an important work call. Don't you need to be somewhere?"

"No, I'll keep Pancho company while you're busy," she said robotically.

Carol couldn't help noticing that Janice's blouse had unbuttoned itself from the top just from the sweltering gaze of Pan. In a half hour beneath his eyes, she would be nude in her front yard.

She took Janice's arm firmly and moved her toward her car. "Call me later," she whispered to her glowing friend. "Make that tomorrow. You got him all heated up again. It's going to take another 'session' to calm him down."

"Can't we spray him with the hose?" Janice begged. "Together?" She closed her eyes against the image of those impossibly tight pants tighter and wet.

"Take your own damned cold shower," Carol hissed like a cat in heat as she shut Janice's car door. This wasn't like her at all. "*He's mine.*"

October

The warm rains of summer had been replaced with the freezing winds of fall.

Lovely squash blossoms, optimistic even at the end of September, urgently pushed themselves into wan little freaks of indeterminate nature, stunted and then aborted by the frost.

"Yoo-hoo," it was Janice at the door. "Hello? Anybody home? ANYBODY HOME?"

A disheveled Carol opened it. "Sorry. Couldn't hear you over the TV."

The World Wide Wrestling Federation blared from inside. Pancho sprawled on the couch, one hand beneath the waist of his pajama bottoms, entranced by the match.

"He's been like that for days," murmured Carol.

"What's up with you? You look awful."

She shrugged. "All I do is run and fetch him more St. Polly Girl. And Whoopee Pies."

"What?"

"He likes the labels on the beer. Thinks it's full of *the tender juices of those pictured maidens*."

"Weird. And the Whoopee Pies?"

"Anything with a cream filling." She sighed and looked ten years older. "Except me."

Janice enfolded her in a motherly embrace. "Oh, honey. I am so sorry."

Carol snuffled back the tears. "I knew it had to end someday. But not like this."

A belch erupted from the shambling beast on the couch.

She turned to address him. "Would you please get your feet off my table?"

"More golden leaves!" He shouted back.

Carol looked at Janice. "He means corn chips. That's his second favorite thing. Anything that's salty."

Janice finished the pitiful thought. "Except you."

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"What am I supposed to do?" Carol asked. "How do you get rid of someone like him? Do I call the sheriff? Would he end up killing an officer of the law?" Her eyes were small and milky from the stress of sleepless nights.

"Carol, I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Please, stay; I don't want to be alone with him."

"My advice is—call Immigration. Or a biker gang that works cheap. He looks like he could be a handful. Honey, are those his feet?"

She had seen them clearly: the massive muscular calves ending in shaggy furred ankles and blackest hooves.

"Hah! Those are the funny slippers I bought him. You better hurry along. Bye!"

Carol retrieved another giant bag of snack food and delivered it to Pan. He hardly looked up. "Have you been next door?" she couldn't help asking the question that had been on her mind for days.

"Uhhh," he grunted in assent.

"Just as I thought," she snarled. "I heard their teen-aged girl singing. And then she stopped. You were gone that night. Deflower another virgin, did you?"

He raised a mammoth arm and scratched the black tumbleweed beneath it. The stench that swirled out of it made her face contort.

"That is the last maidenhead you will add to your count here!" she announced.

And so it was. He vanished the next day.

April again

The foothills around Lost Creek were bewitching this time of year when grass began to tuft celery green and wildflowers unfurled like declarations of unrequited love.

Carol hiked alone, relishing her strong legs, their contact with the solid ground, welcomed by the silence of trees beginning to wake up.

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At 50 she had to rest more often on an uphill stretch. She curled down into a boulder for a moment, sniffing the air like a raven, enjoying its freshness, raw with recent rain.

It was then, in that wild place, that she felt him, a passing breeze. Invisible as he usually is on Earth, he roamed familiarly over her body, making its secret places rise to him in old homage. She felt him like a rush of hot blood to her sex, opening all her doors, taking her by surprise. *The way of instinct*, she mused. *The way an innocent doe knows it is time to be mounted.*

And then the sensation of him was gone as ephemerally as it had visited.

She considered the new man in her life, the brother-in-law of that nerdy woman at work. He was an underwriter for an insurance company, a church-going Catholic, but good with his hands and fixing things around her house. Not so bad really.

Maybe he would stick around. She didn't care too much one way or another.

She knew something now that she hadn't understood about herself before.

She was the Earth. Pan had been her lover. He would always be her lover.

She was okay and would always be okay. No matter the finitude, the imperfections of it all—earth, life, love, herself.

She laughed and listened to the echo.

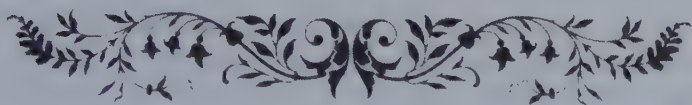
Thunder answered like a lover's agreement.

It was time to climb back down.



Rebekah is a published nonfiction author and award-winning short-fiction writer. Living in Colorado Springs, she is also a zealous front-yard organic gardener and instructor in using the moon's phases to stimulate a better harvest.

First, Take Off the Hoodie



If the nude man in the pear tree hadn't surprised us—inspired us—the day would've gone very differently. And that would have been a pity.

Hard to believe now that I was a touch disappointed in the way it began. The university sent a techie in a Tesla to pick me up at the Palo Alto train station. (I would've preferred to make my triumphant return in a red convertible driven by—me.) Brad was tall, slim, vampire-pale, in jeans and a gray hoodie, cute, with cropped black hair and penetrating blue eyes. He came off as conspicuously brainy, but with a disapproving, almost prim air about him as he stood beside the Tesla in the autumnal California sun, waiting for me to step down from the train.

"I'm supposed to make sure you're happy," he said, as I slid into the back seat. "And congratulations. They're naming the wing after you, huh? I didn't even know we had an archaeology department."

"Thanks," I said, ignoring the implied slight. "And the courtyard garden, too. That's more exciting. I designed it."

"Why archaeology?"

The way his pale, sensitive hands touched the steering wheel, I could see his long fingers twitching over a keyboard. The kid was a computer science major, for sure.

"We need to understand the past to make a better future."

"Do we though? Okay. Why gardening?"

"Professionally, I must dig with a paintbrush. For fun, I dig with a shovel and trowel."

"Can't say I understand the point of hobbies. And nature is overrated."

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Right then, I decided I'd see Brad with dirt under his nails before sunset.

As we started along Palm Drive, I put down the windows in the Tesla, determined to enjoy myself and relax before my speech. The shaggy tops and smooth trunks of the Canary Island palms punctuated the two long, straight miles cutting through the campus.

"Isn't that what TaskRabbit's for?" His sharp-nosed face looked back at me in the rearview mirror. "You pay someone else less money than you make to do the dumb stuff that distracts you from your work. If you need your yard fixed up or your house cleaned or your dog walked. . . ."

I threw my arms back over my head—undignified, but what did I care? Thighs apart, skirt hitched up over my knees, I lolled back on the leather seat admiring the cloudless blue sky.

"But I *like* to walk my dog."

We rolled toward the plaza and the memorial church with its flat facade of glittering gold mosaic. Gold, I reflected—my gold—had brought me back to Stanford. Two decades ago, I'd been a first-generation college student, supported by a hefty scholarship. No wonder I smiled at those familiar sandstone arcades.

In the courtyard garden, I speechified, and the vice-provost accepted my donation. It was all so civilized: raked gravel and neat borders where ruby-throated hummingbirds flitted among red trumpet vine and orange crocosmia. Nicely dressed people on folding chairs applauded when it was over, and I returned to the Tesla, sitting in front now, with Brad.

"That's over! Take me to the garden. The farm on The Farm?" He'd never heard of the school's community garden.

"Sounds hippie-dippy. You sure it's still there?"

He seemed dubious, but followed my directions, driving toward the edge of campus, away from Palo Alto.

"There's the stable!" I peered out at my favorite places, landscapes more sunbaked and blowsy than the irrigated and

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sharply edged central campus we'd left behind. "We're nearly there."

We left the car under a live oak and, crunching over acorns, followed a dirt path. It wasn't long before we heard the low gossipy sounds of chickens. I sniffed air scented with mulch and manure and something herbal.

"Rosemary . . . lavender . . . Come on!"

We emerged in a gloriously messy garden with raised beds barely containing sprawling squash and pumpkin vines, hulking tomato plants that had seen better days, prickly blue-flowered borage, and yellow nasturtiums. Straw-strewn paths, soft underfoot, muffled our steps. I breathed in perfume from small lemon trees and the floral fug of ripe and overripe fruit.

"This feels like home."

"What a dump."

Farther in, we padded past piles of wood chips, heaps of empty pots, the chicken coop.

"I bet you used to smoke weed here."

Did he sound jealous? "Waste of time, I know."

By a big-leaved, knobby fig tree, a small pond winked in the partial shade. Around it sat battered patio furniture and around that a curving row of taller fruit trees.

"Apple, apple." I pointed. "Quince, pear . . ."

Brad saw him first. "Oh, wow."

In the pear tree, a nude man picked fruit. His bare feet grasped a lower limb. My eyes moved up his ankles and tanned calves and thighs, lingered on tanned, round butt cheeks. I watched him reach up among the pale green leaves to harvest the gilded pears hanging on fragile branches near the top of the tree. Sun-streaked hair hung down his muscular back as he raised his face to the fruit. When he turned to gently toss one, two, three pears into a basket at the base of the tree, he flashed us straw-colored pubic hair and a substantial, swinging penis. The mirrored sunglasses glinting on his tanned face made him all the more naked.

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As I stared at the nude man, I became aware of tall, slim Brad beside me in his jeans and gray hoodie, aware of him as a separate person with a body of his own and his own perceptions, mysterious, unknown. My bare arm lifted itself away from the side of my dress, hesitated, then pressed up against his hand. I felt smoothness, skin that had never touched a shovel. Then the back of his hand returned the pressure, warm against my elbow.

The nude guy jumped lightly down from the tree and tossed me the last pear. Brad's hand was gone, withdrawn and plunged into his jean's pocket, his face averted. The nude guy slipped into a tiny pair of faded denim cutoffs, zipping them over his bulging crotch, and poked his feet into some flip-flops. His bike leaned against a shed with cracking red paint. Before he threw his leg over it, he nodded to a basket of bulbs on the straw-strewn ground.

"Wanna help out? You could plant the daffs."

"Have they been properly pre-chilled?" I asked severely.

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned before bumping away on his bike over the undulating path, the basket of pears balanced in front of him, his long hair flying back.

"Wonder what he's going to do with the fruit."

"Waste of effort." Brad scowled. "All this. No wonder it's a mess, most students don't even know it's here."

I bit into the pear the nude guy had thrown to me. Warm, sweet, crunchy. "Intoxicating."

I instantly, urgently, wanted to remove my clothes. I took two more bites and held out the pear to Brad, offering it in my right hand, palm up, fingers curled around the half-eaten fruit. I could see the blue veins in my wrist and wondered if he could, too.

"Nooo."

"Eat. You're supposed to keep me happy. That's what the letter from the department said."

While he bit into the pear, I unzipped my dress and let it fall, then kicked off my shoes. In my slip, I exhaled, closed my eyes, felt my bare feet flat on the warm, rough mulch.

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“What’re you doing?”

“Can’t plant bulbs in my fancy dress.” I opened my eyes. “Come on, grab that shovel by the shed. First, take off the hoodie.”

Brad bit into the pear again, thoughtfully, tossed away the core and nodded. He pulled the gray cotton hoodie over his head, then, unbidden, peeled off the tight, obscure-logo T-shirt under it. He was as creamy white as a calla lily but surprisingly buff, with a thick neck, round shoulders, a small patch of dark hair on his chest and, when he sucked in, a four-pack. He drew up tall, smiled at me and exhaled. “I do work out.”

“Indoors.”

“Obviously.”

“Pants.”

He rolled his eyes, but obeyed. He wore sky-blue, skintight boxer briefs.

“Keep the shoes on.” Where should we plant the daffodils? “Dig a trench *there*.” I narrowed my eyes at the row of small lemon trees in wine barrels. Brad bent over, foot on shovel, and broke into the earth. From the pear tree’s shade, I watched his thighs work, his butt stretching the blue boxers, a flush breaking out on his upper back and big shoulders. After a few minutes, I slipped my feet into my shoes again and went into the shed to look for another shovel. The hot, still air smelled dusty, of peat moss and potting soil. Beside the tool rack, unfinished plywood shelves held an assortment of items—seeds and bulbs, beer, books, candles and matches, even condoms.

I left the shed with a splintery-handled shovel.

“*Watching* is overrated,” I said, returning to Brad.

Together we dug that trench quickly, throwing the soft black earth to the side. We both bent forward, facing each other, our arms working with the same rhythm. I saw him look at my breasts, loose in my slip. My nipples rubbed against the silky fabric and hardened. I caught his eye and we paused in our work a moment, looking at each other

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curiously. Then, smiling to ourselves, we both returned to digging, leaning into the shovels, then pulling back to pitch aside the dirt.

"I have a muscle-memory," he began in a formal way, though out of breath. "Of going to the park with my friends and moving rocks in the creek, trying to make a dam."

"I did that! Never worked, but it was fun getting wet and muddy."

Brad smeared a dirty hand across his pale forehead.

"Sand castles, too," I said. "Built by young engineers."

"My roommate wants to be a civil engineer. He's an idiot."

"Why?"

"The world may need new bridges, but not really *new* bridges. Software engineering can still remake the world." His dark hair stood up from his sweaty forehead in short spikes. He seemed younger this way, though not *too* young.

"What the hell is that?" He stared down into the trench.

"What?" I'd been staring at his handsome face, his throat, his bare shoulders. "What's what?"

I looked down, too.

"An earthworm, silly. I thought you'd seen a tarantula."

The worm wriggled down into the soft soil and disappeared.

"The bulbs?"

Brad fetched the basket, holding it to his chest, and frowned down into the trench. "Looks like a grave."

"And the bulbs look dead to you?"

"They do."

I cupped one, with its dry and papery base, and handed it to him "Point up," I instructed.

After we'd planted them and pushed back the soil and patted it down, we retreated to the shade by the pond. By tomorrow, Brad's fair skin would likely be the same shrimp-pink of my favorite Oriental poppy.

"Wait."

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He was about to throw himself down on an old chaise longue with a frayed and ripped cushion. Reaching under, I unfastened the Velcro straps that held the cushion attached to the metal frame, then I flipped the cushion over.

“Now.”

“Come *on*.” He smiled skeptically.

“Now!”

He tilted his head, seemed to think, then shrugged and stretched out his white body on the brown cushion. At once I fastened the straps around his ankles, then, throwing his arms over his head, secured them around his wrists. The sun-rotted fabric tore a bit as he pretended to struggle.

Kneeling between his feet at the bottom of the chaise longue, I pulled down his boxer briefs. His penis bobbed up out of the black pubic hair to greet me. His head, however, turned sideways on the cushion. He squeezed shut his eyes and smiled hard. “Don’t hurt me.”

“Now, where’s that worm?”

“No!”

Leaving the chaise for a moment, I pawed through the compost pile, extracting a long, pink segmented worm that curled up on itself as I ferried it through the air and lowered it onto Brad’s firm white belly. His eyes popped open when he felt the cold damp worm wriggling near his public hair.

“Take it off!”

“It’s just a little worm.” I replaced it in the compost and wiped the smudge of dirt off Brad’s belly, then squeezed his penis. I sucked it until it filled my mouth, and scraped it with just a bit of teeth.

“Ow!”

I crawled up over his body until we were face to face. Then I pressed my hands over his wrists on the metal frame.

“You have dirt under your nails,” I said with satisfaction.

“That’s your fault.”

I let the straps of my slip slide down off my shoulders, setting my breasts free. Then I brushed the tip of my right breast across his face and lips. He opened his mouth and

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licked, sucked the nipple, then reached with his face for my left breast and sucked harder.

“Ow!”

I ripped the constraints from around his wrists and then felt his hand pushing down my slip, pressing on my bare back. His other hand moved down my waist, gripping my bum through my undies, then fingering its way inside. I pulled them off quickly, tossing them onto the ground—or into the pond, for all I knew.

His smooth palm squeezed my butt cheek, while his sensitive fingertip probed inside. He continued to nuzzle my breasts, then kissed my lips. I wasn’t expecting to feel so much. His finger was in my ass, his tongue flicking into my mouth. I had pulled myself onto his right leg and was humping his thigh, pressing my groin against him, on the edge of coming.

As he flexed his legs, I heard a tearing sound as he pulled free of the ankle straps. Then we exchanged places, twisting like seals, maybe, or some other graceful underwater creatures. He knelt on the cushion and poked his cock in my face, so I sucked some more, taking it all the way into my mouth and peering up at his long white torso. He pulled out of my mouth and slid down my body until he knelt at the bottom of the chaise with his head between my legs. He kissed my thighs, nuzzled me, began to lick. I grabbed onto the armrests and arched my back.

And there was the pear tree upside down, with the blue sky behind it. I imagined the nude guy squatting in the branches, grinning approvingly down on us as I writhed on the cushion, my legs spreading wider under Brad’s head. He wriggled a finger inside of me, deep, and rubbed it in and out, while he circled with his tongue. He thrust with his finger and lapped faster and faster, while I pressed up against him and kept staring at the pear tree until I came, hard.

“Oh, God. Again.”

I closed my eyes and came again. This time it was easy, just so easy.

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I relaxed and caressed his bristly short black hair. Before I told him about the condoms in the shed, I held on to the moment, already feeling it die away or at least grow into something else. I couldn't help thinking about the future.

"Promise me in the spring—no, before that—after the winter rains and the New Year's first sunny days, early February, say, you'll come back to this garden, alone or with a girl, and see what we started here today."

I imagined the yellow daffodils blooming in the clear watery sunlight. I wanted him to know, to *see*, that the bulbs weren't dead at all and that together we had dug not a grave but a flowerbed.

I raised my head from the cushion and looked down at his face, sideways on my thigh, his blue eyes staring out at the pond.

"You mustn't *miss* it." I pictured him sitting in his dim dorm room at his computer, while the yellow daffodils blossomed unseen. "Promise you won't forget."

He promised, but I wonder now if he remembered. I'll always hope that one spring morning, Brad closed his laptop, climbed onto his bike, and pushed off into the sunshine to seek the hidden road and find his way back to the garden.



Simone Martel is the author of *The Expectant Gardener*, a work of creative nonfiction. Her shorter nonfiction has appeared in *Greenwoman Magazine*, *Greenprints*, *Soundings Review*, *Hip Mama*, and *Horticulture*. Her fiction has appeared in *Fogged Clarity*, *WomenArts Quarterly Journal*, *Magnolia*, *Fantastique Unfettered*, *Bacopa*, and *Main Street Rag*. Edwin E. Smith Press will publish a chapbook of her garden-themed stories in 2014. She lives in Berkeley, California.

Seed



The Friday night before the lottery to assign plots, I glanced out my second-story bedroom window toward the community garden and saw a naked woman dancing in the moonlight. I thought nothing of it—surrounded as I was by aging hippies and back-to-nature granola-eaters—and returned to bed.

My neighborhood's community garden filled a lot mid-block where an abandoned house had been condemned and later bulldozed to the ground. My two-story home—a fixer-upper I'd rescued before it could reach a similar state of disrepair—stood to the south of the garden. The home to the north, though in the process of renovation, was not yet habitable. The owner of the home behind the garden had surrounded his property with a solid wooden fence, and directly across the street from the garden stood an abandoned home, one too dilapidated to be rescued by urban pioneers but not yet on the city's schedule for demolition.

The entire lot upon which the community garden had been organized was divided into plots, with the plots assigned by lottery each spring to households within a two-block radius. A small shed had been built from materials salvaged from the abandoned homes dotting the neighborhood, and a combination lock protected the gardening tools within. Someone had illegally tapped into the city's water supply, bypassing the meter intended to serve the long-abandoned lot, and neighbors carried compost from home in hopes of improving the soil without resorting to non-organic means.

Though I did not share their passion for digging in the dirt, my home's proximity to the garden meant that I could

not avoid my neighbors, and I soon learned to identify them by appearance if not always by name. They represented a patchwork quilt of ethnicities, ages, and sexual orientations, from the heavily-tattooed lesbian barely old enough to vote who shared living space with a hyperactive border collie to the slow-moving WWII veteran who had driven in the Red Ball Express. Some were urban pioneers drawn to the neighborhood by dirt-cheap real estate prices, while others had spent their lifetime in the neighborhood and could not afford to leave. A few of the gardeners were artists, like me, who had chosen to slash living costs as much as possible in the hope of supporting themselves from their art.

My paintings graced the covers of several science fiction novels, and prints of my work sold at science fiction conventions and through my website, providing me with a modest and erratic income. Some of my neighbors had posed for me when I needed models for preliminary sketches, and I repaid them in whatever small ways I could—fixing leaky faucets, cleaning gutters, chauffeuring those who could no longer drive, and serving as *de facto* guardian of the garden.

On Saturday morning, my gardening neighbors arrived *en masse* to accept their lottery-assigned plots without complaint. Then they spent the day spreading mulch and compost, building mounds and making furrows, planting seeds and seedlings, their efforts well-practiced but rather desultory. When I asked why, they complained that each year's harvest had proven less bountiful than the previous year, as if the ground were losing fertility, and no amount of effort or compost seemed to be turning things around.

Each day until everything was planted and the flurry of activity diminished, I watched from my back porch or from the ground-floor studio on the north side of my house. Depending on the weather, retirees and unemployed neighbors visited their plots in the morning while employed neighbors visited their plots in the evening. Though Henry Washington, the slow-moving WWII veteran, regularly visited his plot in the afternoon, I often saw him poking around the

entire garden early in the morning and late in the evening, maintaining the pathways between the plots and passing judgment on the gardening skills of his neighbors.

If I were sitting on the back porch and did not appear to be working, Henry would make his way across my yard and sit with me for a bit. He never remembered my name—his short-term memory having eroded—but he regaled me with stories of growing up in the Deep South, enlisting in the army when he was barely 14, and seeing war-torn Europe from the cab of an army truck. He had moved north after discharge, built a home, raised a family, and seemed more attuned to the earth than the other gardeners. He would scoop soil into his hands, sniff it, taste it, and let it trickle between his fingers before telling other gardeners things about it they could only determine by using store-bought test kits. One afternoon I asked him about the garden's diminishing returns.

"Nature is a fickle bitch," he said. "If you don't love her, she won't put out for you."

"But what of your fellow gardeners?" I asked. "They certainly seem to do all the right things."

"They just go through the motions," Henry said, "but they don't love nature. They're in the relationship for what they get out of it."

"And you?"

"I'm too damn old," he said. "No amount of boner pills is going to help me love nature the way she needs to be loved."



I had not been with a woman since a rather disastrous coupling with an up-and-coming fantasy novelist at a regional science fiction convention several months earlier. Though my desire was strong, I'd had too much to drink at the room parties and my flesh was weak. I had fallen asleep on top of her before either of us had reached the climax of our short story. She had awoken me and pushed me into the hall before

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I could pull on anything more than my boxers. Then she threw the rest of my clothing to the floor beside me.

When I saw the naked woman dancing in the community garden a second night, I stopped to watch and soon realized she wasn't one of my neighbors. Her blonde hair fluttered like corn silk in the breeze. With full breasts, ample hips, and golden blonde hair that fell to her waist, she moved to the beat of a drum only she could hear, and watching her gave me an erection that strained against the boxers I'd worn to bed that evening. I sat in my bedroom's window seat and watched her until I dozed off.

If I had awoken in bed, I would have thought the dancing woman a dream, but I awoke still sitting in the window seat, my arms wrapped around my upraised knees. When I rubbed sleep from my eyes and looked toward the garden, I saw Henry standing on the central garden path leaning on a rake and an older couple at the far end of the garden unlocking the shed. Before any of them noticed me, I slipped from the window seat and started my day.

After I showered and dressed, I got a drink and carried it and my sketchpad onto the back porch. Henry saw me and called me to the garden.

"She's been here," he said.

"Who?"

He pointed to a footprint and then raked it out of existence.

Benny and June caught my attention. They had once posed for the cover of a novel about a zombie uprising that begins in a nursing home where medical staff is slow to realize the enormity of the unfolding disaster because even the healthiest patients shuffled from place to place.

"No fried green tomatoes this year," June told me.

They showed me tomato bushes in cages that had grown nearly waist high but sported only a few marble-sized fruit.

"The plants grow," Benny said. "They just don't produce. It's as if they aren't getting fertilized."

"Nothing's producing," June said. She showed me

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vegetables growing in other plots that also had produced little or no fruit. She pulled a few root vegetables from the ground to show me that what grew beneath the surface was just as underdeveloped.

"We're doing everything we can," Benny said.

"Everybody is," June said.

"But nothing's working."

"This might be the last year for the community garden," June told me. "We're working too hard for too little."



The next time I saw the woman dancing naked in the garden I was prepared. I made several sketches of her that night and hung them in my studio. The following morning, a Saturday when most of my neighbors gathered to garden and gossip, I passed around a sketch of just her face. No one recognized the woman and I returned home to work on the cover of an urban fantasy about werewolves in Wichita.

That afternoon, when I took a break from my work, Henry joined me on the porch. I showed him all of my sketches of the naked dancer. "You know her?"

Just as the other neighbors had denied knowing the woman, he too denied knowing her, but after he stared at the sketches a bit longer, he looked at me. "She dances in the garden?"

I told him she did.

"And you're the only one who sees her?"

"Seems that way."

He cocked his head to the side and stared at me for so long I thought he'd drifted away. "She's chosen you."

He wouldn't answer any more of my questions and I finally stopped asking. Whatever Henry thought he knew he wasn't prepared to share.



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I sat up late every night after that, propped up on the window seat in my bedroom where I could watch the community garden from the second floor. When the dancing woman finally returned, I slipped out of my house wearing only cut-offs and a T-shirt, and I crossed the yard to the garden. When the naked woman saw me standing at one end of the central path, she stopped dancing.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Why are you here?”

She touched her finger to her lips, silencing me. She stepped lightly down the path until she stood less than a foot from me. She took my hand, lifted it to her lips, and kissed my palm. Then she placed my hand on her breast, the damp spot in the center of my palm pressing against her tightening nipple. Her full breast was soft yet firm, and I reached out to take her other breast in my other hand.

She wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and pulled me close enough to cover my lips with hers and slip her tongue into my mouth. She tasted of cucumbers and tomatoes and bell peppers and sweet onions.

With her hands on my shoulders, the naked dancer applied a light pressure, letting me know what she wanted. I kissed my way down her neck and her chest and devoted attention to each ripe nipple in turn. I drew them into my mouth, suckled and licked and nipped and then lowered myself to my knees.

I wrapped my hands around her thighs, grabbed her buttocks, and pulled her toward me until my face was buried in the soft, blonde triangle at the juncture of her thighs. The downy hair tickled my nose as I licked the length of her slit and tasted the earthy tang of her desire. Then I parted her swollen labia and teased the engorged bud of her clit with the tip of my tongue.

She grabbed the back of my head and her hips began moving forward and back, her pubic mound grinding against my nose as the effluent of her desire flowed down my chin.

And then she came. Her knees buckled and she might have fallen if I had not been wrapped around her, supporting

her like a tomato cage.

A moment later she pulled me to my feet and helped me strip off my clothes. My cock stood firm and erect, jutting upward like ripe okra ready for picking. With the ball of her thumb, she wiped a glistening drop of pre-cum from the tip of my erect cock, stuck her thumb between her lips, and sucked away the dewdrop of my desire.

Then she lowered herself to the ground and lay upon the community garden's main path. She spread her legs, opening her womanly furrow to me, so I lowered myself to the ground again and knelt between her widespread thighs. As I covered her, she reached between us and guided the head of my cock into her wet opening.

I entered her slowly at first, but I need not have bothered. She was well lubricated and ready to accept my entire length. As I drew back and pushed forward a second time, she drew her knees up, placed the soles of her feet on the ground, and pushed her pelvis up to meet my inbound thrust.

She wrapped her arms around the back of my neck and drew my face to hers. We kissed again—long, hard and deep—and she kept her eyes open, staring deep into my eyes as I rode her.

I plowed her hard and fast and soon she came, her entire body quivering as I plowed into her another half-dozen times. And then, with one last, powerful thrust, I came, spilling my seed within her. Her pussy clenched and unclenched as if trying to milk every last seed from my manroot.

I couldn't help myself. I closed my eyes.

Something changed beneath me and when my eyes snapped open I found myself atop a female-shaped mound of dirt, my spasming cock spilling its seed into the mud and tuft of grass beneath my pelvis.

As I struggled to my feet, I glanced around. The dancing woman was gone and the garden had come alive. I grabbed my clothes and hurried home, hoping none of my neighbors had seen what I had done. I threw my soiled clothes in the wash, rinsed the taste of vegetation from my mouth, and

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showered away the mud and the cum crusting my pubic hair.

After I dressed, I sat in my bedroom window and watched the flowers bloom and the fruit ripen in the community garden until the sun rose. Henry arrived first and raked the central path, flattening the muddy mound before other neighbors arrived to marvel at the rebirth of their garden.

The dancing woman did not return—not that night, nor the next night, nor any night thereafter. Though I never saw her again, I had my sketches by which to remember her.

Henry eyed me knowingly after that, but I never told him or any of my neighbors what I had done, and the gardeners enjoyed a bountiful harvest that year.



Michael Bracken is the managing editor of a bi-monthly gardening magazine, the editor of a weekly gardening e-newsletter, and the author of erotic stories published in anthologies such as *Cowboy Heat*, *Cowboy Lust*, *Flesh and Blood: Guilty as Sin*, *Hot Blood: Strange Bedfellows*, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica*, *The Mammoth Book of Erotic Confessions*, and many other publications. He lives and writes in Texas.

The Education of a French Gardener



I was far too old for *My Little Pony* and yet not old enough to date—age 21 according to the Apostolic Holy Roller Church. In some places, I would have been old enough to marry, in others I might have had three children by now, but I was a virgin, albeit a curious one.

With all the drama of young women, I had taken to wearing black in mourning for the mother who died when I was a child, and I obsessed about dressing her grave with white, only white, flowers.

The woman at the end of the street had a flower garden designed for the moon, full of the night-blooming kinds whose ghostly incandescence attract pollinating moths. I wanted those flowers for my mother . . . actually, for me. I was a flower closed by day, ready to bloom only in the cover of night.

Once in the daytime, I stole a lush peony, tinged with pink and swollen with petals, that hung over the strange woman's willow-branch fence. I could feel her eyes on me from behind a lacy curtain.

As a child I was told she was French, insufferably arrogant, and did not give a damn what anyone thought. She followed strange politics, chased away meter readers while shouting expletives against capitalism, didn't wear makeup, and fed feral cats. She'd married at least twice, and then opened her door to as many stray men as she did tomcats.

Now she was alone and entering a different season.

So was I.

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The second time I was bolder, entering the front gate to pluck several. Simone opened her door to watch, arms folded. "You should pick the ones that are budding," she instructed. "That one will fall apart before you get home."

She was right. The first peony had disassembled to silken shards in my car on the way to the cemetery.

Simone was standing next to me. Her body was square and sturdy in the way of women who are not young or old; her bare feet were still delicate, but her face was tanned rough by many seasons of sun. She smelled of clove cigarettes and a gardener's sweat mingled with patchouli. Her graying hair, once black as a raven, was pulled up in a messy knot above thick brows and dark eyes that gleamed sad yet mischievous.

"Look," she pointed out the tight round buds. "They want to open but cannot without the ant who licks their sugar to free them. Too much sweetness can be a burden."

For the first time I noticed the working of the big black ants, dismissed in my mind before as nuisances, not gardeners.

I was breathing softly, absorbed in their silent work of liberation, in the lighter-than-rose fragrance of peonies, the coziness of the morning sun, and her.

"I can teach you more," she called out as I left.

I heard myself say without turning, "Tomorrow."

The next day I argued with myself about spending time with an aging woman who likes to put her hands in dirt, yet that very thing drew me. By now it was almost evening and she was adding some raspberry bushes to the patch at the side of her house.

Her first lesson was about roots. "You must dig deep to give them room to stretch and grow," she said. "The roots of a tree or bush or plant can be much bigger than the part you see above ground. It is the same with people, you know. The secrets we do not tell anyone make up the greatest part of a woman."

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Her eyebrows rose as she appraised me closely so that I felt naked and small, yet also important and understood. "If I tell you my secrets, will you tell me just one of yours?"

After the bushes were tamped down and watered, we sat together in the gloom of twilight, whispering about things usually not uttered aloud—little fears, strange dreams, and even sexual thoughts and curiosities.

She timidly offered the first sexual fantasy and then I told another, and another, until a robin scolded the first stars for watching us, and the chill of night intensified.

"I am so hot." She suddenly rose, leaving me and shutting her door.

I felt powerful and playful, something I had never known; I was slow to leave. As I did, I saw the blazing white trumpet of a moonflower. It also revealed its wondrous self to a hummingbird moth, its soft wings vibrating furiously like my heart.



The next time I visited Simone she was in the back near the private border of an urban forest. She stood ankle-deep in the softest earth with a hoe and beckoned me to help her create a new garden since her other one was planted and full.

She wobbled as I approached. Dressed primly in white shorts and blouse, I put out my hand to steady her. In a second she pulled me down to the ground with her. After a flash of anger, I had to laugh too, all my carefulness stained beyond pretense. "I saved you \$300," she said. "In France the richest women pay that for a mud bath. Tonight after you shower, you will have flesh soft enough to make a lover weep."

"What is it like to have a lover?" I shyly wondered.

I heard her stories (many of them tinged with humor) of men she would not name. Some of them made me look away, embarrassed to be seen staring. She was nonchalant, as if she were discussing ingredients for a soup.

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"And have you had a lover yet?" she asked.

"Me?"

"Of course, you. Did you think I was speaking to the earthworms?"

I wriggled in disgust. "Are we sitting on earthworms?"

"Oh, my dear," she purred. "Let me tell you about the joy of worms. The human kind, too. They look so terrible, but can be so helpful to a garden . . . or a woman."

She taught me not only about men. She asked me if I knew what a flower was, and I was insulted and argumentative, until she explained that it was an orgasm.

"A flower is the genitalia of a plant," she told me. "And when it blooms, well . . . surely you have had an orgasm before?"

My head was full of so many things. When I left that day I felt queasy with something like envy or jealousy. And my stomach ached with hunger for something more nourishing than words or soup.



What can I say about the next time I saw Simone?

Shall I reveal that in the middle of quiet weeding, our bodies drenched in summer sweat, a rainstorm fell heavy around us in puddles? That our bodies responded with dancing and laughter and screaming like little children as we ran to the potting shed?

I will tell you that when we entered that place, secret and dark as a church, we were excited by its silence. I will admit the only prayer I made was a moan when Simone moved behind me and, like a focused ant that will not be distracted, she lifted the sweetness from my bud so it could open and I would bloom.

I confess that I blossomed for the first time as I looked out the wavy glass of her shed window on a green world that appeared under water. I swam up again, over and over, atop tides that rose and fell, tirelessly.

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It became our favorite place.



One time we were in the potting shed preparing stakes for the garden and discovered they make great little paddles for playful swats. And longer strokes.

We did not garden at all that day.



My shame kept me away a little while. I finally came to see Simone as she was watering her garden at the end of a dry August day.

She did not mention my absence. “You know the secret of keeping your garden moist?” she asked. “It is to work the hose very slowly over it, very gently, for an hour.” She was painstaking with gradual, almost imperceptible, movement. It made me think of the first time in her potting shed. She continued, “Many gardeners, especially men who do not understand, use too much force. Soft, like a mist. Taking all the time you need.”

I was already wet.



The last time I saw Simone she was singing in French, happy to find her older raspberry canes had produced fruit now ripe to eat. She would use some to flavor vinegar for salads, add others to champagne, and use whatever remained to create a chilled soup.

I told her about the boy I had begun to date. Uncharacteristically, she said nothing and did not ask questions although I was bursting to tell her about the first time he made love to me. I had even nicknamed his member “Worm”—something that made him make a face.

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She only said we should celebrate the new raspberries by eating them fresh off our laps together on the porch.

I remember lying on the dusty summer boards, just out of sight of my mother's house and the busy street, savoring the lusciousness of the plush, tangy fruit. My hot face must have been as bright as a berry at the thought of how easily we could be discovered—me with my jeans undone and listening to Simone below me eating noisily, her mouth full of me.

Soon I was busy preparing for college and away before I could even call or say good-bye. I regret it still, the absence of our farewells.



Perhaps that is the last and best lesson of gardening. There is never a true good-bye. The chopped vine of one summer becomes the mulch of winter and the food of lettuce in spring. There is no end to the cycle of the earth, the rising and falling of flower and leaf. We are made of an earth that cannot die, recreated every season.

I saw Simone's quaint house, red painted and blue shuttered, locked and empty the next year. I was too afraid to ask what had become of her.

There were wild rumors. She had taken to excessive drink and was hospitalized. An intruder assaulted her in the night and she returned to France. No, she had met a new man and was traveling with him before she grew too old. None turned out to be true.

I graduated, married, and had a baby. By then I was not ashamed or afraid of remembering that summer of rain and heat and of touch and tangled vine. I visited Simone's house alone once more.

A lanky young man sat on the front steps smoking a cigarette.

"You want to buy the house?" he asked when he saw me admire the ancient night-blooming jasmine braced against the arched gate.

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I shook my head. "Just hoping to see a friend."

"Oh, you knew Aunt Simi?" He stood up and introduced himself as her nephew, heir to Simone's estate. She had died two years before from an aneurysm that took her suddenly as she pulled up an old sunflower root.

I felt as unmoored as a dandelion seed floating through the air. I told him my name and allowed him to lead me into her house whose interior I never saw before. Simone and I preferred the outdoors.

There on a table, besides a huge dried wasp nest and scattering of seeds, was an envelope with my name on it. He handed it to me.

There was nothing inside but a poem copied in Simone's own hand, quivery with age. I somehow knew at that moment that in my absence she had followed stories of me. She knew I married and had a little girl. She also knew we would always be connected through the innocent beauty of the peonies I once had stolen from her. I thought they were for my mother's grave, but in truth, I needed their courage to love my own life.

My eyes tumbled over the words she'd written, again and again, like fingers over rosary beads, in silent prayer:

*The peony flowers,
having fallen,
we part without regrets.*

—Hokusai (1665-1718)



Becky Trachsel was born in Akron, Ohio, where she worked as a social agitator for a free earth. At age 17, she first fell in love with a woman who showed her the fragrance of phlox, the humor of Tom Robbins, and the joy of singing French songs to bullfrogs.

Lady Sally Rudston-Chichester and the Walled Garden



Jack Buckingham was worried about this new commission. Admittedly he had not confirmed it, let alone signed a contract, yet he still had grave misgivings. He was at Rudston Hall to discuss plans and finalise details with the client, Lady Sally Rudston-Chichester. He fingered her calling-card nervously as he sipped tea from a china cup whilst admiring the estate's beautifully appointed park. The card depicted a shield, divided into quarters with the letters "L, S, R, C" in a black and purple Gothic script intertwined with ivy, which surmounted two crossed whips and the legend "Lady Sally Rudston-Chichester, Edwardian gentlewoman and strict dominatrix." The card aroused a mixture of curiosity and apprehension in him. And then there was her bizarre transvestite French maid, dressed in black dress, frilly white apron and layers of petticoats, who had approached him seeking to employ his services as landscape gardener for the re-design of her mistress's walled garden. That only contributed to his unease about this potential client.

Jack's attention was drawn by a commotion as the French windows were flung open and two figures emerged onto the terrace. There was Lady Sally's maid who flapped around with a parasol trying to shield her mistress's alabaster face from the sun. But it was the striking figure of Lady Sally Rudston-Chichester that really commanded his attention. She was dressed in the most incredible outfit he had ever seen. It was a one-piece body suit in a shiny black substance he'd never witnessed before. The quality of the material was such that it clung so tightly to its wearer that every voluptuous curve of

her body was accentuated. And there was no doubt the statuesque figure inside it was capable of displaying its qualities to devastating effect. Combined with a pair of over-the-knee leather boots with a long row of silver eyelets and laces, the impact was stunning and bizarre. Jack had been to some high-class brothels in his time but never had he seen such a striking figure. He was fascinated . . . and aroused, as instinctively he felt a swelling in his cock at the sight of the exotic figure of Lady Sally.

She swept imperiously across the terrace, waited for her maid to pull out a chair for her and sat down, setting a leather whip ceremoniously on the table in front of him like a statement of intent. As she sat next to him the smell of the material combined with the sweet scent of talcum powder and perfume was intoxicating. Close-up, Jack couldn't help but notice how the material clung to her breasts so tightly that the tips of her nipples thrust out provocatively.

"That was an excellent session, Victoria. I rather think Lord Melchiot will not be able to sit down for a number of days."

The maid chuckled. "Yes, madam. You certainly gave him a sore arse."

Lady Sally held out her cup and Victoria poured a stream of tea into it.

Now Lady Sally's piercing gaze swept toward Jack Buckingham. There was the slightest hint of a smile, which he could not help but feel was designed to disarm its victim, like a grinning cat outside a mouse hole waiting to pounce. She stretched out her arm inviting him to kiss her hand, which he obligingly did, pressing his lips against the shiny rubbery surface.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Buckingham. I can see you are intrigued by my attire," she commented, casting a knowing glance down at his crotch.

Stunned into silence, Jack could only nod.

"It's a most unique garment, I'm sure you'll agree. You see, I own a rubber plantation in the hills outside Taiping in

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Malaysia, where they have developed a new product, an incredibly thin yet elastic rubber material in a sheet. The latex of the rubber plant has the most remarkable qualities, you know. I have been testing it since 1905 before deciding whether to market it. My personal couturier makes outfits from it for me to my own design. It's such a fabulously empowering garment to wear and I find that, whenever I wear it, men just dissolve into submission before me. Isn't that interesting?"

"I can quite believe that," mumbled Jack nervously, his heart racing.

"Now, let us get down to business, Mr. Buckingham. I'm delighted to have you on board with this project," she said, rather ignoring the fact that he hadn't actually accepted the commission yet. "Now, Victoria my maid is quite useless at times, so I don't expect she's explained properly what I require and that's why I've invited you here. You see, I have a vision for my walled garden and I need a creative landscape gardener to assist me in completing my enterprise. Your services come highly recommended from my cousin, the Dowager Jessica Sykes. She commented that, despite your youth, you had great knowledge of plants and flowers and I understand she was also highly impressed at how imaginatively and energetically you fulfilled her needs."

Jack Buckingham smiled. His work had extended to far more than servicing the dowager's garden. Hearing where this recommendation came from and seeing how Lady Sally openly flaunted her sexuality, he suspected there might be some sexual undercurrent attached to her commission.

"I have very specific requirements and I won't disguise the fact that I'm an exacting mistress, but the rewards for being in my employment, both financial and . . . otherwise, are considerable. I have exciting plans, which I believe will stretch your skills as a gardener. You will no doubt have noticed the quality of my house and park . . ."

Jack took the opportunity of the slightest of pauses in Lady Sally's monologue to interject with a compliment, "I've

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just been admiring your estate. It's a magnificent park, your ladyship."

"Yes indeed it is! It was my ancestor, the fifth Earl Rudston, who commissioned Capability Brown to landscape it in 1762. It is quite ingeniously laid out, Mr. Buckingham. If you walk along the ridge of the Wolds," she explained pointing across to the hills, "the plantations of trees form avenues that afford delightful vistas of the house. The views across the serpentine lake are especially pleasing. No, I am perfectly satisfied with the park and formal gardens. However, there is one area of the estate that has long been neglected and it's my intention to rectify this with your assistance, Mr. Buckingham. It's the walled garden, you see."

Jack felt more comfortable now the conversation had turned to gardening, "What did you have in mind, your ladyship—formal flower beds, a rose garden, a vegetable garden, exotic fruits? There are lots of possibilities for a walled garden."

"Ah, well, there you are, Mr. Buckingham, I do have some quite specific ideas for the space. Perhaps it would be easier to take a look and I can talk you through some of my plans."

As they made their way to the walled garden they must have appeared a strange group, Jack Buckingham in his tweed jacket, waistcoat, silk cravat and bowler hat perched on his curly brown hair along with the transvestite French maid and, leading the way, the formidable figure of Lady Sally, her hour-glass figure restrained in skin-tight rubber.

She unlocked the door in the wall and opened it. The garden was in a sorry state. Jack reflected that it would take a lot of work to clear before he could even begin any planting. But it was an excellent space and he could see it had enormous potential.

"The plans, Victoria," ordered Lady Sally, at which command her maid produced a roll of papers from within her petticoats.

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Lady Sally laid them out on a tree stump and began to expound, pointing to her sketches.

"In this corner here I want colour. I thought some foxgloves against the back of the wall here, probably in purple and then some oleander in clusters of red, pink and white just here. And a laburnum tree in the corner there. And I want some deadly nightshade. I simply love belladonna and its black berries, dark as night, just like me!"

Jack laughed, "You'd best be careful, Lady Sally—all of those plants are poisonous."

"Oh yes, of course, I know that!"

"You want them to be poisonous?"

"Absolutely. I understand digesting small quantities can increase the heart rate and some even have hallucinogenic qualities. Do you have any further suggestions, Mr. Buckingham?"

The gardener was a little taken aback but fortunately knew something about which flowers had poisonous qualities, "Well, narcissus would be good or lily of the valley and chrysanthemum. But you have to be careful with chrysanthus because even touching them can cause itching and irritation."

"Really, how fascinating. Well, I simply must have some chrysanthemum then . . . some orange and yellow will be good too."

Jack was intrigued and not a little alarmed at Lady Sally's predilections.

"Here," she said pointing along another length of the wall, "I want a willow tree and then some bamboo, cane and rattan. Can you obtain some mature plants as I'll want to use them straight away?"

"Use them?"

Lady Sally took up her whip, flexing it in her hands, and fixed him in the eye, silently conveying her intent for this area of the garden.

"Oh, I see, yes. Well, I should be able to get some mature ones."

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"Different sizes and flexibility? I'll need them all to hand, you see."

"Well, yes, I know an excellent market garden where I source anything rare or unusual. They've never let me down."

"The mature tree in the centre of the lawn can stay but then I would like a small vegetable garden over there with carrots and courgettes."

"Just those, wouldn't you like more? I can lay out a proper vegetable garden for you."

"No, that will suffice. I'm only looking for vegetables of a certain shape. And I want some chilli plants as well."

"That's not a problem, your ladyship. I can propagate them in a greenhouse and transfer the fully grown plants into your garden."

"Excellent. Now, over here," Lady Sally said gesturing toward another corner, "I don't want to clear all of the nettles, you must leave a largish patch of them and the thistles too. And then what I'd really like is some giant hogweed against the wall, a holly bush and some poison ivy . . . but it must be poison ivy."

"It's not native to England, your ladyship, but I can find some and see if it'll take. It causes a painful itch, though, and the sap from hogweed stings. I got some on my hand once and it really burnt."

"Oh, excellent. I'm most pleased, Mr. Buckingham. You clearly know your plants and wildflowers. Just imagine when some of these come into contact with the most sensitive parts of the male anatomy."

"You'll certainly have your slaves squealing then," chuckled Victoria.

"Indeed. Oh, just talking about it is making me excited. I'm so impatient now. I can hardly wait."

"Sorry, Lady Sally, but do you mean to use all of these?"

"Why, yes, of course! Have you not realised, Mr. Buckingham, I want the walled garden for my outdoor play area. It will be my little garden of pain!"

Jack Buckingham looked shocked.

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"So, that's excellent, Mr. Buckingham. It's all settled. I'll have my estate manager draw up the contract and you can start next week."

"But . . ."

Lady Sally arched an eyebrow.

"So that's all in order then," she added sharply.

"Well, yes, I suppose so, your ladyship," concurred Jack, acknowledging that Lady Sally had persuaded (or was it overwhelmed?) him into accepting the commission.

Jack Buckingham left the meeting no less disconcerted than when he started. Lady Sally was a formidable figure and he was conscious he'd been swept away by a combination of her enthusiasm and her dominant personality. He was conscious of being compelled into doing her bidding but at the same time enjoying the experience. And the vision of Lady Sally with her long ebony hair and dressed in the shiny black rubber was one that was to give him vivid erotic fantasies for many weeks. And from a gardener's perspective, the commission was certainly a challenging one which he'd enjoy doing. In any case he'd as good as accepted now and whatever the terms of the contract he knew he was not going to turn Lady Sally down.

He got to work straight away. He enlisted a group of lads from the village for the hard labour of clearing the site of its tangle of weeds. During this stage of the work it was not unusual for Lady Sally to take tea in the walled garden so she could watch the progress. Her maid would bring down a chair and table for her and a tray with a pot of tea and sometimes a scone with jam and cream or fancy cakes.

"Mmm, thank you, Victoria. Lapsang Souchong, my favourite blend and from my very own plantation in the foothills of the Himalayas," she commented.

On one particular occasion it was a hot spring day and most of the workers, including Jack, had stripped down to their waists.

"Ah," sighed Lady Sally, "there's nothing I enjoy more than seeing a group of sweaty men working for me."

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“Yes, madam, of course, that’s how it should be,” replied Victoria.

“And there are some rather nice physiques there. Indeed, Mr. Buckingham has rather a delicious body don’t you think? All that physical work has certainly toned his muscles. There’s nothing I enjoy more than dominating a man with a powerful physique, there’s something exciting about having all that masculinity succumb to my will. But I must say, Victoria, I rather think I will have some fun with Mr. Buckingham when my walled garden is finished. Did you notice his erection when he first saw me in the rubber?”

“Yes, madam, he certainly got very aroused.”

“Indeed, Victoria. I believe I’d rather like to have his cock inside me, but I will have my fun with him first.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will, madam.”

“Mr. Buckingham, come over here, will you?” Lady Sally ordered.

Although not dressed in her dominatrix clothes, Lady Sally was still a stunning figure. She wore a floral print linen dress cut to display her ample cleavage and thin enough to show her nipples pressing against the material. The dress was daringly short showing swathes of firm thigh. Jack felt his cock swelling up inside his moleskin trousers and since his crotch was practically at Lady Sally’s eye level there was no disguising his arousal.

“How are things progressing, Mr. Buckingham?”

Jack shuffled nervously, conscious of the bulge in his pants. “Very well, your ladyship, we’ll soon have all this cleared, then I can make a start on the creative part.”

“You’ve certainly employed some strapping young men, Mr. Buckingham.”

“All lads from the village, Lady Sally. They’ll be grateful for some gainful employment and some money in their pocket.”

“They look as though they need a firm hand to keep them in order. Do you need a firm hand to keep you in order, Mr. Buckingham?” she added with a wicked curl on her lips.

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"Well, not really, Lady Sally, I set out to fulfill all my clients' wishes to my best abilities."

"That's excellent, I shall test that promise to its fullest!"

Jack was not a little worried about this. He hadn't meant it in the way Lady Sally had clearly interpreted it. And yet, he couldn't help but be intrigued. What would it be like to submit to Lady Sally's beguiling charms? He could not resist being drawn to her and speculated what it would feel like to be dominated by her. Could he be tempted to do rather more than landscape gardening for her? He tried to put the idea to the back of his mind, but it kept resurfacing.

They had one final meeting to discuss some of the detailed arrangements for the planting. It was here that Lady Sally issued the curious instructions about setting out wooden stakes on the lawn and fixing sets of iron rings into the wall. Jack was under no illusions—Lady Sally intended these to be used for tying her submissives to. It was at this stage that her maid interjected with another strange proposal.

"If I may be so bold as to make a comment, madam?"

"Yes, you may, Victoria, provided you are prepared to suffer the consequences!"

"Well, I think the design of madam's garden is magnificent of course but lacking one small detail. I think you could do with a water feature."

"A water feature! Why, Victoria, that's a splendid suggestion. Yes, I simply must have a water feature."

"I can erect a fountain for your ladyship," proposed Jack, "and perhaps a statue. I know a sculptor friend who can do the 'Three Graces' for you."

"No, no, not a fountain," said Lady Sally, "I need something that allows water to cascade downwards."

"Downwards. You mean a waterfall?"

"Not quite, Mr. Buckingham. What I had in mind was something more like a hollowed-out tree trunk I could sit on that tapered into a funnel and then raised off the ground so that a person could lie underneath it, if you get my meaning?"

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Jack thought he understood what Lady Sally was getting at, but he wasn't quite sure. "But I don't quite see where the water comes from . . ."

"Mr. Buckingham, surely you're not so naïve that you cannot discern my intent?"

"Oh yes, I think I get it, Lady Sally. I'm sure I can erect something suitable."

The work continued for several weeks, mainly with Jack and a few of his experienced staff as the poisonous plants and flowers were brought into the garden. Lady Sally stopped making appearances at that stage as she wanted the final garden to be a surprising revelation to her. Jack was soon putting the finishing touches to the walled garden. As he drove the wooden stakes into the ground, judging the distances that would leave a man nicely spread-eagled on the lawn, he could not help but fantasise about what it would feel like to be secured to the ground, completely at Lady Sally's mercy.

The day of the official opening arrived. Victoria set out a table with champagne from Lady Sally's cellar (the vintage Laurent-Perrier, of course) and bowls of strawberries (in the Ming willow pattern china, of course). Lady Sally was dressed for action. It was early summer by now and the weather was rather too hot for one of her rubber outfits but her dress was no less stunning. She wore ankle boots, silk stockings, a suspender belt and the tightest, sexiest corset Jack Buckingham had ever seen. It was made in panels of black and purple satin with whalebone stays and cords that pulled her waist in tight but thrust her naked breasts upwards. Jack didn't know where to look or what to say. As was always the case in Lady Sally's presence, he felt a strange mixture of unease, fascination and arousal.

"I take pleasure in wearing my corsets. I believe I have the finest collection of them in the whole country."

"Two wardrobes full of them," muttered her maid.

"Well, yes of course, Victoria, as you should know, a lady can never have too many corsets!"

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Lady Sally ceremoniously cut a ribbon and the door into the walled garden was flung open. She stepped inside, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She drew in the perfumed scents of the flowers, the earthy aroma of soil and smell of freshly mown grass before finally opening her eyes. She looked around in silence and absorbed every detail of her new garden; the blaze of colour in the beds with their poisonous flowers, the wild garden with nettles, lilac-headed thistles and wild flowers, the rows of bamboo and cane and the patch with vegetables ready to pick and chilli plants with their bright red fruits.

"It's wonderful," Lady Sally gasped. "It's everything I hoped for. I've all I need here for my outdoor play. Oh, it's marvellous. I love it. I simply I have to try it out!"

"Try it out?" queried Jack hesitantly. What did Lady Sally mean by that? Surely. . .

"Why, yes, of course, Mr. Buckingham. Having put all that hard work into my garden, surely you must be the first person to experience it."

"I . . ."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Buckingham, surely you knew I'd want to try it out on you. I know you desire it. I've seen the way you look at me. I know that in your innermost desires you want this."

Lady Sally's perceptive observations and persuasive tones had their effect. And it was true from the moment she appeared on the terrace in the amazing rubber outfit he instinctively knew this time would come. That mixture of unease and excitement pointed to him making a climactic decision. The fantasies that had built up over the last few weeks about submitting to her could no longer be suppressed or denied.

"First, Mr. Buckingham, you must strip naked for me."

"Yes. You mean completely naked?" he questioned, wondering what he had let himself in for.

"Yes, what?" Lady Sally replied sharply. "And is there any other kind of naked?"

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"Yes, mistress?"

"That's better, Mr. Buckingham."

He reluctantly removed his shirt, breeches and long-johns and passed them to Victoria, who put them in a sack for him. He really felt exposed now, his cock throbbing with a combination of apprehension and excitement.

"Have you the rope, Victoria?"

The maid ferreted inside her petticoats and from somewhere produced several coils of rope.

"Hmm, now let me see. This is so exciting. There's so much to choose from, where do I start? I don't want to use the poisonous flowers yet. To be honest I rather wanted those for their vivid colours and to dangle the threat of poisoning before my slaves."

Jack was relieved to hear that. He knew that, if ingested in anything other than minute quantities, some of the plants he had used were dangerous, if not deadly.

"First you must help me tie Victoria up. I want to test how good the tree is for some bondage play."

She made her maid stand against the tree in the centre of the garden with her legs spread and her arms behind the trunk, where they were tied. Lengths of rope were then passed to Jack and back to Lady Sally until Victoria was restrained with a criss-cross pattern of tight rope bondage. As a final flourish she lifted up her layers of petticoats to tie a rope around her balls, pulling the knot tightly and throwing the rope over one of the lower branches of the tree where she could pull it. A tug on the rope caused the sac of the maid's balls to be pulled up, bringing a squeal of pain from Victoria's lips.

"It's a shame you've got your maid's uniform on, I should have loved to see what marks the bark of the tree left on your backside, Victoria. Now, you can watch proceedings from there. Bend over, Mr. Buckingham," she commanded.

Jack's heart raced. What had he given himself up to? He obediently bent over and heard Lady Sally walk in the direction of the vegetable patch.

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"Hmm," she contemplated, "the courgette or the carrot? Have you ever had anything inserted in your backside before, Mr. Buckingham?"

He gulped. "No, Lady Sally."

"Well, in that case I'll go with the carrot."

He heard her wash the vegetable in the water butt and was soon conscious of her presence behind him.

"Now, keep that position, Mr. Buckingham."

He felt something ease into his back passage but it was only a gloved finger to prepare him for something more strenuous. Then he felt something hard press into him. He expelled a gasp as the vegetable was first eased and then pushed into his back passage. The carrot pressed against the sensitive nerves in his backside, which only served to generate a strangely satisfying sensation.

"That's excellent, Mr. Buckingham. The carrot is nearly full in but I've left the greenery on the end sticking out. Yes, that's a most agreeable visual effect," she said, admiring the tuft of green plant sticking out of his rear.

"Now, I really think I should stick with some tried and tested corporal punishment just to get warmed up. You can't beat that. Follow me, Mr. Buckingham."

Jack followed Lady Sally who told him to face the wall where the rings were fixed and with some smaller lengths of rope she secured his wrists and ankles to the iron. The rough surface of the wall dug into his flesh as Lady Sally lifted one of her ankle boots and pressed him hard against its surface, the point of its heel digging into him. He let out a squeal of pain.

"Victoria prepared these for me earlier. I've a willow branch, bamboo and cane. This will be fun for me."

Jack heard a swishing sound from behind him as Lady Sally tested the hand-made whips fashioned from the plants in the special area of the garden designed for precisely that purpose. He braced himself for the first stroke, doubting his sanity in allowing himself to be subjected to this but at the same time secretly yearning for it. He had a mental picture of

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Lady Sally in her fine silk corsetry with a branch of willow in her hand and him, pressed against the wall, a carrot sticking out of his arse. It was an image that couldn't help but amuse him.

That didn't last for long as the first stroke came down on his backside. It was a hard one and designed as a wake-up call to make it clear Lady Sally meant business. He expelled a yelp of pain. She was a skilled practitioner in the art of corporal punishment. She knew when to push his limits and when to hold back to allow him some respite. The strokes could be harsh and cruel or restrained and sensual. She alternated between the different tools her new garden of pain afforded her, relishing the act of testing the different textures and flexibility of her implements of torment. After a period of this kind of punishment Jack had a light-headed woozy feeling.

He felt her breasts squeezed against his back and smelt the scent of her dark hair as she pressed her face against his cheek and whispered tantalisingly, "You are doing well, Mr. Buckingham. I'm getting great pleasure out of testing my garden. Do you feel the fruits of your labours on your backside? The pain can be quite a delicious sensation, can it not?"

"Yes, mistress," Jack mumbled.

"Now, brace yourself. I'll give you five more strokes with willow, bamboo and cane. These will be punishing ones. I will push your limits with these," she threatened quietly.

The final strokes rained down on Jack's backside. He could not help but shout and squirm with the pain, but Lady Sally offered him no respite with these strokes. By the time she had finished, his heart was thumping and his arse was throbbing. He felt the cool satin of Lady Sally's gloved hands against his sore backside and it felt exquisite; a sensual relief that made every second of the severe corporal punishment worthwhile.

"Now, let's get you down from there and try out something else," said Lady Sally.

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Jack was alarmed. There was going to be more? She untied him and led him past the hollowed wooden trunk with its funnel.

"Hmm, shall I?" She teased, "No, I think not. I shall save that up for another time."

They ended up at the wooden stakes driven into the ground at the foot of the tree where her maid was still in bondage.

"Now, lay down here, Mr. Buckingham, and stretch your arms and legs out for me," she ordered.

He did as he was told, both fearful and eager with anticipation at what punishment she would come up with next. His wrists and ankles were stretched to their fullest limit, straining his leg and arm muscles, and then tied to the wooden stakes so securely with rope that he could barely move.

"Now, what should I use now? You've done such a wonderful job, Mr. Buckingham—there are so many marvellous things at my disposal. Not the hogweed today, I think—the sap of that might be a bit much."

She went off to collect some plants from the patch with nettles, thistles and wild flowers as Jack Buckingham laid there motionless, alarmed at what she might come back with. She set down a row of plants, which Jack could just about see out of the corner of his eye.

Lady Sally knelt over him, strands of her dark hair brushing against his smooth chest. The smell of her, a subtle perfume mingled with the fresh air and earthy garden smells to create a uniquely alluring aroma, was glorious. Her face was practically over his. The stimuli of sight, smell and touch had the inevitable effect on his swelling cock.

"Ah, we shall have to do something about that in good time," she said as she stretched a hand back and stroked his cock with her gloved hand making his erection even harder, "but first I think I need to quell your ardour a little."

She picked up the holly leaves and got to work on his nipples, brushing the sharp little spines against the sensitive flesh. Jack immediately groaned and squirmed in response.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Buckingham, that was a mere tickle. I'm sure you can take more than that," she said as she dug the thorns hard into his nipples, making him yelp in pain.

And yet it was like no other pain he had felt before. He should have been screaming for mercy but his whimpers were as much out of pleasure as pain. Lady Sally shuffled down to pay attention to his cock and balls. By lifting his head slightly Jack could see her kneeling over him, her white breasts hanging above him as she concentrated on pressing the thorns against the tip of his cock. He jerked and wriggled in response. She put the holly down and picked up a bunch of the nettles.

She taunted him by waving the stinging nettles in his face, "This will make your most sensitive parts sting a little, Mr. Buckingham. You are knowledgeable about plants. You will know how this works. The sting is in the tiny hairs on the leaves that inject the poison into you."

She brushed the nettle against his chest and it stung but was bearable. But when she brushed it against his balls, as the tiny hairs did their work, Jack felt the sharp prickling sensation course through his body. And when she brushed the nettles gently up the length of his cock and around its tip the pain was both excruciating and exquisite. His erection flagged, but only a little.

"Oh, Mr. Buckingham, you must be very virile. A sting like that would cause most men to droop immediately." She wrapped her satin gloves around his cock, "but you're still quite hard. Do you want it, Mr. Buckingham? Do you want release? Think very carefully before you answer."

Jack was short of breath and gasping. He considered carefully. There was a trick to the question. He was in a heightened state of sexual readiness and of course he wanted release at the hands of the stunning Lady Sally, but he also

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had the awareness to grasp something very important about her nature.

He gasped, "What I want is irrelevant, Lady Sally. It's what you want that's important, mistress."

She beamed, "Oh, very good, Mr. Buckingham. You're a fast learner."

She stretched out and picked up a thistle and Jack braced himself for further torment. Instead, Sally used the delicate purple flower of the thistle to brush gently over his body. The touch of the flower was subtle and sensuous and when it was touched against his cock his erection quickly recovered to its full potency.

Lady Sally stood up and shuffled out of her purple satin knickers. She stepped over to Victoria, her maid, still tied to the tree and getting her own form of arousal from watching her mistress play, and held the knickers up to her nose.

"Breathe that in, Vicky-maid, smell the aromas of your mistress. Is that good?"

"Yes, madam, thank you, madam."

She tossed the pants aside and stood over Jack Buckingham. What a sight it was to behold as he laid stretched out and powerless on the grass. This formidable figure in her magnificent corsetry and exotic lingerie, her crotch exposed and framed with dark pubic hair and her breasts thrust up by the stiff whalebone corset. Jack felt he was in heaven. He didn't care what pain he had to endure, he only wanted to be in that one place, in her hands and in the garden with all the tools of torment he had helped create for her.

His eyes widened and he gasped with ecstasy as Lady Sally lowered herself onto his cock and then leant over him, the flesh of her bare breast pressing against his chest.

"You must understand, Mr. Buckingham, this is for my pleasure. I have to confess to wanting you inside me since I saw you bare-chested and sweating as you worked on my garden . . . and I tend to get what I want, as you might expect. This is a rare pleasure offered only to servants who've given

me outstanding service. You must consider this a reward for the excellent job you've done in creating my walled garden, which is going to give me hours of pleasure."

At those words Lady Sally sat up and rode her gardener, rotating her hips around his cock and fingering her clit until she reached her climax with Jack following soon after.

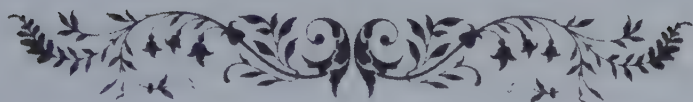
Once Jack and Victoria had been released from their bondage, Lady Sally and her gardener sat down for some afternoon tea, which her maid brought out for them. His senses heightened by his experience in Lady Sally's new garden, Jack Buckingham had never had a scone, jam and cream that tasted so good.

"Now, Mr. Buckingham, there is the question of the work on my rose garden. . . ."



Slave Nano is a writer of erotic stories with dark and exotic content often drawing on the themes of female supremacy, BDSM and fetish, frequently in fantasy, paranormal or historical settings. His short stories and novellas have been published by Xcite Books, House of Erotica and in *Smutter's* and *Coming Together* anthologies. His full-length erotic novel, *Adventures in Fetishland*, a bdsm/fetish reinvention of *Alice in Wonderland*, was published by Xcite Books in 2012. You can find out more about Slave Nano and his writing on his website at www.slavenano.co.uk

The Judgment of Eric



When it came to his garden, Eric tended to be eclectic, practical, and most of all, cheap. For instance, the laurel tree in the back corner had been a gift. It looked good in the corner and was just starting to reach above the privacy fence. The hyacinths that had smelled so good a few months before, he had bought in bulk from a website offering discounts.

His latest additions were some grapevines. They were something different, and most important, they were on clearance and looked healthy. He didn't expect to get any grapes this year, but he was hopeful for next season.

He had just finished planting them and stood back to admire his work. He had put them where some mini roses had not survived the unusually cold winter. A few beads of sweat slid down his cheek. He took off his glasses and wiped his forehead.

When Eric put the glasses back on, he stared at the grapevines. They had filled the area, climbing up the privacy fence, each laden with plump purple fruit.

He took his glasses off and wiped his eyes again. Then he rubbed the lenses with the bottom of his T-shirt. With his eyes still closed, he put the glasses back on. He counted to three and opened his eyes again.

The grapes had even more fruit than before.

Eric stared, not sure what to do, not sure what was happening. Then the music started. It was low at first, almost at the edge of his hearing. But then it began to swell, filling the garden with the sounds of what he thought must be a harp. Just hearing the tune made him happy. No. Not just happy. *Blissful*. He had never thought he would use that

word to describe his own feelings, but it seemed to be the only word that fit.

When the music stopped, he almost started crying. He might have if someone behind him hadn't said right then, "Greetings, mortal."

Eric spun around and was struck speechless by the two men who stood on the wooly thyme he had gotten as a buy one, get one free. Both were young and beautiful. The one on the left had dark hair that hung down past his shoulders and a light beard around his chin. His complexion was dark, sun-kissed. And to Eric's astonishment, he seemed to only be wearing a grape vine, strategically entwined around his body. One broad leaf covered his loins, and it twitched when Eric looked.

The one on the right had golden hair, and light seemed to glow around him. Eric could see a quiver of arrows over the man's shoulder. He held a harp at his waist, half covering his cock, but just barely.

"It's a lyre, actually," the golden one said.

It took a minute for Eric to process this. His ears and mind had stopped working as all his blood seemed to be pouring into the stiffest erection he ever remembered having.

"It's not a harp. It's a lyre."

"Okay," Eric mumbled, not really caring—except that he wanted the man to move it a few inches to the right.

"Ahem. Shall we get down to the goal of our visit?"

The voice came from neither man but belonged to a woman. It was a pleasant voice, but as soon as the words entered his ears, all sexual desire vanished. Eric was left panting and wanting the woman to go away.

He turned towards the woman he hadn't noticed to tell her off, but stopped immediately. He gulped instead.

The woman stood at least seven feet tall. Or at least the top of her helmet did. She held a spear even taller. She had a breastplate on and a tunic. She was beautiful but, Eric had to admit, really scary.

"I am Athena, goddess of wisdom. My brothers here have had a quarrel and it has been decided to have a mortal judge between them. They have chosen you."

Listening to her brought him a type of clarity he had never had before. He could ignore the sensuality of the two men behind him and concentrate again. Though what she said was so outlandish, he knew it was true. He also began to remember some of his college mythology class. Athena. Goddess of Wisdom and War. A virgin goddess. That explained why his erection had vanished when she spoke.

Athena scowled and Eric realized that she could also read his mind.

She had said *her brothers*. He risked a glance back at the two men. Grapevine must be Dionysus. Bow and lyre, Apollo. Eric was glad now that the mythology class had fit into his schedule.

Then he remembered what Athena had said. He was going to be a judge between two gods. That never ended well.

"What kind of disagreement?"

"They are arguing about which one of them is the better lover."

A quick succession of thoughts and emotions ran through his brain faster than he thought possible. Joy. Lust. Fear. *Terror.*

"Best lover? And I'm going to judge? How?" he said.

He never would have thought Athena would smirk, but she did.

"I thought that would be rather obvious."

He glanced back at the two gods. Apollo had put his lyre aside. He wasn't erect yet, but even so, Eric knew that none of those statues had ever done the god justice. Had not even come close.

"Why me?" he squeaked. He hated the way his voice betrayed him.

This time Apollo spoke. "You show homage to both of us, Eric. You grow laurel and hyacinths, both special to me. And of course, grapes are the province of my brother."

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Eric looked towards Dionysus. The grapevine had shifted and was no longer strategically placed. He felt his own erection stiffening once again.

"And it's obvious you are of an inclination to help," Dionysus said.

Eric couldn't deny that, but there was still a part of his brain screaming in terror.

"But what about a goddess or a nymph?"

Dionysus answered. "The goddesses did not wish to get involved. Apollo did ask a nymph, but she ran away and was turned into some weeds."

Apollo turned a glare on his brother that Eric knew, if directed at him, would have turned him to ashes. Dionysus just chuckled.

"So you, Eric, are the chosen mortal who will decide," Dionysus said and started walking toward him.

Eric couldn't decide if he wanted to back away or rush forward.

Dionysus grabbed Eric by the back of the head. "What say you?" Dionysus whispered.

"Okay," Eric whispered back.

Dionysus smiled and pulled him forward into a kiss, pressing his lips against Eric's.

He tasted grapes and wine. The god's lips were cool upon his, and he felt himself getting lightheaded. Then Dionysus pushed his tongue into his mouth, and his pleasure increased tenfold. He felt dizzy and hot and horny. He would have collapsed if Dionysus hadn't been holding him. He felt intoxicated, as if he had just gone from sober to staggering drunk in seconds. And he probably had.

Then he could breathe again and he actually did stagger a little. He opened his eyes to see Dionysus' back moving away and Apollo moving forward.

Apollo put his strong hands on either side of Eric's head and leaned into him, brushing against his lips. Eric felt warmth flow from his lips throughout his whole body. Where Dionysus had pressed, Apollo lightly touched their

lips together before he too put his tongue into Eric's mouth. Their tongues met and Eric felt like he had an instant fever. He could feel the heat radiating from his face, his hands, even his cock. He also knew he wouldn't be able to stand much more of this.

Apollo withdrew and Eric fell to his knees. So this is what a swoon feels like, he thought.

"So, whose kiss was better?" Dionysus asked.

"It does appear he enjoyed them," Apollo answered.

Gods, yes, he enjoyed them. The gods didn't need to read his mind, just see his raging erection and the wet spot bigger than a grapefruit on his shorts. He rarely had much pre-cum, but then again, he had never had foreplay like this before.

He had the impression though that they were waiting for an answer. "I'm . . . not sure," he said.

The gods scowled slightly, but then Dionysus shrugged. "It matters not. That was just the first round of three challenges."

"Did you say *three*?"

Dionysus nodded and came forward once again.

"Three? What are they?" Eric asked.

Dionysus just smiled. He caught Eric's gaze and his worries and fears left him. Instead, he felt wild, like stripping off his clothes and running through the mountains. "Ready?" the god asked.

Eric nodded, staring into those eyes. Then the beautiful eyes were gone.

Eric blinked. Where did he . . . but then he knew. He felt his shorts and underwear pulled down to his ankles and then lips closed around his cock. He reeled as the god's tongue caressed the shaft, tickled around the head. He was panting and moaning and oh gods, what if the neighbors could hear him or the whole block for that matter?

Dionysus did not seem to have a gag reflex and took it all into his mouth. He moved up and down, faster and faster, his tongue still caressing the underside of Eric's cock.

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He didn't feel drunk this time. He felt *alive*. He could smell pine and clean air and wine and sex. Now he knew, now he knew what *ecstasy* meant.

He came, harder and more than he ever had before. It lasted and lasted for minutes. He felt Dionysus swallow and then he released him. As the god stood up, Eric collapsed onto his knees.

Dionysus smiled and turned to Apollo. "Top that, brother."

Apollo did not answer, just stepped forward and took Eric under the arms and lifted him. The god let go, then reached down, brushing the tips of his fingers across the top of Eric's still damp cock. Despite being drained and exhausted, Eric felt his cock tingle and start to grow. Eric groaned as Apollo knelt down.

Apollo paused for a moment then licked lightly at the head, flicking his tongue back and forth over it. Each time the tongue connected, he felt a small tingle, and a small jolt of heat. In less than a minute, his erection was back, as hard as it was before. Apollo smiled and put just the tip between his lips. Eric felt the warmth flood up the shaft and fill his body with light and heat.

Apollo moved down his cock slowly, licking each inch as he took it all in his mouth. Eric was certain the whole city could hear him now, as his moans increased.

Then Apollo did something unexpected. He started humming while his lips were still pressed against the base of his cock. Eric's cock started vibrating from the sound, and Eric could feel the vibrations moving through his body. His head filled with music and light, and his cock vibrated, and Apollo didn't even have to move his lips. He just kept humming and Eric yelled and came again as much as before if not more. His legs felt weaker than before, and he wasn't even sure what was holding him up. His orgasm finally stopped, but Apollo kept licking, cleaning each drop from his cock, and each time the tongue touched him, he shuddered again.

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Finally, Apollo stood up and Eric collapsed. The pleasures had been too intense, and he couldn't imagine what he would feel after the third test. Well, he actually could, but he wasn't sure he would survive it.

He saw Dionysus start to move toward him. "Please, wait. Let me, let me rest for a moment."

Dionysus' smile vanished, but he stopped. Eric sighed in relief.

Mortal, you have shown amazing . . . fortitude. But you know this will not end well. It is never wise to judge between gods. I speak from experience.

He heard Athena's voice in his head. Yes, he remembered the Judgment of Paris from his mythology class and the aftermath of that decision.

I know. But how do I get out of this? Can you help me?

I cannot directly interfere or give you the answer. However, if you promise to plant an olive tree here in your garden, I will give you one of my gifts to bestow: wisdom.

Yes, please.

The voice in his head vanished and was replaced with something else. He thought it through, his predicament, his knowledge of mythology, everything he knew. He formulated a plan in an instant.

Eric slowly climbed to his feet.

"I have reached my decision," he said.

Apollo and Dionysus looked perplexed.

"We still have one more challenge to complete," Apollo said.

"Well, yes, about that . . ."

Eric had a very good idea what the third challenge was. First, he didn't think he could take more sex with the two gods. Second, he was usually the top.

"Look, Apollo, Dionysus, I am greatly honored that you chose me to be the judge in your dispute. The trials have been, well, absolutely amazing. However, the experience is more than my mortal mind can take. Well, and I think more than my mortal body can take as well. All I know is that both

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of you blew my mind, as well as my, well. I can't really tell the difference between the two because my mind is just too small to contain it."

Neither one of the gods looked happy. Eric had visions of spending the rest of his life as a small squeaking mammal, and that was if he were lucky.

"What I am trying to say is that the only ones who can judge between the two of you is yourselves."

The gods looked surprised. "What?" Dionysus asked.

"I think you should make love to each other. Then you can decide which one is better."

The two gods looked stunned. Eric held his breath, waiting for a silver arrow through his chest or a man-eating lion to appear from the hydrangeas.

"The mortal makes a good case," Athena said, and then she winked at him.

Apollo and Dionysus looked at each other. Slowly, smirks appeared on each other's face as they contemplated the challenges to come.

Dionysus turned back to Eric. "That is a wise decision," he said, with a glance at Athena. "We would like to grant you a gift for helping us get this far."

Eric froze. He remembered what the gifts of the gods were like. Midas's touch. Cassandra's gift of prophecy.

"Really, I need no gifts," he paused. "Except, and forgive me for asking, please, let me forget what it was like to be with you. I could never enjoy sex with another mortal again otherwise."

Once again he seemed to surprise both of the gods.

"Very well," Apollo said.

He took a few steps forward and placed his hand on Eric's forehead. "When you wake up, you will not remember this afternoon ever happened."

"Thank you," Eric said, already feeling his eyes getting heavy.

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"Though, whenever you eat one of these grapes, you will have the same orgasms you had this afternoon. We leave you that much," Dionysus said, smiling.

Eric couldn't respond as his eyes closed and he fell asleep.



Eric awoke in his garden. How had he fallen asleep out here? He slowly climbed to his feet and looked over to where the scraggly rose bush tried to climb up a trellis. I should really take that out and put in an olive tree, he thought. But at least the grapes are looking good. He reached out, picked one from the vine, and popped it into his mouth.



Andrew Peters' first Greek mythology-themed erotic story (about the last night that Patroclus spends with Achilles) appeared in the anthology *Love Under Foot*. He has also published a variety of short fiction and poetry, including two chapbooks, and has a forthcoming short story collection from Post Mortem Press. He teaches creative writing.

Lavished



Three virile strikes at the black walnut door were followed by the revelation of a man attractive in a shiny-insect way: wet almost black eyes, lean angled face and sinewy, darting body. "May I congratulate you upon your recent nuptials, Nehemiah Coombes?"

"Stanley Aston!" Nehemiah pulled him in. "Is it really you?"

"Could I present a paper to the Royal Society of London without inquiring as to the amorous intrigues of my dearest accomplice?"

Nehemiah ordered the elderly housekeeper, "Mrs. Sanborn, please deliver a pot of tea to the study for us. Use the pekoe from yesterday; it is still good." To his old friend, he grumbled, "One must forever instruct servants, and women, of course, in the virtues of parsimony."

Stanley laughed as they walked to the study. "I'm quite astonished you would decide for matrimony—for that and many other reasons. Was it not you who gave discourse to our fellows on *The Inferiority of Feminine Morals as Evidenced by Her Misfortunate Anatomical Deficiencies?*"

"Aristotle was not the first to notice that women have fewer teeth than men, and a smaller head; all such aberrations show her to be but a poorly made man. Not to mention the absence of that essential acquisition which is, shall we say, our primary tool of fecund power?" He grinned lewdly as Mrs. Sanborn brought in the tea tray and left.

"You mean of course . . ."

"Yes, what is called *stamen* in botany. You no doubt heard of my discovery and paper before the Society last spring. We

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know now that the source of a plant's fertility is absolutely, irrefutably, masculine."

"Fascinating. I am no theologian, but my father always held with good Christian doctors that women are by nature ignoble Eves. How sensible that Nature would confirm the divine assertion of man's supremacy."

Nehemiah smirked as he handed Stanley a filled teacup. "Even the wise pagans thought evil men returned to the world as women, born again through transmigration of the soul. Of course, that foolishly presumes women have souls."

Stanley crossed his leg and leaned toward Nehemiah. "So why marry?"

"Why indeed?" At this he seemed perplexed until a thought occurred. "The early Greeks also hold aloft the value of marriage and family as essential to the welfare of the nation-state."

Stanley paused to sip. He cynically asked, "Do you really want me to believe you are motivated for purposes of the king? That's not the rogue Nehemiah I know."

"Well, there is the matter of Sophia's inheritance." Nehemiah at last gave his wife a name. "She would only squander it if left to her own devices. Fortunately, *feme covert* as defined by law gives me proper stewardship over her financial dilemma."

"Wise as a salamander as always, my dear Nehemiah," said Stanley. "Shall I meet your mistress of meritorious benefits?"

"Not today. I recommended exercise for her in the garden. A woman's body is a self-indulgent thing rarely given to the pursuit of asceticism. Let us tour my new collection in the library. You will, of course, stay with me tonight?"

"I shan't impose upon your happy family, and without prior notice."

"Nonsense. My wife and I sleep separately as advisable for the health of my liver. You may join me in my bed as you did in our days at Cambridge, two students shivering beneath

one thin sheet, whispering heresies and plotting rowing strategies.”

Both men glowed with memories of more than collegiate companionship, the flickering lamp revealing their mutual fervent glances in the shadows.

“Then let me request help from your servants to bring in my wedding gift, Nehemiah. It is quite large and unusual, much like your own brain, dear friend.”

“What could you find that I would possibly need?” He threw back his arm as if to uncover a treasure trove and not an academic office cluttered with books.

Stanley looked faraway. “I was in India, in a forest so dark and magical the holy men of the village refused to speak of it. I found there this: Tree? Plant? It stood beside a cerulean waterfall they named Astarta for a deva. There is nothing like it in any book of botany, Nehemiah, I will wager you. It’s called *the woman’s vine* in their tongue. Men are forbidden to touch it; it is cultivated only by women in secret to make the most potent aphrodisiacs in the world. Of course, I figured you would want to study such an oddity as a scientist undeterred by old wives’ stories.”

The bridegroom’s eyes gleamed at the prospect. He rubbed his soft palms together. “Let’s take it straight away to my conservatory.”



The conservatory was a wonder of the late 18^h century made of angled and polished glass to catch and magnify the sun of London for magnanimous effect on the flowers, plants, herbs, and trees stolen from more robust climates. Three fountains lined the middle: one was filled with rare fish from China, circling the pool in a golden trance; the last was dotted with green, pink and white rushes, lotuses and water lilies; and the central largest one lay beneath a musical waterfall, from which water poured through clear glass spouts in every

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direction like spokes from the hub of a wheel to irrigate the greenhouse in its entirety.

The two men were surprised by the presence of Mrs. Coombes there. She sat at the side of the fountain with water plants, trailing its surface dreamily with long fingers. She was a tall woman of proportionate size, a mousy face, dun-colored hair and large breasts, the latter noted by Stanley with disdain. He also wrinkled his nose at the sight of her shucked shoes, revealing white stockings with muddied bottoms. Her husband tapped his walking cane several times before she was startled from her reverie.

"Mrs. Coombes! Did I not instruct you to walk in the garden this evening for the air and your good health?"

She flushed. Hurrying to put on her shoes she said, "Sir, I am sorry, I thought it too chilly and . . . it is so nice here."

"Need I remind you of the Greek philosopher's words? *The courage of a man lies in commanding, a woman's lies in obeying.* You fear the cold. Where is your moral courage to obey me no matter the weather?"

He ignored her apologies and pleadings to address his friend. "Well. Let's see your fine gift. Is that . . . it?"

There were no words for it.

It was as tall as a giant man, about seven feet at full size, and as thick as a woman with child, its center belling outward slightly. The bark was queer: flesh-colored, nearly velvet to the touch, which none could resist. It gave off a slight odor that was not unpleasant, sweet as nutmeg and sour as the nape of a woman's neck after working all day in the sun. He wanted to taste it but did not in front of his wife and friend. Instead, he brought a magnifying glass to its trunk, astounded by what appeared to be pores.

"My God, what is this?" The top branch of the tree-plant bent low to the ground. What appeared to be a vine—thus its name—bore two stellar flowers of modest white quite high; lower on the vine perched a great oval flower, shaped like a cup, and hot pink. Protruding midway was a stamen that amazed him. It was three cornered, glistening, and red as a

devil's horn. On the other side a dark tapering vine, barren except for huge thorns, seemed to anchor the tree to the ground like vegetable ballast.

"Quite the spectacle, isn't it?" Stanley reveled in his friend's amazement.

"Hideous. No wonder only women touch it. Perhaps they're an unclean caste perfect for nurturing such a deformed monster. I can't wait to take cuttings."

At this young Mrs. Coombes could not be still. "Please, dear husband, don't harm it, I beg you."

He scoffed. "Sentimental woman! You know I only do the work of science. She cried for days, Stanley, when I completed my famous *Autopsy of an English Rose*, in which I delineated by research through scalpel and microscope the way petals are precisely folded within an unopened bud."

At the sound of the men's laughter, she grew pale as a narcissus and vanished in the shadows.

"You would think this was her nursery," Nehemiah growled, "and these flowers were her infants."

"Does she suffer for want of a child?" Stanley asked.

"I don't know. I don't have time to wonder. The world is waiting for men like me to show them that the secrets of the earth are knowable; that mystery can be domesticated to serve progress. I don't believe in magic trees or women who go mad from empty wombs."

The two walked out of the conservatory, dim in the twilight hour as a cathedral and as serene, hands clasped behind them. They pondered the strange world of nature and wives, and all the other dark continents designed for their private exploration.



After a lengthy fortnight visit by his childhood bedfellow Stanley Aston, during which youthful passions and boyhood loyalties were renewed, Nehemiah Coombes nearly forgot the bizarre vine-tree lurking behind the great palms of his conservatory. He was steeped in writing his latest medical

treatise, *A Remarkable Anatomy of the Mucous Organs*, and feverishly working for its publication for his peers and sycophants.

Mrs. Coombes continued to visit the conservatory, as was her custom, in the late afternoon and early evening. She was not missed.

There was only one anomaly in the predictable rhythms of the well-regulated household. He waited until breakfast to speak of it. "Mrs. Coombes, I wonder: what was the cause of your crying out last night? Are you afflicted with vapors of the spleen?"

"Sir?" She tapped her poached egg to break it.

"I could not sleep for the disturbance. When I entered your room you were thrashing back and forth like a flounder in a net. RAVISH I think you said. Or was it radish? Are you not eating well?" He noticed a thin and wilder look about her recently.

"No sir, but thank you for your concern."

He could not leave the matter. "I am certain you said RAVISH. RAVISH ME." He bent low so the servants could not hear and hissed, "What could you possibly mean by that?"

"Sir, I am certain now that what I said was LAVISH. It's a new perfume among ladies. The word means unbearable, boundless, unrestrained generosity."

Nehemiah studied her fevered eyes as if it could help him understand women. "Yes, yes, I know what it means," he mumbled with irritation. "From the old French for a downpour of rain—*lavage*."

"Sir, may I be excused?"

"You've barely touched your egg!"

She was gone, and in her train he could detect no perfume, named in her sleep or not.



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It was time to study the monstrous gift, Nehemiah decided, and put away any nagging mysticism about its origin or purpose.

He instructed his gardening assistants—in close earshot of his solicitous wife—to refrain from giving it any water. He wanted to see the effects of deprivation upon it, and at what point the plant was stressed and lost vitality.

To his surprise, his wife did not object.

Still it thrived, growing a foot in less than a month, more splendidly horrid in its unnatural colors and writhing shape than before. He suspected she secretly watered it when she visited the conservatory alone to do her needlepoint or read the Greek essays he assigned her.

He waited until she left dinner, staying behind to watch the servants put out the lights, and then moved swiftly to the conservatory door.

It was locked, he discovered with surprise: from the inside.

He knew the locations of ventilation openings and found one nearest the door. Peering in, he saw that the door had been barred crudely with a pruning hook.

Women, he thought, are like children or animals—not to be trusted. What is she hiding from me?

Nehemiah tried three other ventilation openings before he came to the one that revealed the answer to his question. He stared and stared, uncomprehending, at the sight of it, for which he had no language or explanation.

Sophia, naked save for one stocking left on in haste, straddled the thick vine of the bent-over tree. As she rocked her sex against it her rolling breasts moved close to the two white flowers trembling atop the vine. Each aureole disappeared into a blossom, which latched onto it like a soft mouth. Each time she rocked forward, the blossoms attempted to close until her red nipples disappeared completely inside them.

It was then he heard a squeak and slosh that seemed to come from the deep pink flower wide as a soup bowl just

below Sophia's sex. It, too, was a kind of mouth, yawning and gaping for her sex as she moved nearer in lascivious rocking. Now she was right against it, leaning forward so it took her sex's swollen lips in its own pouty ones. Like a Venus flytrap, it shut on its prey. Though she continued to move back and forth it would not release her any more than the sweet flowers above would relax around her stiff nipples.

Like all vegetable things, the woman's vine was slow and tenacious, just as a tiny seedling breaks through a stone with time and perseverance. Thus it worked upon its victim, Sophia, with no mind to time, no limiting human impatience, immovable.

With a scientist's detached scrutiny, Nehemiah observed the reddening of Sophia's throat and upper chest, an interesting biological change he had never seen in her before. *Was her flesh hot there or merely flushed from the hectic movement she seemed no longer able to control?*

She held on tighter to the vine, knees tightening and releasing, and then suddenly moved backward, arching her back. The pink flower gasped open and her sex was free for a few moments from its suckle. But only for the moment necessary for the rapid pulse in her own pink bud to quicken and slow. An astounding development followed: now that the female parts of the vine-tree had finished its ravishment, it was the turn of the male triple-cornered stamen to spring forward and furrow itself deeply into her waiting sex.

Here is the scientific reason for the tree's survival of an experiment of artificial drought, thought Nehemiah. The moisture from her sex made the vine glisten and dripped from trunk to roots, a downpour of secret waters renewing its verdancy. The tree, an archaic perversion from an ancient world, was made—no, thrived!—to pleasure women.

Sophia moved without consciousness now, swooning. From her closed fist she pushed a handkerchief into her mouth to stifle howls of inordinate passion.

It was then Nehemiah regained his senses.

First he was ashamed that the sight of this woman had created his own rising sap straining against his breeches. He had pressed his hand there without consciousness.

Second, he feared for his wife: was she raped? Despoiled for his deflowering should he ever decide to do so? Seduced by a forbidden tree of lost Eden? Why then did she bar the door?

He was not thinking anymore when he picked up the axe at the outside entrance and broke the glass of his precious conservatory to surprise her. He felt only rage for the lewd and unnatural way she betrayed him, and jealousy that an unintelligent frond could bring his wife to muffled screams of lust where he could not.

He raised his axe to the trunk of the Judas tree, feeling joy in the movement that released his torture, when he became aware of something else.

It wasn't like him to forget but he had not counted on the lowest vine, the one with thorns, raising up to lightly graze the small of his back. It made him stop, that small tickle. It reminded him of Stanley, behind him as they spooned on one cot. He didn't mean to smile.



"Mrs. Sanborn, in checking your references for work I could not locate your previous employer."

She snuffled into a hanky. "Oh, sir, the lady of the house is gone, no one knows where. The gentleman, I'm sorry to say, is incarcerated at the asylum . . . at least that's what I hear."

The interviewer raised his brow. "Are you speaking of the celebrated Doctor Nehemiah Coombes?"

"Why yes, I worked 12 years for him before he married, nearly six months after," she stifled a sob. "Now they say he'll never leave that dismal place and must lie abed, crippled from ever sitting at a writing desk again."

“What could have led to a downfall from such a lofty career as his?”

“None rightly know, sir. There’s gossip, which I avoid. But they say he bore a strange injury: the branch of a tree was found buried inside him.”

“A branch you say? However did it arrive there?”

She could not look up from the floor, studying her creased shoes. “It came in from the backside, sir. So deep in his bowels it took a surgeon to remove it. Do you know the worst part of it?”

The story had to be given its lurid end. “They say it was still moving inside like it had the will to sprout out the other end of him! He never stopped screaming, sir. I daresay he may still be.”

The old housekeeper covered her mouth as if to keep from shouting herself and relieving her weary soul of all the unspeakable depravities she had seen in her time in the estates of rich men.

The interviewer shuddered, took up his pen and turned to the subject of wages.



Sophia arrived with a fever in the forest village of India known for its *woman vines*. She knew what would cure her.

Before she unpacked she left her guides and headed down to the secret place.

She was not too tired to meander through the jungle, its spicy air alive with glittering insects and the unfamiliar cries of unnamed birds.

She had chosen to live in this place because her small fortune would last two lifetimes here. And for one even more compelling reason.

As she walked past the Astarta waterfall, her hands caressed the trunks of dozens of flesh-colored trees. The feel of them caused a chill to glide up her spine and the hair at the nape of her neck to dampen.

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Beyond the grove, from over the hill and darker forests, came mysterious sounds. The shrieks of wild peacocks and the soft hooting of monkeys nearly masked the purr of old women's moans and the urgent distress of young women's gasps.

She found the one she wanted. She hitched up her skirt and petticoats and kneeled at the tree, one that was especially low and twisted.

She was home.



R. R. S. may appear to be a comely matron of 58 years but hides a deformity: an extra rib in her back where a broken wing would cling. As a sickly child growing up in the shadow of sooty smokestacks, she entertained herself for hours with fanciful tales of a morbid or provocative nature.

Love Lies Bleeding



He comes to tend the garden, almost every day. I watch him from the high windows of my house, crouched up there right under the frieze of weeping nymphs. The glass is filthy but I have no problem keeping him in view because my windows face every point of the compass rose. And he seems to glow against the foliage as he plants, and prunes, and wrestles the overgrown rhododendrons.

Oh, I long to go out and see him face to face. But I don't dare.

I can't.

I've been ill so long . . .

All through this last winter he cut back the bushes, revealing the lank and spindly grass of the neglected paths. He wore thick black trousers with HUSQVARNA written down them, and made an unbelievable racket as he worked. The smoke from the bonfires he tended turned the air hazy, and he drank steaming soup from the metal flask he brought with him.

His eyes are blue. He is beautiful.

By spring he'd cleared right the way round my house. Other people came to look over the place. They admired the Ionic columns and the mournful caryatids at the porch and examined the mortar of the stones, but I wasn't interested in them. I only wanted to see him. Long legs, skillful hands, a body quick and strong and lithe. While he was uprooting rhododendron stumps and felling the sycamore that had infested every patch the rhododendrons had not claimed, he wore his hair tied back. Now that it's warmer he lets it hang loose sometimes, untidy hair that runs to sun-blonded curls at the tips. He's tall, with broad shoulders, and his face is

more browned and weathered by the sun than you'd guess just from those boyish locks. He does not often bother to shave.

Papa would not approve of him.

The others put up a chain across my front steps and a sign on it that reads DANGER—NO PUBLIC ACCESS. As if they needed to. The door is locked against visitors.

Of course, I do leave the house sometimes. At night, when everyone has safely gone, I walk under the trees, or I steal to the brow of the hill and look down toward my childhood home where I lived before I fell into this decline. But the big house does not draw me now. My own little abode is space enough. I like being alone. I was always a shy girl, and since my illness I have grown more solitary. Mama used to tell me that if I wanted to make a good impression at my coming out into society, I needed to learn to be more vivacious. It's too late for that now. I have spent so long in my bed . . .

What was I talking about? Ah, yes. Him.

He is restoring the grounds around my house. Spring sunlight, returning to earth long shadowed, has resulted in an unexpected treasury of flowers along the margins of the old rides: stunted narcissi and crocuses early in the year and a nervous carpet of bluebells following on in May. The warmth of the season reveals more of him too. Working mostly alone here, in an area of the gardens long closed off, he sheds his shirt when the weather allows it and labors bare-chested, golden and ruddy. Freckles bloom like tiny flowers across his shoulders, more and more each day, and tiny flecks of soil and cut grass and dry leaves stick to his glistening skin, a patina that makes him scratch pleasurably whenever he pauses to ease his muscles.

Papa would not approve of that either. He always tried to shield me from such coarse sights, lest I be spoilt for any future husband. But it is such a long time since Papa last came down here to visit me. I can't recall how long exactly . . . I wonder what he would say if he knew one of his workmen

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was toiling half-naked within sight of his daughter?

I watch, illicitly, feeling a thrill I had not known myself capable of.

He is beautiful.

His skin is golden, but his nipples are flat and brown, and blondish hair marches down across his chest and belly like an army converging upon the narrower pass beyond his hips. When he is working hard his shoulders are glossy with sweat and droplets run down the declivity of his spine and slip beneath the waistband of his trousers. I want to follow them with my fingers. I want to bite his chest and feel his hot hard flesh beneath my hands. I want to feel the life burning beneath his skin, to press my lips to that fire, to taste it on my tongue.

He shines. He shines. In my world of shadows and stillness, he glows like a burning lamp. He summons me.

He is digging a new flowerbed on the southern approach to my home, and I cannot tear my eyes away. But I cannot make myself known.

Once, greatly daring, I did come out while he was here. My desire was so fierce that day I could not resist the lure. He'd been laboring all morning a little way off from the house, where the woodland understory was still thick. Maybe he glimpsed my presence at the corner of his eyes, because he would pause and glance about himself occasionally, frowning into the depths of the grove. But he never truly saw me. Resting after his lunch in a cleared dell, he dozed off for a moment, I think, in a patch of sun. I crept in closer under the dense cover of the rhododendrons. There he lay in his open shirt, one arm tucked behind his head to pillow it. His face was peaceful in repose, his lashes long and silky. That broad chest of his rose and fell mesmerically. Beyond the crest of his ribcage, his torso sloped down to the shallower flatland of his stomach, a vulnerable stretch that seemed to crave the touch of my hand. I was close enough to hear his gentle breathing, to smell his sweat, to feel the heat of his blood like a furnace on my face. Almost close enough to reach out to

him. My lust for him was an ache bone-deep.

But he lay in sunlight. I was confined to my shadows.

Almost as if he felt my gaze upon him in his shallow dreams—and perhaps he did—he woke up abruptly and sat up shivering and looking around him. In my hiding place amongst the dark and glossy leaves, I froze.

Did I want him to see me? The answer is, I do not know. I have been ill so long, and there are no mirrors in my house. I am no longer entirely sure that I look like the pretty girl I used to be, all ringlets and wide eyes and blossoming maidenly curves. I think I must be pitifully frail and slender now. I don't eat much these days. My appetite comes and goes.

I like to watch him eat.

I like to watch when he goes off to empty his bladder against the bole of some tree. There is something exquisitely masculine about the way he stands; the insouciant tilt of his hips; the brace of his legs; the satisfied little bounce he gives as he readjusts his clothing afterward.

He's in the prime of his youth, and male, and working alone. I can see the low burn of the fire that's in his flesh, always. It must be hard to ignore the imperative itch of his potency. That weight he carries between his thighs. I imagine it is burdensome at times. And I sympathize, because my own need is just as cruel.

Sometimes I see it become too uncomfortable for him to ignore. Then he sets his back to a tree and parts his clothes and stretches taut, milking the seed from his heavy stones with swift, grateful movements. I see it. I see it all. It makes me writhe—not with the shame suited to my maiden state, but with a desire so overwhelming that it can only be felt as hunger, and with envy. Envy of his touch on his own body where mine should be. His hand is brutal in its action, and I wonder if he would treat a woman so forcefully. My curiosity is like a sickness all of its own. It turns me inside out and reduces me to moans.

I wonder what it would have been like to be married to a

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man like him, to know the trials and pleasures of a woman's marital duties.

But of course I would not have married a man like him—a mere gardener—if I had been well enough to wed. I would have married a fine gentleman, my social equal. Someone with a grand country estate and a house in town, and ten thousand pounds a year to his name. Not a dirty, unshaven, sweaty gardener whose work-hardened forearms are dusted with sun-bleached hair. Whose callused hands would maul shamelessly my white virginal skin. Whose disrespectful eyes and casual coarseness and sense of humor would make a scullery maid blush.

He likes the grieving caryatids that flank the stairs to my front door. Pillars in the form of half-draped Grecian women, they hold up the lintel of the veranda that circles my abode, their stony faces solemn and their busts jutting and matronly. When he won his way through the shrubbery, that very first time, the first thing he did was to reach up and fondle the lichened breast of the one on the left, and grin. So pleased with himself.

It has become a ritual; every day he comes up here with his tools, and before starting work he gives both caryatids a grope, rubbing their stone breasts. If he's in a particularly cheerful mood he might jump up on one of their stone pedestals—he has no fear of the chain or the sign—and embrace one from behind for a private joke, his hands cupping that stone bosom, his crotch bumping her unyielding buttocks.

Watching him through the crack between the double doors, I would give anything to be that caryatid, then.

But all I do is watch.

He is creating a new flowerbed, on the south-facing approach. A splash of extra interest for anyone looking up the re-opened grass ride toward the dome of my house. He is planting yellow azaleas to compliment the bigger rhododendrons, and day-lilies and golden-leaved oriental maples and amaranths with their drooping red tassels. *Love-*

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lies-bleeding, Mama used to call it.

That is how I feel, trapped behind these walls in the half-light of the algae-stained windows. I am bleeding for love, as if it were some open wound that will not heal. When I venture out under the moon's kinder rays, even then I ache with sorrow because what I truly want is beyond my grasp, gone home, far away. He is warm and happy in his firelit house, I imagine, oblivious to my existence.

There is no warm hearth in mine. Only stone and shadow.

I have never known such thoughts before. For years all I did was lie in my bed and stare at the canopy over me. Walk in my garden. Eat a little. All without any thoughts to stir the dust of my memories.

He has woken me from slumber, with his heat and his shine and his life.

I do not like it.



Today it is raining.

Today drizzle and deceptive lulls alternate with the heavy windless downpours of summer. Water patters on the unwanted sycamores and the admired beeches and soaks the ground even beneath the leather-leaved rhododendrons, and it spouts off the lead-work of my roof. There's rain dribbling off the proud nipples of the caryatids when he runs in to shelter beneath my porch from the opening heavens.

Will he notice? Will he see what I have done?

Today the bronze padlock lies open on the flagstones. And my front door is ajar.

It takes him a few moments, in fact. He is preoccupied shaking the water out of his unkempt hair, like some scruffy dog. His black undershirt—I do not understand why there is writing emblazoned on it, or what the word METALLICA means—is plastered damply to his chest, and the shining yellow waistcoat over it is flecked with mud.

He sees the slice of shadow between the leaves of the

door, and frowns. Glances down at the fallen padlock, and draws his lower teeth over his upper lip. Then curiosity gets the better of him. He pushes cautiously at the bronze-faced door.

Instantly I retreat, fleeing to the rear—and up the wall and into the shadows under the dome, where Diana's unsullied companions cavort in faded fresco.

He steps inside and glances about him. It is dim in here, because the only light is from the tiny windows set just below the dome. I suppose it must take a few moments for his eyes to adjust. He will see a round chamber, and a stone bier. My house is not large. The floor is littered with the leaves and dirt that have crept through that broken pane on the north side. He pokes with his toe at the husk of a grey squirrel, nothing but bones and fur—I confess I am not always as tidy as I should be—and peers up into the ceiling.

He looks straight at me. And he does not see me.

Nothing but one of the painted nymphs, grey and exhausted by her perpetual virginity, or perhaps a swatch of dusty cobweb.

I am too worn by my illness.

His attention falls to the stone, of course. The focal point. Outside, the building is so ornate, but in here it is almost the only exception to a rule of bare austerity. A box of white stone, like a sacrificial altar, and laid out across it the marble figure of a girl.

Curiosity draws him, naturally. I watch from my high perch as he approaches. I doubt that he can understand the incised text—most of it is in Greek, Euripides if I remember correctly, although it is so long since I bothered to read it that I myself have forgotten the words. There are dates in English though, and a name. "Iphy" is what my family called me, fondly, and the full-sized image is that of the beautiful Iphigenia, daughter of King Menelaus, cruelly taken from life at the cusp of her maiden state by the fickle gods and a fate greater than herself. She lies back across the altar in an attitude of resigned despair, her alabaster robes disarrayed to

reveal her supple virgin breasts to the sacrificial knife.

In one hand she clutches a lily, symbol of purity—and of death.

It is an image intended to inspire pity and pathos in the onlooker. That's what Papa would say.

Does he see that? Does he even recognize whom it depicts?

Somehow I doubt it.

He looks at the sculpture in silence for a moment, then reaches out to trail his fingers across her white marble thigh. The girl is skillfully carved; except for her pallor you might almost take the slim stone limbs for smooth flesh. He strokes the marble, tentatively, as if he fears staining it with his sap-greened hands. Then he leans over and shifts his hand to her bosom, cupping each small breast in turn and circling their pert little nipples with his fingertips.

I feel it in my own bosom, like a tingling echo. She is me after all. Her face was modelled upon mine. When he looks upon her with that narrow smile—half admiring, half lascivious—it is my body that stirs and intrigues his lust.

Self-consciously, he shifts his hips and glances back toward the door. He's uncomfortable in his coarse blue trousers now. The way he puts a hand to his crotch to adjust the arrangement within betrays his shameful secret. Blood flows more swiftly where it should not. Sap rises, one might say. He favors the marble girl with another long caress, more thorough this time; thighs and waist and breasts. But though her contours are clearly pleasing she isn't as pliant as he would like. He cannot lift that marble dress or part her stone thighs.

He wants, but he cannot have.

He is like me.

Shaking his head and snorting—is his derision aimed at her or himself?—he walks away. I am frozen in my place, no more able to move than my image below me.

He gets as far as the door, and then he stops, and hesitates, and looks back at the beautiful sarcophagus. His

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fingers drum on his hip. One hand drifts over to scoop the bulge at his groin and squeeze it thoughtfully.

Why not? The words are almost written on his face now.

Why not? Quickly—no one is looking, after all. Outside, the rain sluices down.

Come on, my sweet. Let me see. I will not tell.

Suddenly decisive, he steps away from the door, into the sheltering curve of the wall. Setting his shoulders to the plaster, he plucks the buttons of his trousers from the top downward, one two three four. His hands reach in to scoop out what he seeks, comforting its restlessness with a firm squeeze, cupping the fat sack below as if assessing its weight. I see it all, and it burns like a flame in my sight. He is heavy and glossy and thick already—the eager itchy need of life simmering and swelling in his flesh. This is the purpose for which his body was made.

My own body seems nothing but an empty pit yearning to be filled. I want him so badly it hurts. I am surprised he cannot hear the howl of need that sings from every particle of my being.

But he hears nothing except the race of his own blood and the beat of his rising pulse. He is rapt, face blank and fixed, eyes glazed, his hand working with unhurried pleasure at the task it knows so well. He's looking at the sculpture, one might think, but there's no way of telling if he sees it. Cords pull taut in his neck. For a moment his eyes flutter shut, and he lifts his chin as in supplication.

That is the moment I fall from above, light as a mote of dust or a dried moth wing and wispy as a cobweb. He does not hear the parched-leaf whisper of my feet as I land upon the marble. He does not see as I duck beneath the stone—and then rise again, cloaking myself in the merest film of its white surface.

The sacrificial maiden, after all, is me. I have given her form, and she loans it back to me.

When he opens his eyes I am standing before him. And this time he does see me.

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I am pale, pale as marble, even my hair and the pupils of my eyes. Young and fair and beautiful, as all maidens of myth should be. My faux-Grecian dress slips from my slight shoulders to reveal my pouting and impossibly perfect breasts, white as snow.

Nipples like alabaster.

Mouth like the calyx of a stone lily.

He is frozen, wide-eyed, jaw sagging.

I seize my chance. Falling to my knees, I crawl to him and set my lips to his flesh. He feels hot enough to burn me; hot and fierce and charged with life and blood and strength—all the things I so need. My timing is perfect. The imperative lust of his flesh will not be denied, even in his confusion; he does not even try to thrust me away. I take him into my mouth and he lets me, his hands yielding their place. He touches my hair as if in disbelief, but what does belief have to do with anything, after all? Not when I am sucking him deep into my throat. Not when there is such pleasure to be had from my tongue and my lips and my teeth.

I don't need to breathe, remember.

Flesh to flesh. Hot to cold. I want him, I want him, I want him.

I feel his pleasure. I feel it run through me all the way to my core just as if it were my own, a burning path that we slip down together. I feel his pulse thudding in my own veins. I feel his surge and his cresting and his tip into ecstasy, and it ignites my own body too. He arches and shudders, wrenches at my hair, slams his open hand against the wall beside him, cries out hoarsely.

I am in ecstasy. It is better than I ever imagined.

He can't stop. He can't stop. There is no end to this burning slippery path, no bottom to this fall. It goes on forever. We are one flesh, one blood, one glory. Even when there is no strength left in his legs and he slithers down the wall, he is still shuddering and spurting into me. Still feeding me.

I don't unlock my teeth until his body goes limp, and my

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own sobbing pleasure has passed to calmness once more.

Little trails of red lie spilled across the stone flags, like fallen tassels of amaranth.

It is only an annual flower after all. It blooms once. And then dies.

But I remain, a stone lily. Forever and forever and forever, in the shadows.



Janine Ashbless is an established writer of erotica and hot romantic adventure. She's had novels published by HarperCollins, Black Lace, Samhain and Ellora's Cave. Her latest books are *Cover Him with Darkness*, a novel of fallen angels and religious conspiracies (Cleis Press) and *Fierce Enchantments: Ten Erotic Tales of Myth, Magic and Desire* (Sweetmeats Press), both to be released in October 2014.

The Pulse of the Earth



If it weren't for the villagers, Andreas would never have made it to the Mission San Rafael. As it was, every jolting step as they carried him in the litter sent bolts of agony through his burned arm and chest. "Stop," he begged them, but they didn't.

The desert sun was relentless as they traveled past prickly pear and saguaro cacti which loomed over him with great, curving arms. Surely he'd die of pain or thirst before ever reaching safety.

It was late afternoon when he glimpsed the white adobe walls of the mission. The bell tower stretched high into the sky, dizzying him. The villagers shouted for aid, and moments later he was surrounded by brown-robed figures who took the litter and carried him inside a blessedly cool building. The moment he was laid on a cot, he let out a sigh of relief. Here, at last, he could rest.

"I'm Padre Eduardo," said an old priest with a kindly face. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Andreas Javier Lopez de los Reyes. There was a fire." If he closed his eyes, he could smell the acrid smoke as the blaze ripped through the tiny village. "I went back for the child. I saved her, but . . ."

"Rest easy, my son. We will soon have you well." To an acolyte he said, "Fetch Brother Jacinto." The boy ran off, sandals slapping in the corridor.

With gentle efficiency, Padre Eduardo stripped Andreas's blackened and bloodstained clothing. Andreas didn't protest. Pain and blood loss had left him too weak and dizzy.

It wasn't long before the acolyte returned with another priest, this one hooded and resting one hand on the boy's

shoulder. Under his arm he carried a wooden box, which he set on a table next to the bed. The boy laid out more supplies along with a teapot and mug.

The newcomer pushed back his hood. At first, Andreas was struck by the chiseled beauty of the man's face. Despite the agony of his wounds, his cock thickened with desire.

Then he saw jagged scars around unseeing eyes, and lust transformed into anxiety. He jerked upright too fast. He blacked out for an instant and came to again to find the old priest's hand pressing down on his unburned shoulder. "Easy, my son."

There was no way he was going to let the younger priest tend him. "I don't need his help. Just let me rest. I'll be fine."

"You won't. The Creator has given him a gift. He may have lost his sight, but he knows his herbs better than most of us know our chants and prayers."

It was little comfort, but Andreas didn't have a choice. Brother Jacinto groped in the air for a moment before finding Andreas's forehead. His touch was soft and cool and sent a delicious tingling through Andreas's body.

"What is he doing?" Andreas asked.

"If you want to know what I'm about, please ask me directly. I'm neither deaf nor dumb." Brother Jacinto's voice brooked no argument.

Chastened, Andreas rephrased his question. "May I ask what you're doing?"

"Sensing your vital force so I know which herbs to use. Your burns are bad and will be painful, but they aren't life-threatening unless they become infected." He opened the box and withdrew several pinches of dried herbs which he placed into a mug. At his gesture, the acolyte poured steaming water into the mug. While it seeped, he prepared another concoction and laid out bandages.

"Drink. It's bitter, but it will make you sleep. Trust me, it's preferable to being awake while we tend your burns. And," he said with a wry smile, "I assure you it is not poisoned."

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With Padre Eduardo's assistance, Andreas downed the foul liquid, more than willing to comply. He kept his gaze on the handsome priest as long as he could before unconsciousness carried him away.



"Welcome back, my son. I've brought you some stew. You must be hungry."

Andreas opened his eyes, disappointed to see only Padre Eduardo, but when the words registered he realized that he was indeed starving. Having a left arm swathed in bandages made eating awkward, but Padre Eduardo patiently held the bowl while Andreas fumbled with the spoon and managed to finish the soup.

Afterwards, the padre helped him shave and tend to his personal needs. Andreas was weaker than he'd expected and grateful when he could lie back down and rest. "Will Brother Jacinto come again?"

"He will."

"What happened to his eyes?"

"Ah. That is Brother Jacinto's story to tell if he is so inclined. Now rest, my son."

Rest was difficult. Every breath jarred the damaged skin and there was no comfortable position in which to lie. The stone building was cool during the night, but by midmorning it was sweltering.

The pain had become unbearable by the time he heard the *tap-tap* of a cane against stone. Brother Jacinto appeared, escorted by the acolyte who'd assisted him earlier. The boy carried a pitcher and water basin, which he set on the chest of drawers.

Brother Jacinto stopped short, cocked his head, then spoke to the boy. "Fetch hot water and a mug. Be quick."

The boy ran off, returning a short time later with the requested items. Brother Jacinto made up the tea and helped Andreas lift his head enough to drink. This concoction had a

difference; the pain eased, but Andreas did not drift off to sleep as he had before.

"Thank you," he said when the agony dissipated enough to let him think clearly.

"You won't thank me in a few minutes." He told the hovering boy, "Go on, Gregorio. I know burns aren't easy to look at."

The boy let out a sigh of relief and disappeared. Andreas watched in fascination as Brother Jacinto expertly prepared his concoctions. "How do you know which plants are which?"

He shrugged. "I can feel it. More practically, I'm very careful as to what goes into which compartment so I always know where to find what I need. I'm sorry for what I must do. Brace yourself."

Andreas gritted his teeth. Cleaning the burns was painful, and now that his skin was healing the process was agonizing. "I don't suppose you have more of that tea."

"It's too addictive; we can't use much. I would be a poor healer to fix one problem only to leave another in its place."

Andreas supposed that was true, but it didn't make it any more bearable. He bore it as long as he could before begging Brother Jacinto to give him a break. The priest did, but all too soon started again.

By the time it was over, Andreas was breathing hard and covered in sweat. He bit his tongue to keep from screaming and swearing inside a house of worship. Brother Jacinto sliced the pad of a prickly pear cactus and laid the insides against the burns. The juice cooled the worst of the pain.

Brother Jacinto cleaned up his supplies with the same finesse as he doled them out. "Your burns are healing well. The discomfort should ease in another day or two."

In a way, the good news disappointed him. The faster he recovered, the sooner he would have to leave. His heart ached at the thought of never seeing Brother Jacinto again.

"I expect you'd like a bath."

His gut tightened at the thought of just how he was going

to receive that bath, but he was tired of feeling filthy. "Yes."

Brother Jacinto pulled back the sheet, dipped the sponge in the water and began. Whether it was because he couldn't see or because Andreas was attracted to him, the gentle touch roused a response he'd be better off forgetting.

The water was cool as it sluiced over skin sticky and salty from sweat. Andreas fixed his gaze on Brother Jacinto, amazed at the placidity in his face as he worked. Yet, he was disappointed. It wasn't right to expect anything from a priest he barely knew. Brother Jacinto had probably taken some vow or another to remain chaste. It wasn't possible to have any sort of relationship, but that didn't mean Andreas couldn't fantasize about one.

He had no control over his body's reaction when Brother Jacinto sponged between his legs. His cock was as stiff as a rod and utterly appreciative as the priest ran the sponge from base to tip and back down, tucking into the crevices around and beneath Andreas's balls. Andreas closed his eyes, glad Brother Jacinto couldn't see the heated embarrassment that must be creeping over his face.

The pressure in his lower body built to an unbearable level. Andreas breathed deeply, trying to still the tide of desire flooding him, but failed. Climax struck hard and fast. Spasms clutched his cock as he spilled himself over Brother Jacinto's hands. Andreas groaned, half out of relief, half in shame from the inability to control himself.

Yet, despite the mess, Brother Jacinto's face didn't change. He continued to sponge Andreas clean with no apparent disgust or disapproval, and too soon, Andreas was washed and covered. "Thank you," Andreas said. It wasn't enough for everything the priest had done, but it was all he had to offer.

Brother Jacinto bowed his head. "I'm merely doing my duty." He gathered up his box then made his way to the door, cane clicking against the stone floor.

"Will you come again?"

"Your burns continue to need care, so, yes, I will return."

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He paused and said over his shoulder, "And to answer the question you are too ashamed to ask, chastity is not a requirement here. We may act as we see fit as long as it's for the greater good."

Then he was gone, leaving Andreas wondering whether that last statement was an observation or an invitation.



The next few days passed in much the same way. One of the other priests would see to his needs in the morning, and just after lunch Brother Jacinto would be by to change the poultices and bathe him. After that first incident, Andreas kept more control of himself, although he wished he didn't have to. Brother Jacinto spoke so little that Andreas contented himself with watching the priest's movements and enjoying his attentions.

Eventually, Andreas had the courage to ask, "How were you blinded?"

Brother Jacinto stiffened. "I'd rather not speak of the past."

"The past makes us who we are. If there's anything I can do . . ."

"There isn't." At length, he sighed. "I know you've been watching me. Since there seems to be no other way to sate your curiosity, look and be done with it." He untied his cincture then pulled off his robe and linen undershirt, exposing a body bare except for his drawers.

Andreas hadn't been sure what to expect, but it wasn't the sheer number of scars that covered Brother Jacinto's torso and back. Tentatively, Andreas traced one down the center of Brother Jacinto's chest. The priest flinched but didn't draw away. This was more than a beating. This was torture. "Who did this?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does." Andreas fingered the lines of mangled flesh that wrapped around Jacinto's belly and back. Whip marks, he

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guessed. All the while, Jacinto stood there submissively, rapid breaths the only outward sign of his nervousness. Andreas wished he could take the priest into his arms and comfort him, to tell him everything was all right and that he'd never be hurt again.

But that was presuming too much, and Andreas didn't have the right to make such a promise.

"Seen enough?"

"No." Andreas couldn't get enough of him. Not just the scars, but of the lean, muscled body hardened by physical labor. "You're beautiful."

Brother Jacinto flushed. He snatched his robe and pulled it on. "Gregorio will bring your dinner."

"I'm sorry. I only wanted to—"

"The past is over and done with. I ask you to leave it lie." He left so fast that Andreas didn't have a chance to say anything in response.

It wasn't the boy Gregorio who brought the evening meal, but Padre Eduardo himself. He'd just finished the stew when the priest caught his arm. "Please be careful, my son. Brother Jacinto is a valued member of our community. He is also very fragile."

Andreas could tell. He'd seen men broken when they'd come home from war or endured terrible hardships such as raids and famine. Many protected their new fragility with walls around their hearts and souls. "I care about him, Father."

Padre Eduardo patted his arm. "I'm glad. Brother Jacinto needs his friends. But please, tread carefully with him."



Two weeks passed before Brother Jacinto exacted his revenge. As had been their custom, the priest came in the afternoon to inspect and tend to Andreas's injuries. The wounds had healed well, and Brother Jacinto rubbed Andreas's scars with fragrant oils to keep his skin from

stiffening. Andreas enjoyed these massages more than he let on and sometimes feigned soreness he didn't have just to keep the healer from leaving.

Brother Jacinto dug his fingers into a particularly tender spot and said, "Tell me how you came by your burns."

"As I told Padre Eduardo, I ran into a burning hut to save a child."

"How did the fire start?"

"The soldiers wanted to flush them out."

"You're lying." Brother Jacinto's dug his fingers into Andreas's good arm. "I can tell by your accent you're from the south. What were you trying to do, burn the village down and steal their land?"

"No."

"You were willing to hurt innocent women and children and take the men as slaves?"

"I tried to help them! I'm not a soldier. I'm a trader. I brought jewelry and fabrics from the south. When I saw the smoke, I left the mule behind and raced to help. The soldiers had gone. The village was in chaos. I did what I could. The poor mule is probably either dead or in someone else's hands along with all my goods."

Brother Jacinto's grip eased. "The mule found her way here last night. She was starving and very much in need of water, but she is safe along with your supplies."

"I'm glad to hear it." And in that instant, Andreas knew the reason for the priest's reaction. Brother Jacinto had the look of one of those local villagers. The soldiers spent long months in the desert. When they were bored, they became dangerous, especially toward women and pretty young men in the villages. He rested a hand atop the priest's. "Brother Jacinto—"

He jerked away. "Tomorrow you will be well enough to spend some time in the garden, I think."

Box tucked under his arm, Brother Jacinto made his way toward the door.

"I'm sorry."

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But Brother Jacinto didn't acknowledge he'd heard.



The next day, true to his word, Brother Jacinto escorted Andreas outside. Andreas breathed deeply of the fresh, clean air, grateful to be alive on such a fine morning.

"The garden is this way."

It struck him as odd, the blind man leading the crippled one, but he gave in and let the priest guide him along the mission's exterior and into a garden surrounded by a low wall. Dirt pathways led to different patches of herbs, while further down were beds given to crops. Several priests and acolytes were bent over, weeding, and called out greetings.

Andreas sat on the wall and took everything in. Interspersed among the beds were mesquite and acacia trees, which provided shade for the more fragile plants. Outside the wall were cacti. Prickly pear buds made excellent jelly and juice, he said, which provided a number of benefits including reducing inflammation and illness. The pads, when stripped of their needles and sliced, were remedies for snakebites and burns, as Andreas had already discovered.

And there, while Jacinto was in his element, Andreas saw the true beauty in Jacinto's soul. The priest was capable of love. It showed in the explanations he gave for each plant and in the way he stroked each leaf and gave each just the right amount of water. Andreas sighed, wondering if it would ever be possible for Brother Jacinto to extend such feelings to a man.

There was no way Andreas would remember even a fraction of what Brother Jacinto told him, but it didn't matter. He enjoyed listening to the priest speak and grew more and more fascinated by the extent of his knowledge.

When the tour ended, he said, "You asked me once how I differentiated between my herbs. It's like this." Brother Jacinto crouched and dug his fingers into the soft loam. "I can feel the pulse of the earth."

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Andreas knelt beside him and mimicked Brother Jacinto. To his disappointment, all he felt was the dirt beneath his palm.

"Each plant has its own energy and life force. That's how I know which is which as well as their purpose." He took a long, shuddering breath. "When a man's vital force is strong, I can feel it as well. You're quite potent."

Potent wasn't enough to encompass the sudden tightness in his breeches. His cock ached for Brother Jacinto's touch. He wanted that lithe body beneath him, to melt the priest's chilly exterior and show him that not all foreigners were violent. "You're very gifted."

"I am in service to the Creator. I am a healer and aid my patients in whatever way is required."

The bland response was disappointing. Andreas wondered just how far Brother Jacinto had gone for the sake of "service."

The priest glanced up so his face was bathed in sunlight. "It's nearly noon. You shouldn't be out in this heat."

They went inside, and maybe it was Andreas's imagination, but when Brother Jacinto helped him to bed, the priest seemed to leave his hands on Andreas just a little longer than strictly necessary.



That night, Andreas found it difficult to sleep. He figured Brother Jacinto must have filled his head with too much information to process. Because of his insomnia, he saw a white figure drift past his window.

Andreas's heart pounded. A spirit? He didn't think so. After all, this was a holy place; none of the priests or acolytes had made mention of it being haunted.

Still weak, he made his way outside, stopping every now and then to lean against a wall and catch his breath. He probably should have summoned one of the brothers, but he hated waking them when they already rose before dawn.

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Besides, he liked the idea of an adventure on his own.

The mission's grounds were a far different place at night, full of shadows and strange forms. Coyotes howled in the distance. Crickets and cicadas buzzed. Andreas's footsteps were nearly silent as he headed toward the walled garden, drawn there as if tugged by a leash.

The little wooden gate was open, and inside Andreas found the white-clad priest curled up amidst his beloved herbs. He stifled a cry of dismay and hurried toward his friend's side. "Brother Jacinto?"

The linen shirt and drawers were light to cope with the desert heat. Andreas could feel each muscle and bone through the thin fabric. He shook the man but received no response although Brother Jacinto's eyes were wide open. If it weren't for the damn burns, Andreas could have lifted him and carried him inside. Instead, he pulled the priest upright. "It's all right. You're safe."

At last Brother Jacinto stirred. He twitched and moaned, lost in some nightmare. Andreas suspected the priest was remembering terrible things. Brother Jacinto whimpered and leaned against him. Andreas wrapped his arms around the lithe body and rocked him, whispering reassurances in his ear.

The priest calmed. He tilted his head upward, lips slightly spread. Andreas couldn't resist. He kissed him.

Brother Jacinto didn't draw away. Instead, he grabbed the back of Andreas's head and kept him from pulling back. Andreas didn't care. The priest tasted sweet, and he couldn't get enough. Their bodies ground together, chest to chest, separated only by a single layer of clothing.

Andreas rubbed Brother Jacinto's side, going higher beneath the shirt. It was too much. Brother Jacinto jerked and cried out. Shivers racked his body and no matter how tightly Andreas held him, he didn't stop.

Tears ran down the priest's face to dampen Andreas's chest. "It's all right. You're safe," Andreas said, but he wasn't sure if Brother Jacinto understood him or not.

There was nothing more he could do. Feeling helpless, he

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managed to get Brother Jacinto to his feet and half carried him back to the mission.

Padre Eduardo met them at the entrance. "I'll take care of him."

"But . . ."

"Please, my son. I know what to do."

So did Andreas, but he had the feeling their ideas differed. Reluctantly, he released Brother Jacinto into the older priest's care. He followed them just far enough to see which room they vanished into and then headed back to his own.



Andreas didn't see Brother Jacinto the next day, or the next.

"He has spells," Padre Eduardo explained. "It's best to leave him be until they're over."

The padre knew best, Andreas supposed, but it didn't ease his heart. When the priests were all at evening prayers, Andreas slipped out of his room and into the dormitory wing and let himself into Brother Jacinto's room.

The cell was as bare as his own with just a chest of drawers, a basin for washing, and the bed upon which Brother Jacinto lay. The priest's eyes were closed, breathing regular, but he was pale and frighteningly still.

"Is there something you need, Andreas Javier Lopez de los Reyes?" Brother Jacinto asked without opening his eyes.

"How did you know it was me?"

"My brothers all smell of incense. You don't."

Andreas wondered what he did smell like but thought it best not to ask. At least his friend still had what passed for his sense of humor. "I was worried about you."

"I'm fine."

Andreas, who hadn't forgotten the way Brother Jacinto had trembled in his arms, doubted that. "Are you sure?"

For a long time, Brother Jacinto didn't say anything. Andreas was afraid he'd gone to sleep when he said, "I know

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what you did the other night.”

Andreas froze. From the tone, he couldn’t tell if Brother Jacinto was angry or not. “Oh?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve felt anything like that.”

“Like what?” Andreas dared to sit on the edge of Brother Jacinto’s bed. The priest had crossed his hands atop his belly. Andreas clasped them, surprised at how thin and bony they felt.

“Tell me about the village you tried to save.”

Andreas couldn’t see what that had to do with anything, but once again he told the priest about coming upon the burning homes. This time he added details about the people and was relieved to see a faint smile on the priest’s lips.

“Just like my village, before . . .”

“Before the soldiers came?”

Brother Jacinto gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod. “There are some nights when the memories are too hard to bear. An herbalist shouldn’t dose himself. I was desperate. I took too much, and, well, you saw.”

Andreas’s heart sank. So the kiss and what had come after hadn’t been Brother Jacinto after all, but only a side effect of whatever medicine he’d taken. “Yes. I saw. I’m glad you’re feeling better.” He stood. “I’ll leave you to your rest.”

“Wait.” Brother Jacinto pushed himself upright so slowly Andreas had to fight the urge to help. He searched the air for a moment before finding Andreas’s cheek. Then the priest drew him back down onto the bed and kissed him.

Andreas’s heart raced. He badly wanted to tear off those underclothes and make love to every inch of Brother Jacinto’s battered body. Running his hands down the priest’s back, he savored the feel of every muscle and bone, delighted to have permission to touch.

Just when Andreas’s body thrummed with need, Brother Jacinto gently pushed him away. “Not yet. Not here.”

At least it wasn’t a *not ever*. “When?”

“I’ll come to you.”

“Soon?”

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Brother Jacinto kissed him lightly on the cheek and whispered, "Soon."



The days were long, the nights longer still. Andreas patiently accompanied Brother Jacinto to the garden and back, looking for some sign of their impending meeting. None came, and he dared not ask. Since the priest had been forced to endure terrible things, Andreas knew that by pushing too hard, too fast, he would lose any chance at all with Brother Jacinto.

It must have been past midnight several days later when Andreas's door creaked open. He startled, disoriented at first and then frightened by the intruder. "Who is it?"

"Come with me," Brother Jacinto said.

Heart pounding with excitement and nervousness, Andreas hurried out of bed, not bothering to grab his shirt. Darkness didn't matter to Brother Jacinto. He was sure-footed as he led the way through the corridors and out into the garden. The night was crisp, though not unpleasantly so.

A lantern burned, just light enough that Andreas could see clearly. There inside the walled garden Brother Jacinto had laid out the tools of his art. Smoke wafted up from an incense burner. A woven blanket lay upon a bare patch of ground. Bowls of lotions and oils sat within easy reach.

Of course the meeting had to be here, the one place where Brother Jacinto felt most at ease. From his garden came nothing but love and healing, and Andreas was determined to keep it so.

They sat together on the blanket, the heat of their bodies warding away the chill. Brother Jacinto dipped his fingers in one of the oils and slowly rubbed it into Andreas's skin. The sharp green scent relaxed him. It must have calmed Brother Jacinto as well, because he began to speak.

"I was apprenticed to be a *curandero*. A healer. My teacher was known for many miles, and dozens of people came to him for help. When the soldiers came looking for food, we

gave it to them. They demanded more than we had, and grew angry when we could not produce it. So instead they forced us to build their forts and roads with almost nothing to eat. When we grew weak they called us lazy and beat us or . . . worse. When I called them ugly, they slashed my eyes. If Padre Eduardo hadn't arrived when he did and freed us, I would be dead. I was the one who told him which herbs to use and how."

The tale roused both sympathy for Brother Jacinto and ire against his captors. Andreas struggled against the instinct to take him in his arms and never let him out of his sight lest something terrible happen again. But when he tried to do just that, Brother Jacinto shook his head.

"I didn't ask you here to be my protector."

The rebuke, light as it was, still stung. For a long time, Andreas wasn't sure what his role in this was. "I'm no fighter. I'm just a simple trader."

"Not so simple. Driven to a solitary, wandering life because you never fit anywhere, but I don't think you want to be alone any longer, do you?"

The priest knew more than Andreas had ever admitted to himself. Andreas held his breath as Brother Jacinto removed his linen shirt and drawers, leaving him wonderfully, gloriously nude. Lamplight flickered across his body, highlighting both scars and unbroken skin.

"One thing you must understand. I will never, ever belong to a man again. I will let no one but the Creator use me."

And that was why he'd dedicated his life to the Creator and his garden. It was his choice, and neither would hurt him. In giving himself to Andreas, he trusted that Andreas would respect him and take nothing that wasn't offered. "I understand."

"Good." Brother Jacinto smiled and drew him in for a kiss. Lust jolted through Andreas's body. As quickly as he could he shed his smallclothes so that he was as naked as Brother Jacinto. He felt no shame, since the priest already

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knew his body so intimately.

Brother Jacinto urged him down onto his back. His hand flopped onto the dirt. This time, when he touched the ground, he felt the earth throbbing beneath his palm. At his swift intake of breath, Brother Jacinto laughed. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

Amazing wasn't enough to cover everything Andreas felt. Life and energy poured through him and he was suddenly desperate to share everything with Brother Jacinto.

The priest, too, seemed determined to share. He chose a different oil, one smelling of cedar, and swirled it across Andreas's chest, stopping to tease each nipple. The oil made his skin warm and tingly. He gasped as Brother Jacinto worked up each leg until he reached the apex of Andreas's thighs. The priest, so cautious before, now unreservedly kneaded Andreas's cock and balls. He squeezed and rubbed and stroked, bringing Andreas to the edge of climax but refusing to tip him over.

There was only so much he could stand. Andreas sat up, laid a long, lingering kiss upon Brother Jacinto's lips, then said, "Let me. Please."

After a breath or two, Brother Jacinto nodded. Andreas dipped his fingers in the cedar oil and finally caressed the priest's body the way he'd been longing to. He willed love and care into his touch as he traced line after brutal line.

"Lie down. Please."

After another brief hesitation, Brother Jacinto stretched out on his stomach. Andreas worked at muscles knotted from hours spend bent over in the garden. Little by little, Brother Jacinto lost his fear, and Andreas dared to run his fingers between the priest's buttocks.

"If you are so determined, use the gel in that bowl there." Brother Jacinto pointed.

Andreas did as he was asked. The gel was cool upon his fingers and easily coated the crevice. When he reached the tight muscle, the priest flinched. Andreas kept up the pressure, circling slowly until Brother Jacinto relaxed enough

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to let one finger slide inside. He didn't miss the priest's hands as they suddenly clenched the blanket.

Carefully, he probed within the slick, warm depths until he found the internal pleasure point and rubbed. Within moments, Brother Jacinto let out a strangled sound of enjoyment and Andreas dared to insert another lubed finger. The priest was tight but receptive, and Andreas's cock ached with the need to be inside him.

Unsure of how much longer he could last, Andreas withdrew his fingers. "Sit up."

Andreas arranged them so he was kneeling and Brother Jacinto straddled his thighs with his back to Andreas's belly. Andreas took a moment to coat his cock with the gel then grasped Brother Jacinto's waist and directed him into position. This way, Brother Jacinto had more control over how fast and deep he was comfortable with.

It was torture of a different kind to have a ripe, willing body right there at the tip of his cock yet be unable to sate himself. One breath. Two. Then, slowly, Brother Jacinto sank down, enveloping him with the tight heat Andreas had been longing for ever since he'd first set eyes on the handsome priest.

In that moment of joining, the world seemed to explode. All of the energy which had lain dormant in the ground suddenly shot through him and he felt more alive than he'd ever been. Brother Jacinto, too, was transformed as he levered himself up and down, riding Andreas to suit his own pleasure. The priest angled his head back and their lips met. Andreas drove his tongue inside, penetrating Brother Jacinto's mouth even as his cock was taken deeper and deeper. He grabbed for the priest's cock, which was rock hard. He rubbed, timing his strokes with Brother Jacinto's movement in his hips.

Brother Jacinto's body stiffened, and he let out a cry muffled by Andreas's mouth. His seed spurted over Andreas's hands, coating them with sticky sweetness.

Andreas's climax came a few moments later, egged on by

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the priest's body spasming around his cock. He let himself go, certain he'd never felt anything so fantastic and wonderful.



Andreas didn't think there could be anything more beautiful than the sight of his lover curled within his arms, sleeping peacefully at last.

Yet in that moment, doubt assailed him. He wasn't worthy of this extraordinary man. How could he be? Brother Jacinto had been through so much and survived, and Andreas had thought of little more than profit. He had no long-term goals beyond earning enough money to buy a small ranch where he could live out his days.

But meeting Brother Jacinto had changed everything. No longer did Andreas want to be alone. He'd found home, finally, though didn't feel as if he deserved it. Yet.

By the time the priests had risen and performed morning prayers, Andreas had come up with a plan. He packed his mule and gathered the goods so carefully preserved by his caretakers. Leaving Brother Jacinto was hard, but it must be done.

"I have one last road to travel and then I'll be back to stay."

Brother Jacinto turned away, saying nothing. The last time Andreas saw him, he was kneeling in his garden with his back turned to the road.



Several weeks later, Andreas returned to the mission laden with a string of sheep, food, medicines and other gifts for the priests who'd saved his life. From his saddlebags, he withdrew his most fragile and important prizes and looked around for Brother Jacinto.

"In the garden. Where else?" Padre Eduardo said.

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Andreas hurried along the pathways. His heart leapt at the sight of Brother Jacinto, carefully gathering leaves to dry for his medicines.

“Back so soon?” Brother Jacinto asked without rising.

“I brought you a gift.” Andreas crouched beside him. Then he took Brother Jacinto’s hands and placed the seedlings in his palms. He’d traveled to the higher, greener country in the north and spoken with the healers there to find the most effective plants.

Brother Jacinto’s face lit with wonder. “Thank you. I will be able to use these, but . . .”

Stung, Andreas asked, “But what?”

“There was no need to bring gifts when the true reward is you, just as you are.” Brother Jacinto stroked Andreas’s unshaven cheek.

Relief and love warmed him. “Do you mean that?”

“You’re a good trader. We could use one here. Besides, there is much *I* am willing to trade for.”

“As long as it’s for the greater good.”

“Right now, I think the greater good is to welcome you home.”

Home. Andreas had never believed he’d hear that word and feel such rightness. But when Brother Jacinto’s arms enfolded him, he knew his wandering heart had found a place to rest at last.



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Rosewitch



The day Henry went to see the rosewitch dawned ferociously bright. Partway through his ride, he discarded his hat—though the brim offered welcome shade, it wasn't worth the added heat of the black felt atop his head, baked by the sun. And now he could ride faster without fearing the wind of his passing would tear the tricorne from his brow. He was not in a mood to be fazed by the risk of sun blindness.

By the time he arrived at the cottage, the mist that usually cloaked Antevin's fields had burned off, and the spring air was warm and heavy and sweet-scented as the caress of a perfumed lady. *If only*, he thought, dismounting and leaving his gelding to be led away by a silent stable boy, if only Felicia's embrace could be so stifling. Anything but her present chilly indifference.

A chill of a different sort began to grow in Henry's belly as a silent maidservant came up to him, bobbed a curtsy, and led him into the gray stone house. The corridors seemed far longer than the modest cottage should allow for, and the polished wood floors did not only groan under his feet but even seemed to gossip and giggle. He was not to be shown to the witch Desidira's front parlor, that much was clear.

He was led to her garden instead.

A low-arched door, swinging out at the touch of the maidservant's hand, let in a shaft of golden light and a warm breeze with a powerful green-and-sweet-musk scent. When the dazzle of both effects faded, Henry could make out a lush, if small, lawn enclosed by slate walls overgrown with rose vines. Jade leaves and thorns of emerald or scarlet peeked from a screen of petals—pink, peach, butter-yellow, cream-white, red as raw ox heart. In the shade of the walls

marched more rows of rose bushes trimmed into the shape of trees. Henry couldn't shake the feeling that the shadows were in neither the right number nor direction for the position of the garden or time of day—none of which he was so certain of, suddenly.

"Is it all roses?" he asked, though the maidservant of course did not answer.

Halfway down the lawn, a fountain sang seductively, making him realize how thirsty he was. Beyond it grew a gathering of bushes that did not carry the least eglantine bud—either because they were some different sort of herb, or because they had been stripped of blossoms.

The undresser of branches herself stood not far away, bent to sweep petals into the basket at her feet. Desidira looked neither as young as Henry expected a witch would spell herself to look, nor as old as he would expect if she showed her true age. From the back her straight-shouldered form was more handsome than beautiful; when she turned, her face revealed no classic loveliness, but a nose slightly bent, eyes more open than wide, and a mouth with a twist suggesting humor, cruel or kindly he could not guess. Her lips were painted a scarlet more vivid than the roses, matching the lines of embroidered flowers down her muslin gown and bordering her apron, and a little brighter than the crimson underpetticoat that flashed as she strode towards him. Between her breasts—sun-browed, despite the straw hat she wore decked with a white band and more flowers—a single rose peeked from her décolletage. It was white splattered with spots of red, a pattern no other blossom in the garden had. Henry even checked her basket to see if it held dismembered siblings. Indeed, there were petals in a wealth of colors—yellow so vivid it approached gold, whites almost blue, coral shading to blush, even a scattering of lilac-purple—but no others in a mosaic, or as if stained with drops of blood.

For a moment he was so distracted by the rose that he missed taking note of the breasts it nested between—high-

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curved and a little heavier than Felicia's, but not sharing their sweet roundness.

Desidira's lips formed a tiny smile and she made a gesture, at which the maidservant glided away. "What would you ask of me?"

Her voice was clarion clear and her pronunciation reminded Henry of his grandparents' friends swapping news in musty drawing rooms. If he met Desidira in a salon he would have called her charming. But *charm* in a sorceress's garden carried quite a different ring.

He bowed, making a leg that would send Felicia's cohorts swooning. Desidira's expression did not alter, unless it grew a trifle more shaded. Henry straightened, pressing down the long line of his waistcoat, and cleared his throat. "Good morning, madam. I seek . . . I've come hoping for your assistance to win the love of a noble lady."

"Noble in the sense of her virtues, or is she aristocratic?"

"Er—both." Jolted by Desidira's dry tone, Henry babbled on. "Felicia is the scion of the Hayvenwell family, and a divine example of charity, and darling to her friends—"

"Are you one of those?"

"A friend? I should hope so."

The witch turned back to her rose vines, took wicked-looking shears from somewhere on her bucolically-garbed person and snipped another flower. She pulled loose its petals and let them shower down to join the rest as she spoke. "Yet you are not friendly enough, it would seem. What would you have me do?"

"Well, you could—in your wisdom, I would expect—I would not presume—"

"Oh, presume away." A steel-cold *snick* beheaded a blushing, fresh-opened bud which went whole into the basket. "I like to know where we stand."

"I have heard of love philters, madam, which can alter the opinions, or even the perceptions, of the drinker—in favor of the one who would be beloved."

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The snap of shears and rustling of skirts as she walked was the only sound for a few moments.

"You want me to make you a love potion."

"Yes, madam," he said, though Desidira had not voiced it like a question.

"To bespell the girl, steal her wits."

"To, ah . . . perhaps *befuddle* is the better word?"

"To overturn her will."

Desidira turned and faced him squarely. Somehow she had drawn close, so close that meeting her gaze startled Henry, and sent him leaping, almost into the thorny arms of the bush behind him.

"Do you think so little of this Felicia's judgment, or else of your own appeal, that you would petition me to *drug* her before you press your suit?"

"Aren't love potions relatively commonplace for witches to make?" Henry asked weakly.

"Not so common as they are in the tales of would-be lotharios," Desidira spat.

She raised her shears over his shoulder to clip another rose.

As she ripped its petals out, she said conversationally, "It takes half a pound of these to make one dose of good rose wine. For perfumes, an even greater bulk. It is a good thing I find the harvest such a sweet pastime. Of course, if I did not I would not have become a rosewitch."

She wore scarlet leather gloves, the right hand fingerless beyond the first knuckle. With the left she held the length of stem, shielded against its thorns.

"Why would you pursue what you do not care for?" she asked.

He protested, "I admire Felicia more than anyone else in the world."

"Then I fear and despair for the rest of us, if your admiration cannot keep you from ravishing her by trickery."

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Henry only stared. It was as if he had discovered himself speaking in a foreign language—and saying one key word utterly wrong.

“Exactly,” Desidira said. “So tell me, to satisfy my curiosity, why?”

He could not speak. At that, he feared to speak, lest he say one wrong thing too many and seal his doom.

In fact, he was overtaken by a positive thrill of terror. A thrill. Cold ice in the pit of his stomach, and beneath that a day-bright maelstrom. He was utterly pinned by Desidira’s chocolate-brown eyes. Her glare made them gleam like living jewels. *If only*, he found himself thinking, if only Felicia could look at him with such passion—never mind if it was disgust or contempt. Desidira could break him in half and he’d consider it a privilege.

“Surely you could court her,” the witch said, as if oblivious to his thoughts. “In fact, why don’t you? Are you short on time? Is there a clause in a will somewhere? Neither of you is dying, are you?—No, surely you’d have asked something different of me in that case. Wiser. So what *do* you have against courting?”

To hear her pry at his motives and character, picking ideas loose like petals, gathering only to discard but nonetheless intently focused on his very self, her thoughts as quick-moving and merciless as her gloved and ungloved fingertips—well, in short Henry *reacted* to it, and Desidira was studying him too closely not to see his reaction. Her mouth widened into an *Ah* of realization.

“But to court, that’s a bit of trouble,” she continued. “It takes . . . attention. Effort. Skill. All admirable things in a lover—yet it is also appealing to be pliant, listening, evaluating and in the end, yielding. To be courted, indeed, that too has its rewards and fascinations. To some.”

She stood so near that he could smell her breath—a rich sweetness, against which the headiest musk of her roses turned to dry powder. A love philter, he thought, would smell like that. He imagined how it would be to drink one, to fall

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under an irresistible spell—to be ravished by one who desired him, yes, to be taken, to be held too precious to risk with freer choices—

Desidira's voice was gentler as she said, "What you really want is Felicia to court you, no? But however much she may like you, it is either not enough, or not in her nature to show it that way. You would like me to drive her mad—wild—with wanting you."

Her lips pursed, taking on the shape of a scarlet rosebud. "Uninhibited lust is a pleasure, I would not deny that." A throaty laugh. "But it takes a toll, too, and most especially on one not inclined to it. I would not push someone to it against their preference, any more than I would force unwilling submission."

She blinked, a beat of smooth, heavy lashes. "Willing, though—it's quite a different matter."

"Madam," Henry whispered, aghast at what he wanted to ask, even as he had the strangest certainty that Desidira already knew it.

She plucked another rose from over his shoulder, a globular red one half the size of a cabbage, and held it before him. Henry felt her watching as he bent his head to smell it. Its perfume dazed him, or perhaps instead his perception of sensations was heightened. Her regard seemed to weigh on him with each breath, not an unpleasant weight. The mingled scents of her and her roses were strong enough to taste, coating his tongue and the back of his throat, making his cheeks tingle. His mouth watered with it.

Though he couldn't see beyond the crimson petals, he knew there was a stiff line at the groin of his buff breeches and knew she saw it, too. Urgency pulsed harder as he took another breath of the rose—it was sweet beyond imagining. He pressed closer, until his lips met the outer petals, felt their kiss.

"You can take it, if you want," Desidira said suddenly.

Henry lowered the blossom just as she brought her gaze back up to meet his. "A token of me," she said. "Take it and go."

"Is there another option?"

The small, cruel smile flirted with her mouth as if despite herself. "I won't give you that love philter."

"Of course not. I understand."

"Not too late, either." Desidira removed her hat, releasing a fall of lustrous brown hair. As it hung around her face, it did not make her look younger but removed the last hint of prosaicness she'd had. She now resembled a goddess come to the green earth.

Henry offered her the lush, red rose. He held still as she took it, as her red-gloved hands twisted it apart into a fall of petals like autumn leaves. They landed with a near-silent, plush whisper among their fellows at her feet.

Then she reached for the other rose—the white-and-red one resting at her bosom. She plucked it free, and Henry thought for a moment she might offer it to him. He had time for the thought—and to see and wonder at the stem's profuse, fanglike thorns—before she struck him across the face with it.

Petals more than thorns batted against his cheek. Their stroke was almost a caress. The scent, though, was strange. Less like a garden than like wine, and the dust of old books, and a touch of human sweat, neither dirty nor clean but suggesting exertion, strength, and power. Above all it was a powerful smell. And it seemed to surround him, seeping through his flesh to his bones. It was an overwhelming feeling, a ravishing one.

Henry delighted in it. Only slowly did he become aware of the line of more fiery sweetness, from above his jaw to the corner of his eye, where the rose's thorns had indeed connected and torn the skin. His fingers traced their path, and he sighed at the touch—a sigh that shocked his own ears with its wantonness.

Desidira's smile widened. Then with her left hand she slapped him.

The glove's leather was soft but still hornier, cooler than flesh. Half Henry's face stung, then went numb, then burned again. Blood rushed in his cheek and, as if drawn by the most rational principle of gravity, he felt it rushing elsewhere as well.

Firm as the blow was, and not fully expected, he hadn't stumbled. That mystery was solved with the discovery of another as he tried to bring his hand up: he was held, securely but a little tightly for comfort, by a sudden spurt of supple, coiling rose vines. A thorn pricked at him coyly as he shifted, testing the give of his bonds.

"Good," Desidira purred. It wasn't voiced as a question, but it may have been meant as one—she lifted one dark brow inquiringly.

"Yes," Henry said. "Good."

Her eyes raked him again, prickly and heady as the roses. "As you can see, I am not the most experienced in courting. . . . What I have not learned, I invented."

It may have been Henry's imagination, but the clinging rose vines seemed to tighten. He flexed his muscles, savoring how little give he found. Not usual courtship, no—but it was the kind he wanted.

"And some things," Desidira mused from behind her smile, "need not be invented more than once."

She set the spotted flower back between her breasts. Then the ungloved fingertips of her right hand pinched at the buttons of his breeches flap. As she knelt, he caught her velvety scent, and shivered at a stroke of her fingers. Then the soft, heavy air of the garden touched him intimately as she let the flap drop. Her hand went inside, measured the length of him—not inconsiderable, though perhaps he'd win no contests—and cupped the sack of his balls, gently but with a sense of undeniable possession. The red leather of her glove had warmed from contact with his skin, although not

so much that he didn't mewl at the friction as it passed against his body.

She stroked him again with her right hand, fingers exploring from the sweet spot behind his balls down along his cock. The pads, where they weren't covered by glove leather, were soft in comparison though faintly callused. She let the back of her nail flick against his cockhead, and Henry stifled another gasp.

"What was that?" Her finger hovered, not touching him again but promising to, if he asked.

"Yes, please," Henry said. The flick came again—a sting that seemed to swim along his nerves, transmuting to pleasure before it reached his brain. A new tide of blood rushed down to his groin, summoned as she stroked and fondled. He tried to thrust to meet her, but the rose vines held him fast.

"Ask for what you want," Desidira said. "Should I go harder? Quicker?"

"Not too quickly—please." It seemed cruel of her to make him speak, to find words. But her touch was all generosity, thrilling, not sweet but hotter and headier than he had ever dreamed of from Felicia. The leather, smooth and cool against her rougher, warmer fingertips, wrapped around him, the squeeze and stroking pulse of what she did to him, all asked nothing but his surrender in return. So he gave in, his head falling back, his weight supported only by the sorcerous vines.

"Hmm," Desidira said. The words came from startlingly close to his cock.

He looked down and saw her, gloved grip guiding the head to her mouth, where red lips pursed in imitation of the roses—but lusher, moister, with a dark core revealed as they parted. Desire shot through the depths of him, along with something yet deeper and darker: not fear, but the realization of his own helplessness. Her teeth, white as pearls but distinctly more sharp than round, appeared. Her tongue was richly red, and wet, and as it swiped the head of his cock

Henry thought he would melt under it. She bent closer, her head eclipsing his view—some strands of hair fell to brush his thighs. He expected to feel her teeth at any moment. But instead she shielded him from them, sheathed them with her lips as she took him in and in, as if she would swallow all of him. Her tongue lashed out to touch the very root of him, pressing the underside and the thatch of crisp curls surrounding it. Then she pulled back, letting the flesh of her mouth and his cock slide together every inch of the way. The sun-warmed air felt cool in contrast.

“Not quickly,” she said, releasing him. “As you asked.” Then he was had again.

In again, then out. She took, tasted, toyed with him. Where her mouth did not hold him, now her half-gloved hand did, adding anew to the play of textures and heat and friction. Her left hand, full-gloved, cupped against one buttock to push him closer to her. It all but contorted his spine, given how his upper arms were held. With a jerk one thorn pricked through his sleeve, and as she sucked at him he felt a wet bead form beneath his white lawn shirt. Energy like a brewing storm pooled at the small of his back, and deeper, lower. Desidira pulled at it, with each stroke of her fingers and lapping tongue, pulled as if to bring him inside out.

The first dew welled from him and was licked, sucked, even kissed away, the touch of her lips leaving red spots and streaks on ruddy skin. They reminded him of the flower that he could see once more between her breasts. He admired the curve of those breasts, their apparent weight and softness, without once thinking of touching them himself. That was not his privilege, nor the use she had for him. What use there *was*—ah, that was enough. So went his last thought as he felt himself close to coming.

Sensing it, she took him deep into her mouth again.

Henry climaxed in spasms, writhing between her hands and the vines and her lips and tongue and pale cheeks tented from providing suction. He felt devoured, as if she held far more of him than his cock behind her teeth. A shudder made

his spine bend like a cracked whip, his entire sense of up and down shaken, eyelids sealed and breath caught. More thorns pricked, a few cruelly enough to draw blood, but he only realized that as the annihilating thrill of orgasm faded. And even then, he felt content to hang there among them. For as long as she chose, even forever.

"Mmmm." Desidira's thumb swiped the last drops of creamy whiteness from him and from her lips. She cleaned it on the grass. "*Mmm.*"

Her clean hand stroked upwards along his tight-fitting clothes, from the delta of muscle pointing to his groin, along his abdomen and sternum, to fist in the fine satin waistcoat over his heart. The grip jerked him forward. His breath going out in a gasp, Henry braced for the prick of more thorns, but it didn't happen. The vines no longer clung so tightly. As he watched, they loosened from around him, not wilting but yielding some of their harsh tenacity. Without their support his legs had to take on his weight. They were not equal to the task, and the rosewitch's grip had to guide his fall as he went to his knees before her.

She kissed him, a quick sweet peck on the lips that he smelled more than tasted or felt—another flush of roses. Then Desidira stood. Her left hand settled on his shoulder, still supporting him. Her other hand, with the bare fingertips, began to hike her skirts.

"Well," she said, voice rich with amusement and husky, too. "A witch gives measure for measure."

"Yes, madam." Henry licked his lips. Water welled in his mouth as he saw her stockings—ivory cotton tied with silk garters, clinging tight to well-built, shapely legs. The bare skin of her thighs was darker than the cotton, and the covering of hair was even darker, curls of almost black surrounding plump folds of more shadowed flesh still. Her inner lips were just slightly longer than the outer, peeking through, offering a tantalizing glimpse of rich color, pink as a dusky rose.

She tucked the petticoats and underpetticoats into the band of her apron and widened her stance. Henry's hands still

hung limp at his sides, and he would not have raised them without her permission anyway. But neither did she grip his hair or the scruff of his neck to pull him in. She waited, patiently, until he brought his mouth to her of his own accord. Only then did he feel leather against his scalp, petting, stroking and combing his hair. Her bare fingertips skimmed his upper lip as she reached down to toy with herself. Playfully, he licked at them.

Desidira laughed approvingly. Her fingers circled the swollen bud, then pressed back. His tongue followed, but after a few laps at her Henry couldn't resist drawing back to watch. He thought of petals, of blossoming. Her fingertips gleamed with dewy liquid. He smelled her essence, rich but with a vital tang that teased the senses.

"Mmm." Again that sound—not quite a sigh, not quite a growl. Two fingers spread apart, revealing her slit in invitation. The base of her hand rubbed her nub again, and this time Desidira's moan was sharp, compelling.

He dove in, wrapping his lips around her, fingers and folds together, swallowing the juices that flowed to quench his thirst, letting his tongue press against every cranny. He sucked each wrinkle individually, and laved every inch. He savored even the ashy bitterness of her hair, the salt of sweat, felt the texture of goose pimples beneath his mouth as he moved along her thighs, and smoother, silken tissue as he pressed inwards. He sensed the strength of her muscles trembling around him. Desidira's hips moved in small circles, pressing against him, then drawing back, then pressing again in a rhythmic tide.

Strange as it must seem, it felt completely natural—to be here, debauched and partway undressed, on his knees, servicing the rosewitch in her own garden. This was what he desired, to be of service, to be used. To be wanted—and she did want him, her breathing revealed that as it roughened, her hands revealed that as they tightened on him and fluttered more rapidly against her flesh, and her hips revealed it with their unceasing motion. Not all of him, perhaps, and not for

long. But for now—this is what she would have, and what he was more than willing to give.

To be courted—to be taken by a woman who, if not gone wild with pleasure was certainly urgent with it—it was everything Henry could have hoped for.

His tongue glided down her channel and began moving in slow, sweeping circles that echoed the dance she made, until it was not so slow, until they were hastening to a conclusion he half regretted, not wanting this timeless pace and the sensation of her using him to end. And yet he was also eager for it, to raise her pleasure to a fever pitch, to pay back what she had granted him, to give her her due. Another flood of velvety liquid coated his lips and tongue and filled his mouth with a zest no love potion could ever mimic. Above him, Desidira growled, the growl growing higher, almost shrill, but as pleasant to his ears as the chime of the church bells he had imagined around Felicia. It, and the rapid clenching of muscles and quiver in the thighs locked around him, showed that he had succeeded.

A hand moved through his hair, pushing back long strands where they had fallen across his brow. It cupped his cheek, and he felt the warm softness of a naked palm. Desidira had ungloved. He leaned against her touch. No urgency now. Nothing demanded or given by either of them, except this: a few moments of gentleness, companionable, even intimate, though not with the intensity of the past . . . he could not even guess how short or long a time had passed.

Desidira shifted, untucking her skirts to let them fall down again. The air stirred with the smell of hard-laundered linen, covering her musk. And of course all around was the perfume of the roses. Henry wondered if he would ever be able to smell a rose in the same way again.

He shifted, slowly gathering his feet beneath him. Desidira helped him stand.

“And that is a better fee than many I’ve collected this quarter.” Her voice was dry but warm, and her eyes flickered over him with a more kindly gleam.

"Was it your fee, madam?" He tugged his waistcoat straight, blushing. "Surely, I was glad to . . ."

"I am glad to be of assistance." She took a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed a corner against his mouth, sticky with her essence. "And close your breeches, mind."

As he did, she plucked a stem of grass and chewed its pale, plump end. "Being courted," she said, "certainly has its benefits. I am glad to help reveal them to you. But it must be willingly got."

"No potions." Henry nodded, with such enthusiasm that she smiled.

"Perhaps this Felicia is not for you, then, if your spirits are not compatible."

"Perhaps." His heart did sink at the thought, though not so low as he had feared. "Or perhaps she could find courting me a pleasure—if the offer was made."

"Indeed," Desidira said, in the driest tone yet. "You could just *ask* her."

"Is that what you tell all the young men seeking potions?"

"Not all of them. Nor all the young women. Some I send away without another word—they are not worth speaking to. And a few, a very few . . . They and I both benefit from demonstration." She took the glove up from where she'd cast it aside and slipped it on. Henry reached out, and she accepted his help. Before he buttoned the last clasp, he bent to kiss her wrist.

"If it does not go well with Felicia or anyone else," Desidira purred, "which I indeed feel unlikely, you do at least know where to find me."

"Madam?" He looked up, meeting her grin.

"It's a thought," she said. "But go, now. Today's too fine a day to waste. For me, if not for you. You know your way through the house?"

"Yes, madam."

She received his bow with a nod, a little too warm to be imperious. She tied on her straw hat once again, and as he took his leave of her she was snipping another rose and

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letting it fall apart in her fingers, gathering its power for her magic.



T.C. Mill's erotic and romantic science fiction and fantasy stories have been published by Carina Press, Storm Moon, Dreamspinner, and in anthologies from Circlet, Cleis, and House of Erotica. Mill blogs and writes book reviews at TC-Mill.com.

Sunlight and Water



Phyllida loved Marcus with every fiber of her being, and she would do anything to get him to love her in return. She would walk through fire, climb a mountain range of jagged peaks, swim a river teeming with sharks, or throttle the woman Marcus was to marry next week. She would do *anything*. She explained all of this to Flora, the herb-witch who lived in the wood.

"I see," Flora said. "I can make you a love potion. There are three herbs you'll have to harvest, plus one other special ingredient. There's a few more herbs that I'll get myself right now—and while I fetch them, I want you to take a nap. As you fall asleep, you are to think of the one you love."

The last thing Phyllida wanted to do was sleep. Time was of the essence, and every moment that Marcus wasn't hers pained her like a splinter festering under her skin. But after the old witch waddled out the door, Phyllida lay down with an impatient sigh on the lone bed in the cottage and thought of Marcus.

It wasn't hard. She lived and breathed his image, and when she closed her eyes she could see his gray eyes above her, the strong line of his jaw as his mouth curved in a smile. She could feel the phantom of his body shifting over hers, and she exhaled and ran her hand over her breast and down her ribs to the dip of her waist and hip. She yanked up her skirt, and her fingers dipped between her legs, and she imagined it was his fingers caressing her, drenching her sex in a fresh wave of moisture.

But she must have been more tired than she'd thought, because that was how she fell asleep.

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She dreamed of Marcus. Not of the beginning, when they'd met in her mother's soap-stall. Starry-eyed, blown away by the attentions of a charming nobleman, she'd promptly closed shop when he'd asked her to take a walk with him after work. Nor of the end, when after a month of passionate encounters at a local inn, he didn't show up to one of their planned assignations, and he'd left her devastated.

She dreamed of the middle—of the delirious pleasure she'd experienced with him, the euphoria that would wash over her in waves when he kissed her, the feeling of completeness when he was inside her. When he touched her, she felt as if every cell of her body opened to receive him. "Come here," she dreamed she said to him, and she felt a delicious ache unfurling inside her core as his mouth moved over her throat, hands soft as they slipped inside her gown to caress one breast, then the other, thumbs pausing to circle around each nipple until it hardened to a nub and caused her to gasp, arching her back, pelvis lifting to press against a hardness between his thighs.

He scooted up and kissed her then; something was different about his mouth. What was it? Curious, she tasted, tongue meeting his, flicking across lips that seemed thinner, but more mobile than they should be.

She promptly forgot about the difference as he rolled her nipples between thumb and forefinger, twisting them, sending pleasure arcing through her body as her body undulated in an echoing spiral. Her pelvis thrust up against his erection, and she felt the coolness of air against her thighs as they were uncovered, and then the delicious pressure of cock probing against her—she tucked and lifted her buttocks to meet him as he sunk inside her, waking up her pussy as it caressed her inner walls—the ecstasy too good to be just a dream . . . and she opened her eyes.

A complete stranger lay on top of her, his cock embedded to the hilt inside her, his face so close to hers that she could tell very clearly that he wasn't Marcus. Although he had eyes of the same color, he was younger—perhaps the same age as

her own twenty-three years—with dark curly hair and a face narrower and more angular than Marcus's. What could have been a scholar's head was offset by a broad and well-muscled body—nothing to complain about, except that she had no idea who he was or what he was doing with his cock inside her.

Well, maybe she did have *some* idea; she couldn't prevent the movement of her own hips as he picked up his pace, pistoning like a woodpecker. Then he held still, gasping in climax before he half-collapsed over her, panting.

Then she heard a strange sound—it reminded her of a branch breaking off a tree—and she experienced an instant of disorientation, as he moved away from her, but his cock remained embedded inside her. The man's eyes dilated, his features freezing, becoming masklike and waxen-pale. "What have you done to me?"

He reached down, thumb and middle finger reaching into Phyllida's pussy—and she felt his cock, still erect, being yanked out of her.

She sat up and stared. His cock had broken off—still gloriously erect, long, and thick, a lovely specimen of manhood—but cleanly separated close to the root, and appearing horribly incongruous held in front of the man's face instead of attached at that stump of a space above his testicles. "You broke it!" the man shouted.

Phyllida immediately grew defensive. "I broke it? I wasn't the one who was having sex with a sleeping woman!"

"Ha—sure. I'm sure you were fast asleep when I came into the cottage and you touched yourself and told me to come over and fuck you. You must have been having a very realistic dream!"

Phyllida felt her face grow hot as she realized that that was indeed the case. She understood then that he'd probably misinterpreted her horny Marcus dream, but that was still no excuse for him to not at least make sure her eyes were open! She opened her mouth to tell him where he could shove his broken cock when the door of the cottage burst open.

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Flora entered with a basket full of wiry dark twigs and red moss. She glanced at the man, who sat on his heels, trying to hold his cock against the stump as if sheer pressure could force it back on.

"Ah. The special ingredient," she said, round brown face dimpling.

The man made a sound as if he were being strangled. "You—you're the witch. Is this your doing? You'll fix it immediately or I'll have you arrested!"

"Go ahead," Flora said. "I just wish I could be there to hear you explain what the problem is!"

The man's teeth gritted, and if looks could have killed, Flora certainly would have been struck dead. But he made no move to stop the witch when she approached and took the cock from his nerveless hand. "The whole cottage is bespelled. No man can have sex within these walls without losing, shall we call it, the flower of his manhood. It's the only way a woman can live in peace alone in the woods. But I know what you've come for, anyway. Your name is Egan. Your father sent a messenger in advance to warn me of your arrival." She chortled. "I believe I've taken care of your problem. You wanted some kind of contraceptive spell, eh? Well this will do the trick. You won't be getting any more girls pregnant now. Except for maybe Phyllida here, but I'll give her something to prevent conception from today's fun."

Phyllida stared at the man. His name rang a bell . . . Something got triggered in the back of her mind—a memory, something Marcus had said—he had a younger brother who'd gotten a girl pregnant the past year causing a great scandal . . . and his name had been . . .

"You're Marcus's brother!" she blurted. That was why his eyes looked so familiar!

Egan's head swiveled toward her. Marcus's eyes stared out of a strange face, no longer handsome for its haggard lines, its chalky shade. "And I recognize your name too," he said. "You must be that girl who makes soap who kept

hanging around at the gate waiting for him. He told me you were a good lay but a freak.”

Phyllida’s face burned. “I don’t believe he said any such thing. You’re not fit to lick his boots—I’d never in a million years have slept with you had I not been ordered to accept your invitation—and now that I know that the point was to take your cock off, I’m glad!”

“Now, now,” Flora said. “No need to fight. You . . .” she said, turning to Egan, “I’ve got an ointment for you that’ll fix you right up. Remember I’m an herb-witch. I know all about making things grow.” She waddled to her kitchen area and put the cock she held into a jar. She opened up a cabinet and exchanged the jar for one filled with white salve. Digging into the salve for a generous fingerful, she rubbed it all over the stump where Egan’s cock used to be.

“It’ll grow back?” Egan asked, his voice trembling with emotion.

Flora nodded. “With some conditions. Now listen carefully. I’ve given you a salve that I use on my own plants when they’ve been wounded. It’s been modified for use on humans, of course, but the basic principles are the same. To grow, a plant needs sunlight and water.”

“You mean I need to walk around exposing myself?” Egan asked.

“Not at all,” Flora replied. “Your particular flower would need a different sort of energy to feed it. Flowers are attracted to the sun—think about what yours is attracted to. Feed it, and it will grow.”

“So I should have lots of sex,” Egan said. “But how can I, with *this*?” He gestured wildly at his crotch.

“You’re a smart man. Figure it out. Sunlight and water, remember.”

Egan threw her a dark look and stomped out of the cottage, slamming the door.

Phyllida glanced dubiously at the jar in the cabinet in which Egan’s cock now nestled. “You aren’t going to . . . grind it up for the potion, are you?”

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Flora giggled. "Of course not. I'll show you later what it's for. But for now, you need to get the other herbs for the potion." She went to the cabinet and pulled down three empty jars. "You can harvest them all within a twelve-hour period. Redwort you can get by the light of the midnight moon, and that you'll find only amongst the mushrooms beside the stillest ponds. Tomorrow just at dawn, you'll get robins' feathers, which must be picked in the fields when the leaves are wet with morning dew. Then you must pick cocklehead at noontime, deep in the forest, in the hollows of the largest oak trees."

"But how will I know what these herbs look like?" Phyllida asked, feeling somewhat daunted by the instructions. She *would* do anything for Marcus . . . but that had been a more hypothetical idea than practical, as she had thought she would just need to give the herb-witch some money and then be off with her potion.

Flora handed Phyllida what looked like a small silver compass. "I've put bits of each herb that you need inside this magic herbfinder," she said. "Just remember the hour you're supposed to go looking, and the herbfinder will point out exactly where you need to go."



Phyllida headed out a couple hours after the sun went down. The herbfinder worked well in the light of the moon, its silver finger pointing confidently east, and she followed a gentle downslope for two hours before she saw a thick copse of trees. She sensed that beyond lay the pond with the still water and the mushrooms and the redwort.

Although the moon was plenty bright, within the copse of trees her eyes needed to adjust to the dimness, and she squinted and stumbled on a tree root. It took more stumbling and cursing before the silver finger of the herbfinder, dimly reflecting light, pointed her toward a likely mushroom patch.

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There, though, she couldn't tell the redwort from any of the other plants here—its distinguishing characteristic was its color, and everything looked black.

A light flared behind her, and colors came to life in the glow of a torch that came through the trees and showed, behind it, the tall figure of a man.

"Hi," said Egan, holding the torch aloft. Unlike herself, he looked well-prepared for a nighttime jaunt; he wore a thick cloak and carried a satchel.

"What are you doing here?" she asked suspiciously.

"I followed you," he said. "I saw you leave the cottage and I wondered what you were doing, traipsing around in the dark by yourself. So what are you doing?"

"Picking herbs," she said. "Flora told me some very specific times for collecting them. Otherwise it wouldn't really be my choice to be digging around in the dark."

"What are the herbs for?"

Phyllida stared at him defiantly. Why not tell the truth? She had nothing to hide. "I'm going to make a potion for Marcus. So he won't make the biggest mistake of his life marrying that woman instead of me."

"Ah," Egan said, nodding sagely. "Well, that seems like a worthy cause. What do these herbs look like?" He held the torch closer.

"Well, they have red veins, and they grow beside the mushrooms," Phyllida said, leaning down. "There." She reached down to pluck the first plant.

She felt a tingle in her fingers as she grasped the stem and pulled on it to break it off, and she shivered, feeling that tingle spread over her skin, leaving a warmth in its wake. The warmth centered in her belly, and she suddenly became more aware of Egan standing beside her, the muscles in his forearm holding the torch steady. She glanced up at his face, warm in the glow of the torch, and suddenly she remembered what it felt like when he kissed her, and a wave of lust nearly made her pass out.

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She tore her eyes away and brought them back to the mushroom patch, reaching for another plant.

The tingle came again, waking up her skin even further, and something else—now she could smell Egan, the delicious musk of him—and cock or no cock, her gaze was magnetized to his crotch and she had to grab her knees to stop her legs from sending her catapulting to rip his pants off and start sucking his balls.

“I can’t do this,” she groaned, biting her lower lip hard, trying to fight these unnatural urges she was having.

“Why not?” Egan asked. He propped the torch up in a tree and bent down to pluck a plant.

He sucked in a breath as his whole body trembled. He was still for a long moment. Then both he and Phyllida turned slowly toward each other, as if hypnotized.

At the same moment, they lunged, bodies crashing together. The sound of ripping cloth filled the copse of trees and for a while, they rolled on the mossy ground, mouths mashed together, hands clawing and frantically pawing. Somehow Egan’s leggings got pulled down and Phyllida got on top long enough to get her mouth onto his balls as she’d been craving, and she tongued and sucked and even kissed the stump of his cock until he moaned and begged her to stop, or to continue—she couldn’t tell—and then she crawled up on him, body rubbing up against him, and she humped his cockless genitals with her pussy, rubbing her wet folds, her erect clitoris against him until she shrieked and shuddered and collapsed on top of him, breathless and spent.

Moments later, Phyllida sat up. She stared down at Egan in consternation. What had just come over her? She was supposed to be picking herbs so she could get Marcus to fall in love with her! Instead she was practically raping his brother.

“That was . . .” Egan said, “I think good?”

“It was insane,” Phyllida muttered. She jumped to her feet and began the attempt at putting her clothes back in order. The bodice was torn in two; she glared at Egan and

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then began some creative knot-tying. "This can't happen again!"

Egan was frowning down at his crotch. "Yeah, there was something not quite . . . balanced about that," he said. Phyllida looked. She saw that his cock had grown back—and although it had developed a girth of perhaps two inches, it hadn't grown much in length—so it was like a stubbly round knob, not much more than just a cockhead. It resembled an artichoke heart, and its color in the torchlight was a puke green. Egan pulled his leggings up to cover himself.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to be hanging around each other," Phyllida said. "Why don't you just go home? Go have your little cock-growing experiments with some other woman! My heart is occupied."

Egan's mouth quirked. "But if you're going to be with my brother, you'll see me around all the time. Wouldn't it be best for us to get these urges under control now, so we don't screw it up later right in front of him?"

Phyllida frowned. She supposed he was right. "All those urges are under control right now. Of course I have no attraction to you whatsoever. And I'll prove it. Let's go get the next herb, then."

They walked back up the slope through the night. The torch burned out, but they were guided by the light of the moon and the silver finger of the herbfinder. Finally, when a streak of orange had clawed its way across the dark velvet of the sky, the herbfinder indicated that she should stop. They were about two-thirds of the way back toward the cottage. Phyllida almost missed the plant, whose soft white fronds were well hidden within the taller grasses. As she plucked the first stem, a bit of the white stuff flew off, and she sneezed.

The fuzz of the plant was tenacious stuff, clinging to the insides of her nasal passages, and her eyes started watering. She shook her head, feeling suddenly groggy.

"Here, I'll do it," Egan said. He got a few of them, depositing them in the jar, before he began to sneeze as well.

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Phyllida felt lightheaded and odd. She watched Egan sneezing, and it was as if she saw him moving in slow motion, the curls of his hair jiggling. Did a touch of gold from the rising sun lend a halo to those lush brown tresses? Had she ever seen such long lashes as the ones that lay curled against Egan's cheeks as that beautiful mouth of his exploded with another gust of sweet breath? She gasped at the poetry of his beauty. She imagined that his gorgeous, tanned abdominal muscles rippled as he sneezed, and her hands ached to feather-touch them and to perhaps write a verse about the amazing way they mediated the space between his manly chest and that adorable stub of fat cock blooming between his legs.

Egan stopped sneezing and gazed at Phyllida, eyes widening, jaw dropping open. He fell to his knees and clasped his hands together. "Oh, sun and moon of my existence!" he cried. "Let me worship you." He bowed and scraped at her feet.

"Oh, no, no," Phyllida said, dropping down to her knees to join him. "It's you who should be worshipped!" And she pulled his head onto her lap.

They spent the next hour so, murmuring verse as they were inspired, or simple praise as they wished. Phyllida played with the curls on Egan's head, and Egan massaged Phyllida's feet and sighed rapturously in between his mutterings. Then Phyllida thought it would be a good idea to whisper sweet nothings to his cock. "Because plants grow better when they are praised and given adoration," she said. "We should let it know that it is safe to enter the world, that it will be nurtured and treated well."

"Anything you say, oh divine beauty," Egan said, his voice husky with emotion. He sat up and pulled his leggings down.

Both of them stopped short. His cock had grown—but the thick cock-head-stub now hung from a long, spindly shaft of a half-inch diameter, so thin it looked as if it might break.

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Besides the bulbous, puke-green head, it was the color and shape of a stalk of celery.

"This isn't right," Egan said, all huskiness gone from his voice.

Phyllida shook her head, trying to clear it. She clapped her hands to her cheeks. What had happened? They'd done it again! She sucked in a breath, ready to blast Egan with her accusations.

"The plants!" Egan cried. "It's something about these plants you're harvesting. They're making us behave like this!"

Phyllida exhaled. He was right! The redwort had made her horny, the robins' feathers had made her starry-eyed with romance. They were both ingredients for a love potion, so it made sense. What did not make sense was harvesting them with a man like Egan around.

Their gazes met. "I should go," Egan said. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interfere with your thing with Marcus. I'll stay out of your way from now on." He pulled his leggings up, being very careful with the wilted artichoke-heart-headed celery-stalk shaft of his cock. Then he turned and trudged away, up through the fields toward the cottage. And the road toward home.

Phyllida watched him leave, fists clenched, face set. When he was out of sight, she burst into tears. She didn't even know why.

When she was all cried out, she tore off two strips of cloth from her already-ruined dress, using one to tie over her nose, the other around her fingers. She finished her harvesting of the robins' feathers, being careful to keep every wispy white piece of it out of her nose. If only she'd known to do so before!

She looked at the sky. Maybe two hours or so until noon, and then she could get the final herb and end this fiasco. She took out the herbfinder and allowed it to lead her. Cacklehead would be deep in the forest, she recalled, in the hollows of the largest oak trees.

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It took her an hour of walking before the needle of the herbfinder stopped moving. She stood before a tree so tall she couldn't see its top, within it a lovely large hollow at the level of her chest. Inside, she found cocklehead—a golden-colored plant with long reedy strands, each of which had a small bubble-like formation at its top. She wondered what sort of strange urges this plant would cause if she touched it. Should she cover her nose and hand again?

Maybe it didn't matter, since she was alone. And she found that she was curious. If the first herb caused lust, the second romance, what would this third one do? What other ingredient did a love potion need?

She touched a strand.

Nothing happened. She blinked. She felt nothing. Relieved, and a little disappointed, she began to harvest the cocklehead, pulling each strand gently by the root to free it from inside the tree hollow.

When her jar was full, though, she stared at the golden reeds filling the glass, and she felt empty. What was she doing? She didn't want to make a love potion. Not for Marcus, at least, for it hit her like a thunderbolt—she didn't love him!

She tried to think of Marcus's face; she could call up his image in her head, but she felt nothing. All the euphoria, the adoration, the lust for him was gone. She'd loved the idea of him, but everything else had been just a projection of her fantasies.

She upended the jar of cocklehead, spilling its contents onto the forest floor.

"You're not going to make the potion?" Egan said behind her.

Phyllida yelped and jumped. "You have got to stop sneaking up on me," she said, although she could tell that her surprise wasn't the only reason her heart was beating a little faster. "No, I'm not."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure," Phyllida said. "I started picking it, and then I just realized that I don't love him. He can marry that woman; it doesn't matter to me any longer."

Egan bent and picked up one of the spilled plants. He rubbed it between his fingers, sniffed it, studied it.

"Honesty," he finally said. "That's the third ingredient for a love potion. Lust, romance, and honesty."

"Hmph," Phyllida said, not liking being wrong about Marcus. But she did feel a flash of admiration for Egan; not only was he cute, but he was far from stupid as well.

"You don't need a love potion, anyway," Egan said, taking a step toward her. "At least not for some people." He smiled and bridged the distance between them, enclosing her gently in his arms.

Phyllida found herself smiling in return, and one smile met the other and clung, lingering in a kiss that sent thrills up Phyllida's spine. A vortex of desire grew both down below, in her female parts, and inside a heart that was opening like a flower.

After some interminable time was spent in exploration of each other's mouths, Phyllida pressed closer to him—and she stopped, finding something curiously large and hard between his legs. She pulled it out—a lovely erection, perfect in both length and girth, with a beautiful smooth mushroom-head and a shaft so hard Phyllida could trace the veins running along it. It looked exactly as before, except with a slight tinge of green.

"You grew it back," Phyllida said in surprise.

"No—we grew it back. You were my sunlight and water," Egan said.

He unlaced her dress then, pulling it off her shoulders and then over her hips where it pooled down around her ankles. His own clothes followed, and they stood in the depths of the forest, naked, a little chilly.

And he kissed her again, skin cleaving to skin, and it was no longer chilly at all even when Egan backed Phyllida against the oak tree with the hollow, and he picked her up by the

buttocks and leaned her against the tree and he notched his cock in between the delicate flower-folds of her pussy and sank in, deep, with a groan. The hardness of the wood against Phyllida's back contrasted with the silken softness of cock thrusting into very wet pussy, and she found herself coming quickly, her nails digging into Egan's shoulders. He smiled and bit her nipple gently, causing her tapering orgasm to spike into another round of convulsions.

"Look at how we fit together," he whispered. "You're so beautiful. I could do this all day."

"That's the robins' feathers talking," she gasped.

He laughed. "Maybe. I do admit I'm looking forward to taking you home and doing this in a proper bed." And then Phyllida took his face in her hands and kissed him to stop him from talking. Egan groaned against her mouth, and presently his thrusts became short and jerky. Phyllida held onto him, so her arms and legs were wrapped around him as he pulled her buttocks up toward him so their bodies were as deeply merged as they could possibly be as his cock twitched inside her.

It turned out that Flora didn't actually make love potions; she didn't approve of them, she said. "I did see how the two of you might suit each other, though," she told them with a chuckle. She showed them how she composted Egan's old cock to make a special fertilizer. "My garden is very fertile," she said with a manic glint in her eye that made Egan suddenly feel compelled to go home.

Phyllida didn't mind, although there was no hurry now. She had by her side the man she liked more than any she'd ever met before, and she knew that the seeds had been planted for love. As they left the cottage for home, Phyllida riding behind Egan on his horse, she found herself looking forward to the exploration—the discovery of the sunlight and water that would feed them, body and soul.



Fifty Shades of Green

Colleen Chen is a freelance writer and bodyworker living in the Twin Cities. Her debut novel, currently titled *Dysmorphic Kingdom*, will be released in early 2015. She has several stories published or forthcoming in print or e-anthologies, including the *Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica*, Pink Narcissus' *Queer Fish*, and Circlet Press' anthology of collected microfiction. Her blog is at www.colleenchen.com.

Exploding Alfalfa



“When a bee visits an alfalfa flower, she has to poke her proboscis down to the bottom of the tube to reach the nectar, but she comes in from the side so as to not set off the flower’s trigger. You see, if her proboscis comes in contact with the lower part of the blossom, it’s like the touch on the trigger of a gun. The group of stamens are set down there like a spring, and a touch can throw the upper part of stamens and pistil forward. If that happens, the flower *explodes*.”

When Professor Clement said, “the flower explodes,” his brown eyes met mine, and I almost dropped my notebook. We had been flirting through the whole class period—him sneaking glances at me, me boldly staring at him (after all, he was the teacher).

A churn of sexual excitement went through me with those words . . . that look. What’s more, I knew he could read it on my face, the interest that had blossomed to lust. It was as if he were probing me, like the bee or the butterfly probes the flower for nectar, trying to find what sweetness I might hold.

It was the way he handled the delicate flowers and leaves he spoke about. His enthusiasm. His encyclopedic knowledge. As an intro into wild raspberries, found near the stream below the gravel road in this park, he started with almonds. “Almonds,” he said, “are not technically, a nut. They are the pit of a drupe.”

Most of us were a little puzzled (what was a drupe again?) as he answered for us. Drupes were fruits that had pits, like plums and peaches.

He got back to the raspberries. “They’re not berries at all,” he said. “Each carpel is a drupe—what you think of as the ‘berry’ is a collection or aggregate of drupes.”

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Oh, I thought, all those carpels, those flower ovaries, pollinated and fused into one fruit!

He had disappeared down the stream bank and found a handful of raspberries. He handed them out, declaring that they were “mouth-wateringly delicious.” He made sure to give me one, and his fingers touched my palm, sending a thrill through my lower belly. I pressed the red berry between the roof of my mouth and tongue to release its juices, and it was true, the flavor was glorious. I imagined the professor and I cozying up, sharing berries, and then more than berries.

I couldn’t believe my physical reaction to this man. He wasn’t what you’d call sexy. He was probably a little over 40, tall with broad shoulders (and a nice round ass), a little overweight, messy dark hair, scruffy short beard. He was wearing khakis and cheap tennis shoes. But as I watched him now, holding another flower in his meaty hand, gently pulling it apart, showing us the petal structure, those internal sex organs, then passing the pieces around among the group of women as if they were precious jewels, I caught my breath. His rough, big hands on the delicate petals brought one thing to mind with absolute clarity: *I needed his hands on me.*

The day had started out innocently enough. A ten o’clock gathering of a dozen women, mostly middle-aged and senior (I was, by far, the youngest), at a local park for a Native Plant class. It was sunny, warm enough to wear shorts, but cool enough to bring a jacket along in case the wind kicked up or clouds covered the sun. We were on a mountain road with only foot and bicycle traffic. The air was fresh and full of bird song. Even the water in the creek seemed to be serenading us.

Our group of women had visited other parks over the spring and summer and studied native shrubs, grasses, and flowers. We’d learned the ropes of “keying out,” identifying plants according to a series of botanical questions—shape of leaves and their placement on stems, number of petals in flowers, and so on. We’d studied the uses of different plants through the ages. Every class before this one had been pretty

standard, interesting but nothing to write home about, and then, this man.

He'd come in from the university just for us. The Latin rolled beautifully off his tongue as did the details of each plant's use throughout history, not only American history, but Earth history. I had never encountered this depth of enthusiasm in any teacher. Wandering among nature, fondling and rhapsodizing about the green world, he was in his element.

I was not planning on lusting after anyone today, or any other day. Since the death of my husband five years before I'd been depressed and, as far as any romantic possibilities, shut down. My husband had been my world. We'd been together since high school and married for six years when he'd died during a routine surgical procedure. At the time we'd been trying to have a baby. I'd been limping along like half a person ever since. I felt old, sometimes ancient, and I was only 33.

The fog began to lift two years ago when I bought a tomato plant at a yard sale on my street. A Sun Gold cherry tomato. I'd never gardened, never bought a vegetable plant before, but something drew me to it. I wanted a small life to nurture. I bought a book on gardening, special organic soil and plant food. I edged out into the warmth of the sun from complete darkness—and my plant flourished. When the harvest came I popped those tiny gleaming globes of fruit into my mouth like celebratory candy. With this triumph a world opened. I wanted to live again, and I wanted to do it with my hands in the dirt. My obsession started slowly, first with the tomato then flowers and herbs, and finally shrubs and trees. Wanting to know everything, I read constantly, took classes. I quit my job in finance and began living off the insurance settlement that had been sitting in the bank doing nothing. I started blogging about plants, and I began to write poetry.

My sexual feelings had begun to stir again (oh, how they had begun to stir!), but I only satisfied myself. I was afraid of

a relationship. It was especially difficult when some days I would feel as if every cell in my body was vibrating and crying out for communion with another person. On those days I would look at the calendar and see, yes, I was ovulating.

Suddenly I realized that was my situation now. Of course! Last night at the grocery store. How the clerk had smiled at me, asked me questions about my plans for the weekend. He was more than sweet, now that I thought about it—he was wolfish! I was putting out pheromones that said, “pollinate me.”

The looks that I was giving the professor today said even more: “I am willing to be pollinated. By you.”

He was now standing by the side of the gravel road, had picked another flower, and was holding it in his hand. The flower that he’d passed around a minute ago was in mine, and I was unthinkingly holding it to my face, looking at him again, staring. I was now the wolf. He met my eyes, and I felt him reading my thoughts.

“Do you mind passing that on?” a fifty-something woman standing next to me asked. She’d picked up on the flirtations, the eager questions, the breezy laughs. Now she gave me a disapproving look, a look that said, “Slut.”

Yet I had done nothing slutty. *Yet*. Did I care what this woman thought? Hell no. As I looked at this man with his strong, capable body and his quick, encyclopedic, plant-loving mind, I made a decision. I *would* have him. Today.

Fifteen minutes later we were all heading to the parking lot. A flock of women surrounded the professor, of course, with last-minute questions and compliments about the class, but I hung back and patiently waited.

The woman who gave me the look earlier walked by and gave me another that said, “I know what you’re up to.”

I winked at her.

The professor looked over the women’s heads at me (checking to see if I was still around, I was thrilled to note). When the last one had finally left to go to her car I walked up and introduced myself.

"I loved what you said about the alfalfa exploding." I looked up into his eyes, and my longing connected with something within him. There was no turning back. Here goes, I thought. "I found it erotic."

My remark caused a tremble in his hands. He turned to watch the last car pull out of the parking lot and head down the gravel road. His car's trunk was open, ready for his books and gear. He turned to me and softly said, "Maybe you'll write about it on your blog?"

My heart thudded. "You've read it?"

"A colleague forwards it to me every week. It's quite a hit in the biology department." At that he looked a little embarrassed and shy. My heart melted.

"Thank you, that means a lot." I stepped closer, close enough to smell him. He smelled earthy and spicy and wonderful. I looked up at him; he met my gaze and smiled.

"Do you have any plans for lunch?" He gestured to his backpack. "I brought a couple of sandwiches, some fruit. I was going to eat in the car and then go up the trail to pick some more of those raspberries." He suddenly seemed shy again.

"I would love to join you for lunch, Professor." I saw that there was a wool blanket in the trunk next to the backpack and seized the opportunity. "I see you have a blanket. Why don't we have a little picnic, and then you can show me where those berries are? It'll be fun."

He flushed again, and I knew then that he felt the same as I did. He grabbed his backpack from the trunk—and the blanket. "Come on, I'll show you my favorite spot up here."

We hiked back up the trail for a quarter mile and then went down a steep embankment to the stream. I couldn't get over how wonderful the air smelled, how every cell of my body seemed electrified, and God, I was getting wet. Never had anything like this happened in my life. I had always been the shy, quiet nerd, and so, I could tell, had this man. Now I sensed he was growing more excited with every moment, too.

He tried to make small talk, but it was no use, we could barely put a sentence together.

The spot we came to had a grassy area under a beautiful western river birch. No one could see anything from the trail as shrubs lined the road. The water was rushing so fast (like my heart) no one could possibly hear us . . .

"There are lots of raspberries up there, by the road," he pointed.

"Mmmm. We'll have to pick some on our way back . . ."

He laid out the blanket then turned around, took me in his arms and kissed me with a forcefulness that left me weak and wanting. He tasted sweet and salty, his scent was so good, dark woods, spice, musk. The embrace felt like more than just sexual excitement; it felt like a claiming. I pressed my body into his and discovered that his erection was enormous.

The world around us disappeared as we began fumbling with each other's clothes, between fondling, exploring, kissing, sucking. We had a few moments of nervous laughter as we struggled with tugging off shoes and socks and underwear. And all through it I felt the building of an intense hunger.

Soon we were on the blanket, on our knees, facing each other, naked, kissing. His body showed my favorite amount of hairiness, and his large penis pressed into my thigh. A slight breeze blew over us like a caress, honoring us with its breath, and dapples of light fell on our bodies.

I moved down to sit in front of him and cradled his balls in my hand. I stroked one muscular thigh and kissed it. I took his cock into my mouth gently. He drew in his breath and trembled. It had been so long for me, but now I remembered. I loved fellatio; how I had missed it. I took my time, running my tongue along the underside, tenderly licking and teasing, and then taking him fully into my mouth, fucking his cock slowly.

He gently pulled away from me and said, "I want to taste you." He laid me on my back and kissed and nuzzled a trail down my belly and on the top of my thighs before going for

that sweet, moist garden between my legs. There he set to ensuring my pleasure. This was a man who loved what he was doing—and he knew a woman’s anatomy as well as he knew a flower’s. He focused on my reddening, swelling bud and made it the center of his attention with his strong and eager tongue, grabbing my ass and pulling me into him. He was relentless, determined to take me all the way. His short beard was at turns soft and maddeningly rough against my thighs as he focused and worked. I could no longer hold back. I moaned and clutched his dark hair. I tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t have it and kept on. Soon I bucked and convulsed. He moaned, turned on by my pleasure. He worked his way back up my body, burying his face in my breasts and hungrily sucking them.

I took his face in my hands and kissed him deeply. “I want you to fuck me.” I rolled over and got on my knees, presenting my feverish, still-electrified flower to him from the backside. We were beasts in the woods—and I wanted to be taken like one.

He grabbed my hips and slid his cock in all the way, slowly and deliciously, moaning all the while. I felt a tiny jolt when it met my cervix, right before he began pulling it out, easing it out slowly, making me want it again.

“Don’t stop,” I said.

We rocked, fucking, bucking on the blanket, under the tree, as the rapt sound of the stream’s melody played, insects buzzed and butterflies hovered, birds trilled. We were one, with not only ourselves but all of nature.

Over and over he thrust, and I met each thrust in needy ecstasy. Before long he cried out and drove harder and faster as he came, filling me with his pollen.

Our bodies were slick with sweat and our spilled juices as we lay side by side on the blanket. He pulled a water bottle from the backpack and we drank, and a little while later we ate, and then we enjoyed ourselves again. Then we fell asleep.

We never did get to those berries.

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That afternoon took place over twenty years ago, but it's still the most vivid and erotic memory of my life. You see, that was the day life returned to me. It came back in the form of the Professor (I still call him that) and the life we created together under that western river birch—our twin daughters, Marguerite and Linnea.

While the pregnancy was a surprise, it didn't scare us. It wasn't long before our lust turned to love (if it hadn't on that very first day), and besides, we both wanted a family.

Today we have our own garden full of native plants, a honeybee colony, and of course, raspberries. Sometimes we sneak out to the back of the property, bringing a wool blanket (of course), and we take pleasure in the hidden corner of our yard, among the small group of trees and the ground blanketed with alfalfa.



Gloria Holden fell in love with plants at the age of seven, when she pressed a pinto bean (culled from her family's dinner) into the soil—and the miracle of life revealed itself. When she grew up and became a mother she decided to follow her obsession and write about the green world. She marvels daily at the splendors of creation and feels that connecting with this force is the key to . . . everything. This is her first erotic story.



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