

a romance of witches

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By

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To deny the possibility, nay, the actual existence of witchcraft and sorcery, is at once flatly to contradict the revealed word of God in various passages both of the Old and New Testament, and the thing itself is a Truth to which every nation in the world hath, in its turn, borne testimony, by either example seemingly well attested or by prohibitory laws, which at least suppose the possibility of a commerce with evil spirits.

~ Sir William Blackstone

CHAPTER 1

The woman stalked the couple. The two were witches and believed themselves unobserved, or as of little notice as any other couple walking on the downtown sidewalk. But the woman knew them for what they were.

The woman stopped for a moment, allowing the witches to move farther away. She was unconcerned about losing them and had in fact been following the two Wiccans for a couple of weeks. Her patience was deep, but nearing an end. Still, she took the time to breathe and absorb the bustle around her.

The bus motoring by her increased in volume as her ears began releasing their focus on the couple. An overcast day shielded her eyes from much of the perturbing glare that she tried to avoid by living in her darkened building.

She dismissed the two from her mind with a sharp turn to entertain herself with a gaze across the street. She saw herself there, reflected in the plate window of the curio shop selling overpriced tourist knickknacks of plastic manufacture. Surprised at seeing herself so clearly, she stopped for a moment. At this distance, the slight strands of gray could not be seen. She looked younger, perhaps even in her early thirties. She tried to grasp the time when she was in her thirties and failed. Motorcars might not have been invented then.

The dark hair and porcelain skin had endured. But even as she wondered at the beauty reflected, she became quickly disinterested as had been happening so often and more frequently as the years passed.

What was her life? Why had she endured? What did the future hold for her but endless tedium? As in recent previous years, she wondered whether she could survive another year, as short as they seemed, or decide to be done with it all and sleep as she should have a century ago.

It was then that she noticed a figure, standing, watching intently. Such attention was not unusual, considering her beauty. However, she had very carefully constructed a pattern that made her less noticeable to others around her. She always did so before stalking potential additions to her Cella.

The watcher was a nondescript man, yet different from all around him. The dichotomy confused her and gave her pause. He wasn't wearing clothing of the year 2012. In fact, his clothing was odd for the time; a high collar on his long-sleeved shirt, leather pants and a leather belt, all in black.

Was he another witch? Her senses detected nothing from him that would indicate so at this distance. Perhaps he was one who mimics or affects certain fashions to influence others. Many of the movies of the time used inane cliches of dress and appearance to convey messages and intent. Appearance was less than substance. But substance led to appearance, usually. So she had found in her journey through life. So was this man appearance? Or substance?

As if noticing her looking, the man casually turned and scanned the rest of the busy street, following other strollers without a care who saw.

The woman's brow creased in puzzlement for a moment. What about him set him apart? What drew her attention? Certainly not his clothing? With a frustrated flick of her head, she turned back to the couple she was stalking. Yes, there they were, not far enough to be lost.

The man watched the woman turn away from his gaze and return to the two witches she was following. Almost nothing amazed him anymore, but the woman had seen him. He was nothing special to look at. His scar disqualified him from what women of this age would call handsome. The scar ran from his right brown eye down across his cheek and ending at his chin. It was jagged, ugly and had caused many in the past to view him with fear. At any time in the last thirty years, he could have paid for a good plastic surgeon to considerably lessen the looks of the jagged feature. But what did he care?

His shoulder-length brown hair mixed with gray was also considered distasteful in this day and age. Women preferred bald men wearing goatees. These women were apparently blind to the fact that these soft men looked ridiculous wearing a fashion once sported over four thousand years ago by the elite lugal warriors of Akkad. But what did they know? Women seemed to be concerned now with the size of the chariot these men drove or their pay.

Nothing about his appearance should have caused her pause. No, what surprised him was that he was operating under a cloak of secrecy – a spell potent enough

to make him so uninteresting as to render him invisible for all practical purposes.

Interesting, he thought. Who was this woman?

Without a glance at the traffic, he began to stride purposefully across the street – knowing that his timing of the flow of traffic allowed his passage without mishap.

The two witches were just ahead. The woman felt agitated and impatient, despite weeks of patience.

Now was the time, she decided.

With some deft moves of her fingers, she stitched a pattern into the air. Her eyes took on a mean glint and betrayed her impatience. Whatever was nagging at her mind came through the spell she stitched. The pair stopped with a faltering step, the female twisting her ankle and the male stumbling. As one they turned to look back.

The female witch was in her late twenties and her mate the same age range. The woman could tell in an instant that the female had led the two to witchcraft, but the male had abilities yet untapped and of which only marginally aware. The male might even provide some amusement and diversion to the woman.

Yes, these two would be adequate additions to the Cella.

The man watched dispassionately as the woman worked a relatively difficult spell. That she could initiate a dual hex was noteworthy of her abilities. Usually, spells or hexes were singular in target. There had been a time when magic of this sort was not only common, but considered nothing more than tricks. Much of that knowledge had been forgotten or ruthlessly stamped out by the church. The man held no animosity against the church, though. Much of the most powerful magic of those times long past utilized spirit-essence rather than the innate power within each human being. Due to that influence, much evil arose and the world had suffered.

“The evil I have witnessed...” and realized he had said it aloud.

He continued to approach the woman and the two witches. Close enough now to hear.

“...am Josephine,” said the woman.

So she has a name, thought the man.

Josephine continued, not seeing the man within hearing distance behind her, “but I am known as Domina, the Dominatrix of our Cella.”

The young Wiccan woman looked embarrassed. “Oh, well, sorry, but we're not into bee-dee-ess-emm.”

The man could see the woman's shoulders tense.

“The title has been usurped by young and ignorant people as something to do with torture and pain--”

“Yeah, we don't go for that whole whip-thing--” The young woman began to say.

The woman's hands moved once again, and suddenly the young woman stopped talking. Her eyes bulged in mild shock. Her mate was still smiling at the woman – at Josephine.

Josephine continued, a dangerous tone to her voice. “Our Cella does not engage in such modern fetishes. Dominatrix simply means 'leader.' We are witches.”

“Oh,” the young woman stammered. “We are Wiccans; we already belong to a coven.”

“You know nothing,” Josephine said. Her voice was all disdain. “You believe in the Rule of Three and thereby limit yourselves to that which piques your conscience.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds. The man was still unnoticed.

“Your coven cannot give you anything more than a taste of that which you should be consuming with a ravenous hunger. May I have the honor of your

names?” Josephine stood, hands on her hips.

The young man spoke. “I’m Matt and this is my wife, Sheila.”

Josephine gave an approving nod. “Come with me and I will show you our Cella. Decide then if we have anything to offer you. But beware; what we teach is far beyond anything you could imagine.”

The young woman looked hesitant. “I...”

Josephine leaned forward. “Are you afraid of wielding more power? Or are you happy conducting your spells that have little or no effect?”

Sheila looked at a loss for words. The puzzlement on her face was evident. The man judged that she thought she had already attained the pinnacle of power with the Wiccans.

Although the two didn't look particularly strong-willed, the man began to doubt that Josephine's simple persuasion hex on the couple would work. He began to consider whether adding his own would be helpful or if he should just let it go. Was now the time to reveal his hand? Was this a good time to interpose and reveal his plan?

No, not yet. Not now.

Matt was already nodding to Josephine and Sheila was convincing herself by the looks on her face.

“Come with me and I will show you true witchcraft.” Josephine began to turn and the man quickly reinforced the pattern of secrecy he had woven earlier.

Josephine didn't notice him. This time. She waved her hand, as if summoning a taxi. Shortly, a black car pulled up and double parked. A fine-looking blond man got out and ran to open the doors for his passengers. First the passenger door, and then the backseat door. With a curt bow of his head, he motioned to Josephine toward the front passenger door. When she had sat herself in the seat, he motioned with a smile to Matt and Sheila.

“I'm Ollie. Welcome,” the blond man said and gestured to the open backseat.

With that, Matt and Sheila scooted themselves into the car and embarked on a journey that would forever change their lives.

The man watched them go. He knew their destination – the brick building on 2nd Street. He turned and began walking. For thousands of years, he had walked. Walking a mile and a half today would be a pittance against what he had walked in his lifetime. Unfortunately, thousands of years had dulled his senses. He was long past gazing at beauty and architectural aesthetics. The unusual business signs meant nothing to him. The skillful use of colors did nothing to attract his compulsory interest.

In fact, he wondered if anything could. But something nagged at him; something odd. When he realized he was thinking of the woman Josephine's beauty, he actually stumbled in mid-step and had to catch himself from falling. Old feelings, long forgotten, began to stir within him.

CHAPTER 2

Josephine and Ollie ushered Matt and Sheila through the steel fire-door of a decrepit-looking brick building on 2nd Street. The windows were all barred with iron and guarded against the unwanted intrusions of the exterior.

Matt looked around with an amount of shock. Seeing the building from the outside, he had expected an equally decrepit interior. But the lighting and art decorations worked together to draw the eye beyond the brick to the beauty and expression of those within. Here was a painting by Monet, though he disliked Monet. There was a sculpture that looked fresh from the museum of Baghdad, a robust Babylonian work looking all too real. Over there was a lit display case of coinage so old that their issuing countries were nothing but myth.

Josephine ignored it all. Matt wondered how a woman could so easily take for granted the wealth around her. He looked at Sheila and saw her mouth open in awe and wonder. With an audible click, his own mouth snapped shut.

Ollie nodded, as if knowing, which perhaps he did. “The displays are all authentic. With patience, we accumulate works of beauty that transcend time.”

Matt opened his mouth to ask, but nothing came out.

“How? How do we afford such wealth?” Ollie winked.

Matt and Sheila both nodded as they followed Josephine, the Dominatrix.

“We perform services that can't be made known to the public,” Ollie smiled.

“For a price. The bigger the service, the bigger the price.”

Josephine's voice muttered, “Enough, Ollie.”

“Yes, Domina,” he responded.

A large room, once a manufacturing space, greeted them as their destination. But instead of machinery, there were a few simple desks, some leather chairs, and several shelves of books and what appeared to be scrolls. Lamp-stands adorned

every desk and chair in the absence of overhead lighting. Three of the desks were occupied. Sleeping on one of the desks were two, large black cats. One cat cracked an eye, but the other only twitched an ear.

“Black cats? Really?” said Matt.

All three of the desk-bound people started to rise but stopped at Josephine's raised hand.

“Carry on,” her voice rang low, but clear.

“This is our library. Collected here are the writings of power unknown to Wicca.” Josephine waved at the shelves.

Matt and Sheila gaped, but Matt thought a bunch of shelves could be holding anything, even silly poetry.

Josephine's eyes drew down briefly and then she waved a hand towards one of the desks. “Sarah. Please fetch the initiate's primer.”

A woman, presumably Sarah, scrambled to her feet. “Yes, Domina.”

Within seconds, Sarah had fetched a scroll from a shelf and brought it to the nearest desk. She spread it and waited.

Josephine beckoned Matt and Sheila to the desk.

Sheila's mind was in a whorl ever since she had found herself climbing into the open car. Never would she have ridden so with a stranger. Her guards and defenses were always kept and her spells of protection were renewed every morning. She had no doubt that something criminal could not touch her. The fact that she willingly got into the car and entered the well-fortified building told her that these were not criminals of any kind. No one here was out to cause her harm.

When Josephine gestured to the desk in the library, Sheila stepped up to the lit area without any hesitation. She was well-placed in her Wiccan coven to decide for herself the validity of any claims this pretend-witch named Josephine could

make.

I am a First-Degree Believer, thought Sheila. I will not be dazzled and bewitched. But who was Josephine? Was she real? Was she a con-artist? She had intimidated some disparaging insinuations of Wicca that had First-Degree Witch Sheila on the defensive.

But Sheila's reservations evaporated when she saw the scroll. The scroll itself was parchment – something expensive, perhaps even real hemp-paper. On it were the scratchings of what looked like charcoal. In some areas, the scribblings looked like crayon. But what amazed her was the content of the scrawling.

Laid out, with an immediate ease of intuition and understanding, were the basics of spellcraft. Gone were the preachy warnings of the written word. She immediately grasped and followed the diagrams and scribbled notes about the uses and employment of power in hex/spell form. Not knowing how she came to this position, she found herself leaned over the scroll and panting as she tried to absorb as much as possible.

A soft, feminine voice whispered into her ear. “This is just the initiate's scroll. There are hundreds of others, more advanced.”

Josephine put her hand over Sheila's. “Join us. We can initiate you this Saturday.”

Sheila did not look at her husband, but felt him right beside her, a comfortable support for a decision not as difficult as Sheila imagined. Though she felt as if the decision were akin to jumping off a cliff, she did not hesitate. “We will join.”

Josephine arched an eyebrow, but remained otherwise expressionless.

Sheila nodded immediately. “Domina,” she said.

Josephine smiled a quick quirk of her lips. She nodded back once. “I'll let you look over this with Sarah's help if you need it. The day after tomorrow shall be you and your husband's initiation. Afterward, you shall begin instruction and have free run of the library.”

With a look at Sarah that produced a nod of deference, Josephine left the library.

CHAPTER 3

The male witch named Sam approached Josephine as she glided through the halls toward her Sanctum.

“Domina, a matter of security, if you will.” Sam nodded his head.

The Dominatrix of the Cella responded immediately and without hesitation or impatience. “Of course, Sam. Please inform me.”

Sam bowed his head, not in fear, but in acquiescence. “Thank you, Domina. A man, a single man, but unusual in appearance...”

Josephine stopped and faced the stout Sam. “Go on, Sam.”

“Domina, a man has been lurking outside, as if expecting a reception.” He stood wringing his hands. “I’m not sure how to describe it, but he’s not our typical Lookey-Lou.”

Josephine nodded and the relief on Sam's face was evident. “Show me.”

With a nod and wave of his hand, he gestured towards the security office. Josephine entered the cramped office that had once been a simple overseer's office. Along the walls were video monitors showing the various external views from different angles of the building. Arranged around the walls of the room were computers and monitors that handled communications, temperature and lighting for the building, and the alarm system and electronic door locks.

But these did not concern her as much as her instant focus on the monitor showing the front door street view. Standing there, hands on hips, and apparently waiting, was the unusual man she had seen earlier.

“Domina?” Sam asked.

Josephine blinked. She had not realized she was staring at the man with a feeling of... what? Something familiar about the feeling. She put a hand to her chest just beneath her neck. Was she getting sick? The feeling made her tremble.

Ah yes! Butterflies, she thought. Preposterous.

“Domina?” Sam asked again.

“Send Allen out, would you? Let us see what our friend wants.” Josephine said.

Sam nodded and sat in one of the chairs. He reached out and pressed the intercom button on the old-fashioned microphone set. “Allen to the front. Allen to the front. Investigate man at door.”

He repeated the message once more after a few seconds. His voice rang breezily and low through the building.

Allen was their armed witch. Good with guns, he was licensed to carry concealed. He was used to determine the intentions of those unknown to the Cella.

Within a bare minute, the “door open” light lit up, shut off and then stepping into camera view was Allen. He was burly enough in his suit to keep away the unwanted. Imposing as he was, the unusual man did not flinch or otherwise react to Allen's demeanor.

They spoke for a few seconds and Allen cocked his head, as if hearing something odd. He nodded and turned to disappear off the camera view. On another monitor, he operated the keypad on the steel front door and entered. The man stayed where he was.

Josephine sighed. “Very well, let's go see what Allen has to say.” Normally, Allen dispensed with those of a curious nature. If the unwanted visitor had been a customer for services offered by the Cella, he would have signaled and invited the man inside. Otherwise, after a short intimidation by Allen, the unwanted visitor would have found something else and somewhere else to occupy his attention.

Josephine strode towards the front door with slightly more alacrity than normal. What was this man? What made him unusual? Why had he caused in her feelings not felt in decades?

“Domina,” Allen nodded when she reached the front entry.

“What do we have?” Josephine demanded, perhaps a little harshly.

“The man asks for sanctuary.”

Josephine took a step back and folded her arms. Sanctuary was a right granted to visitors and travelers from Cella to Cella. The visitor would assume position within the Cella, although only temporarily. Applying as he did for sanctuary, the unusual man declared that he had no confrontational intentions and would submit to the Dominus or Domina of the Cella. While such a supplicant could be sheltered, the status did not grant full membership, as such. Ritual activities were excluded from the rights granted to the sanctuary supplicant.

Josephine tapped her lips with one finger. “Invite him in.”

CHAPTER 4

The man stood outside, waiting. He gazed up at the roof of the two-story brick building. Several ravens lined the edge of the roof.

The man smiled. So she uses ravens as well as security cameras.

Throughout the centuries, he had dedicated himself to helping the church eradicate certain influences best forgotten. No, he was not an agent of the church. But he shared common cause. He remembered the wars of the giants. He remembered the devastation and the bloodshed that had occurred so soon after the flood when mankind was trying to rebuild. Although times were different now, such knowledge and evil could not be allowed to once again devastate the planet.

While his conviction had not changed, the times had moved on beyond the desperation of mankind to survive and rebuild after the flood. His crime resulting in his curse would nowadays be shrugged off and forgotten – a boredom for the contemporary peoples amongst whom he traveled.

But his purpose here was to ferret out sources of power that hinted at a return to horror and violence. Certainly, not all practitioners who stumbled into avenues of power would ever develop and thus release upon the world evil they rediscovered.

“Thou shall not suffer a witch to live,” he whispered the words. But the translation was generic enough to avoid that which was truly intended. Thou shall not suffer a poisoner to live. Witches were fine, and could even be saved. Witches were acknowledged in the Bible as being of a power. But what was lost over the centuries was that only certain witches of certain powers were not to be suffered. Jesus had not told his disciples to go save the world and kill witches, but to save the world.

Still, certain witches were not going to inherit the kingdom of God. It was the unsaid and unwritten that caused so much confusion between the church and witches today. But the man remembered. The man knew. The man carried out his

charge from a long-dead king to whom he owed no more allegiance.

Here, in this place, something tickled his senses. But he was also intrigued by the woman. For once, in the last hundred years, he felt something forgotten – interest.

What would he find here? Would he find an apt witch? Or would he find something more nefarious? Perhaps here, in all places, after all the centuries, he would find death.

That last thought, with a settling calm, eased his mind. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes. He could feel the air and the qualities of its movement unknown by others. This was a witchcraft trick, but mostly forgotten. He could feel the ravens by reaching a little farther. He felt the twitch and calculation of the birds. He felt their intelligence hardly regarded by contemporary man. He felt the compulsion set within them. That compulsion held a flavor and that flavor tasted exactly like the witch he had followed earlier.

Josephine. He exhaled.

The door to the brick building opened. The man who had asked of him appeared and beckoned him inside.

CHAPTER 5

“Welcome to our Cella,” Josephine intoned. “Be at ease and accepted within.”

The man nodded and gazed at the woman – the witch named Josephine. She was beautiful. Her hair was a dark cascade of black with an occasional silver strand. Her eyes were demanding, but soft. Her chin was upthrust, but showing a sensitive mouth. The fine wrinkles around her eyes showed she was no young, doe-eyed child.

His heart thumped in his chest a couple of times before settling down.

What was this reaction? What about her caused such an immediate and long-forgotten reaction? Was it her wavy hair and the long-distant memories rising from that other woman so long ago with her beautiful hair?

Tears almost threatened the man at that point, and he stumbled as he stopped in front of Josephine. The centuries came crashing down and almost overwhelmed him. His eyes clouded, remembering back. Metis, my love...

“Where are you from, traveler?” Josephine's voice interrupted his thoughts. While her tones and inflections were severe, they masked a beauty.

Before he could order his thoughts, he answered from memories long dormant. “Greece.”

Josephine's delicate eyebrows arched. “You don't sound Greek, friend.”

The man pursed his lips and looked away. “It was long ago.”

Josephine's brow furrowed. “And tell us your name?”

The man thought of his name and his other names and all those he had been called throughout history. “Call me Paul.”

“Walk with me, Paul, and I will show you your room.” Josephine turned and walked away. She did not look back. Allen followed at a distance while the

others returned to their previous activities.

The man, Paul, set a quick pace to catch up and walk beside her. “Room? I am honored. Rarely do Cellas have much to offer those seeking sanctuary.”

Josephine stopped, looked at him, then continued on. “We perform services to those who know of us and believe. Some of them are very high-placed.”

Paul gazed at her intently. “High-placed?”

“In the government,” Josephine said.

“That is... impressive,” Paul said, searching for words. He knew that many people had a benevolent opinion of their governments. People wanted to believe that government existed to protect them and look out for them. People believed that government had their best interests in mind. But he knew that governments were the primary source of death for its own citizens beyond natural causes. Evil existed there behind the facade that most people simply refused to accept.

But how could he say such a thing? How could he tell those around him that their own revered American government was behind so much evil in the news? The American citizenry were decent people and they expected decent governance, wrongly believing that they were the selectors of their representatives. In their innocence, they overlooked the corruption and the evil leaked by the news. But the news was no better; often supplying entertainment as news for consumption.

But here was Josephine telling him that they sometimes catered to government. He pursed his lips.

Josephine, mistaking his look, said, “Oh, believe me, we have had quite a few dealings with government officials, and highly placed.”

Paul shot her a quick look. “Oh! My apologies. Do not mistake my demeanor as one of disbelief.”

Josephine blinked.

Paul looked down. “I...”

“Here is your room,” Josephine said. “But, would you do me the... honor... of joining me for dinner tonight?” Her breath seemed labored.

Paul gazed into those light brown eyes and his mouth watered. He struggled to swallow, though he felt no other discomfort. “I would be delighted, Domina.”

A small but pretty smile lit her face as she bowed her head. Paul suddenly yearned to see her teeth in a genuine smile – one of thrill and enchantment. He wanted to see the crinkle of her eyes as they lit up in pleasure and mirth. He wanted to touch her skin and feel her cheeks on his fingers.

Was there a softness behind the cruelty that masked her beauty? Was it just her position? No, he had seen enough to know that Josephine was someone slightly cruel, slightly mean, and ultimately mysterious. But he knew these feelings could be dangerous if he allowed his emotions free reign.

CHAPTER 6

Paul wandered through the warehouse until dinner-time. He spent time viewing the displays of art and treasures. He marveled over a few of the displays that contained things he remembered – the helmet displayed under that light, the coin set from ancient Mesopotamia there, and the hair comb from the Median Empire sitting under ordinary glass right in front of him.

Most museums did a professional job of categorizing within their limited reference of history and knowledge, but he always found mistakes.

Josephine's voice came low, but not before he felt her presence. “You have an eye for our collections? You seem to linger over some of our more prized artifacts that no one else would give second glance.”

“Indeed. I was just marveling that nothing here is mislabeled.” Paul gestured at the comb. “Most would have labeled this Achamaenid.”

A smile lit Josephine's face. It touched her eyes and caused the most delightful lines.

Paul warmed to the subject, only if to see more of her smiles. “But the figure on this comb lacks the wheat sheaves of that time-frame. The unadorned man is indicative of Media before the merger with Persia.”

Josephine's smile showed her wonderful teeth. She clapped like a young girl, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“I am very impressed,” she said.

Paul bowed his head, but said nothing.

“My sanctum is this way, if you would join me?”

Paul's face did something odd. He wasn't sure what it was until he realized he was smiling back at this mysterious woman. What woman would know of history through which he had lived? Could she be immortal but he not know it?

But certainly he would have heard of her. Those who had the ability to curse with immortality had long disappeared from the world. He knew of twenty-two immortals still living today and those comprised less than one-fifth immortalized back then.

Most immortals had chosen death by fire or explosion to the tedium of seeing yet another year, or decade, peopled by those who believed in nothing and remembered nothing.

She must have liked his smile because her face lit up and her skin appeared to flush and glow with vitality. Her eyes danced and he wanted nothing more than to spend the next century right here, in this gallery, gazing into those eyes.

“Paul?” Josephine asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, of course. The meal. Please.” His eyes teared up, unbidden, unwanted as he remembered Metis. He hoped she didn't notice.

She led him to the back of the warehouse along more corridors lined with paintings until they reached an engraved steel door covered with vines and a protective circle. It glistened dully, as if recently rubbed with olive oil – and he was sure it had been. The door showed not a hint of rust and if well-kept would be a relic of its own in the distant future.

But so little ever survived.

Her sanctum was impressive, but not opulent. Blood-red velvet drapes covered the walls. Ornate wooden screens shielded her sleeping area from her audience entry. Her chair was not a throne but a beautifully hand-carved wooden chair plush with red velvet cushioning, center to the room. Candles and candelabras suffused the room instead of electric light. A long table with a plate at the head and a plate to its immediate right was visible beyond another partition.

She preceded him into the dining area, a twist to her step that reminded Paul of something playful. He followed her light perfume, trying to remember the scent Metis had worn. She gripped the head chair and spun lightly.

“I cannot remember the last time I shared dinner with someone in here,” she said. “If I feel like having company, I eat out in their dining hall with the others.”

She seated herself while Paul took the chair to her right.

He tried to clear his eyes by willing them dry; tried to clear his head of painful memories. But he saw Josephine's eyes narrow in question as she regarded him. He grasped at mental stability and picked up his plate, lifting it straight up as in supplication, then placed it back down – a habit from his youth. With the simple motion, he calmed himself and reached to the center platters to serve both of them a roast and a variety of vegetables.

“You seem troubled...” she began, but was interrupted by a large black cat pouncing onto the far end of the table from somewhere off the dark floor.

Paul and the cat shared a stare, each gauging as if the cat were another human. He knew the danger, then. The cat was ensorceled with a powerful divination magick. He should have expected as much after seeing the ravens outside. Of course she would have interior wards.

The cat bared its teeth just as Paul slammed the fastest defense he could manage over his mind. The cat's teeth were too long, too sharp, and meant most definitely ensorceled. These types of wards warned the practitioner of danger to their well-being – threats of potential mortality.

Paul was too late to hide his nature from the cat, but not too late to avoid Josephine's attempt to divine him. Her initial shock allowed him the time to insure he was unreadable.

Still, he felt her mental probes covering him, seeking for entry. He pursed his lips but continued to serve up their dinner. With a mental shrug, he decided to play what came next however it unfolded.

What else could he do?

With a very distinct, but soft clank, her fork was placed carefully back onto the table from where she had picked it up.

Glancing at her, he saw the iron in her eyes, the hint of cruelty and malediction.

“You are more than you appear,” she said. The ice in her voice was far different than a moment ago.

Paul gazed at her and nodded. Then he glanced down at their served meals and dipped his head once to her. Without any other invitation, he began to eat.

“Let's start with your real name,” she said, tapping her utensils with long fingernails.

He gazed at her with sad eyes, but nodded once again. “I am Pelagos. I am an immortal, known by several flattering names that have nothing to do with reality--”

“Immortal?” Josephine sat back in her chair to regard him with interest. “What other names?”

He stabbed some roast with his fork, and lofted it. But he stopped and answered. “Posedawone, Gaiaechos, Enesidaone--”

Josephine blinked. “Pose--”

“Yes,” Paul drew out the answer with evident dismissal. He flicked at the edge of his plate as if brushing away dust. “Poseidon.”

“You claim to be a god?” Josephine was breathless, disbelief and wonder playing across her face.

“Certainly not, and nor should I ever,” he said emphatically. “There are no gods as we know them.”

Josephine snorted in derision. “You come in here claiming to be Poseidon--”

Paul interrupted her abruptly. “I was known as Poseidon. The time after the flood was a period of rebuilding and desperation. When some of us struggled against all odds to rebuild society and succeeded, something of a cult following arose around us.”

Josephine sat, gaping.

“I am just a man,” Paul said.

She found her voice. “How can you sit here claiming to be just a man when men aren't immortal or gods?”

He could still feel her sorcerous fingers probing him. She knew he spoke the truth. “Because my success at sailing across the Mediterranean and establishing communications trade routes had nothing to do with controlling the sea or immortality. Those silly beliefs grew out of legend. But I am just a man.”

“But immortal,” Josephine said with accusation.

“Well, yes, but not originally. I was like any other that you see when you are out and about.”

“So then you didn't become a horse when you pursued Demeter?”

Paul snorted. “Of course not. She had ridden a horse out with a herd as a playful gesture. I got on a horse and rode out after her. We conceived in a field decked with flowers. We were human. The stories that grow up around these things bear no relation to reality.”

“Then how--”

“Did I become immortal?” As much control as Paul had, tears welled in his eyes. After all these centuries! “It was a curse.”

Josephine's eyes widened. “Oh! Medusah?”

Time stood still for Paul. Even hearing the legendary name recalled to him the dark-haired beauty of Metis. Tears rolled down unbidden and he quickly wiped them from his cheeks. “Forgive me.”

Josephine softened almost instantly, her hand reaching out to touch his. The pain and love in his features melted her heart. What would she give to have this from a man? What would she sacrifice to have a man love her even after centuries?

“Please, please tell me.”

“Medusah's real name was Metis, a Carthaginian beauty I brought back to Athens as an ambassador,” said Paul. He was staring down at his plate.

“Metis, the mother of Athena?”

Paul shook his head. "No, not the same. But a common enough name for the times."

"Did she have snakes--"

"No!" Paul burst out. "Not before or after she was cursed. Her hair was unusual for how we wore it at the time. It was beautiful, but never a snake sat in her hair. She was cursed, as was I, for what we did in that stupid temple. I was promised to another and she was considered a poison to Athen's society."

"Her beauty was a threat to the Greek women?" Josephine was enthralled.

Paul nodded. "See? Nothing unusual, nothing new under the sun. Life is the same no matter how we look at it."

"But you are immortal."

Paul waved his hand in the air. "Not because I am anything special! I was cursed. The giants and their offspring knew it to be a curse. And I am cursed. I do not count this immortality as an attribute, but as a curse."

Josephine shook her head. "Almost I would believe you, but giants?"

Paul stared through her. "They were real."

"Oh come on. We would have found fossils by now and yet nothing." Her tone was dismissive.

Paul gave a mirthless laugh. "Quite real and yes, modern man already has found, holds in possession and dismisses the bones of the giants."

"What?" Josephine shook her head to dismiss what she thought a silly notion. "Impossible."

"Not at all," Paul said. "Modern man has found hundreds of bones and skulls of supposedly impossibly tall people. They are explained away as genetic abnormalities because they do not fit modern evolutionary thought."

"Found already? Where?!" Josephine was indignant.

“Peru for one,” Paul muttered. “A very large collection of giant bones is there on display in their museums. Whole unearthed families unscientifically dismissed as freaks.”

She shook her head. She couldn't believe this, but then, couldn't she? Hadn't she been told that mankind had once been smart and somehow regressed? But then, Paul could be telling the truth. Indeed, her constant probing revealed a well-defended psyche, but no deception. He was being honest as he saw it.

And what of the cat? It had warned her as it should as if there was a danger present. The cat was looking at none other than Paul, or Pelagos, or Poseidon! It sat there, still gazing at the enigma of a man, but no longer showing its teeth.

She threw caution to the wind.

“We were once more intelligent...” She stopped.

His eyes had darkened. “Yes.”

She waited for more, but that was all he said.

“What happened?”

He chewed on a mouthful of roast and sat back. His eyes wandered to the ceiling, his mouth chewing as he recalled times at which she could only guess. When he finished swallowing, he said, “After the flood, we were no better than savages in caves. But we rebuilt--”

She rolled her eyes. “You mentioned the flood before. Do you really expect me to believe some myth-book about some massive flood?”

Paul sat back and shrugged. He wasn't going to argue what he knew with someone who didn't care to hear the truth. “Go find out yourself. Discover sea shells at the tops of mountain ranges where there should be none.”

“So we're all supposed to believe this fairy-tale book about floods--”

Paul put his hands on his thighs and scooted back his chair. He eyed the door with imminent thoughts of just walking out. He had no patience for ignorance.

Josephine's eyes drew down as she considered him. Was he hiding anything? Yes, he was. But his words all came true. Nothing in her sorcery indicated that he was lying. But that meant what he said was either true or he remembered it as true.

Deciding to try again, she pursed her lips. "I'm sorry. Please continue about what we once were."

Paul gazed at her quizzically, then said, "we had more than this at one time, if the stories are true." He indicated the room but she understood he meant the modernity of the times.

"So you didn't see--"

"But I did. Sure, I was born after the flood. But I saw the twisted remains of the skyscrapers of Dern, Nassus, and Kellonia."

Josephine gasped with incredulity. "But then, where are these ruins today?"

"Gone," Paul waved his hand. "Within two hundred years the remains were just piles of rust. Today, you would have to dig fifteen or twenty feet down just to find some iron-oxide deposits – something passed over by all but the most astute.

"It's all gone," Paul said slowly.

As much as she hated to fathom what he was saying, she knew he was telling the truth as he saw it. So, was it the truth? He had seen remains of skyscrapers...

He slowly ate his food, but she had lost any interest in hers.

"So, if you are so willing to believe the myth-book about the flood--" She began.

"It was as real to me long before the Bible was ever written as World War Two is for you." He stared at her over his plate.

Josephine blinked. "But your myth-book says nothing about advanced anything because the world was only created six thousand years ago--"

Paul waved his fork at her. "In fact, the Bible does not claim the world was

created in Genesis One. The earth was re-created in Genesis One and the book of Jeremiah details man existing before Adam.”

Josephine just shook her head. She had never heard someone claiming the Bible did not start with the creation of the earth in Genesis Chapter One.

Paul reached over and stabbed a broccoli off her plate. “Do we need to care about it all? Do we need to bring everything you ask back around to your disbelief in a book? Does this myth-book as you call it so consume you that you must frame all reference against it?”

Josephine knew she was not only being confrontational, but unfair. She had asked him to tell her of times long forgotten, yet still she refused to believe. Everything he said she challenged, as if her perspective of not being a first-hand witness meant more than his first-hand experiences.

After several calming breaths, she asked about that which he seemed vulnerable. “Tell me about Medusah.”

For a long time, Paul sat silent, chewing his food, but obviously in thought. Finally he said, “I brought her to Athens and her presence swept the town. Her beauty and poise was above any of the Athenian hierarchy.”

“Didn't the Athenians see her as yours already?” She tentatively prodded her food, then began eating.

“No, I was promised already – Demeter, as you know her. I lost track of Metis after I brought her to Athens, but only for a short time. She came to me in anguish. Never had she been hated. Ignored she could have handled, but the Athenian women hated her. She wept and I was there for her. I think it was my tenderness that sparked what would grow into such an intense love.”

Josephine's eyes furrowed.

Paul waved dismissively. “Don't believe the stories. She did not seduce me nor did I dally with her in some fit of boredom. That dumb story makes no sense. We had to place her somewhere safe, so we placed her in Athena's temple. My niece was extremely ambitious – in the vein of her father. The people of Athens wanted me to be their king, but also revered Athena. She brought farming back into focus. I had little to offer except my knowledge of the sea. My niece had a

temple erected to her to remind the people of her constant presence. In the end, she won the battle for the regency of Athens. What did I have? Trade and a couple of victorious sea battles? The outcome was never in any doubt.”

Josephine continued to eat, warming to the history.

“I developed feelings with Metis that I could not just carry on out in the open. Since she was being harbored in my niece's temple, I would visit her there. Apparently, Athena began to suspect something was going on. I was laying with Metis in her assigned chamber in the temple when Athena came upon us. Her ego was so large that she could not overlook my romance with Metis in her own temple of vanity.”

“So she cursed you both.”

Paul nodded. “That didn't salve her ego, though. After cursing us, the humiliation drove her to strike at me more forcefully. She hired a mercenary to behead Metis.”

“Perseus?” She asked.

“That part of the story you have learned is true. Perseus indeed beheaded who the Athenians called Medusah.” Paul stopped, unable to go further.

She regarded him as he sat, still in pain after thousands of years. His shoulder-length brown hair streaked with silver hung over his eyes and that long scar on his face as he looked down at his plate. He wasn't some big hulk with rippling muscles. He didn't look like any of the Greek statues she had seen. He looked like a normal man – and this was supposedly the Poseidon of legend.

While sitting there pitying him, Josephine was alarmed when he suddenly glared through his brows at her. “I had my revenge.”

His intensity shocked her. Until then, he had seemed almost pacifistic. She thought she might be able to slap him and he would just... blink. Nerves rattled, she said, “How? When?”

His eyes blazed and lines appeared on his cheeks as if he were grimacing in distaste. His muscles tensed under his shirt. His lips curled back from his teeth in a snarl.

Josephine sat shocked. Here was the man of legend. Here was Poseidon, the Greek god.

He hissed a breath. "I came back a few years later and while she slept, suffocated the wrinkled old hag!" His eyes blazed brighter. "Perseus I slew at dusk in the sight of his own home. His children were playing outside. He lay there looking toward his children as I drove the blade over and over into his gut. None of them looked and saw. I took his coinpurse and threw coins to the street-urchins later."

A fork rattled against a plate somewhere, until Josephine realized it was hers.

His fists clenched on the table. "...and none of it brought her back!" Tears flowed then down his cheeks.

Josephine could say nothing. Her charms told her that everything he was saying was the truth. At once so human and yet the psychic feel of immortality rolled off of him and assaulted her senses.

With a sudden lunge, the tear-streaked man rose from his chair. The unfortunate article of furniture clattered back against the wall. The cat rose, arched its back and let out an enormous hiss. He ignored it. "Apologies, but I should return to my chambers."

Without anything else said, he left.

With little thought about not breathing, Josephine realized she could breathe again. What passion could be compared to this? What love lasted throughout the centuries? What kind of woman did it take to elicit such devotion from a man? Was she capable of such love? Was there a man in the world for her?

She stopped breathing again when the tears began rolling down her own cheeks.

CHAPTER 7

Matt was in the library, and in torment. His gorgeous wife-witch was cramming all the instruction Sarah offered. She drooled over the Initiate's Scroll, learning that much of a real witch's ability came from within and using certain symbols drawn in the air with fingers. With these symbols she took delight in using her husband as a testing board.

How many times had he been pinched?

Apparently the most basic magic involved manipulating powers within oneself to effect a change in the powers of another. Or, something as simple as a pinch.

Instead of getting too comfortable with something he may not have later – in case they were not accepted – he sat idly scratching the belly of one of the black cats.

Plopping down beside him was a frail black-haired young woman. “He sure likes you,” she said.

Matt smiled, still scratching the cat's upturned belly. “I don't even know his name.”

“It doesn't have one, that I know of,” she said and shrugged. “But I'm Tammy.”

“Matt,” he said in return. He smiled at her and felt flustered at how close she leaned to him. He figured if either of them leaned any closer, he could look right down her blouse. But she was about as endowed as his wife, Sheila. Which meant, almost flat-chested.

“Are you Wiccan, like your wife?” She asked.

He nodded. “But don't let Sheila hear you talk about that.”

“Why not?” Her delicate brows drew down in a severity almost comical.

“She gets real touchy when anyone speaks against Wicca.”

“Well, I don't have anything against Wiccans or Wicca itself. It's just that Wicca only offers so much and there is so much beyond it.”

“Oh. I thought you were going to start telling me how bad it was to be Wiccan.” His eyes roamed over her black eyes and he found his mouth watering. He pulled back, abruptly.

Tammy laughed. It was a mirthful tinkle that was short and genuine. “There's nothing wrong with it, silly. It's a good starting point – like grade school. But sometime you want to graduate, right? Or am I right?”

He bobbed his head yes, though he felt a little dizzy by her attention. He noticed beyond her the Dominatrix standing in the doorway, fingering the air. She was looking towards them.

He was going to tell Tammy that the Domina was here, but she said, “Are you excited about the initiation tomorrow?”

“Uh, well, sure. But Sheila is really the one that will enjoy it. She got me into all this to begin with.”

Tammy's eyes drew down again. “You know we don't have any initiates who are married; does the sharing bother you?”

“Huh?” Matt was stupefied. “Sharing what?”

“Witches share and share-alike. That's how we make it here. We live here. It is a mini-commune of sorts.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Hmm, I don't think you understand, Matt.” Tammy eyed him with a cute tilt to her head.

He stopped scratching the cat. “I know what a commune is.”

“But we share everything. That means Sheila will be claimed by one and all. With consent of course, but her initiation will be a demonstration of that sharing.”

“Um,” Matt didn't know what to say. Did Sheila drag him into all this for some witchy orgy?

“Of course, that includes you,” she said.

“Huh?” Matt was confused.

“You are also available to be claimed, with consent.” Tammy peered at him.

Matt felt something stir in him that such a pretty woman was informing him inches from his face that he would be up for claiming and witchy orgies and all that radical cool stuff.

“There's something about you, something special; something that has been making the rumor-rounds--”

“Yeah, I've kind of had the way with chicks for--”

“No!” Tammy interrupted. “That's not what I meant. You have some ability beyond what even your wife has.” Tammy flipped her head towards Sheila.

“No way, Sheila is all the witch and shit.”

Tammy shook her head. “This goes beyond witchcraft.”

Matt went back to scratching the cat's belly. It purred contentedly.

“I'm not sure what it is, but it is paranormal.”

“Well, witchcraft isn't?” Matt shrugged.

“Beyond that, bonehead.” She smiled.

Matt turned back to her and they locked eyes. Their gazes stayed locked longer than decent. He could feel his heart thump in his chest and could hear snippets of voices as happened when he was absorbed into something or someone.

Normal stuff, he thought. Tammy smiled at him without malice or lust – just interest. She leaned close enough that only a foot separated them from kissing. Now why am I thinking about that?

Someone pinched his arm. Matt exhaled abruptly. He turned and midturn felt another pinch. Then another. "Ow!"

A clapping sound interrupted his irritation.

Walking with a slow slink into the room was Josephine. She looked around and a look of disappointment fleeted across her features. But then she returned her gaze to Sheila. "Well done, Sheila. I can see the ability within you."

"This--" she swept her hand over the Initiate's Scroll. "Is amazing. I had assumed that much of spell-casting was symbolic and verbal. But this is--"

"Yes, witchcraft is not just bio-feedback, as it were."

"Right! You knew what I was trying to say!" Sheila was excited.

"Not really, child. Just that I have heard the exact thing so many times before. Spellcraft that has power beyond that of simple ritual and incantation is constructed with power from within and unlocked by the patterns we make in casting." Josephine approached Sheila.

Matt saw his wife glance to the other shelves with a hunger.

The Dominatrix smiled. "All in good time. After your initiation, we can move you along and instruct you yet further."

"I've already learned more than I ever did in my coven," Sheila mused.

Josephine took on a more solemn tone. "With your initiation, you will be committing yourself to the Cella and the Cella to you. You will be one with the Cella."

"I can't wait." Sheila smiled hungrily.

Matt nodded. This was the next step he would have expected. Sheila seemed ever concerned with being the best and growing more powerful. This step was hers and he would not stop it. He wouldn't think of stopping it.

"You understand that joining the Cella means sharing everything?" Josephine asked. "Not only do we expect contribution from your incomes but that which

you hold sacred.”

Sheila had turned back to the scroll, gazing at the complex but simply illustrated steps contained therein. “I want it.”

The Dominatrix turned away. “Tomorrow we shall share a ritual wine-drinking ceremony. A welcome of sorts. Then you shall be ready for your initiation.”

Sheila looked back. “I will be ready.”

She did not know what the initiation entailed.

CHAPTER 8

Josephine gazed at Matt with a mixture of boredom and malice.

The husband of yet another, ignorant, greedy student. None of them ever attained what she had become. None grasped the full implications of what she had written in the teaching scrolls. None understood the history behind the illustrations she had spent years putting to parchment.

But they would not want to know.

She did not feel pain for them. She did not weep for them. She did not pity them. No, instead she despised them. Though hers, she detested leading them and guiding them on the simplistic paths from which they could not lift themselves.

Josephine had lifted herself. She had risen beyond simple witchcraft. She had risen beyond the esoteric spellcasting. She had risen well into a power long forbidden. She had risen so far and rediscovered so much that she had been able to stave off the effects of age. Her ability to hide her powers had been perfected over decades of practical usage.

She looked at Matt. In another day and age, she might have been attracted to his brainless good looks. He was nothing more than meat. Josephine even doubted he would be worth more than a sacrifice, should she decide to squander his talent. However, his looks did not tell the whole story. He had an ability that lay there dormant. An ability to speak with the spirits easier than anyone she had ever known. In fact, Josephine hungered to sit him at a table and conduct a séance just to see how well he could channel the spirits around them.

Matt looked away from Tammy then, and to her. So he liked Tammy, did he? The girl obviously liked him. Josephine almost thought about handing Matt's initiation over to Tammy. What would Sheila's reaction be? What would the proud Wiccan do when she saw her husband being taken sexually by this black-haired, young witch?

The contention aroused Josephine. Not for any possible outbursts and eruptive emotions, but rather the total destruction of the emotional bonds of her initiates.

Was this the product of her boredom? Too long on this world? Too experienced to feel anything but ennui? And how did the mighty Poseidon himself fit into all this? Where was he, come to think of it? Why had he not shown himself? The next day would be a busy one, preparing for the initiation, the wine ceremony and then the initiation ritual itself. Josephine might not see him until Sunday.

She realized she had stopped, standing still in her reveries in front of Matt. He was looking up at her. With a wicked smile, she leaned down close to his face.

“I could nominate any one of my females to perform the initiation ritual on you.” She touched his chin and lifted it as she moved closer to breathe on him. But I think I will initiate you myself.”

“Of course, wh-whatever you say.” He gulped.

Josephine smiled. She would take him right in front of Sheila. But by then, Sheila would have nothing to say; Josephine intended for Sheila to be initiated first. Their contention and their blood would feed her power.

Matt shrank from her eyes, or whatever he saw in them.

Josephine took no pleasure in his fear. She only accepted it as proper. Was she being cruel beyond the typical initiation? Did it have to do with Paul? Where was he? Why hadn't he emerged from his chambers? She could feel his presence in the background if she really tried, so she knew he hadn't left.

He was here. He was still available to explore. She could still... what? What could she still do?

She straightened from Matt, a far-off look on her face. Across the dust of time and the decay of all that was, she stood here, her emotions burning bright for a man that she had only met yesterday. Was he really something different? Had he not said himself he was just a man and not a god? Had he not said his immortality was just a curse?

But if his immortality was a curse, then did he desire that he should have died long ago in the past? Was he so weak that he would have been satisfied to die like some old, drooling fool in a bed with one or two people to witness his passing?

With a sudden anger, she sneered. Was he that pathetic?

She realized when Matt pulled suddenly back that she had been looking just over his head. He must have thought she was looking at him. Good. Let the simple man fear me. It is as it should be.

With a slow move, she ran her finger along Matt's cheek. She whispered to him in breathless tones. "Are you going to be able to stand there watching your wife be taken by another man?"

Matt stammered. "I... uh... whuh?"

"The initiation is a ritual of sharing," she said as she moved her mouth close to his. When her breath caressed his mouth, she continued. "I will be there with you, guiding you, and sharing myself with you as your final initiation."

Matt's eyes started to cross. He looked delirious.

Josephine reached down and placed her hand on Matt's bulge. She massaged, gently. Matt's eyes closed in response and his mouth opened to pant. She flicked out her tongue and teased his parted lips.

Matt straightened up abruptly as Josephine pulled back with a wicked smile on her face. Using one hand, she stitched a quick symbol on his forehead, almost as if she were brushing back one of his locks.

Too easy, she thought. No willpower in the man of today.

At the same time, all too easily diverted, she wondered about Paul.

CHAPTER 9

Josephine listened to the chanting in the ritual chamber. The words and cadence always soothed her. The candles and torches cast natural, feverish light on the scarlet-robed figures in the room. The brick walls reflected the chants and light with a perfection that gave Josephine pleasure.

Ringed the central platform were all twenty-two of her followers. Her two initiates stood slightly inside the ring facing the dais in the center.

Earlier they had consumed the ritual wine and ate a meal of meat strips and hard cheese. The wine for the two initiates was drugged, of course. Something to dull their senses and reactions. But something that helped to reinforce in their subconscious the connection about to be made. The belladonna mixture simply helped overcome those troublesome inhibitions.

The chanting rose and changed cadence as Josephine walked to the dais.

Slowly, stretching her arms wide, she said, "In the darkness before the sunrise, we make our compact--to include those who seek acceptance."

The chanting rose slightly, changing pitch. Twenty-two voices worked in unison. Josephine closed her eyes and lingered in the chant. The ritual would not proceed until she gave her nod. Instead, she drifted on the chants - as she had taught them - to the stirrings of power long-forgotten. How easy it would be to instruct them just a little further. This ritual could then be turned to things greater than influencing politicians or companies trying to issue bribes. What did it matter if one corrupt politician received more dollars than the other corrupt politician? She had seen them all. All of them were corrupt. But to aspire against a system that paid no heed to the occult guaranteed a fight against the will of an unspiritual man against the power of a spiritual force.

She was not yet willing to make such a move. There were those in the world, particularly those in the New World Order faction of greedy globalists, that understood her capacity for power. To reveal herself would be to commit suicide. Nameless agents from organizations never mentioned in the nightly news would

see to her end before she ever got started.

There was a danger there in the governments of the world hidden from the view of those who watched television. She was wary of that mundane power.

Only a fool pretended otherwise.

With a nod, Ollie led a docile Sheila to the dais. The chanting continued, unabated. Ollie laid Sheila back onto the dais so that she was lying face-up. Her robe barely covered her nakedness.

Josephine moved next to a waiting Matt as Ollie undid the ties on Sheila's robe. With a tug and a chant, Sheila's robe fell open from her naked body. Then Josephine asked loudly in the midst of the voices, "Who submits to the Cella for admittance?"

Sheila's head rolled to the side to look at the Dominatrix of the Cella.

"Who submits to the Cella for admittance?" Josephine repeated without agitation.

Sheila's mouth opened but nothing came out.

"Who submits to the Cella for admittance?" Josephine repeated again.

Sheila's mouth opened and she croaked with great effort. "I submit. I am Sheila."

Josephine nodded and stepped back to where Matt stood. The chanting rose yet again in pitch as Ollie reached his hand towards Sheila's exposed sex. Sheila looked away from Matt and Josephine as Ollie's fingers found her clitoris. He slowly rubbed, circling, as the reclined woman began gasping in response and drugged shock.

Matt stiffened beside Josephine, but only barely. The wine and drug were doing their jobs well. The dominatrix of the Cella knew these were crucial moments in the initiation. But the process was easy. All too easy.

Ollie's fingers dipped into Sheila's vagina.

Josephine moved up to Matt and rubbed her body against his. Only the robes

separated their nakedness.

Sheila rolled her head to one side, slowly, then the other. Perhaps looking, but Josephine knew she was responding to Ollie's touch. A gasp escaped Sheila's open mouth, but was lost amidst the chanting. Without losing his prodding of her vagina, Ollie released his robes with his other hand. His manhood grew as he fingered Sheila's moist hole. He gripped his shaft as he continued to probe Sheila's secret. Slowly, he began to stroke.

Matt breathed a little quicker next to Josephine as he swayed to the chanting. She reached over and stroked his semi-hard member through his robes.

A mournful moan escaped Sheila's mouth and her legs parted. Ollie moved closer as he continued stroking his shaft. With a deft hand, he placed his erection against Sheila's clitoris. He rubbed the hard head over her aroused nub. Her body jerked as if from electric jolts.

Josephine watched Matt gazing at his open-legged wife as the blond-haired Ollie toyed his penis against her vagina. His breath was labored and his penis hardened in her grip. She tugged the knot on his robes and opened them so that she could touch his manhood directly. She gripped him and stroked while he watched Ollie tease his wife's opening with his erection.

Josephine enjoyed these moments when she could grip a man's shaft in her hand and feel its smoothness harden with lust. She knew that within moments, Matt's penis would be harder than he had ever known. With just a little manipulation, he would be there. She gripped his naked penis and stroked.

Ollie rubbed his penis over Sheila's clitoris several times, then pressed his erection into her waiting opening. Sheila moaned as Ollie's erection slid in and disappeared into her vagina. He grabbed her hips and pulled himself all the way in. Sheila's eyes rolled in her head, but she did not otherwise react to the invasion of her most sensitive and sexual parts.

Matt's penis pulsed twice with his heartbeat and was fully extended, beating and pulsing with lust. Josephine stroked it from tip to base with a slow stroke.

Ollie pulled out slow and thrust back in with force and speed, then repeated it. Hard in, slow out. Sheila twitched under him, first a leg, then an arm. Her body was reacting to the sex despite being drugged.

Josephine watched the ritual taking and stroked Matt faster. He was fully erect now.

Ollie rammed his male member into Sheila. She began to respond. First an arm came up to touch Ollie's side. Then her legs widened. Both arms came up to grip his shoulders and then her legs lifted to encircle Ollie's hips as he drove his erection into her. Moans began to emit from her mouth punctuated by gasps.

Josephine stroked Matt's pulsing erection at the same pace as he continued watching his wife be pistoned by Ollie's penis. Josephine smiled at Matt while she teased his length. But the smile was not genuine. The smile was not a happy or mirthful smile. The smile was thin and calculating. With her other hand she began stitching a compulsion that played upon deeply submerged sensations. She amplified his pleasure at the sight before him while embedding the suggestions.

He would remember that he enjoyed the sharing. That he found the initiation to be pleasurable and exciting. He would remember that his Domina's manipulation was the point where he felt freed from bonds that he considered oppressive. He would feel free.

She could feel his shaft grow even thicker and longer as he smiled at his wife. Good, another zombie to provide energy.

Ollie lay fully on Sheila now, kissing her ravenously while they made love. His robe lay puddled on the floor and the Cella watched with lust as his butt pumped into her. Sheila was kissing him back, her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs bent up and clutching his waist. She was moaning and grunting, enjoying the act. Her hips bucked up against his with each thrust.

The chanting rose once more and Ollie leaned up, using his hands on her shoulders to pull himself all the way in. He thrust as hard as he could five forceful times as Sheila cried out in pleasure. His butt clenched on the fifth thrust and he held it inside of her as his body jerked with release. His mouth was open, panting, as he shot his seed deep into her womb. Sheila continued moving her hips, not having had release.

Matt moaned with satisfaction. Josephine slowed her stroking, but Matt began humping her fist in time with his wife's hips. His eyes were half-lidded and his manhood swollen and purple.

Ollie leaned all the way up, still inside her, so that he was once again standing. Using one thumb, he circled Sheila's engorged clitoris. With a loud cry of relief, Sheila began bucking and gasping with her own orgasm. Ollie kept his shaft in her while she finished.

The chanting ended. Several of the men were openly stroking their erections. A few of the women had their hands inside their robes, enjoying the display before them.

This was not normal initiation procedures, but these witches did not know that. Josephine had taken them all as inexperienced Wiccans or other ad hoc witchcraft hobbyists who had any kind of talent worth her time. Their energy proved useful, especially their sexual energy. What they didn't know was that not only did she encourage what they thought was hedonistic activities but that Josephine was leeching their energy from them. It was an evil long-unused in the world, but one she had rediscovered through a particularly fortuitous manuscript find.

That she had found the manuscript was due to her congress with certain spirits. Her ability to perform as she did, and to leech as she did, must never be known to her Cella. That manuscript was carefully hidden away in a room not a single of her witches knew existed. The velvet wall hangings in her room hid the door that led down to her cellar sanctuary – her real sanctum, not the one on display.

Ollie withdrew from Sheila, evidence of his orgasm dripping from both of their sexes. He helped her up off the dais. They moved to stand by Josephine, though Sheila was mostly supported by Ollie.

“The Cella welcomes you, Sheila,” Josephine intoned loud. “You are now part of the whole.”

The Domina led Matt to the dais next. She laid him down, face up. She gripped his manhood in one hand and stroked slowly. The chanting began anew. With her other hand she beckoned to Tammy. The young witch approached and immediately bent her head down to take Matt's penis into her mouth. Josephine continued to stroke the base.

Matt moaned and his hips thrust in time with the attention he was getting.

With a few quick hand stitches, Josephine placed yet another suggestion into

Matt and then one into Tammy. Neither would be able to resist each other after this, and their oral sex locked it all into place. She waved Tammy away and then shed her robe. Normally she directed one of the other female witches to perform the sexual initiation. But being that Matt was married, she wanted to do it herself. Easier to perform her charms while directly in the act.

She gripped his erection again and looked back to Sheila. She stroked him in time with the chanting. Sheila was still groggy but clinging to Ollie and watching.

“Who submits to the Cella for admittance?” Josephine intoned loudly.

Matt raised his head, slightly less groggy. “I am Matt and I submit.”

The chanting rose and Josephine sneered at Sheila. With a quick climb onto the dais and over Matt's hips, she gripped his shaft and positioned herself for penetration. She found her hole and sat herself all the way down on him. His erection was embedded in her and she closed her eyes at the feeling of his fullness filling her. She ground her hips around enjoying the feel of this man's shaft massaging the inside of her sex. With her hand, she toyed with her own clitoris while she rode him.

She could feel his energy. She could feel a slight drain in his energy. She could feel the same two effects in the broader room. Her charms were working.

Wanting to make this last, she rode him slowly, milking his shaft all the way up and all the way down. Her head hung back, her mouth open as she enjoyed the sensations. She had gone without for too long. Why did it seem that whenever she had gone a long while without sex that she always rediscovered that she missed it? Part of her long life? Her boredom?

Her mind wandered to Paul. She wondered what he thought of her. The thoughts caused her vagina to flush with additional moisture. The wet sounds of their coupling competed with the chanting.

What was he doing right now? What was he thinking? How long would he stay? Would he notice her if she wasn't the Dominatrix of the Cella? Would he enjoy being under her right now?

The thought was not just dangerous, but too much for Josephine. The tingly

wave that swept her up did not bother to recede at all. Powerless to stop the physical sensation of orgasm, she let it consume her as she thrust her sex down with force against Matt's shaft. He gasped and seconds before her vagina convulsed with her orgasm, she felt the hot flooding of his sperm within her. Her completion came right after his and she kept herself from falling down onto him by bracing her hands on his shoulders. Her hair hung down over her eyes as her body quivered with aftershocks. Her hips rotated languidly as she enjoyed the tingly after-effects.

She pulled off slowly. Matt's penis plopped out with a wet sound. Standing, she could feel his orgasm running down her legs. "The Cella welcomes you, Matt. You are now part of the whole."

She turned to Sheila so the woman could see her husband's seed dripping out of her. She could sense the conflicting emotions in Sheila. The hope, the lust, the jealousy, the desire, and the drive to pursue her development as a witch.

Good, Josephine thought. All is good.

CHAPTER 10

Sheila had been instructed informally about the Cella's rules of membership in the day since the initiation. Share and share alike was just one of the primary rules of inclusion. She was expected to share portions of her incomes, from whatever source. Her job as a receptionist would not be a huge contribution, but at least she would return to work there tomorrow as a witch. A real one.

She was also expected to help perform the ritual services bought and paid for through the Cella. The more on hand at the time, the better the success. She was also expected to move into the building. The entire upper floor looked like an old hotel. Each room was small, enough room for a bed, desk, dresser, and maybe some shelves. Each room had a bathroom. She found the idea appealing. Not only was the room free, but she could be on hand at all times when off of work for any rituals that were bought.

She had seen some of the other rooms. Ollie's room was crammed but neat. Almost every inch of his wallspace was used with shelves and pictures. He had a small single bed in there to free up space. Looking into his room almost felt like looking into his soul. Sheila felt embarrassed afterward, though Ollie had been ready to invite her in.

He had been the one instructing her about what was expected. Another embarrassment had been when he said that while sex was encouraged at all times, that sex was only engaged in either the private rooms or the common lounge downstairs. She hadn't been in the lounge nor was allowed before the initiation. When he showed her the enormous lounge, her face flushed red. There were a few couches and very cushy-looking chairs. A pool table sat under extinguished lights with no players. A chess table, also. An old, but functioning pinball machine was over against the other wall. Two very large wall-mounted televisions graced opposite walls, volume low enough not to disturb those who didn't want to watch. A stereo system stood next to a small dance-floor. Four computers formed a little cube immediately to the left of the door.

But these things didn't cause her embarrassment. No, it was the two couples engaged in sex on the couches that did while one male witch masturbated to the

two couples. There was Sarah, usually in the library, laying back on the couch enjoying some slow but nice-looking sex with Allen. And on the other couch sat her husband receiving a blowjob from the young witch Tammy. Sitting and stroking his shaft while watching both of the couples was Dean, a male witch who smiled a lot but said little.

She flushed even deeper when both Matt and Tammy looked over at the door when she stepped in. Tammy did not stop sucking and Matt merely waved with a happy smile on his face. The other couple only glanced. Sheila wasn't sure what the protocol was for married people who see each other with others. Was she supposed to join in? Cheer? Jeer? Be silent? Ignore it all?

She sheepishly asked Ollie that after they left the lounge. "I mean, what am I supposed to do?"

Ollie shrugged. "We could have commandeered one of the other couches."

Her face could not have possibly gotten any redder, but it did. She could feel her face and neck radiating a lot of heat.

"Believe me, within a week you won't even remember being embarrassed. Try not to worry."

"Well, okay." Sheila wasn't sure about that, but Ollie seemed confident.

She was also told outsider friends or family were not to be invited in. She was to meet them elsewhere and explain this was a commune-type arrangement where guests were not allowed.

She was told she could make requests, but not complain about the food. If she felt strongly enough about a meal, she needed to schedule her own meals or a time when she could take over as meal cook for a particular meal. Food was allowed in the rooms and many witches here maintained a tiny office-type fridge in their rooms. But the food was generally good, healthy and using almost all organic-type foods.

Ollie found her surprise at organic usage to be amusing. "What, did you think we were stupid?"

After the tour and concentrated rules lesson, she asked, "Should I be worried

about Matt and Tammy? Maybe I should go back there?”

Ollie smiled. He gently gripped her and pushed her back up against the wall. “Maybe you should be more concerned with me.”

His lips descended on hers and her mouth opened with his. Her heart beat faster and her body quivered. Their tongues explored each other and wrestled gently with their first non-initiation kiss. She trembled in his heat and clutched him as their kiss grew more fervent. His hands ran over her back and neck while hers reached up into his blond curls. His body pressed against hers and she felt herself melt into him. A fire ignited in her vagina and she pressed it harder into his crotch.

He broke the kiss and she felt suddenly cheated, wanting more but deflating from the passion. She felt dizzy.

Paul wandered the halls until he found the lounge. He was only restricted from the ritual room, as was protocol in all Cellas. As a guest in sanctuary, he was considered a member but not a participating member.

Entering the lounge, he observed the new young man-witch coupling with the black-haired witch on the couch. He had long ago ceased to be titillated by sexual displays, so he ignored them.

He wandered about the room until he saw the chess table. With a smile, he switched on the adjacent lampstand and looked over the board. Good mahogany and oak. Triple-weighted pieces. He itched to play using the set – to find an opponent amongst the witches here.

One of the females of the Cella came and stood behind him, massaging his shoulders. He did not detect a sexual advance, so remained silent. Otherwise he would have brushed her off.

“Ohhh,” she said. “You are a chess player?”

He let her rub some of the tension out of his shoulders while responding with only a nod. Finally he said, “I have played for a long time. I wish I could say I was good, but...”

“Wonderful! Sam has been looking for a worthy opponent. Can I go get him for you?” The woman practically bounced on her feet.

“I would enjoy a game; I am presently unengaged.” He sat back, almost sorry to feel her hands leave his shoulders. How would Josephine's have felt? Despite himself, he felt an odd sensation between his legs at the thought of her. Only as the girl left the room did he remember that the sensation was his penis filling with blood. The semi-erection felt good.

He stared at the black queen and wondered about Josephine. What was she doing? Where was she? Why was she avoiding him? He hadn't seen her since that dinner two nights ago. Did she have spies out to tell her when he was near so she could hide?

The idea seemed ridiculous, but he felt as if he was being purposely ignored. Ah, well, he thought. She probably thinks me a charlatan.

A sense of despair fled through his senses. He was here on a mission, following a scent he detested, one he hated. His luck was such that not only did he detect the scent of evil here that he had sworn to vanquish, but also a woman that could incite his passion. After Metis, a century had passed before he loved again. There had been several women he ended up loving – none as much as Metis and the time between these romances longer and longer. If he had to hazard a memory, his last love was three hundred and ten years ago. Or thereabouts.

Would there be love after this? And why did he consider that this was the start of a new timer of sorts? He hardly knew Josephine. How could he love her? Did he love her? Was that the cause of his upset stomach every day? Was it the cause of his trembling when he thought of her?

Was the mighty Poseidon besotted with some witch-wench?

He laughed out loud in the lounge, his head back with the silliness of it all. But the laughter was short, and self-recriminating. Bitter, even.

Sam was coming in, a laptop tucked under his arm and a cord trailing behind him. For a moment, Paul did not know why the security witch would be coming for him. What was he going to show him? But then he remembered the chess game in front of him.

Sam smiled and began setting up his laptop on a short table against the wall. He stretched out the cord and plugged into an ethernet hookup. With several taps, the camera views of the buildings security views were displayed. He had tapped into the security system and was viewing it remotely from here.

Poseidon shook his head. Such convenience and these men of this time take it all for granted. "Watchman."

Sam nodded back at Paul's honorific and then seated himself. "So you are a chess-player?"

"Oh, well," Paul shrugged. "I have played a little." He was leaning lazily, arm hanging over the back of his chair.

"I must warn you that I took several championships over the years." Sam winked.

Paul didn't answer, he merely waved his hand to begin.

Sam nodded and spun the board so he played the white side and moved first.

For several moves, Paul remained relaxed. He watched the typical opening moves of someone who was familiar with the game. After Sam's seventh move, Paul's brow furrowed and he sat up abruptly. This man knows what he is doing. Time to pay attention.

Paul leaned over the board and his eyes began darting about following the moves and counter-moves in his mind.

Sam raised an eyebrow at him but also a smile. He was unbeaten at chess in all the years he had been in the Cella. He knew he was good. His six trophies attested to his sharp mind. Though he felt confident, the time between each move began to lengthen. At last, a worthy challenge. I shall enjoy beating him.

Paul felt the ability and confidence of his opponent. The watchman had a skillful grasp of chess that few had. Against any normal human, Sam would win. No arguments. Even with Paul's centuries of experience, Sam posed a challenge.

Neither noticed when the sex ceased in the room and people started to gather.

Forty-five minutes into the game, Sam knew he had won. His set-up was flawless. He stretched back, relieving the tension of leaning over for so long. He noticed then that almost the entire Cella was gathered around. He chuckled inwardly. Word must have made the rounds that chess-master Sam was in an epic battle.

Paul had certainly put up a very worthy fight. The best chess is a dance of failed set-ups where neither side gains a clear advantage of dominance on the board. Such was this game. But for a single move on Paul's part, a silly pawn advance, and the game might still be in the balance.

The onlookers were interested, but did not grasp the board. Non-chess players just could not see it. It wasn't their fault; it just wasn't their game.

Sam's posture and sudden confidence told them the outcome. They began to relax and commiserate that Sam had almost met his challenge. As worthy as this sanctuary visitor might be, Sam had beaten him, too. But it was definitely a good game, whatever that meant. Sam wondered if any of them would remember him beating Paul after tonight.

Paul reached out and moved a piece that left his bishop in jeopardy.

Sam shook his head. But still, he took the time to scan the board. Then, he moved his queen to capture the bishop. He smiled at the onlookers and felt his head wag a little in pride. They knew he was good and it served to complement his ego. Few people appreciated his security efforts as they deserved, except for the Domina, of course, but they definitely knew who the chess-master was around here.

Paul's eyes darted across the board, but Sam's brows furrowed when he saw his eyes. His face had the set of someone who already knew what he was looking at. He was only replaying an already planned move out in his mind. With a sudden concern, Sam leaned back over the board and began studying his flawless set-up.

Within three moves, Sam began to see danger and that troubled him. If he had seen danger a move later, he might have considered the man named Paul lucky. Two moves meant that Paul was not just two moves ahead of him, but a serious threat. But three moves? Sam sat stunned as his own eyes darted across the

board. Within eight moves, Paul would have him in a position from which he could not escape without losing his queen. His king would be in peril. Sam began extrapolating the king moves afterwards and saw the checkmate.

For several minutes his eyes followed moves in his mind over the board. Paul watched him and not the board. Not a good sign. Sam tried several different move options in his mind, but there were only so many he could make if he wanted to keep his queen safe.

Sam blinked.

There was no way to save his queen. But the alternatives ended faster. Ten moves ahead, Paul would have him in checkmate, as far as he could tell.

Sam's mouth fell open while Paul gazed at him and smiled.

“You are a very worthy opponent,” Paul said.

Sam scanned the board over and over looking for a way out. But there appeared to be none. All he could hope for now was a mistake on Paul's part. “Ohhh... you have irritated me.”

“Well, I wish not to irritate you, but a win is a win. You remind me of the Sassanid prince--”

“Paul!” Josephine's voice rang out over the onlookers.

With a blink, Paul realized he had been about to admit he had played against the Sassanid Prince in a game of chess – almost three thousand years before. Perhaps this is something that Josephine wanted to keep private. Really, though, he didn't care if everyone knew he was the Poseidon of legend. He just didn't want people to think he had legendary powers, as well.

Sam lifted a hand to the piece he had to move – or face checkmate even sooner. Paul had known Sam would protect his king area as such – Paul himself would have been forced into the same move.

With Sam's piece moved, he made an innocuous move with his knight. Paul

knew that the only outcome at this point was a win for him. Still, he bent over the board and muttered through each move.

Three moves before checkmate, Sam tipped his king to concede the game. He stood abruptly and offered his hand. Gasps from the crowd punctuated his declaration. "Great game. One of the best I have ever had. I hope to play you again... soon?"

Paul took his hand firmly and shook it. "Your skill is remarkable. I would enjoy playing against you again."

Sam's face broke into a relieved grin and he pumped Paul's hand vigorously in the shake.

Paul gladly shook his hand, in the modern tradition, as he recognized a true master at chess. He did not look upon Sam any less for beating him in the first game, and Paul could not claim with any certainty that he could beat Sam again.

Josephine and Sam. Amazing to find such specimens of humanity in these times. But did it matter? Paul frowned as he turned away from Sam. Either one would have been in the pantheon that included him as an object of worship.

Sam gripped his hand, not extra hard, but in acknowledgment of the compliment. "Great! I wouldn't mind a rematch tomorrow! And every day that you are here."

Paul closed his eyes, dipped his head, and held it there for a moment in the bronze-age Persian fashion. The gesture was lost on Sam, but Paul felt satisfaction giving the honor. All is so soon forgotten, yet man thinks he is constantly discovering new things. What about all that was lost?

Josephine came to stand beside him and hook her arm through his. "Join me for a drink?"

"Of course, my lady." Paul bowed his head.

"Domina," an older witch asked. It was Celia, a mid-thirties witch nearing the end of her usefulness.

Josephine rolled her eyes. "Yes, Celia."

She waited for the silliness that Celia thought worth her attention.

“A ritual is requested,” she said no more.

He could see the look of disappointment in her eyes at the interruption, but by the set of her jaw and bearing knew she would set him aside for now to deal with the request.

Josephine sighed, but turned to him. “Please excuse me. Can I persuade you to join me for that drink later this evening?”

Paul bowed his head without a word. While disappointed on the one hand, this provided him an excellent opportunity to gauge the powers used – even though he was not welcome to witness or participate in the ritual. He would just have to wait until later for his chance to be alone with her once again.

CHAPTER 11

The Cella was called not an hour after Celia approached Josephine with the request for a ritual. Apparently, a high-profile senator needed an opponent rendered unable to present himself or any of his materials to the Senate Subcommittee that evening. By rumor overheard by Paul, these rituals commanded the best of prices. In this case, a solid fifty-thousand dollar fee payable upon successful completion.

He was impressed that Josephine had established such a reputation that was called upon by those in power. But Paul knew that government was never innocent or pure after any length of time in power. Unbeknownst to the people, many of the so-called democratic governments and rulers were deep into the occult – often giving their souls over to the advancement of Lucifer. Tell that to any of these people on the streets of this nation and I would be hauled away...

People always wanted to believe that life was normal and their own government not out to kill them. Even in this day of television, people refused to see the evil all about them. Leaks of it reached through the news, but they ignored them.

“Yes, the military experimented on our own soldiers...”

“Yes, the Army conducted mind control experiments...”

“Yes the government has caused tragedy in the past to advance a political agenda...”

“Yes, the government is spraying chemicals from planes...”

“Yes, the government has built camps for its own citizens...”

“Yes, the government is preparing for civil war...”

Paul shook his head. The American citizen did not seem to care. Rather, the people dismissed those who believed the government when the government admitted to such evils. But not just Americans. It was the same all over the western world. Mankind had become too complacent and indifferent to

government.

Suddenly, Paul felt his disgust resurface. Mankind was devolving, not evolving. Mankind was becoming dumber, despite the technology with which he prided himself. Titillated by football and theater movies, mankind was preparing itself for a massacre of biblical proportions.

But did he care? Did it really bother him? Or did it just bother his sensibilities as a rational, thinking human being? The complacency could be led back to a loss of self-responsibility. Mankind had happily handed over responsibility to government and lawyers – even the police. Without having to answer for their own actions, they sailed through life immune to the horror to which such a path led. Violence, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, school shootings, crime... All were a scourge on society. But when you can ignore the scourge by having the Big Burger Meal and watch television every night, who cared? All that was safely outside the room lit from the flashing glow of the television.

Few people in the Cella bothered with the televisions mounted on the wall. Was there hope? Did mankind have a chance to avoid the fast-approaching and self-inflicted wounds of complacency?

Paul sat at one of the couches in the now-empty lounge. The ritual was preparing. His thoughts on the current state of mankind would have to wait. Or should they just be ignored? If parents could not be bothered to care for their children's future, why should he?

And did he really care? At all? After all these centuries? Would he even bother thinking about such things in another hundred years?

Josephine...

He shook his head. Whether or not the beautiful woman held a place in his future, he had an oath to fulfill. But was the oath binding? He had asked himself this many times. Does an oath to a dead person still bind? His integrity demanded yes. His weariness demanded no.

Paul fought to calm himself. This would be crucial, unless he wanted to wait around longer to try again. Closing his eyes, he focused inward. He listened to his breathing slow. He felt his heartbeat slow. He felt the confines of his body, sitting, silent. Reaching to where he knew his power lay, he tapped in slowly.

Always best to go slow. Too fast and either the ability to tap could be broken or the body could react with a misuse of power.

He had known true magicians in the past who could grasp power reliably and perform amazing things. But even back then, man was growing complacent and lazy. The spiritual path to instant power beckoned brighter than the hard, dim path of learning to harness one's own innate power.

His oath was to destroy power using spirits to alter mankind's will. The mixture of the two had created evils that mankind tried to forget and succeeded in forgetting. Even now, history was replete with supposed evils, but all history he had read ignored the real evils. As if evil wrote history and turned everything upside down. Black was white. White was black. Evil was good and good was evil. It was everywhere.

With a loud breath, Paul let go of the tap.

Should I bother? All around me evil exists. Evil is there on the television news, lying. Evil is there in the perfect-teeth visages of the world leaders. Evil is there in those who controlled the banks and wealth of the world. Evil is winning.

What was the point? Why not just let evil win and be done with all this? Would Josephine even care? But he was Pelagos, the mighty Poseidon of legend. Able to do all sorts of implausible things. How he hated his curse. Better if he had died a normal death – strangled or stabbed or gutted like any normal man.

He sighed and tapped back into his power. In his mind, he stretched and flexed, the power running over him like a warm gush of water.

None of it mattered.

Angrily, he tamped down on the insidious thought. Breathing deeply to calm himself, he felt the power on him and then reached out. He imagined flowing along the building towards the forbidden room he was not to enter. He had to be careful here. The Dominatrix was competent and had wards. He would need to find a way through them without alerting her.

Nearing the room, he immediately sensed the wards. She was careful. He sensed the two cats prowling around, but he avoided their limited ability to sound any kind of warning. With a daring brazenness, he brushed along the wards, but he

could find no entry.

Paul relaxed slightly, his physical head cocking to the side in thought. He pushed his thoughts to the floor above and maneuvered past the walls of the ritual chamber. Here he pointed himself down and began feeling along the floor of the room and the ceiling of the ritual chamber.

Ah! There it was. Her wards were based in the walls. The ceiling and floor were generically warded and thus weaker. Slowly moving his consciousness into the chamber through the wards, he felt the tingle of sorcery not his own. He knew he was passing through without alerting the ward.

He heard now the chanting, vaguely familiar. Then, he was through. Distorted, but otherwise clearly, he could see the room – almost as if he were looking through a fish-eye lens. Immediately the stink of what he feared assaulted him. The reek of power forbidden raked every one of his senses.

With a sudden sob, his physical body let go. In an instant, he was back on the couch, tears pooling in his eyes.

He knew what he must do,

“Join me for the drink, now?” Her smile lit the room as Paul stood to greet her return to the lounge.

Paul nodded his head, composed. “How did the ritual go?”

“A success. We have earned our fee.” Her smile was disconcerting.

Paul wanted nothing more right now than to grab her and flee. Take her away from all this and live out a life of passion in a place where man could not reach.

“There is nothing more that I want right now than to spend time with you. I hope that doesn't sound too forward.” Paul gazed down at her through a stray lock of shaggy brown hair streaked with gray.

Josephine's eyes widened and her mouth opened in barely concealed shock. A flush crept up her neck and Paul could see the beat of her heart throbbing in the

small of her throat.

“Come.” She turned and led him to her chambers.

“So you claim there were really dragons?” She asked with disbelief.

“Those that remain, if there is more than the one that I know of, are all hibernating.”

“Hibernating?” She looked at him with disbelief.

He nodded, dangerous thoughts coursing through his mind. He felt himself tottering on the precipice of giving all to this woman, including his knowledge. “Dragons hibernate for very long periods. Sometimes hundreds of years. But many cycles of hibernation have passed and the one that I know of still slumbers.”

“Pff...” she scoffed.

Paul stared at her, unblinking. “I can show you.”

Josephine's mouth hung open. “What? How?”

In that instant, in her dismissive attitude, he decided to expend the power.

Slowly, but with increasing speed, he reached for her hand. Clamping down suddenly, he seized her identity and brought it with him as he recklessly seized power from within. Heedless of precaution, he grasped power faster than he ever had before. He was on the precipice of something that removed all his inhibitions, and he held it in his hand.

With a stomach-churning wrench, he soared upwards, faster than he ever had. He pulled deeper on his power. For a sickening instant, he saw the planet beneath him, clouds and storm systems far below. He felt Josephine beside him, clutching his hand, but also feeling her stomach heave in shock. He tried to calm her and succeeded in keeping her from choking on her own vomit back in the flesh.

Turning back to the planet, they skimmed to the east, faster and faster, until he zeroed in and began shooting downwards. The ground rose up fast. Turkey, visible for a second or two, then a blur of approaching mountains and hills. Within two seconds they were plunged into darkness.

Josephine was frightened. She had been whisked from her body without warning. She knew of the ability, but had never needed it. She had always been able to call upon her spirits to tell what she needed to know.

After the dizzying ascent, Paul had paused to calm her, and she had felt the power in him accomplish it with just a thought and effort of will. What kind of power did he possess? Her own depended on entities at work all around them. Easier, simpler. But Paul's had been his own. Where had he learned of all this? What had the centuries given him that she could not know?

Abruptly, she realized she was in darkness. She could feel him there, next to her.

“Make a light,” he said. Weary.

She began stitching a light pattern to make a glowy globe. It was one of her crowning accomplishments. She finished the pattern and a dim light reached and disappeared into the darkness beyond her sight. But she could see a wall to her right and a jumble of rocks coming from the wall. She was in a deep cave, she knew. She could mentally feel its cool and wetness.

“There,” he said.

She looked where he was pointing. The jumble of rocks spread out from the wall of the cavern, but she didn't see some mythical winged beast roaring with might atop a huge pile of gold.

Paul sighed with irritation. She felt him draw power, deeper, and felt the surge of energy that must be depleting him.

Light flared overhead, gaining in intensity.

His voice shaking, his hands over his head funneling power into the increasing light, he said, “there.”

She looked as the light became not just bright, but super-bright and kept on increasing. In the jumble of rocks she realized something lay. A head! Rocks were up close and on it, as if the form had grown rocks and were using them as a blanket. But there! She could see a snout of sorts and what looked to be a round object covered over with a horizontal slit. An eyeball! Without his greater light, she would never have seen it. The form almost appeared to be metastasizing into the rock.

Her mouth hung open and she approached the form. The head was as big as her body – bigger. The head was maybe half the size of a VW Bug.

“Can I touch it?” She wondered aloud.

“I'm sure you can. This one has hibernated through many cycles. I doubt it might ever awaken.”

With a hesitant step, she approached the form as best she could over the rocks and uneven flooring. She reached out and touched the snout – quickly. It felt like hard leather, or smooth stone. She couldn't tell which. She detected no breathing and the form did not move. “Is it still alive?”

Paul hesitated a couple of seconds. “Yes,” he finally said.

“It seems dead.”

“It's not. But I don't know that it will ever recover from hibernation. It has been well over a thousand years. Longer than any other hibernation previously known by man – when man remembered.”

She could hear the weariness in his voice. She gazed once more at the head, wondering, when suddenly she heard Paul gasp. A wrenching tore her from the cavern and alongside Paul back into heights that made her dizzy. Faster than before, as if on an over-stretched elastic band returning to its form, she snapped back out and down to where she sat in her chambers.

Paul lay in his chair, panting, his face blotchy and his eyes rolling in his head.

Josephine surged from her chair and helped him over to her bed so he could lay down. With a dash, she raced into her privy and wet a rag for his forehead. Hurrying back out, she plopped down beside him and began wiping his forehead

and face.

What she had just seen she couldn't fathom. Had it been real? She was sure she was there. Someplace in Turkey? She had felt physically there, too, but knew she was still here in her rooms. Had this man expended so much of something she didn't understand that he had shown her something unseen by human eyes for centuries? Had he shown her something that she dismissed as myth only because man had forgotten and scoffed at such things in history?

Had he been right about the giants? She resolved to get on the internet in the lounge tomorrow and look up giant skulls in Peru.

His face eased as she stroked the wet cloth across his manly features. His forehead was broad and strong. His cheekbones were prominent and manly. His scar was vivid and heart-wrenching. She would have to ask him where he got it.

His hair was disheveled and streaked with gray. His lips were thin and wide. His chin was bold and strong. His jaw was wide and commanding. He was beautiful. She found herself stroking his face without thought to his condition. When those brown eyes opened and gazed at her, she was inexplicably drawn down while he lifted his face.

Their lips met and the rag in her hand fell to the floor. Both paused on contact and savored the touch of sensitive skin to sensitive skin. She inhaled his breath as he inhaled hers. Sharing the touch of their skin and the dizziness consuming them, she gripped his neck and back of his head in her hands and pulled him into the kiss that developed. Dimly, but with pleasure, she was conscious that he was likewise gripping her neck and pulling her to him. Their lips met with passion and their tongues met in a wet exploration of that passion that swept over them both.

She felt his other hand stroking her face and then suddenly her world turned over as he moved up, twisting, bring her down to the bed beneath him. He pressed a kiss into her mouth, his tongue probing and touching her tongue and teeth. He was neither too hard in his kiss nor too soft. His mouth and passion consumed her and she was swept away with bliss. The fire and ache in her sex awakened her from the apocalypse of his kiss. Her whole body shook with need. She felt an emptiness that he could fill – a gnawing hole inside her that caused her hips to squirm with longing. She wanted his manliness in her, on her, kissing her, taking

her away...

This is what I had been looking for. This is what could save me from endless boredom. This is what could salvage my soul and make it whole. This is what I had needed: love.

Tears leaked down her cheeks as fingers touched her there without her remembering the act of removing her clothes. Parts she felt were only her to use were taken in passion by someone she...

Yes, I love him.

With that realization, she wrapped her arms around his neck as he thrust his stiffness into her. Her mind swam with each thrust. His kisses robbed her of breath. She tossed her head with ecstasy as he thrust over and over into her aching need. She heard someone crying, with pain or pleasure – until she realized it was her.

She knew pain then, the pain of a life without this man. The pain of loss that he might leave. The pain of loss that he might pull out!

But she knew pleasure, too. Her ache was being scratched. Her emptiness filled. Her need was being met and more than she could have imagined. Over and over, he thrust. Each move caused a wave of sensation within her. Each push generated an avalanche of pleasure that built into the wave. She clutched him fiercely. He clutched her in return and further built the wave. Ripples of electricity ripped through her body. At once at the precipice of finality and pleasure, she willingly took the leap. She surrendered to Paul. She surrendered to his passion. She surrendered to his kisses. And she surrendered to his insistent, ramming manhood.

“Ahhh...”

Over the edge she went. A roaring filled her ears as she fell and her body convulsed. Floating, every nerve in her body erupted in blissful agony. She could feel him swell, his erection thickening within her, and then the heat and wetness of his release. Her body hungrily absorbed all he was giving. Her hips worked with his to make sure he deposited all he could.

And then there was comfort. At ease, and satiated, she suddenly drifted.

Paul lifted himself off of Josephine as he regained his senses. He felt a keen headache having constructed a hex so soon after rashly showing her the dragon. He knew what he had to do, but sat for a moment, stroking her face. She would sleep for as long as he held the hex, but his ability to hold it was limited.

Could he walk away? Could he ignore what was going on? Could he ignore that he was in love with this woman? Could he carry out his oath and still be a man?

Tears welled in his eyes as he stood up. Only one final piece of evidence remained to be seen. He knew it would be here, somewhere. But he did not want to find it.

He knew this sanctum was show. It was a facade, a stage and nothing more. Where was her real sanctum? Where was her power? He gazed around the velvet-lined walls. Nothing appeared on the floor, so the walls it had to be. He began a methodical search behind all the hangings.

Behind her bed, the last place he looked to avoid being near her, he found the door. Holding the velvet aside, he turned the knob on the steel door and pushed it open. Stairs went down into the darkness. Without bothering to get a candle, he drew within and lit a light. Hovering over his head and rapidly drawing his power and resolve, a bright light illuminated descending stairs.

Already, tramping down the stairs, he could feel his strength ebbing. He had drawn too much, too soon, and too close together. The descendents of the giants could do this without effort. Also, the magicians of old – but he knew only a portion of their tricks and abilities. Magicians in the bible had even challenged the elect of God, matching ability for ability. But in the end they failed. Their power was not of the infinite, as God, but the finite. They had limits.

Paul was rapidly approaching his.

The stairs led to a cellar, bricked and obviously part of the original building. But the cellar was all wrong. Not here were forgotten objects or pieces of furniture. Not here were boxes of storage long-forgotten holding treasures to the age that rediscovered them. No. Here was a room kept up to date, not forgotten and holding nothing but secrets. No boxes, no furniture, no storage.

Instead, there was all that he did not want to discover – the blood-drawn pentagram on the floor; the braziers that lay cold but would light the room when in use; the altar that appeared stained in blood.

He could in fact detect a faint coppery smell to the cellar – that of old blood. Tears welled in his eyes. He did not want to see this. The focus of the room was a wall with another set of red velvet wall hangings. But these were not covering the whole wall.

Paul shook his head and sank down.

No no no no no...!

Shaking his head, he stood back up and approached the velvet. He knew what was behind it. He knew it was a statue. He knew it was central to that against which he had pledged the eternal fight.

There was nothing to fear here. There was only sadness.

Sweeping back the curtain, he revealed what he knew was there but was hoping was not; a statue of a winged bull, known to those who know as Moloch. Modern people portrayed Moloch as an owl, but that was a recent development. As little as two hundred years ago, Moloch was represented as the winged bull. But even modern people worshiped Moloch, setting aside holy days for him, in ignorance.

Those who established national days of holiday specifically nominated MLK day as a holiday. Some might claim this represented the American government's support for the black man, but this missed the point. MLK in Hebrew meant king and was delivered as Moloch or Melek. The wonder was that mankind had no depth of knowledge to know what was being thrust upon them. Believers and unbelievers alike flocked to pay worship to MLK without realizing the real impetus was to get ignorant people to venerate Moloch. Martin Luther King was just a convenience.

The statue sat there, stinking, and corrupt. Paul could feel it without seeing it. In the days of the giants, man had been taught to tap into the spirit realm instead of his own powers. The spirit realm was quicker, easier, and more satisfying for its speed. But such tapping was a marriage of mankind and evil that had threatened to destroy the entire world. Not until the one God had cursed the giants and

cursed their offspring to a war of annihilation, did the world regain its balance and man forge ahead on his own.

Paul turned away from the statue, letting the drape cover it once more.

The knowledge had threatened to turn mankind into pawns for evil – as if they weren't such now – and derail mankind in favor of giant-man hybrids. Whole civilizations were destroyed in the wars that followed. The giants had to watch their offspring destroy themselves.

One giant still lived to this day. He was heavily guarded by his followers and indifferent to what happened around him. All of his children died in the wars that consumed the offspring of the giants. He had long ago ceased teaching his followers, and what followed him now was ignorant of what their forebears learned.

Although sworn to hunt down this scourge on mankind, Paul realized this sad individual was far removed from being a threat and was the primary reason Paul did not seek him out and destroy him. Let the freak live and suffer. The entire world suffered from his offspring just a couple short thousand years ago.

Mankind had no comprehension at all of time. Man of these times felt it amazing and a huge stride towards understanding when they opened a time-capsule buried only forty years. The pathetic nature of man in these times disgusted Paul.

He climbed back up the stairs, knowing what he had to do was one of the most despicable things he had ever done.

CHAPTER 12

Matt and Sheila sat together in the library, sharing a scroll. Matt understood that they were married but had joined this group where marriage was a construct of the times. He felt no animosity toward Sheila but rather a closeness absent before.

He looked up when he realized that someone was standing before him. There stood the strange visitor, the one who captured the Domina's attention and had the Cella talking in hushed whispers.

“Oh, uh...” Matt began.

Sheila put the scroll down into her lap.

The strange man named Paul said, “I need your help.”

Matt didn't know what to say. How could he help this esteemed man?

Paul looked away, at the doorways. “I don't know who I can trust.”

“What do you need?” Matt asked deferentially.

Paul leaned down. “I need someone who has not yet been touched by the evil stain hidden here. I need someone to help set things right.”

His gaze bored into both Sheila and Matt. “I'll help,” Matt said at the same time his wife said “I will help.”

Paul gave a nod and began his instructions. Getting Josephine out would require nothing more than a touch of trickery.

The woodpile stood on the beach like any other typical beach bonfire. But on this one was tied an odd bull-head statue with wings. Although a public beach, no one off in the distance could tell something odd was part of the woodpile as

the fire had not yet been lit. Even then, after the fire was lit, by the time someone came close enough out of curiosity, the contents of the fire would be consumed.

Paul approached the woodpile carrying the still-unconscious form of Josephine. With each step, his heart and mind increased the resistance. He slowed. He did not want to do this. His oath, so long ago as to be forgotten, demanded his obedience. But his heart demanded another.

He looked down into Josephine's sleeping face. He wanted to touch her face. He wanted to stroke her hair. He wanted to hug her. He wanted anything but what he knew he had to do.

Suffer not a poisoner to live.

He loved Josephine. He could not deny it. He wanted her. He could not resist it. He wanted to be with her and he already missed her look; her gaze, and her touch.

With a frown of determination, he stepped forward. He would maintain his integrity. He would maintain his oath. He would perform as he had been expected thousands of years ago.

Tying Josephine to the pyre, he stepped back. He nodded to Matt and Sheila before he could regret his actions – as if he did not already regret them.

Matt knelt and worked matches onto the gasoline soaked torch. Within seconds, he was holding a flaming brand before him. Looking at Paul, he waited.

Paul nodded, hoping neither could see the tears welling in his eyes.

Suffer not a poisoner to live.

So long ago he had knelt in front of the king Naram-Sin. Did it matter any more whether or not he kept his word to a long-dead king of a long-dead empire? But he knew the import of his promise, and what it meant for mankind. Allowing evil to proceed would have the world under evil's grasp that much sooner. But he knew the world must fall under the grasp of evil. He knew it to be so. If he gave up now, after centuries of faith and fortitude, would he be accounted as having fault?

Matt stepped forward and fed the brand to the woodpile. Josephine's head began to move, to wave in delirium. She was awakening.

Paul stepped forward. He wanted her to see him who delivered the punishment to her that he had promised to Naram-Sin.

Flames began to catch and spread beneath her. With a brief glance at her condition, Josephine looked back to Paul. The tears in her eyes matched the ones in his own. How could he let her burn? How could he not? Her magic would unleash evil prematurely on the world and many would suffer. But did he care anymore?

She gazed at him, a single tear leaking down her right cheek. “You?”

Paul's lip quivered with emotion. The flames were consuming the base and inching higher. Yet still she looked at him, not with pleading, not with threat, not with bargaining, but with love.

Matt and Sheila stood aside. Watching. Chanting lowly in a simple chant they learned from Paul.

More tears streaked down Josephine's face. Paul could sense the attachment, the emotion – the love. “Pelagos...”

Her use of his name wrenched his heart. He could not abide this. He could not stand by while she burned. He was finished. He had loved too long. He had gone too long without love. With a move forward that conquered all hesitation, he clambered up onto the pyre. Heat was all around them. “Focus on me, and inward.”

Josephine gazed into his eyes, completely surrendered to him and all that he was. Her Poseidon. Her man. Her love.

Paul wept. Tears ran down his face and he shook his head no over and over. Not like this. No. No!

Reaching behind her, he untied her hands. The flames were already reaching them. “Focus on me.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held on. They clutched each other as the

flames reached higher. Body pressed to body, they held tight, cheek to cheek, and their bodies caught fire. But they didn't feel it. They felt the heat. They knew their bodies were consumed. But pain was beyond them as they embraced each other and focused on their dying power. He was done. He was finished. This was his end. To be with a woman he loved was the best way he knew how to end it.

Wordlessly, desperately, and with love they died in each other's arms.

EPILOGUE

Sarah moved about the sanctum of her former Domina. She was next in line, though she felt remorse at Josephine's passing. She knew that Josephine held back some of her teaching. She could feel the... hole... in the scrolls. She knew that somewhere in these chambers that were now hers the former Domina had kept the secret.

Not long after entering the room, she found the hidden stairwell. The cellar held interest for her in two ways. One was the small chest that held the ancient manuscript Josephine had used to develop her power. Protected in an airtight tube, Sarah clutched it to her bosom.

The other interest to her was the opened curtain showing the empty alcove where previously stood the statue of Moloch. Her hand grazed the platform and she clutched the tube to herself even tighter.

She would learn the ways.

She would become as Josephine.

She would restore the Cella.