

NOTICE:

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of reproductions of copyrighted material. One specified condition is that the reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses a reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

RESTRICTIONS:

This student work may be read, quoted from, cited, for purposes of research. It may not be published in full except by permission of the author.

Jacklight: Stories

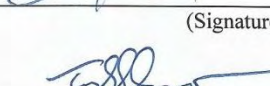
Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Departmental Honors in
English

by
Phoebe Wagner
Lycoming College
April 1, 2014

Approved by:



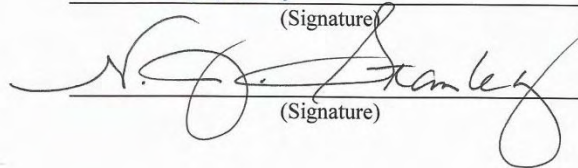
(Signature)



(Signature)



(Signature)



(Signature)

Jacklight: Stories

Table of Contents

Jacklight.....	3
The Bacchanal.....	20
Wothan the Wanderer.....	32
Trickster Shop.....	47
Party Games.....	57
Coyote Story.....	88

Jacklight

At thirteen, Mary discovered her first rune in a raven's half-decayed remains. As if somebody had sifted the bone shards and feathers, they shaped a rune against a bloody backdrop. The rune set inside the broken chest cavity, the pried-open ribs spreading along the spine like leaflets or broken branches. A predator had dismembered the wings, but long flight feathers stuck in dried blood and expanded the rune so it appeared winged. Mary scribbled the design on a receipt and stuffed it in her hip pocket. The next day, she'd taken a spill off her skateboard and would've broken her nose and jaw except, before she hit the asphalt, an air draft swooped her upward, so she landed on her feet like a bird pulling out of a dive. Heat had flared against her hip, and the air had smelled of firecrackers. She'd jerked out the paper. The receipt's edges had browned, but the rune remained unharmed—a single line with broken ribs simplified to arrows, pointing upward to the final sweeping expansion, the motion of a bird spreading its wings.

Mary sketched the rune in her notebook, on napkins, on her hand, but no wind stirred her. She treated it like a good luck charm and drew it on the corners of her tests. Before she attempted to jump over a two-foot-tall park bench in front of her older brother and his friends, she carved it on her skateboard's deck, and she cleared the bench by an easy six inches—unlike her brother who had caught his wheels. Her skateboard grew hot, the deck's varnish bubbling, and the smell of a spent match rose from the board. Her brother challenged her to another jump down fifteen

stairs, his signature move. She landed it on her first try, her board almost gliding as it rejoined the pavement. Her brother started taking bets, and they made five hundred dollars before the other skate crews wised up. When her brother asked how she managed it, she said she practiced a lot.

Mary spent the next three years researching anything related to runic magic, and with a few tips from her parents, she even hacked several library databases. Her parents didn't believe in magic when it came to spells and runes, but at night, they transformed into caffeine-buzzed wizards with skin blued by computer screens. Her parents had several handles, the most popular being Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and they drained bank accounts, spilled secrets, and moved criminals' money.

Her parents pretended to be happy house hunters searching for homes to renovate and flip, but her older brother had just been sentenced to jail after a yearlong trial when Mary and her parents moved to Louisiana. She took her skateboard on late rides along the Mississippi River, searching for magic and avoiding her parents at their computers.

She cruised through lamp-lit St. Francisville, the shop windows still decorated with tinsel and Christmas ornaments, though the banks had hung New Year's deals and advertisements. Riverfront Road had two switchbacks leading to a small boat launch. Instead of riding the curves, Mary jumped the first switchback like a staircase, landing on the next level's pavement, pushing forward, and jumping the second switchback. Midair, she pressed the skateboard's tail, bringing up the nose, which allowed her to glide, gently landing instead of smacking the asphalt and breaking her board. The rune's heat radiated through the deck and into her sneakers. Her runic research explained temperature changes, unusual smells, or energy surges often accompanied a rune's powerful release.

The dark street paralleled the muddy river. Fissures and dips destroyed the pavement, but Mary had memorized when to pop over weedy cracks or swerve from tar patches. The wheels' chantlike *clack* joined with the rushing current. Three days of steady rain had swelled the river and chilled the night to the low forties, silencing the few locusts and cicadas that survived the mild winter. The quiet created a sensation of the year dying, and the last full moon silvered the choppy water. Mary hoped she might discover something magical along the border of a great river at the edge of a new year beneath a full moon—an atmosphere for magic, according to ancient magicians like Albertus Magnus and Johann Weyer.

She sat on her skateboard at the road's crest before it sloped to a rickety dock and crumbling launch where rusted chains locked canoes to pine trees. She pulled out a notepad and flipped the smudged pages filled with runes, in neat stanzas or twisting strands, copied from behind-glass library books or photocopies of medieval manuscripts. The runes remained dead on the page no matter the conditions—the runes' order, the moon's cycle, the planets' alignment, the paper's color. She'd attempted simple runes to heal a scab or call a rabbit from its warren and tried the greatest spells designed to rain fire or freeze an ocean. Only her flight rune worked. She'd surpassed the skateboard trick and could fly a paper airplane across the high school cafeteria.

The current slogged and slapped the bank. Sweat cooled her skin, and she zipped her jacket against the river's breeze. Wet air dampened her hair and clothes until she smelled like the underside of a rock. She tried practicing a kick-flip, but the wheels' *crack* as they rejoined the pavement echoed down the river and the road. She guessed the time by the moon's height before checking her cell phone, the screen's blue glowing making her eyes ache. Moonbeams glanced off the choppy river, but no prehistoric muzzle split the surface, no fairy flames hovered along the shore, no strangely shaped shadows tapered from the pine copses. Twice, Mary nosed her

skateboard toward town, but her limbs grew heavy while a tug in her gut said stay. She settled like a nesting sparrow, hunkered on her board with her knees drawn close and her arms crossed over top, pillowing her head. Stillness seeped into her, broken only by the water's slurring.

Around midnight, a bluesy note spread like heat lightning. Mary raised her head and blinked. The moon silvered the river and launch except for a golden glitter at a dock's edge. Another note spurted up like a jumping bass then lengthened into widening ripples.

Mary's skateboard thrummed, and copper scented the night. She cruised down the cresting road to the boat launch. A man swayed on the stubby dockside. The moon's reflection created a path before him, silhouetting his lean figure. He cradled a saxophone that shone like an apple, and a length of braided hemp dangled from the bell, interwoven rock bits reflecting the instrument's gleam.

A moaning note stretched across the water as if to nip the moon, and the man glanced over his shoulder, his face a shadow. He motioned to a graffiti-scarred bench where set an open case, the velvet lining worn thin. "Take a seat. Plenty of room in the front row." Whiffs of alcohol and dumpster rot drifted from his long trench coat, the pockets bulging and giving him a packrat appearance. A scruffy beard hid his neck and dreadlocks draped his shoulders.

Mary kicked up her board, catching the nose. "The folks down the road are going to hear if you keep playing. Probably call the cops."

"Nah, that's why I got this." He swung the hemp braid. "Aunt Nancy charmed it. Lets only lonely folks hear the music."

"I'm not lonely."

He let out a long breath and wet his lips. "Never seen one of Aunt Nancy's charms go bad. This one's been working good since the old days when nobody wanted to hear me sing. Had to

draw my listeners out of the woodwork, understand? So come on out of the shadows, and I'll play for you."

She looked both ways along the empty road, white as ice in the moonlight, before easing her board onto the wooden dock. The wheels bumped staccato against the slats, which the man copied, thumping his shoe. He leaned into the music as if bracing against the current.

Quick notes matched her board's rhythm then lengthened into a moan that silenced the river and made Mary grip the bench's backrest. He dipped toward the water, and the notes deepened to a resonant hum, aching like a bruise until she strained with him against the darkness, but when he bent back to salute the moon, the quickening tempo and rising pitch cycloned away the winter's bleakness, leaving her light as river foam, her toe tapping. The beat breathed summer sweat and damp alleyways, the scents overpowering the loamy air, and she tasted oranges. His riffs slowed, the notes softening to velvet, brushing Mary's skin. His saxophone conjured heartbreak, but nothing she'd experienced. This hurt burned hot as a forge, but the music faded until the tune was lost in swishing eddies.

She closed her eyes and tried to hold onto the song like a sweet taste. "Who was she, the woman you just played about?"

"Old Mother Earth herself. I was there when all was green and dew-fresh, but now she's harder and harder to find, even out here, and she's so restless, spooked by anything at all."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't bother with surprise, sister. You've got magiclight in your eyes, just a spark."

"You're drunk."

"Weren't you listening? It's the threshold of a new year on the land's edge—you expected to find something tonight, and my instrument called you." He stroked the bell. "Be grateful, plenty

of darker things roam the edges on the year's last full moon." He sat on a bench and rested the saxophone in the scuffed case. "So, what'd you bring me?"

Mary perched near him, her skateboard balanced on her knees. "Bring you?"

"If you want something from me, you got to give in return."

She pulled a cigarette pack from her shirt pocket and offered him the box. He tapped out two and handed her one. They shared a matchbook.

"I'm Mary, by the way."

"Just Mary? You can do better than that. I've been named more times than I remember: Jackrabbit, Hare, Brother Rabbit, Trickster, even Whiskey Jack. Just yesterday, got mistaken for Slim Greer. Take your pick or come up with something new." He took a drag and exhaled, the smoke hanging like river mist. "Go ahead and ask for whatever you're aiming to get."

Mary pulled a notepad from her back pocket and showed it to him. "I write them again and again, but I can only make one rune work."

He scanned the pages and wet his lips. "You got some real runes of power, here. Old magic, almost as old as me." He tore out several pages and lit them with his cigarette.

Mary cried and lunged, but he pushed her back.

He crumpled the flaming ball in his hand then scattered the ashes. "Some old magic should be forgotten. You're not into that kind of darkness, I don't believe."

She snatched the notebook. "If I'm going to study a subject, I need to understand all of it, not just the rosy bits."

"Fair enough, but if you don't make camp on some side of the river, you'll be sleeping beneath bridges with folks like me. And some of us bite."

"If I were afraid, I wouldn't be hanging out late at night smoking a cigarette with you."

“Maybe you shouldn’t be. There’s folks out here who make the darkest runes sing for them, and they’ll kill you with a few pencil strokes. This isn’t a world of love potions and good luck charms. You’re not scared because you don’t know what to be afraid of.”

Mary flicked her stub toward an overflowing trashcan. “Somebody who plays music like you, who can make the river listen, you can’t be such a bad spirit.”

“I’m a god—get it right. Even if folks’ prayers take the form of stories rather than pleadings. You said you got one rune working, so show me.”

Mary walked to the boat launch’s far side and stepped onto her board. The overflowing trashcan set across from her, and with the domed lid, it reached four feet tall. She surged toward it, gaining speed with every push. She smashed her heel against the tail, popping the board and jumping the trashcan with a foot to spare. She glided into her landing and swiveled the board toward the bench, the final momentum carrying her. She stepped off and showed him the deck’s underside.

He whistled and rubbed his thumb over the etching. “That’s a Flight rune for sure. Belongs to old Brother Raven’s children. In the right hands, that board could fly like a falcon.”

“I jumped off a house the other day, but I wouldn’t call it flying—just not falling very hard.”

“That’s because you’re still stretching your wings, building your magical muscles. Other than shaming the boys, why’re you looking for this magic? I can’t give up the trade secrets to every girl drunk on her first sweet-tasting spell.”

“Because with one rune, I can dive off a house and not get a scratch. Magic like that is better than marrying some guy with a business degree and living in a fancy place downtown, and it’s way better than my parents’ hacking into bank accounts and moving money for criminals. I don’t

want to end up in jail like my brother. With magic, I'll be better than my family—if I can get any of these runes to work.”

“Nah, it's more than that. If you were just curious about the gods, you'd join a cult, not go roaming riverbanks. Tell me what happened.”

She dropped her board, the wheels smacking the asphalt. She leaned onto the tail, balancing on the back wheels. “It's my older brother. He's coming for me. He's already killed my little brother and another man.”

The wheels slipped, and she lost her balance as the board skidded. She staggered a few steps. “Abel was innocent, not like Simeon and me. Abel knew the family hacking business was wrong, that we hurt people. He used to get this look when we stole drinks or candy bars from the store—frowning and looking like he could smell our sins. Simeon hated him for it, was always beating up on him.”

She nudged her sneaker beneath the board and flipped it into her hands. Her fingers probed the grip tape and lifted a strand, unraveling it until a wood sliver showed white across the deck. “If Abel knew I was coding or writing scam emails, he'd do anything to get me off my computer. He asked me to teach him to skate even though he couldn't keep his balance. He was only ten when Simeon ran a red light. After that, Simeon got meaner, started drinking more, started disappearing over the weekends. But I felt guilty, as if I should be living a cleaner life for Abel's sake. I think that's why I turned in Simeon. A couple years later, we were at this party, and I saw Simeon stab a guy.”

Splinters roughened the asphalt-scarred ends, and she collected the bits until the wood appeared smooth again. “I could've called for help or screamed or even tried to stop Simeon—

Abel would've done something. But I just watched like I've watched my parents hurt hundreds of people from their keyboards. Simeon said if I told anybody, he'd cut me up even worse."

She shuffled to the dockside and submerged her fist then opened her hand. The splinters floated, but little waves parted them. "I saved his bloody clothes from the garbage and gave the police an anonymous tip, but my brother knew. My parents disappeared with me after the arrest, but we kept an eye on the trial. Just a couple of months ago, he got thirty-five years."

She hooked the wheels over the dock's lip, her foot on the tail as if she were about to drop down a ramp then she eased the pressure so the nose dipped into the water. "Prison doesn't stop a good hacker from getting out a message if he wants, and big brother Simeon is careful to let me know he hasn't forgotten me."

She picked up the board and returned to the bench, sitting next to Jack. The Flight rune split the deck, the wheels like ballasts. "He's promised to get even."

Jack hefted the board and balanced it on his palm. The skateboard levitated a few inches. "Magic might protect you from a knife between the ribs, but it won't turn you into a saint for your brother's sake."

"I think Abel tapped into some older genes than me. Either that or he came from a different man. He had this deep black hair, very fine, which made him so pale he sometimes looked translucent. I like to think he wasn't from an affair, that maybe I have some of his goodness inside. This"—she held up her notepad of runes—"makes me feel like a better person."

"Well, you got reason enough to want it so bad, and I can get you started. Come with me."

Still carrying his saxophone, he led her to the longest dock, a spindly contraption, the narrow posts and knothole-ridden planks spotted with bird droppings. A dead-fish smell rose between

the slats, and the murky water frothed around the posts. Wood groaned as the rain-glutted river pulled at the dock.

Jack flicked his cigarette butt into the water and lit a second by snapping his fingers, the filter flashing red. “All you gotta do is jump—off a cliff, into the river. Seen it work every time. Survival kicks in, and if you got a drop of magic in your gut, it’ll save you. Those that don’t, they never take the leap.”

“The current could drag me right out.”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you? Too careful, have to examine it from all angles until you’re sure you’re right?”

She braced her skateboard against her lower back, gripping the ends like a railing. “Well, I am studying runes. I can’t just speak it like a spell or use willpower like charms. If I choose the wrong rune or simply fail and fall in the river, I won’t get a second chance.”

Jack leaned against a post and blew a perfect smoke ring. “That’s the point. Give yourself up to magic and see what happens. Listen, I’ve got a story for you. Most folks think a trickster is a clever fellow, but let me tell you how I got the name.”

As he talked, his back straightened, and he raised his head, regarding the water. His voice deepened an octave, and his reverberating words quieted the river. “I was always singing a tune and thumping a beat, but I didn’t pick up that saxophone until not very long ago. I was knocking around town when I heard the saddest cry ever given by man—could make anybody start bawling.” His fingers glided over the saxophone keys as if remembering a tune. He patted the bell. “I followed it all across town straight into an old bar, and just when I thought the ache of sadness would split me in two, that golden instrument let out the happiest howl you’ve heard and got everybody dancing. I asked the fellow next to me what such a thing was called and went

looking for a sax of my own.” He adjusted the instrument so moonlight glinted off the worn keys and arched neck while the charm’s crystals winked.

“Everyone knows old Raven collects shiny things, and I just bet he had one. Sure enough, he did, and I pleaded with him to trade me for it. He agreed, but he only wanted one thing.” He swiped his tongue over his bright teeth. “My tongue. Strange, I know, but a few years back, I’d taught myself human speech by way of a few spells, and he was so jealous that I’d learn to talk with the townsfolk, and he wanted to talk with them, too.”

His cigarette burned close to his fingers, and the filter’s glow illuminated a faded tattoo with a spider web of green filaments. He flicked the stub into the water. “Now, I made my livelihood telling stories and sweet-talking people, but I finally gave in, and we traded.” He used his hands to mimic flapping wings. “As Raven flew off, he called in his new manly voice, ‘Trickster, Trickster, will you always fall for my tricks?’ That’s how old Raven learned to speak.

“You might guess what happened when I put my lips to that saxophone—only a dying wheeze came out. I still couldn’t make music. Now, I only had half of what I wanted, and it was burning me up, holding my sax and not being able to make a sound. But this wasn’t the first time I’d gotten myself in such a fix.

“Raven, he loved to preen his feathers until they were shiny as fresh tar and strut his stuff down Main Street, but whenever a pretty woman caught his eye, he’d start stuttering and couldn’t think of anything to say.” He straightened his collar and winked at Mary. “I’ve always been popular with the ladies, so he came flapping back, asking advice. There wasn’t much I could mime to him, and he got ruffled, dipping and cawing, which sounded just silly coming from a human tongue.” His gestures mirrored the bobbing, and Raven became a puppet, Jack’s hands extending the story.

“Caw, all right, ca-caw! I’ll give you back your tongue only so you can tell me about those fancy words. If you try to escape, I’ll peck out your eyes!”

“I considered legging it, but Raven could fly fast as I could run, so I came up with another plan. Raven gave me back my tongue, and I explained the girls loved a hard-talking man and taught him some harsh words—hell and goddamn and the like. He flew straight to town and tried them, but now, the woman hurried away with a swish of their skirts, and their men said he should be ashamed to talk like that in public. Raven thought he must be saying the words wrong since he was still getting used to a human tongue. He came flapping on back. This time, I gave him some childish jokes and said the ladies loved when a man could make them laugh. Of course, those girls just harrumphed at old Raven.”

He patted the bulging trench coat pockets then fished inside one that had a bit of string hanging over the edge, or so Mary believed until it twitched and slipped into the recesses. He eased out a silver circlet and swept back his rootlike hair, threading the dreadlocks through the circlet and setting it high on his brow.

“Now, his coming and going went on for a week or so—Raven loaning me my tongue so I could teach him all manner of sayings, some of which were respectable and pleasant, just to keep him hooked. Finally, after a long session, I asked him a favor.” He slumped his shoulders, wringing his hands and shuffling. “With hat in hand, I asked if I could keep the tongue until morning so I could tell my town girl why I couldn’t see her any longer due to a piece of my own foolishness. I said it’d make a nice, noble story he could tell all the men in town, about how he helped young, naïve Brother Rabbit. He puffed out his feathers and cawed his consent.”

Jack straightened, rolling his shoulders and neck. The silver circlet glinting from the hollows of his dreadlocks caught the starlight, and the saxophone settled at his side like a sword. “You

can probably guess I hopped the first train, my sax case strapped to my back. I gave it all up—my comfy pine bed, my home in the briar patch, my friends and neighbors, even my name. If I got caught, I paid my train fares in blues and earned my dinner playing ragtime with the barroom pianist. Sure, I was sorry to leave it all, but the only way I could win my music was to run hard, which I am all too good at when the moon is high and full.”

He stilled, his presence a growing fog that cooled Mary’s skin.

She crouched at the dock’s edge, the water lapping a few inches below the boards. “That doesn’t give me any reason to drown in the river. You ended up worse than when you started—in hiding and even though you had your tongue, it’s not like you knew how to play.”

“But I had an instrument,” he said. “I had a place to start, and like you, I’m a fast learner.” He polished the saxophone with his cuff. “The rest I could make up as I went along instead of sitting at home, blowing down a mouthpiece and maybe by luck, coaxing out a note. Right now, you got a scarred skateboard. You need to leave that behind and shoot for something grander. There’s magic in the stars, in the tangled branches, in the spider’s web, in the river. You place yourself in the power of that old magic then those book runes will start dancing.”

Mary balanced her board across her knees and scrubbed dirt off the deck’s glossy underside. “You don’t think I’ve been looking for more runes in every piece of roadkill? It’s not like the first time.”

“Never is. You have plenty of theory written on that pad, so now, play it on the river—always a good proving ground. You got to improvise, make your own combinations and not just copy the originals.”

“What do you want me to do, turn myself into a fish?”

“I’m just an old soul with a saxophone—I don’t want anything. You’re the one asking for something. If you want to make your runes work, I’m telling you to test them. You’re scared. Scared the runes won’t work, that your skateboard is an accident, and you’re scared the runes will work because how can you live a regular life once magic has caught you up in its current? Just to ease your mind, I’m going to give you something.” He stomped a tempo and raised his saxophone.

A bluesy moan caught her breath until the tune broke into rolling, rapid notes, the rhythm harsh but glittering like a rough cut ruby, playing with her heartbeat. Riffs lengthened and softened to a sonorous hum before swooping into a hip-swaying groove then the pitch rose to a sharp call that drove a splinter into the base of her throat. She shivered as the echo faded, the river resuming control of the night.

“There, now you have my blessing. Whether you chose to try yourself against the river magic or to return home, you will find success in all its forms, whether the praise of others or the courage to face failure.”

He returned to his bench, the saxophone gleaming like thin ice.

Mary dipped her hand in the murky water, the cold sending an ache up her arm. The low moon shone along the river so the surface appeared frozen. Mary slipped off her sneakers and took out her pocket knife. She flipped through her notepad and chose two runes, carving them into the sneakers’ soles—a jagged, oval rune meant to freeze whatever it touched layered with a wavelike buoyancy rune. Just in case, she piled her sweatshirt, wallet, cellphone, and pocketknife onto her skateboard. She double-knotted her laces and balanced on the dock’s edge.

“Hey, Jazzman, you watching?”

With her gaze fixed on the far bank, she stepped onto the river. The air grew cold, burning her nose and lungs. Water crackled as if she'd stepped on shattered glass. She kept her feet aligned and knees slightly bent, a skateboarding stance. The river froze beneath her soles, and mist shrouded her sneakers. She glided toward the center, each step crunching and dusting frost, while her footprints floated downstream. The current sucked at her feet, but as long as she kept walking, her path stayed even. Ice encased her shoes and numbed her.

Midstream, she shuffled her sneakers, freezing a patch wide enough to stand on, and she bobbed with the current. She waved at Jack, who'd returned to the dock's edge, standing over her piled possessions.

“There you go, sister, but watch your step!”

She shifted her weight and let her right foot drag, a snaking line of ice forming beneath her toe. She scuffed the water, and the splash froze mid-arc. “Better than my skateboard trick?”

Numbness stiffened her ankles, and a cramp clenched her leg. She crouched, massaging her muscles, but her float hit curling rapids, pitching her forward. Freezing water shocked the air from her, and she convulsed, gulping gritty water. She twisted toward the surface, but ice clamped around her sneakers and pinned her. The float grew larger, more iceberglike as the river washed over her upturned soles, layering the ice.

Mary tried to slip off her shoes, but the laces were too tight and frozen. She jerked at the knots with her deadened fingers then tried to wrench free each foot, pain jolting through her ankles. Her chest hitched, lungs clenching, as she placed her hand against the smooth float and closed her eyes. She envisioned her notepad and chose a rune meant to untie knots, entangled threads that lengthened into a long tail, and a simple Escape rune shaped like an open door. She

carved them into the ice between her sneakers, her numbed fingers bleeding as her nails splintered.

The laces writhed, their ends dipping and pulling free of the knots and first few eyelets. Mary kicked away from the float. The moon pierced the water as if it were a frosted pane, and she followed the light, breaching the surface and sucking in the cool air that burned her lungs. The current dragged her down river while the float bobbed behind her. She hooked an arm over the ice, her fingernails bloodying the frost. She dragged herself half onto the float and steered it toward the opposite bank, kicking through rapids. Grit crunched between her teeth, and muddy water flooded her nose and mouth. As her arms cramped, her fingers slipping, the float whirled into a cove formed by an uprooted pine.

Mary stumbled onto the pebbly bank, fell to her knees, and retched. River water stung her scraped arms and sliced feet. She shivered and rolled upright, pulling in her knees, trembling as she rubbed the warmth into her chest and arms.

Her ice float had grown into a small surfboard, five feet long and two feet wide. It rasped against the pebbly bank, and Mary flipped it over, her sneakers still intact and ice-coated. She shattered the float with a large rock then retied the laces, slinging the shoes over her shoulder, the soles heavy with ice. From her long night rides, she knew a bridge crossed the river a quarter mile down the bank, and she jogged to warm herself.

The setting moon faded, the sunrise illuminating the empty launch. Her hoodie, cell phone, wallet, skateboard, and notepad were missing—all her studies, her runes, her anchor in the world of magic, stolen. Only a stack of pebbles pinning a note and Jack's hemp charm suggested the god's presence.

She moaned and swatted away the pebbles, picking up the note.

Before you start complaining about my thieving, I got some things to make it up. Remember, if you're going to walk across the river's back, you better be prepared for it to shake you off, but your magic saved you. You got a place to start, and here's a rune to keep you warm. I think you'll find it easy to use after your dunking. Write it on your chest with river mud. Now, just as Raven called me Trickster, I name you Jacklight and leave you this charm so you will remember the likes of me. Use it carefully. It might attract more than you wish.

She held the charm to the pale light. "What kind of a name is Jacklight?" The loop of hemp rope ended in a braided tassel with crystal bits tied among the strands, winking in the dawn. A running hare, carved in ebony, dangled from the final knot. She hung the charm around her neck and tucked it beneath her T-shirt, the hemp scratching her skin.

Instead of signing the note, he'd sketched a flame-shaped rune. Mary limped to the bank and scooped up a fistful of silt. She painted the three-tongued flame below the hollow of her throat, and heat prickled her skin, warming her, following her bones like a fuse.

The Bacchanal

Over spring break, Mary attended the Bacchanal to meet Dionysus and witness his particular brand of magic—the perfect party. To the public, he masqueraded as a playboy famed for his yacht parties, but Mary, a practitioner of the Magic Arts, recognized the god. His black yacht idled at the dock, and a single light illuminated the name: *Tragoidia*. At least four hundred feet long, it contained five levels and a neon-lit deck crammed with writhing bodies. On the lower decks, strobe lights flashed slinking silhouettes against dark curtains. Exhaust fumes and alcohol overpowered the sea breeze. Mary waited in a line leading from the gangway guarded by two women dressed in open-backed gowns that displayed their pale and protruding shoulders. Black tattoos created a fawn-spotted pattern along their spines, identifying them as Dionysus' followers, the Maenads. They vetted the guests: spring break girls in bandeau tops, men in suit jacket hoodies and their smoky-eyed women. Mary felt underdressed in loose jeans and a V-neck T-shirt.

The line inched forward, and after half an hour, Mary presented her invitation, illegally obtained online. A Maenad offered a hand and helped Mary onto the gangway. She climbed along the wooden ramp, music pulsing through the rope railing and growing louder as she neared the top.

She stepped onto the seething deck. A DJ spun from a stand at the bow, his face lit from beneath, giving him a deathly appearance. Bodies ground together, and when the DJ dropped a heavy beat, hands shot upward, wrists bound with glow bracelets. Thudding speakers obliterated any other sound and dictated Mary's heartbeat. The smells of sweat and vomit mixed with marijuana. From across the deck, someone hurled a beer bottle, spewing alcohol overhead. The Maenads strode among the dancers, finding crevices in the crowd without a second glance, while balancing black marble platters of unlabeled bottles.

The bass tugged at Mary like a riptide. She glided into the wake of a Maenad, following the fawn-patterned back tattooed with luminous ink. The crowd tramped on Mary's heels and caught at her T-shirt until she slowed. The deck trembled with thumping feet, and surging bodies forced her into the groove. From her right, a man in a black shirt brushed her elbow. A fedora half-hid his curls and shadowed his eyes, but at his touch, magic spiked her pulse—Dionysus had searched her out. He guided her toward him, hands light on her hips, and an earthy, animal musk enveloped Mary as he ground his pelvis against hers. She leaned into him, swaying, but when his hands slid up her sides, caressing her breasts, she twisted free and lifted the hat, exposing two bony points among the curls. He snatched at the fedora, but she elbowed through the crushing bodies. He caught her on the fringe, hooking an arm around her waist.

She faced him, the fedora cocked over her right eye. "Don't you think it looks better on me?"

He reclaimed it. "Admittedly, but the guests aren't quite far gone enough to miss my horns. If everyone knew I arrived in Boston each spring, I'd have all the miracle seekers in addition to troublesome female magicians like you clambering to get on board."

"How do you know I practice the Arts?"

He edged closer, toe-to-toe. “Your skin is thick with magic, like a perfume. While you waited on the docks, I could smell it—pomegranates.”

“Did you smell trouble, too?”

He fingered a lock of her hair then cupped his hand around her neck. “Or new possibilities. You’ve already made the night more interesting, and something tells me you’re not here for the booze.”

“I’m here to learn from a god.”

“Gods are dangerous.”

“I’m prepared—even to handle you.”

“Careful, don’t get ahead of yourself.” He offered his arm. “How about a drink?”

He escorted her down a stairwell to the next deck where incandescent paint shimmered under black light, the atmosphere hot with packed bodies. Glow sticks outlined the DJ’s station and a stage where women exhibited themselves as human canvases. Phosphorescent greens, blues, and pinks emphasized their bare breasts and swiveling hips with zebra stripes or peacock swirls. The guests clustered around the painted women, leaving the dimly lit bar empty. Music rattled the tinted windows, but voices could penetrate the sound barrier.

The Maenad bartender set out two glasses and a wine bottle, and Dionysus poured. The low lights sculpted his high cheekbones and pointed chin.

“It’s a nice white wine made with Assyrtiko, Aidani, and Athiri grapes, all the way from the Aegean Islands.” He raised his glass. “In the islands, we say ‘*Stinygiasou*,’ which means ‘To our health.’ *Stinygiasou!*”

Mary repeated the toast, and her glass grazed his. She sipped the sharp wine. “Excellent, though I’m by no means an expert.”

He set aside the fedora and scratched the root of his right horn. “Because your expertise lies in magic. Let me guess, something sexy: a Mistress of Charms? Spell-caster?”

“Runes, actually, but I study more than that. That’s why I’m here, to observe your methods—how you incite crowds and empower them to perform incredible feats.”

He slumped against the bar, swirling his glass. “You make it sound so technical, so boring. The only way you can understand the Bacchanal is to experience it. Forget about observation.”

“I can learn from you without pledging myself. I’m not interested in worshiping any god.”

“The Bacchanal is much more. Consider it a release. The first step is to get drunk.”

Mary leaned over the bar, searching for a whiskey glass. “Then let’s play a game—Quarters, but with magic. The shooter enchants the quarter while the defender enchants the glass. The rules are the same except it ends when one of us miscasts an enchantment or breaks the glass. If I win, you explain the Bacchic rites, but if you win, we finish that dance.”

He closed his fist then opened it, spilling six quarters onto the bar. “Shall we leave the first shot to chance? You call.” He spun a coin, and she called heads as it slowed to a wobble then tipped—her win.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ve already worked my magic.”

She pulled a notepad and pencil stub from her pocket. Shielding the pad with her hand, she sketched a runic seven-pointed star and pressed a quarter over the design. A textbook Invisibility rune combined with her practiced skill at tossing created a simple first move. She aimed and flicked the coin. As it struck the marble bar, it vanished then reappeared with a *clink* in the bottom of the glass.

Dionysus scratched the base of a horn. “Not bad—I guess I drink.” He emptied his wine glass then waved her on. “I’ve already recast. Go ahead.”

Mary's second turn relied on the success of the first. She combined two Celtic runes to teleport the quarter, guiding it toward the original Invisibility rune. Even if Dionysus used magic to cover the glass, her quarter might make it through. She tossed.

The glass inverted itself, the bottom rising to become the top and bringing her first quarter with it. As she planned, her second coin stacked on top of the first, but since the glass was bottoms-up, she failed. Dionysus winked, and the glass reverted itself, the bottom sinking.

Mary picked out her coins and sketched another rune. She ripped off the paper, folded it, and dipped it in the cup, charging it to repel metal. "Whenever you're ready."

Dionysus threw, and the coin cracked against the marble bar but hovered over the glass, teetering. He glared, leaning forward, and the coin edged closer. The charred scent of straining magic drifted over the bar. He bared his teeth, lowering his horns. Her rune succumbed to his will, and the coin dropped inside.

He rolled his neck, horns gleaming. "Cheers."

As Dionysus had, she finished her wine in a gulp.

He poured for them. "A waste of a good wine, really."

Dionysus sank the next shot, but Mary blocked the third with a simple move—twirling the glass as the quarter landed, spinning it out. She only completed one shot before Dionysus stopped her. Some of his attempts relied on cleverness, but he also powered through her defenses, shattering her control. She hoped to use that as an advantage, forcing him to break the glass. She regained her turn three scores later and wrote a sequence of runes meant to fold the quarter into a tiny bird. She triple-checked each letter, fighting the wine-induced fog. She swiped the quarter against the sketch then tossed. The quarter expanded with chiming metal feathers, and a silver bird darted upward, wheeled, and dove. The beak stopped above the rim, and Dionysus snorted,

pressing into his magic. The whiskey glass trembled as the silver beak reddened, a swirl of smoke rising. A crack inched from the rim, but the small wings glowed white and sagged.

Mary leaned over and kissed Dionysus, a hand behind his head, mussing his hair.

His enchantment shattered the glass, splinters tinkling across the marble.

She pulled away, but he swung off his stool and trapped her against the bar. His mouth bruised hers until her body shuddered for air.

She tried to push him back. “I won. You owe me.”

“I’d call it a draw. Relax, we have all night.” He nuzzled her collarbone.

“I’m not here to fool around. We made a bet.”

He raised his head and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, still straining against her.

“The Bacchanal is about action, succumbing to desires. Have you ever given yourself over to passion? To rage?”

“A night with you is more than abandonment—it’s devotion.”

“To become a great magician, you’ll need the help of a god. You’re scared, I get it.”

“If I was afraid, I wouldn’t have stepped on this boat. After two years learning to control my magic, I’m not going to jeopardize that because you’re bored.”

He snatched his hat off the bar and swatted away the glass bits. “So that’s it, control. No wonder you treat your runes like formulae.”

She braced herself as she stood, the wine blurring her vision. “They are formulaic. If I know the right sequence of runes, I can create almost anything—like chemistry.”

“And humans are merely meat sacks—see how that kind of thinking gets you in trouble? You need to loosen up. And I’ve got just the thing. You’ll like the Temple.”

He led her into the yacht's belly, the hold transformed by the presence of white marble pillars rising to the shadowy ceiling. Candles, thin as skeletal fingers, clustered on the floor or dripped wax down gold stands, but a smog of incense and marijuana smoke dulled the light. The bass, piped in through floor speakers, beat heavier in the hold, resounding and wavering the candle flames. A tray of fire illuminated a statue presiding over the Temple. Naked Dionysus posed with his cup raised and ivy crowning his curls. Statues of animals were scattered across the floor—two roaring tigers guarding the entrance, a bull with lowered horns, a slinking leopard. In the center, golden cages stood on pillared stands, each holding three black goats. These attracted certain guests, the kind stoned as shamans.

Long benches displayed piles of fawn skins and thyrsi—sharpened staves with a pinecone fitting the blunt handle. Some guests had stripped, and women tied the skins into togas while men wore them like capes or kilts. The Maenads served more than drinks. One stretched on a sofa while a man snorted cocaine off her fawn-patterned back. Some Maenads passed out more of the lancelike thyrsi while others guided passionate couples into a series of screened alcoves furnished with animal skin pallets where silhouettes romped behind the gauzy curtains.

Dionysus hung his fedora from the tiger statue's raised tail and rolled his neck so his horns, grown longer and curved, flicked as if hooking a cape. "Feel that pull in your gut? It's their worship affecting the atmosphere, and they don't even realize it."

Mary nodded at the cages. "I'm guessing those are the sacrifices to be torn apart."

"Of course. There's plenty of sex and drugs, but it's a celebration of my divinity after all. I'm not the Devil, not Pan, but I do require a sacrifice on my terms." He strutted toward the cages. A goat stuck its head between the bars, and he held it by a ribbed horn. "Really, it's not that bad. My Maenads do most of the dirty work. It's a bit early for the blood and guts, but if you want to

kick things off, go ahead.” He pulled back on the horn to expose the goat’s throat. It bleated and stomped.

“I said I’m not here to worship, only observe.”

He forced her against the cage. “You will never become a competent magician if you don’t give yourself to the Art, if you only observe. That’s why you’re really here, isn’t it? To prove your abilities and show you can stand toe-to-toe with a god and survive. So try me.”

“I won’t sacrifice my humanity. I’ll leave first.”

He pinned her wrists to her sides. “This is my ship—you’re not going anywhere.” He dragged her into a curtained alcove and threw her onto the bed of animal skins. She squirmed backward and kicked at his gut, but he caught her ankle and dragged her toward him then straddled her.

He leaned close, his breath sharp with wine. “You’re playing at magic, memorizing party tricks. True magic is dark, earthy, the ache in your chest, the burning in your throat. It bruises your mouth and bloodies your hands. In comparison, I am a gentle lover.”

She spit in his face. “I’m not a goat in your cage.”

His shoulders slumped, and he bowed his head. “Oh, for the love of Zeus.” He flopped beside her, the animal pelts releasing a puff of dust, and wiped his face with a piece of hide. “What’s it going to take to make you flinch? I’m trying to help, you know. Once you take the plunge, it’s empowering.”

Mary rolled away, fighting the pelts tangling her legs. Dionysus caught her belt and jerked. “Hold on, we need to finish this. Besides, turning your back on a god is never smart—life lesson for somebody in your profession.”

She tried to twist free, but Dionysus kept his fingers hooked in her belt.

“Seriously,” he said, “other gods would just fuck you and toss you overboard, but I’m trying to help—that was our bargain, wasn’t it? Something has to push you over the edge, otherwise you’ll never understand the Bacchanal.” He forced her face toward him, studying her like uncharted territory. “What’s stopping you? You’re breaking no social mores, hurting no one, so why deny me?”

“If I give myself to you, I may not find my way back. I don’t want one night with a god to change who I am or release anything I can’t control.”

He gripped her shoulders. “Any magic will change you, no matter the source. If you’re afraid of its inerrant darkness, then you’re blind. We all have a portion of madness, passion, darkness, whatever you call it, under our skin. Denying it only creates a cage. Fight or love it, but don’t ignore it.”

He released her and stood, offering his hand. “I have a final surprise for you. I hope you’re prepared to jump.”

She dodged him and rushed into the Temple, but a crowd surrounding the bull statue blocked her exit. The bull’s tail twitched, inciting shouts and applause. The bull shook its head then lowered the stone horns. When it pawed, the hoof struck like a gunshot, chipping the marble floor.

Dionysus slung an arm around Mary’s shoulder. “With my help, you can find the strength to rip off its head before anybody gets hurt—isn’t that what you’re here to learn? Trust me, I don’t want to see your talents wasted.”

Mary reached into her pocket and gripped her pencil, but she needed runes to crush stone, not turn a quarter invisible. She shrugged off Dionysus and nodded at the crowd. “I’d rather put my trust in them.”

“Of course, everyone being gored to death is the better option.”

The bull snorted marble dust, and a man prodded it with a thyrsus. It bellowed and swung, its horns tearing the man’s T-shirt as he stumbled backward. The bull charged, trampling two guests and tossing another.

Mary picked up a discarded fawn skin and hurried toward the guests still gathered around the bull as if it were only a hallucination. “Move! Get back!” She placed herself between them and the bull.

The stone bull lumbered forward, but when Mary snapped the skin, it veered for her, away from the scattering crowd. The right horn grazed her hip, and she stumbled against a pillar. The bull faced her, dipping its head and spattering a few droplets of blood while huddled groups peered from behind statues and pillars. Three men rushed to the door, but it was locked.

“I need all your help,” Mary said as she flicked the fawn skin at the bull. It snorted and twitched its ears, the stone grating.

“When it charges, it’s going to hit the pillar. That should stun it. I need all of you to pile on top. Try to break off the legs and horns. It’s just stone.”

Only the bull acknowledged her. It trotted forward then galloped, the hooves striking like sledgehammers. Mary leaned onto her good leg and swung around the pillar as stone cracked against stone. The bull sunk to its knees, both horns crushed. A long fracture split the head from nose to shoulders. Mary dropped over the bulging neck, holding on by the horn stumps. As the bull shuddered beneath her, the chiseled muscles straining and grinding, Mary squeezed her eyes shut.

“Now! Drag him down!”

The crowd surged forward. Men threw themselves over the churning shoulders; women piled onto the fluttering ribcage. Guests beat the lancelike thyrsi against the wagging head, and the ears snapped. A woman hacked off the tail, but a hoof punched her in the stomach. She struggled to her feet as three others filled her place, attacking with thyrsi.

“Roll him over,” Mary said, pulling at the horn stumps. “Take off his legs!”

The crowd heaved, turning the bull onto its side. When Mary and enough of the guests leaned onto the right foreleg, it snapped. They splintered the back legs then, at her urging, pried open the head along the fracture.

Mary emerged from the tangle of people still carving up the statue and claiming souvenirs. She clutched a broken shard of horn, the ragged edge cutting her palm. Marble dust stuck to her lips and ground between her teeth even after she spit. The bull’s dismembered torso resembled a block fresh from the quarry, the curves and polish savaged by the guests. Blood from split knuckles and torn fingernails smeared the body.

Mary limped toward the door, her gashed leg only dully aching due to the wine. She paused, unhooking Dionysus’ fedora from its hanger. Across the Temple, his Maenad flock protected him. His horns, now long and sharp, glowed in the candlelight. With a flourish, she tilted the hat over one eye and grinned.

He spread his arms as if to embrace her. “Welcome to the Bacchanal.”

Mary dropped the horn shard. Her blood darkened the root as if she’d wrenched it from a living creature. Her throat burned, and she pressed a fist to her mouth as her elation drained, leaving a trembling, hollow feeling. She sagged against the locked door then punched it until her knuckles split. With a bloody finger, she painted a rune meant to spark tinder, but her hollowness fueled the magic. The door flashed with fire and fell off its hinges, the crash echoing.

She bowed toward Dionysus and backed out of his Temple.

Wothan the Wanderer

Mary tracked Odin and his tattoo shop to different locales as he joined a shady circus or the backside of a county carnival, but the proprietors never remembered his face or who recommended him or where his paperwork had gone.

After tracing his general pattern for a year, Mary guessed he'd stop next in Pennsylvania and called every fair or fireman's carnival scheduled in July, asking for information on his many names: All-Father, Gallows Lord, Wothan the Wanderer, Shifty-Eyed, the Gore God. A worker at the Wolf's Run County Carnival said he might've heard something about a weird tattoo artist going by the name of Wothan.

Mary gripped her satchel as she followed the walkway packed with men and women in hunter's orange, parents pulling children by their wrists, boys in sweaty undershirts holding hands with girls in cutoff shorts. Junk jewelry carts and woodcraft sellers vied for attention with the food vendors, but ninety-degree heat caused long lines at the ice cream stands and lemonade carts. People crowded the benches, slurping milkshakes. Mary tasted sugar in the air when she passed a cotton candy vendor. Her stomach clenched, but she refused to waste money on the overpriced food. Flies blackened overflowing trashcans, rising in a swarm if somebody tried to pile another ketchup-laden French fry container on top. A local radio station's truck half-blocked

the path and wailed country music while across a demolition derby arena, amusement park rides creaked and rattled, their whining engines constant as the flies' buzzing.

Mary slipped through long sheds housing crafting contests and baked goods raffles but skipped the freshly painted barns reeking of cow manure and horse sweat, searching for the out-of-the-way corner where psychics, religious groups, and oddity sellers lurked. She skirted the neon barricades of games as children begged for one more try to pop the balloon, and the barkers called for attention: "Plush teddy bear, just what the pretty little lady wants. Here, Miss, have a try."

As the game stalls thinned, she took a side path lined with tents selling biker's leather and Confederate flag T-shirts, the air scented with new leather. Down the path, a walk-through trailer's western-style paint job advertised a Sight to Marvel and Malign the Mind—the World's largest Rat! smallest Horse! and ugliest Lady! The Christian and Missionary Alliance's pavilion sagged next door, their members handing out pamphlets and wooden cross pendants. Opposite, Madame Gorbachova's Psychic Services offered free palm reading. The path ended in a cul-de-sac of dented trailers. A final tent was staked in the center.

Black canvas stretched taut between white ash poles etched with armored figures and giants. Hemp charms weighted by dangling stone figurines hung from ropes and lined the canopied entrance. Mary caressed a small raven, the wings outstretched, and a tremor jolted her arm. A heavy curtain shielded the entrance, and silver letters announced that Wothan the Wanderer, the Traveling Tattooist Trained in the Pleasures of Body Art was currently performing, shows on the half hour. A cool draft leaked from the entrance.

Mary slipped behind the heavy curtain into a gloomy arena, and like breaking a seal, the heat and carnival clamor seeped in behind her. The audience never turned, even the back row strained toward the stage, but Wothan fixed his single eye on Mary.

He stood on a wooden stage painted with a swirling galaxy, the stars glinting in the dim light—an overhead beam mimicking the moon. He emphasized his empty eye socket by tilting a wide-brimmed hat over his good eye. Wrinkles cracked his skin, but his hair and trimmed beard remained black. A cloak embroidered with tattoo-like Celtic designs rippled down his broad shoulders and rigid back. His gaze lifted as he faced his assistant, or Wish Maiden as he called her—another name for a Valkyrie.

Mary let out a shaky breath and eased into a back seat far from the nearest man. Ratty velvet blanketed the folding chairs and smelled of spiced incense and body odor. The audience consisted of men in camouflage T-shirts and baggy jeans. Those seated by the aisle spat tobacco juice into the dirt walkway.

The Wish Maiden strutted among the audience to select volunteers, which incited muttered comments and whistles. High heels emphasized her legs. She grinned, flashing perfect teeth, and licked her full lips. She wore a metal corset with her skin flashing through lacelike designs cut in the front and sides. The back only tied halfway, but her blonde hair hid her exposed shoulders. She tousled the boys' hair or caressed their bearded faces before choosing a volunteer, guiding him up the rough cut stairs with an arm around his waist.

The audience only had eyes for the Wish Maiden, which Wothan's sleight of hand exploited. His act mostly consisted of the Maiden exposing part of her flawless skin to the crowd then Wothan muttering Old Norse, passing his cloak over her, and making a tattoo appear. He encouraged participants to test his magic by trying to smudge the ink or searching her skin for

concealed designs. By the show's end, traditional flash tattoos—nearly naked Gypsies, sailor girls, nautical stars, gliding swallows, and writhing dragons—covered her body.

Wothan's guttural voice filled the tent, and a commanding tone edged his words. "How many of you young, red-blooded, American men would like to take this lovely maiden home for a night?"

Whistles and obscene calls made Mary flip up her hood. The Wish Maiden blew a few kisses and took a sweeping bow that made the front row crane their necks.

"I'm afraid I can't spare her, but for an extra five dollars, she will apply a tattoo sure to bring plenty of—shall we call it pleasure?"

Only the boys, grinning sixteen-year-olds, lined up in front of the Wish Maiden, receiving a temporary tattoo of a topless Gypsy that the Maiden made a great show of wetting with her tongue before smoothing it across each boy's forearm.

Wothan waited at the entrance and traced the tattoos with a knotty wand, muttering a salacious phrase. Mary pulled out her notepad and sketched Wothan's design. After the Wish Maiden forced the final boy out, Wothan flourished his silver-veined cape over her head then snapped it back—she vanished. Without the cloak's enveloping folds, he appeared leaner, more muscular. Like a weightlifter, veins ridged his arms under faded green ink. He rolled his black T-shirt's sleeves, displaying a raven tattoo on each bicep, their outstretched wings disappearing along his collarbones. Runes inked the folds of his neck, and Mary recognized designs to protect against harm from behind and turn him invisible to those who wished him violence. She had hand-tattooed similar runes on her wrists using a sewing needle and pen ink but kept the designs hidden with makeup.

He tossed the cape over a chair and clapped his hands. “Let me have a look at you, my intruder.”

From a hidden fixture, the lights brightened, and the spotlight shone on Mary. She squinted, shading her eyes and gripping her pencil like a knife, but she stepped out of the light and bowed. “All-Father, I’ve come to make a request.”

Odin straddled a chair, his arms folded along the backrest. “It’s been a long while since anyone called me that.”

“It’s the form of address a Viking might make before asking supplication.”

He turned his head, catching her with his good eye. “Times have changed. Perhaps I prefer Gallows Lord. Besides, you’re too short for one of my warriors. Let me guess, you want a miserable Spell against the Evil Eye tattooed on your neck—like the other magicians.”

Mary dropped her satchel on a chair beside him and removed a thousand-page book with a broken spine and a nearly illegible ornate title: *Runes Appropriate for the Decoration of Body and Soul*. She balanced the book on her forearms, opened to a list of the eighteen runes—Odin’s runes—that not only made up the Old Norse alphabet but unlocked the words’ potential to create magic. “Since I am training to become a runist, these seem more fitting.”

He stood, heat radiating from his skin, and the scent of carrion sickened her. “For nine days, I hung from a tree with a spear in my side to win half of these runes. For the others, I gave my eye. What could you give?”

She returned the book to her satchel and cast her lie. “You need somebody to display your handiwork and carry on your legacy. It’s bigger than a carny show.”

“Mary Collins, age twenty-one, graduated from Stanford with a degree in computer sciences, minor in medieval studies. No magic in the family heritage, which is largely Italian with a touch of Native American. You’re not my kind.”

“So a bunch of boys from Hicksville deserve your magic?” Mary held up her drawing of the rune—a braided infinity symbol. “I saw you tracing this on the tattoos.”

“Clever girl to write it down. The last time, somebody simply traced it over his arm and in so doing, imprinted his shirt’s checked pattern onto his flesh. Ended up calling it a birthmark, I believe.”

“It’s a Bonding rune. You made each of those tattoos permanent. Why go to all the trouble?”

Odin placed his foot on a chair and folded his arms over his knee, his shoulders hunched, predatorlike, and staring eye-to-eye with Mary. She retreated a step.

“Every day when they look in the mirror, they’ll think of me. When the woman passing on the sidewalk stares and sneers, they’ll think of me. When others ask about the tattoo, they’ll tell a story about me, or even better, lie—invent a story to explain away the chaos I’ve seared onto their skin. These boys will remember me for the rest of their lives.”

“You mean they’ll hate you. If you’re looking for worship, you won’t find it in their thoughts.”

“Don’t disregard rage. My Berserkers felt little love for me, but they fulfilled my purpose.”

“These are backwoods kids, not bloodthirsty warriors.”

“You think they deserve better? I could tell you the futures of each of those young men.” He pointed to different chairs. “A coward in combat. Steals his brother’s wife. A murderer. But maybe my tattoo will send them into degeneracy or send them into a convent for repentance. I’ve added a little chaos into their lives, a wild card—enough to alter the future beyond my foresight.”

She sketched another rune, vortex-shaped meant to glimpse the future as if peering through a keyhole. “But not all of them would have become dishonorable.” She ripped off the page and pressed the rune against a seat, witnessing a pinhole portion of the last occupant’s future. “Police chief, decorated. Doubt that’s going to happen with a stripper tattoo.”

Odin cupped her chin and tilted her face upward. She jerked at his touch, but his fingernails pricked like claws. “You question my designs—the God of Wisdom and Gore? You should know by now it’s a magician’s job to obey the gods.”

She stepped out of his reach. “Like you said, times change. I serve no deity.”

“So you’re a wanderer—no altar to call home. That makes me your god.” He swept open the entrance curtain, motioning her outside. “After my little show, you’re still willing to trust me with your skin?”

“Since it’s in your best interest, yes. From now on, my magic will hold a part of your signature—and I’m willing to pay.”

Sunlight burned off Odin’s showman persona fast as oil, leaving only his inhuman presence. He swept off his hat and shook out his sweaty hair, scowling against the noonday sun. His T-shirt stretched tight across his broad chest and clung to his shoulders while his tattoos gleamed. He stalked the throughway, the crowd parting before him without a glance but bumping into Mary or blocking her path, so she walked in Odin’s footsteps.

He slipped between a funnel cake cart and pocket-knife seller into a trailer lot and strode between the dented RVs. He unlocked a vintage trailer, holding the door for Mary. A festering smell filled the air. Bear and wolf pelts carpeted the floor and blanketed a small bed wedged against the back wall. Black feathers dusted the countertop, Mary guessed from Odin’s ravens Huginn and Muninn—thought and memory. A driftwood bird perch stood by the only

uncurtained window, and a half-eaten rabbit bloodied a metal tray screwed to the perch. Picked-clean ribs arced over torn fur, and its remaining eye stared at Mary. She gagged and turned away. Weapons lined the walls, creating an armory rather than a sense of style—shields painted red and white, swords with runed hilts, silver-inlaid scabbards, a yew longbow with carved ivy tendrils. Battle scene tapestries, haunted by a cloaked Odin, hung over the windows, and two stuttering candles had been placed in makeshift lanterns made from empty mead bottles labeled in Icelandic. Drinking horns hung over the counter.

Odin lounged at a small table fitted with bench seats and patted a narrow spot next to him, but Mary only placed her book on the table, avoiding a dark stain. He flipped through the section dedicated to the runes he'd discovered, granting him wisdom and ultimately, magic. The thin paper whispered beneath his fingers. Illustrations showed his simple runes in different designs, each change giving the tattoos a certain bent—to protect the wearer against enemy weapons, unfriendly spells, poisons or to offer good luck, health, endurance. The final design, bookmarked by a ribbon, depicted nine interlocking circles binding the body. Instead of a specific concentration, the wearer willed the runes into action against whatever problems a situation might present just as a Norse skald might mold the same eighteen runes into an intricate metaphor.

Odin tapped the page. “If you were merely a rune writer, you’d want a Wisdom tattoo, but you’re inking yourself in battle finery.”

“Trickster gods like you turn magic against others without a second thought, so I need some protection. Besides, when it comes to runes, I want to become one of the best runists.”

“Then you can’t fear getting your hands dirty. They’ll be covered in blood one day, and so the trick is to make sure it’s not yours.” He stood, circling her, forcing her to shuffle aside. “I

hope your ambition means you're willing to pay my sacrifice." He unzipped her sweatshirt and eased it off. "You've studied the gods long enough to know what I desire."

She hooked her fingers in his jeans, pulling him closer. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

He pressed her against the counter, and his lips bruised hers, his teeth sharp. She leaned into him, mussing his hair then running her fingers along his jaw line as a wolf's muzzle. He tore at her belt, ripping down her jeans, and his hand brushed a month-old tattoo scarring the skin beneath her navel.

Mary stepped out of herself and backed away, pulling up her jeans. A translucent double, the rune book had called it her shadow, continued fulfilling Odin's sacrifice, but she felt like the shadow, watching as Odin forced her other self onto the bed.

Mary rested her palm against the waistline tattoo she'd hand-inked with a sewing needle—a knot with mazelike threads. The rune combined a Welsh design meant to help a person escape thieves by casting a double and an Irish rune to stop unwanted guests from entering a house. She hadn't tested it before now.

Outside, she waited for them to finish and huddled on a cinderblock outside, shivering beneath the July sun. Her back felt exposed, and when she turned, no shadow mirrored her—an unforeseen loss. The tattoo had gone cold, icy tendrils freezing her skin, unlike the unresponsive runic scripts she'd cast in her notebooks, performing silly things like creating fire that wouldn't scorch or preserving a rose through the frost so it bloomed all winter—not defying a god.

Odin shouldered open the screen door and stretched, hollowing his shoulders so his black T-shirt pulled tight across his chest. He licked his lips then sauntered toward Mary. "Dangerous game, tricking a god." He struck just as she stepped aside, but he still caught a fistful of her sweatshirt. He gripped her by the throat and slammed her against the trailer. His icy hands put a

chill beneath her skin, and the emptiness of his missing eye glared as fierce as the glow in the other. His inhumanly cool breath smelled of frozen turf and snow-slushed seas.

She swallowed but choked, his fingers tightening and nails splitting her skin. She tried to pry open his hand. “I’m only following your example.”

He bared his teeth, but his grip loosened.

She sucked in a breath. “You stole the mead of poetry by making love to a woman for three days before running off. If you’d given me a test of strength or courage like one of your warriors, I wouldn’t have to rely on trickery.”

He released her throat and dragged her by a fistful of her sweatshirt behind his trailer, hidden from view. “Strength and courage, is it? Fine, I’ll test your stamina.” From beneath the trailer, he pulled a metal briefcase and plastic folding table, forcing open the legs. “Take off your clothes.”

“What are—”

“Strip or I’ll do it for you.”

Mary hesitated until Odin stepped toward her. She kicked off her sneakers and slipped out of her jeans then underwear while Odin watched as he opened the briefcase and assembled his tattoo gun. She tugged off her T-shirt and unhooked her bra, dropping them on top of the pile. She planted her bare feet, back straight and hands clenched at her sides.

He slapped the table. “Lie face down.”

She crawled on top, the plastic cold against her skin, and stretched out, her feet hanging off the edge and chin resting on her folded hands. She shivered even though the sun scorched her.

Odin smoothed his hands down her spine and over her hips as if flattening an unruly canvas. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her arms against her ribs as he caressed her lower back, tracing a rune—one of his eighteen.

Metal clicked against metal, and the tattoo gun whirred. “If you squeal, I’ll cut out your tongue.”

The needle stabbed, and Mary ground her teeth then bit into the flesh of her palm.

Hour by hour, Odin’s needle laced runes and ink into scars. The process combined magic and traditional inking techniques, and her skin healed in moments without flaking or scabbing, but the usual irritation became intense pain. His power burned beneath her skin like a fever. Mary’s muscles ached and sweat slicked her hair along her neck and shoulders.

The first time Odin’s needle grazed a vertebra, her body arched, but he forced her flat again, bracing his forearm across her. As the needle progressed up her spine, it felt as if Odin had slit her skin and carved his runes into her bones. Pain pushed her into partial consciousness—a waking dream where the tattoo gun’s whirring became the buzz of black flies crawling over her naked body, their legs pricking her skin. Ropes bound her to a tree, cutting off circulation until her arms and legs felt like deadwood, and a wind warm as breath made the ropes creak, the tree moan.

Odin’s heavy hand brushing the sweaty hair from her face pulled her into the present. The tattoo gun was silent.

“Stand if you like—if you can.”

He held a carved drinking horn with silver rim, the sweet scent of mead adding a bite to the evening air. The sun slipped behind the hills, and multicolored carnival blubs flashed while floodlights lit the crash derby arena. Moths swooped and dove into the beams.

Mary swung her legs over the side and eased herself upright. She tried to take a deep breath, but her chest and sides ached, bruised by the table top. Odin sat beside her, and she turned, facing away. He towed the blood and ink off her back. His rough hands made her flinch.

He slung the towel over his shoulder and sipped from his horn. “About a quarter done, I’d say. The worst is over.” He cupped his hand, cold from the drinking horn, around the curve of her pelvis then played his fingers along her ribs to her shoulder blades. “But there’s still plenty of skin.”

Mary bowed, hair shadowing her face as she bit her already split lip.

He clasped her shoulders and lowered her onto the table again. The dark didn’t stop him. He only leaned closer, his arms propped on her back and his breath raising gooseflesh along her spine.

As the sky grayed and dew mixed with her sweat, Odin turned her toward him. On her side, she tried to draw up her knees, but her back’s stretching skin pulsed. She crossed her arms and closed her eyes as his fingers explored the curves of her hips, the hollows of her ribs.

“Nearly done. Just the finishing touches.”

On both sides, he inked rootlike tendrils around her hips while branches followed her ribs—the only sections of the design she could see. She rolled onto her stomach again, but the tattoo gun, mostly silent, buzzed in spurts. She flinched at each noise.

After a few minutes of quiet, Odin spread a blanket over Mary’s raw back. Sweat and blood from her gnawed lip stained her face, and she wiped herself clean before raising her head, clutching the blanket as she slid off the table. Blood spattered the plastic surface. Her skin prickled, and sweat streaked the extra ink bruising her skin with Odin’s smeared fingerprints. Her back throbbed.

Odin toweled off his bloody hands. “There’s a mirror in the bathroom.”

She gathered her clothes and entered through the backdoor while Odin waited outside. On the bed, a charcoal stain outlined a human shape like an atomic flash burn. She touched the remains

of her shadow, the grit sharp as powdered glass and smelling of Odin's carrion musk. She backed away and shuffled into the tiny bathroom.

A cabinet mirror hung over the sink. Mary turned around and let the blanket fall. She took a shaky breath, braced against the counter, and looked over her shoulder. An ash tree grew across her skin, the trunk following her backbone while branches spread along her shoulder's bends and roots curved around her hips like fingers. The trunk had been shaped from a column made of Odin's runes. Roots, branches, and leaves were also created from runes, fine-lined as capillaries, and read from left to right, forming sentences—letters for magic and words. The Old Norse alphabet consisted of the same magic runes, so every spell also became a statement.

A single glance branded the boldest runes into her memory. Mary faced the mirror, pressing her aching back against the cool shower door. Runes flashed behind her eyes, and she jammed her fists against her sockets. The runes sorted themselves, and automatically, she translated her own saga. Odin had fulfilled his promise and tattooed the powerful runes, but he had used them to write a prophecy in her skin. After the flare of fear burned off, she took another look, half-perched on the sink and angling toward the mirror until her spine popped. She reversed the runes and mouthed the words as she translated whole paragraphs, her past recorded in the roots and her future in the branches, all supported by the trunk of eighteen runes—what she'd requested of Odin.

Her life story bloomed from the base of her spine, growing in gleaming lines that tangled into roots or branches of Nordic runes that not only controlled the supernatural but language, spelling out the possibilities of magic while binding her with a predicted future: her pursuit of knowledge would turn the next years tumultuous, and for each runic triumph, something of great importance would be lost, partially in sacrifice to the gods as Odin would not be the last deity to cross her

path—other tricksters would find her, come to her with the frequency of lovers. She never married, no children, and her friends remained spread along her travels and would call her a wanderer, but her search for runic knowledge would be a success, her power growing. She'd gain recognition from other practitioners of the Magical Arts before her early death near age fifty. While not suicide, she played a part in her passing—a violent end. She'd survived deceiving Odin with only surface wounds but had sacrificed her shadow to receive another.

She punched the mirror, a web of cracks distorting the glass. A second blow shattered it and bent the cabinet door. Shards filled the sink. Her hand bled over the glittering bits, but the fresh stinging dulled her back pain. She used an edge to cut a length from the blanket then rinsed her hand until the water ran clear and bound up the wounds.

She wiped off stray ink and Odin's fingerprints. With a damp corner, she swabbed her face and neck. She held her breath as she tugged on her T-shirt, the material making her skin tingle. The waistline of her jeans rubbed the fresh ink with each step. She zipped her sweatshirt to her neck, and holding up a large piece of mirror, combed her fingers through her sweat-tangled hair.

Outside, Odin faced the sun, his wide-brimmed hat tilted to shade his good eye. Her blood still stained his hands. Neither cast a shadow.

Mary shoved her fists into her pockets to hide her trembling. "You need a new mirror."

"Next time, take a closer look at my designs. I've hidden all sorts of runic spells in the roots and branches. If you ever learn to use the tattoos, you will be a fine piece of my magic."

"I'm not yours. We've made a business transaction—that's all."

He clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be so cold, Mary. It doesn't suit you. No human calls on a god and escapes unscarred."

"These scars will make me better, not control me. I freed my future by coming to you."

“You never needed me, as proved by your little bedroom trick. Your homemade tattoo fooled me long enough to demonstrate your talent. In a few years, you could have tattooed yourself with almost the same result, but you chose me, and in doing so, your future.”

She strode around the trailer toward the main pathway, but Odin followed her.

“In case you didn’t read your prophecy that far ahead, we’ll meet again in four years. I’m looking forward to it.”

“We’ll see,” she said under her breath. She left him standing in the morning sun like a lost ruin, surrounded by rusty trailers and the distant rattle and crash of carnival rides.

Trickster Shop

As a student of Runic Magic, Mary had written her triple-checked Spell of Greeting next to Loki's name on her wrist, and when she arrived at his shop, she traced a Welcome rune in the winter condensation on the glass door. A wooden sign, carved letters spelling *Trickster Shop*, banged the siding with each burst of wind. As a two-toned whistle announced her entrance, she wiped slush on an oriental doormat. The mat shuddered and flew off, flooring her.

A man with wire spectacles and a corduroy jacket leaned against a glass counter. "Need to be careful with those lucky charms."

She used the door handle to heave herself upright. A faint mist collected in the corners and along the molding of the shop. Shelves towered over her, blanketed by dust and dividing the room into three aisles, each fading into gloom. A pale face peeked out, giggled, and vanished. Metal clattered, and wood groaned deep in the corners. Spicy incense clung to the air as if she stood inside an empty temple.

"Got to cast runes on a solid surface." He pointed at the door. "Not something drippy."

A dirty streak of water split the rune into something resembling a Loose Footing Curse.

She smoothed her long coat. "Loki, *ykkarr andskoti dúði innan hel hjá yakkarr—*"

He drummed his fingers on the countertop. "No, no, you just said let my enemies be tossed into hell beside me—not the best blessing."

“But I’ve checked this with my professor—”

“A god, is he? Getting lunch with Odin this Sunday, huh?” He waltzed around the counter, hands on his hips.

“He’s head of the Mythic Magic Graduate Department at—”

“And regurgitating books like a mother penguin counts as learning these days? Good gods, we’re lost worse than Odysseus.”

She unbuttoned her coat. “Loki, I’ve been hired by the—”

“Hired? You’re too young. And short.”

“Height has nothing to do with age. I’m twenty-four. Now, I’ve been—”

He clicked his tongue. “Grew women taller in my day.”

She took a notepad from her back pocket, a pencil stub threading the rings, and scribbled a circle combined with a triangle, weathervane shapes sprouting from the corners.

Loki massaged his throat then wagged a finger at her.

“I’ve been hired by the Mythopoeic Bureau of Investigation to be a consultant once I complete graduate school.”

He loped behind the counter and pulled a wooden box from a shelf of wide-spined books.

“My professor, Dr. Finch, sent me here in hopes of learning some useful runes from you—preferably for Invisibility, Discovery of Mischief, Lie Detecting, Escape, et cetera.”

The box held rows of paper squares ordered by lettered filing cards. He thumbed through the C section, plucked one, licked it, and slapped it on his wrist. He peeled off the waxy paper, revealing a black compass design. “While I applaud your usage of a Silence rune, you could use more practice since I just counteracted it with a children’s tattoo.”

She pulled a slip from the D section. “I doubt even you give out Death by Blood Poisoning Curses to children.”

He snatched it and shut the box. “All the time. Like candy.”

“Then you won’t have a problem helping me with my runes.”

“You can get all the help you desire from *The Golden Bough*. You don’t need me.”

“It’s more than runes. I want to catch tricksters.”

He shook his head. “Got to be one yourself. Too straight-laced, and you can’t get into their beady little brains.”

“If you help me, I’ll have my own bag of runes to match whatever they’ve got, and—”

“And what? You’re the good guy? My kind have been running circles around you for centuries.” With his thumb, he erased the rune to a black smudge. “It would be interesting, though, if you learned the master’s secrets. Wouldn’t be quite as boring.”

He rolled his shoulders, and a rust colored tail grew beneath his jacket like an unraveling thread. “It’d keep the others on their toes.” Fox ears sprouted from his dull hair. “Well, before I sign you on as a full time worshipper, you have to run the shop for the rest of the day.” He wrapped his arms around his knees, his reddening body shrinking like a deflating balloon. “I’ll be observing, of course. Can’t let a repeat of Pandora happen, or Odin will hack off my lovely tail.” A fox now, he perched on the counter and licked his leg twice. “If you can finish my list, I might keep you.” He padded along the dim center aisle.

Mary stepped over the returned doormat and flipped a switch by the door, but the shop remained in twilight even after she sketched an Illumination rune. Behind the counter, a to-do list, several items already crossed off, stuck to the cash register keys. *Sign for package, Exterminate ghosts.*

She tore it free and ambled down the middle aisle. Masks hung on pegs, shining with facial grease. She ran her finger down the sloping nose of George Clooney, realistic as a tabloid photo. Another shelf displayed batches of gloves, perfect right down to the fingernail polish. A dangling tag read *Political Handshake* (priced at one vial of witch's blood).

The two-toned whistle sounded.

She strode out of the aisle. "How can I help you?"

A UPS man waited just behind the threshold, shifting from foot to foot and half hidden behind a tall cardboard box. He clutched a clipboard like a shield. "Just sign—here."

She signed, and he wrenched it back, hurrying to his truck.

The box pinned the flying doormat, which stretched and twisted like a cat with a trapped tail. Mary eased the box up, the contents shifting with a whimper and a snuffling noise. She flipped open her pocket knife and sliced the packing tape.

A wolf's gray muzzle pointed at her. Light silver thread encircled his jaws and body until it bound his tail flat as a tied Christmas tree. A piece of parchment stuck from a leather collar, and she snatched it.

He tried to kill me again. —Odin

The wolf put his paws on the edge and lifted his head, ears flat. A collar tag identified him as Fenrir. He tipped the box and stumbled out. Silver thread shackled his hind legs, but it had unraveled around his front paws and trailed on the floor.

She backed off, her hands extended. "Loki! It's your son."

Metal clashed, and a spear rolled from the shadows of the middle aisle. Giggling ricocheted around the corners.

Fenrir crouched, snarled, and bit at the thread then scratched at the collar. His tail wagged.

Another crash echoed, and she shuddered. “Stay.” She jogged past the spear. Piles of knives, lances, and swords waited below an empty shelf like a game of pick-up sticks.

Feet pattered, and something slapped her pant leg.

She took a pen from inside her jacket and sketched onto her hand a different form of the Illumination rune meant to divine ghosts. A pale figure shimmered into focus. He crossed his arms over a broad chest, feet spread wide. His hair was slicked back, and he wore dark clothes—maybe leather—grayed by his ghost light.

He swaggered forward. “Hey, doll.”

“The owner of this shop has asked me to remove any ghosts from the premises. There’s an abandoned apartment building next door, which you may occupy.”

He withdrew a small block of wood from his jacket. “But here we have so many gizmos.” He pried the wood apart, the block growing larger in his hands like a puzzle cube.

“If you don’t vacate the premises, I’ll use magical force.”

“What are you, a fairytale cop?” He tossed the wood onto the floor, already the size of a travel map. It clacked and snapped, curling like a wave. A long plank, inscribed with *Skiðblaðnir*, extended and toppled a shelf. A dragon figurehead clicked into place. Green scales replaced wood, and the dragon shook its head, scales clinking. Its neck dissolved into the hull of the newly formed ship, which listed between shelves while the mast poked through the ceiling. A salty breeze billowed the wide sail. The dragon roared, and flames glowed deep in its throat.

Mary sprinted for the store front when heat singed her. She dove between shelves and pressed against one, her shoulders hunched and pen held tight as smoke billowed down the aisle.

“Take that, ghostbuster!” The words sounded far off, as if over water.

With a puff of dust, Loki nosed past a bronze statue on a shelf across the way. “Loki, one; Mary, zero.”

She wrote in her notebook, balled up the slip of paper, and walked into the ship-wrecked aisle. She bounced on her toes.

Loki leaped off the shelf. “Are you trying to barbecue yourself?”

Fire dripped from the dragon’s horned nostrils, and long spikes bumped along his neck until he blended into the hull with a collar of splinters. The greaser ghost steadied the ship’s wheel while three other specters solidified beside him.

Mary tossed the paper ball at the dragon figurehead and lunged aside. It snuffed the wad with a burst of flames. The ship paled like a setting moon, sail thinned to spider web. A tide of mist cascaded around the hull, and the bow rocked as if at port. The dragon snorted, sprinkling ashes instead of sparks.

“Gather your people and sail off,” Mary said. “The winds will bring you good fortune.”

Dozens of transparent figures zipped past. Next to her, Loki morphed into a man. He squeezed her wrist and pinned her against a shelf. Scents of cinders heated his breath. “That ship wasn’t yours to give.”

She twisted away, his fingers leaving red marks. “You shouldn’t have possessed it in the first place.”

The ship nosed forward, the greaser straddling the dragon’s neck. “Hey, man. Off the little lady, or do I have to haunt you again?”

Loki bowed with a sweep of his arms. “May I offer a gift for your journey?”

“We’re not that stupid.”

The ship pivoted right, passing through shelves until it pierced the far wall, a string of mist in its wake.

Mary pocketed her notepad and tucked the pen behind her ear. “I inverted a Reincarnation rune and combined some runes from an Animation spell so the ship would become like them.”

Loki kicked a shield on the floor. “I know how you did it! I’m a god as your insubordination seems to imply you forget.” He fingered a rough pot shelved among three others. “I was going to give them one of Gideon’s lanterns, too—fighting amongst themselves through eternity on a ghost ship.” He pointed at the wall. “That ship was how I planned on escaping this half-life-hell-of-humanity before Odin tries to end the world again.” He slipped into guttural Nordic tongue, scooped up a spear, and hurled it at Mary.

It halted, tip trembling and catching the threads of her jacket. She side-stepped, and it continued along the hall with a *swoosh*.

“Not much gives Gungnir pause,” he said. His anger had physically changed him. Some of his hard wrinkles had smoothed, and he’d lost the spectacles. His shoulders filled his suit more—no longer corduroy but a dark grey. “Gungnir isn’t perfect, but your Bodily Defense runes must be rather spectacular.” He prowled forward. “Where’s the mark?”

She untucked and lifted her shirt. Rootlike tattoos wrapped around her waist and hips. “I have more—all the original eighteen Norse runes.”

Loki paused, glancing sideways. He slumped into a fox and scaled three shelves to disappear through a hole in the molding.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

A shelf exploded, splinters pricking her neck and clinging to her coat. Fenrir’s head shattered the backboard, jaws snapping and flinging spit. No silver thread tied him.

Mary zig-zagged between shelves. Fenrir's stride vibrated the floorboards. After a final sprint, she paused behind a shelf to scribble a knotty rune then tossed it to the floor. Thorns erupted from the paper, corkscrewing until the aisle became dense with points.

In fox form, Loki slinked across a shelf of goblets. "That won't stop him for more than a minute."

She ran past rows of vases, woven baskets, and pottery. "I told you he was here."

Loki padded along the shelving. "Oh yes, we had a chat. He still, well, blames me for the whole tied-up-for-centuries ordeal, and really, that wasn't me. Tyr came up with that one, but Fenrir won't listen." He flicked his tail.

Mary paused, huffing, at a selection of Japanese weapons and leather Samurai chest plates. She rooted behind mustached helmets and took a sword labeled *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi* (priced at three Wind Dragon scales).

A yelp filled the store, followed by snarling and crunching twigs.

"Even after I untied him," Loki said, "he still wanted to rip out my throat." With a head shake, he leapt over the other side of the shelf.

She shoved it, helmets rolling to the floor. "Come back here! This is your problem!"

Fenrir howled, and Mary hurried one shelf down where cloaks, breastplates, chainmail, and helmets hung from pegs. One empty hook was entitled *Fafnir's Helm* (priced at a day pass to the Underworld). Beneath the tag, she traced the outline of a large circlet with a centered rune. She slipped it onto her shoulder, and her body vanished.

She padded to the store front, pausing every few feet to listen. The fading afternoon sun reflected off the glass counter where the silver thread lay coiled. She wound it around her wrist then scribbled several Summoning runes, leaving the paper on the countertop.

The glass counter rattled, and the cash register drawer opened with a *ching*. She pressed against the far wall, still invisible even with the Samurai sword drawn. Fenrir bounded from aisle one, long thorns falling from his muzzle as he swung his head, sniffing.

Mary crept forward, sword extended. Fenrir's ears flattened.

A wisp of incense crept over her shoulder. "Don't kill him for godsakes! He's my son!"

With a snarl, Fenrir whipped around, jaws clamping onto her sword hand.

Her wrist cracked. She screamed and twisted—her arm ended in splintered bones and flesh hanging like loose threads. Still invisible except for a red trail, she crawled, breathing hard through her nose. She traced a rune on her wounded hand, and the blood slowed to a leak and the pain dulled.

Fenrir licked blood off his lips. Ears perked, he nosed the floor. She crawled around him, stiffening at every paw shuffle and tail flicker, unwinding the silver thread and sketching hieroglyphs with her blood. After encircling him, she stood and whistled.

Fenrir lunged but rebounded into the circle. He smacked his muzzle again then paced, banging his shoulder against the invisible wall every few steps.

She moaned and collapsed against a shelf. The invisibility circlet slipped off her arm, and she tucked it inside her coat. Loki waltzed down the aisle in human form.

She gasped, body quaking. "You—you did this."

"And you've proved your ability to handle the problems of a god, a necessary skill here." He waved at Fenrir, who rammed the invisible wall. Loki slipped her arm through his and led her to the counter. This time, he'd changed to a slender man with white teeth, blond hair, and a pinstriped suit. He sat her on a stool. A wooden box rested on the counter, and runes decorating the lid translated to "leavings of the wolf."

After wiping clean her stump with a handkerchief, Loki lifted the lid, revealing a hand, blood still oozing from the ragged wrist. “This should fix things.”

She jerked, but he dug in his nails. “I don’t need someone else’s hand. Stop it!”

He placed the still-warm flesh against her splintered bones. “You’ll need it to work at my shop, and I can teach you a rune to hide it.” He released her, flicking the blood from his fingers.

The hand, too large and boney, felt awkward as a manacle dangling from her wrist, but the throbbing pain had ended. Her serrated skin matched the man’s hand like a key in its lock.

“Whose is it?” she asked.

“I’m not your mythological encyclopedia. Besides, all you’ve been doing is asking questions. It’s my turn.” He nodded at the invisible wall. “I thought you were a runic expert.”

“Egyptian hieroglyphs was an elective. I combined a Mummy Containment Curse with the strength of the Gleipnir thread.”

He massaged her new hand, and her skin tingled. “Impressive. Now, about your hours—”

“Who says I’m staying? You got my hand bitten off.”

“And I gave it back. You want to enter the field, correct? Better get used to some wear and tear.” He sidled closer. “I’ll make you a great magician and place you among the gods.”

“I’m going to work as a field agent. That’s all. I want to remain human, Loki.”

He patted her new hand. “Too late. You’re already a part of my world.”

She pressed her hands together. The other fingers were longer than the originals. “Not completely.” She buttoned her coat, testing the hand’s dexterity.

He waved. “We’ll see.”

Mary slogged through slush to her car. With a glance at the frosty shop windows, she reached inside her coat and brushed the invisibility circlet. She’d return it tomorrow.

Party Games

To celebrate Mary's last day at the Trickster Shop, Loki said they were going out and she'd need a dress. He waited at her apartment, leaning against a 1934 Indian motorcycle. When she joined him, he gave her a critical look, circling to examine her gauzy, fitted black dress with a buttoned cardigan hiding her runic tattoos. A night with Loki would mean more than fancy food, so she'd chosen flats instead of heels and tucked her notepad, pencil, and prewritten runes for quick god deterrent beneath a wide waist belt.

"Passable," Loki said. His positive or negative attitude dictated his bodily form. Tonight his platinum hair tied in a loose ponytail framed high cheekbones and a sharp jawline while his eyes shone crisp as a blue jay feather. A slim-fit tuxedo emphasized his muscular body. "But lose the sweater."

"My tattoos will show."

He stepped behind her and tugged off the cardigan. "Oh my, not very virginal, Mary."

The dress exposed her back, her skin more like canvas. A full-back tattoo of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, spread from her tailbone and branched across her shoulders. The trunk featured the eighteen runes of power as discovered by Odin, her tattooist. Smaller, fine-lined runes pressed together like a mosaic to form roots, branches, and leaves. Since Odin's runes of power also

created the Old Norse alphabet, each cluster composed a spell and a sentence. The roots explained her past while the branches and leaves prophesied her future.

Loki's finger brushed her skin, tracing a branch. "Ah, here we are, prophesied on this very evening, but what an ambiguous ending to the night."

Mary shivered at his touch, and stepped aside, reaching for her sweater. "That's why I keep them covered."

"No, no, you look better without the sweater. Most will ignore the tattoos while the rest of us will think it rather brave of you, if not naïve. You can use that to your advantage."

"What's this about, Loki? If you're taking me somewhere just to show off then I'm staying home."

Loki mounted the motorcycle. "I have a final assignment for you. Consider it a cumulative exam. Thanks to me, your knowledge of runes is unrivaled, but that's not what I wanted to teach you. If you haven't learned what I intended then the rest is merely for show. You want to catch tricksters, so catch me one, if you can."

She slid on behind him, hesitating before settling her arms around his waist. "Of course I can. I've been around tricksters long enough to set a trap. But where are we going?"

He kicked up the stand and opened the throttle. "To party with the Devil." The Indian surged forward until evening out at ninety. Loki speeded along country roads bordered with cow pastures and hay fields. Mary tightened her hold as he leaned into the curves. They revved through a small town called Hellum onto a wooded lane. At a narrow turnoff, Loki veered onto a dirt road where ruts jolted Mary while underbrush whipped her legs. The bouncing headlight shone on a spiked gate supported by splintered posts, but Loki swerved around it. A second wrought iron gate blocked the trail. Two gargoyles perched on brick support pillars, their faces

contorted into silent screeches, their wings arched as if ready to swoop. Loki accelerated, and Mary slumped behind him as they bore down on the gargoyles. Her heartbeat tripled, and adrenaline made her hands shake. She buried her face between Loki's shoulders.

The Indian burst through the gates, spewing dust as Loki braked. The setting sun replaced treetops, a mountain ridge cut a jagged horizon, and the underbrush transformed to a desert expanse broken by a cluster of buildings. Mary loosened her hold around his waist. Loki appeared unshaken. She glanced back, but the desert stretched into twilight.

“What just happened?”

He pushed the motorcycle to sixty, pulling out of the dust cloud. “We passed through Hellum's Second Gate of Hell into the Mojave Desert.”

They skimmed across the cracked dirt toward buildings rising from the desert. Bonfires the size of trucks lit one outer building, a rectangular Greek temple over two hundred feet long with twenty-foot columns. Its glossy paint reflected the setting sun, and it loomed over smaller temples, including a circular building, grapevines wrapping the pillars. The structures seemed almost fragile or makeshift since a slight breeze made them shudder. A tray of fire cast fingering shadows over two obelisks guarding a sphinx-lined hall, and beyond the obelisks spread Persian tents, African thatch-roofed towers, Native American tepees, Celtic cairns, and Indian domed palaces. A smaller camp consisted of a four-armed, heavy-hipped statue surrounded by nylon tents. In the streaking sunset and bonfires' blazing, each temple glittered, and shadows fell just right over the statues' faces, sharpening their frowns. People swarmed the structures, lounging on the steps or at a statue's base, dancing around the bonfires, attending to stone altars. Differing drumbeats throbbed over the growling motorcycle. A panoramic view suggested stage scenery meant to awe.

Loki slowed and turned into a crowded bazaar. The sputtering engine cleared a path, and if not, Loki's guttural Old Norse cursing shifted the people. On the fringe, fold-up pavilions manned by Americans in dreadlocks sold incense, trinkets, and idols while cardboard booths and plywood lean-tos displayed paintings and tapestries honoring Diana, Anansi, and Kali. A long smithy tent advertised in English, Norwegian, and Icelandic competitively priced blades and armor ready to receive a god's blessing. Two shirtless men worked at a forge, the embers adding to the desert heat. An animal stink rose from scrap-wood corrals penning lambs, kids, and calves. Bulls bellowed from a series of stalls, their horns visible over the doors. Other booths sold chickens and doves, the crates stacked high. Bakers listed their fresh loaves on hanging chalkboards, and their odor overpowered the animal sweat. Wine- and beer-sellers called out which gods preferred grapes to grains and offered menus explaining the gods' favorite brands for sacrificial libation—always the most expensive. Other vendors sold twelve-packs from pickup trucks. A tie-dye tent displayed tall hookahs and hand-carved pipes. Baggies of marijuana, peyote, and mushrooms filled candy jars while harder drugs were doled out from a lockbox.

Mary leaned over Loki's shoulder, close to his ear. "This is the Festival of the Gods, isn't it? I got sun poisoning last year wandering around looking for this place."

"It's invite only. Devil invites the gods, and we choose the followers. Talented magicians cause too much trouble. Always asking questions and trying to learn our secrets." He patted her thigh. He turned behind the vendors along a stretch of open ground and coasted to a stop, killing the engine.

The empty sand created a ring around four structures: a series of white tents, a dining pavilion, a grandstand, and a bar. He swung off the motorcycle. "All the prestigious guests stay in the Devil's Quarters. Only gods allowed, no humans unless escorted."

Mary dismounted, smoothing her dress and combing her fingers through her hair. The few runes she'd stitched into the seams had protected the cloth from any stains or torn hems, but sand stuck to her skin. Sunlight intensified wood smoke, incense, and charred meat. Radios blared from the bazaar and voices echoed, the slurred words and different languages mixing.

Loki yelled at a half-naked man wearing a fist-sized pendant of Thor's hammer. "Hey, you Viking! Wheel my bike to the longhouse. I'll pick it up later."

The man whipped around, growling, his eyes bloodshot and teeth bared, but he froze, looking Loki up and down then bowed. "As you command, God of Mischief."

"Just make sure Odin keeps his grubby paws off it." Loki strode over the open sand, and Mary followed, glancing at the Viking who gently touched the handlebars and tank. He glared at Mary and spat.

She caught up with Loki. "Wait, Odin's here?"

"You need an audience if you're going to demonstrate your skills."

Across the open ground, the temperature dropped to a comfortable mid-sixties and a cherry scent freshened the air. The Devil's Quarters revolved around a circular, free-standing bar tended by androgynous figures with long hair and black fingernails. A wide tree, the lower branches stripped, grew from the bar's center. Shelves were screwed into the trunk. Ribbons wrapped around the trunk and upper branches like a maypole, stretching over the gods and tying to the surrounding tents' supports. As the sun set, the lines smoldered then burned without being consumed, illuminating the Quarters with candlelight. Only the humans cast shadows.

The white tents spread near the dividing line, and gauzy hallways connected smaller tents to the main entrance. Beside them, a wide pavilion catered to each god's preferred feast. The crash of swords and thumping of shields ricocheted from the grandstand arena.

Some deities chose traditional outfits, but most had modernized like Loki, wearing tuxedos or gowns. Mary's tattoos marked her as human, but Loki's insistence on a dress separated her from the bohemian pagans and painted warriors. She followed Loki to the bar. The paneling's ornate carvings changed according to the god, telling the story of that deity's greatest triumph. When Loki sat, the bar top depicted a tongue lashing he'd given his fellow gods at an ancient gathering, but the varnished surface before Mary only offered her reflection.

He ordered two meads, but Mary changed her drink to water.

"You're scheming," Mary said. "I'm not going to let you get me tipsy."

The bartender brought the mead in a silver drinking horn with delicate animal paws to hold it upright, but he placed a plain glass in front of Mary.

Loki lunged and caught a fistful of his tuxedo, dragging him half over the bar. "If you slight her, you slight me." Loki pushed back the bartender and swatted the glass, which shattered on the ground. "Bring her a horn." Loki glared at him until he delivered it then adjusted his jacket. "The Fallen Angels are always a little resentful of being relegated to waiting on humans, but that should keep them away for part of the night." He tipped back his head and gulped from the horn.

Mary found the horn unwieldy unless she raised it high like Loki. She set it aside. "Who's this trickster I'm looking for?"

"That's the trick. You have to find me the trickster. Bring me the name of a guest, but be careful of your magic for you are among the gods. Don't get ahead of yourself." He leaned his back against the bar then drained his drink. He licked his lips and called for another. "If you don't have a name for me by dawn, I destroy your memories starting from the day you walked into my shop."

She pressed her fist against her mouth, suppressing an Old Norse curse referring to Loki as a pregnant mare. She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and kept her voice even.

“You can’t do that. Not after all the work I’ve done for you.”

He slipped an arm around her and drew her close, his breath sweet and hot against her hair.

“You forget, Mary. I do whatever I like. The festival is quite extensive, but since you’ve worked so hard and learned so many runes, I doubt it’ll take you no more than, what, half an hour?”

Mary shrugged him off. “When I find this trickster, what’s my reward?”

“My good word whenever you need it.” He raised his horn. “Now, to your future and remembering the past. I’ll give you one hint. I’m not sending you after a known trickster. It’ll be somebody unheard of, somebody fresh.” He chugged the second mead, his swallowing an audible rhythm. He sighed, and glistening liquid trickled from the rim. “If you get lonely, I’ll be in the Temple.” He pointed at the white tents. “Sif and I have a date in the tryst tents—don’t tell Thor.” He sauntered toward the Temple entrance, loosening his bowtie.

Mary felt naked without Loki. The bartender scowled while polishing glasses, and the gods’ gazes raked over her tattoos. A dagger-shaped rune between her shoulders prickled, alerting her that somebody wished her harm.

The bar provided a good vantage point, but she decided to explore the festival and observe the deities. She sketched a map in her notepad, the bar at the center while the festival spread in concentric rings. A trickster would reside either in the center of things or on the fringe. The feast pavilion would be a perfect place to show off and maybe embarrass a few deities. She crossed the sands, swerving to avoid the gods whose strides never faltered.

A waltz played inside the pavilion without an orchestra or speakers. Candles hung upside down from the ceiling, reflecting off the wait staff’s gold platters. A hive of waiters passed

between the gods and two parallel tables loaded with rich foods. Golden bowls held towers of fruit ranging from apples to spikey rambutan, and herb bunches scented the air with hints of basil and mint, while shallow dishes cupped ground spices. Bushel-sized bread baskets set at the tables' ends and never emptied as waiters sliced rye, wheat, and sourdough or tore apart naan and pita. Between the tables, an ember-filled trench roasted whole boars, deer, sheep, goats, and even a bear. Dripping fat popped and caused the fire to flare.

Mary walked the pavilion's edge, searching for a place to sit and observe. Identifying scents wafted from the gods' tables. Poseidon's brine matched his laughter, harsh as a wave scraping a pebbled beach. He ate with a Chinese sea goddess judging by the storm wind aroma rising from her red dress. Three South American gods spoke Mayan combined with Spanish and Latin, and their fragrances of roasting maize, wet leaves, and jungle earth mixed as easily as their words. Thor and Heimdallr, fresh furrows with a hint of blood, gulped from long horns, but Thor's wife Sif was absent. As Mary passed, Thor met her gaze and smiled—true to his nature, a friend of man.

Her tattoos grew feverish and tingled as her protective runes clashed with the gods' presences, sensing ill will especially from the wait staff. Disgust for all the humans radiated strong as their sulfurous stench. She identified the others by the way they draped over their deities like colorful sashes. The men and women appeared dazed whether by alcohol, drugs, or magic, Mary couldn't discern.

A waiter blocked her path, standing so close his sulfuric odor made her eyes tear. He gripped her wrist with scalding fingers and motioned her outside. "You should eat with your kind."

She braced against his pull. "My friend said he'd joined me here," she lied, "but he must not have arrived yet."

A dark man excused himself from a nearby table and called her name. The scowling waiter stepped aside. The man wore a tan three piece suit with an ivory tie, but dirt smudged his shoes and pants. He escorted her to an empty table, and his touch exuded no magic, dampening the atmosphere's buzz. He smelled only of Armani cologne. While handsome with curly hair, he didn't possess the gods' flawless skin—three pockmarks spotted his jaw and a scar twisted his right eyebrow.

“Thanks for the rescue,” Mary said. “But I’m afraid I don’t know you.”

He drew out her chair. “Not formally. I saw your presentation at the Convention of Norse Runology. Your understanding of runic devices in the sagas is rather impressive. And please, don’t mention it. The Fallen Angels are always giving me looks even though I’ve done business with the Devil several times. I’m Jakob Meers.”

“How did my fellow human end up among the gods?”

“That obvious, is it? I was Bast’s lover for several years, so I always have an invitation, and my work provides me with plenty of connections. I’m a writer specializing in, well, let’s call it rediscovering lost manuscripts from ancient to modern times.”

“So you forge documents?”

“Anything from Egyptian hieroglyphs to Hemingway’s drafts. When a god starts to feel old, he will look me up, and for the right price or favor, I’ll write a story about him. Find a desperate scholar to discover the work, and we’re all happy—the scholar makes his career, the god receives some fresh attention, or worship as they like to call it, and I have money in my pocket and another secret to leverage. But what about you? Let me guess—the distant granddaughter of Helen.”

“I’m sort of working for this god, Loki, and I think he brought me here to mess with me.”

“Ah, Loki, I know him,” Jakob said. “That must be exciting times for a magician like you. You’re an actual runist, not just a scholar, correct? I couldn’t help but notice your beautiful tattoos.”

“Yes, I start my training at the Mythopoeic Bureau of Investigation in two weeks if I get through tonight. I’ve spent the last few months studying with Loki, and he says there’s an unidentified trickster here. If I don’t give him this trickster’s name, Loki is going to make me forget everything I learned from him. I thought a feast might be a good place to start since tricksters like to show off.”

Jakob nodded at the pavilion’s entrance. “There’s more than one trickster here tonight.”

Dionysus staggered inside, and his two Maenads partially supported him. He wore a dark fedora and a suit the color of a bruise.

Mary ducked her head and faced away from the entrance.

“I see you know Dionysus,” Jakob said.

“Know? I wish I’d never met him.”

She tried not to stare as a waiter led Dionysus past her table, but Dionysus stopped and spun around. He swaggered over, his Maenads trailing.

“Five years later and you’re still sitting at the kids’ table.”

“Careful, Dionysus,” Jakob said. “Or a nasty poem by an ancient playwright might show up at a dig in Greece.”

Mary reached beneath her belt and palmed two prewritten runes scribbled onto folded notecards. If she rubbed the circular designs clockwise, a timer would start to activate the second layer of runes—thorny-looking sparks ready to ignite.

Dionysus leaned over the back of her chair, his breath sour with wine. His dry lips brushed her ear. “You’ll always be a worshiper if you don’t elevate yourself. Come with me, and I’ll sit you among the Olympians.”

She stood, slipped her arms around his shoulders, and forced him against the table. “Your price is too high for me, remember?” She kissed him, his oversweet taste filling her. She ran her hands up his back, mussing his hair while tucking the prewritten runes beneath his collar and into his hat band.

She pulled away. “Satisfied? Now leave me alone.” She swayed toward the open air, and Jakob followed her. She clenched his hand. “I just did something really stupid. We need to leave.”

Her runes sparked. Dionysus’s fedora burst like a firecracker, and flames surged down his back and along his sleeves. He knocked off his hat while the Maenads jerked his jacket off amid the other gods’ laughter and scattered applause.

“You’ll pay for that!”

Mary and Jakob dashed across the open sand to the white maze of Temple tents. Jakob held up a corner, and they ducked inside a small room. Candles on golden stands lit the interior, empty except for an unoccupied bed of animal pelts. They exited into a hallway created by gauzy linens strung between tent poles. Lavender and jasmine saturated the cloth.

“And I thought you might need *my* help,” Jakob said.

“Considering that little stunt could get us killed, I don’t think you should be congratulating me. I just get so tired of them acting as if I’m a virgin on their altar.”

“A word of advice: stay focused on your reason for mixing with the gods, and if a few rough nights will get you there, so be it.”

“Easy for you to say. You won’t wake up pregnant with a monster child.”

“But you’re strong enough to handle it.” His voice strained, and he cleared his throat. “Some aren’t.”

At a T in the hallway, Jakob motioned her left. They padded along the velvet carpet while moans, groans, and cries came from behind the curtains as if they were walking through a brothel. Men and women wearing white shifts slipped from the entrances, their hair disheveled and their skin sweat-streaked.

“What is this place, exactly?” Mary asked.

“Each year, the Devil supplies an open priesthood, if you will. Whatever sacrificial fetish a god desires, they provide. Mostly, it’s a getaway called the tryst tents, I believe.”

“We should go. Dionysus knows these halls better than us, and I wouldn’t want to run into Loki.”

“He’s in here?” Jakob asked. “I was hoping you might introduce us before the night’s over.”

She paused next to a quiet opening then peeked inside—empty. “If we get out of here.”

Jakob frowned. “Of course, I meant only if you have the chance.”

She lifted the tent wall, and they crept into the desert night. A hundred yards ahead, the bazaar ranged, still crammed with people. Fire pits and tiki torches cast wavering shadows over the moonlit sands. A heavy metal song screamed from a strobe-lit stage near the bazaar’s center. The cooling night lessened the animal stink, but cook fire smoke scented the air with roasting hotdogs and burgers. Mary tasted alcohol in the breeze.

She hitched her thumb toward the crowd. “I think I’m going to avoid the Devil’s Quarters for a while and keep looking for my trickster. I hope I haven’t ruined any of your business plans.”

“Why don’t I join you? In return, you can introduce me to Loki. I know the perfect place to start. I lost some money to a few tricksters at Reynard’s this afternoon.”

The bazaar had become congested after dark. The temperature increased in the clogged corridors, and many walked half naked, the men in jean cutoffs, the women in bikinis or bandanas. An old man riding a bicycle was nude except for tribal patterned glow paint. Some stands encouraged visitors with free drinks, and nearly everyone had cigarettes between their lips or pipes cupped in their palms. Warrior gangs strutted along the walkway, decked in leather armor and sometimes chainmail, swords or shields strapped to their backs. They stepped aside for Mary, glaring. A narrow path remained clear in front of her, the customers pressing closer to the stands or waiting for her to pass before rejoining the current. Jakob followed in her wake. Shop barkers would call to him, fancy man in the suit, but not to Mary.

After three drunk women stumbled into her path then shrank away with muttered apologies, Mary pulled Jakob into a corridor between two booths. “Do they think I’m a god?”

“No, but they know you are close with the gods. You have no shadow, the fingerprint of divinity, and you don’t smell human but like pomegranates. Yet you are dusty like us, you sweat, you pant. They don’t know what to do with you.”

Beyond the bazaar, Reynard had staked a saloon close to the camps. His air conditioned tent made of stitched cowhide was visible as any god’s temples. Two fence posts supported washboard doors that opened onto craps tables, poker games, roulette wheels, even billiards. Several newer deities or children of the gods played pool, their cues carved with runes and spells. Guests gathered at a bar or settled in overstuffed chairs around a stone fire pit. The blue flames released a cool draft. Big game heads were mounted to the tent poles—a Manticore, a Werewolf, a Thunderbird, and a Minotaur. A stuffed Basilisk hung by wires from the canopied ceiling.

Men and women in red smoking jackets played for the house. Reynard, no longer a fox but a wiry man with bushy red hair and goatee, strutted among the tables, whispering to the dealers or

congratulating winners. He wore a white suit with a red tie to match his hair. A few other trickster gods observed the games: Hermes and his mini-skirted groupies, Chakijana, Tomas the Innkeeper. Reynard would grin and joke with them, but once he passed, he'd snarl, his thin face appearing more foxlike.

"The best card sharks come here," Jakob said, "to test themselves, and sadly, I discovered this afternoon that I am not one of them. Reynard uses this as recruitment for his gambling ring."

"Still trying to raid the hen house."

Jakob leaned closer. "Rumor has it he keeps his tail tucked down his pants. He learned to change form from a *kitsune*, but she played him and ran off with his money before teaching him the final transformation."

They passed from game to game, among women encouraging the craps players with oohs and ahs, or hipsters hovering behind the pool tables. Cheating was the expectation. Players showed off their best tricks, but they demonstrated no other trickster personality traits. None exhibited any duality, even the most basic sense of creation and chaos. Their sexuality remained limited to insults, and their jokes only evoked huffs or snorts except from the teller, his laughter quick and nervous. The best cheaters stayed quiet, letting any attention after a good hand slide away like an outgoing wave instead of reveling in it as a trickster should. These players seemed to focus on the next hand, their bets careful, and if somebody went all in, the others folded and waited for the next deal.

Mary and Jakob regrouped at the bar. She ordered a beer, drinking away the lingering remnants of Dionysus's kiss.

"I need to draw him out," Mary said.

"How do you know it's a he not a she?" he asked.

“Tricksters are almost exclusively male, and I have yet to meet a woman. I’m thinking a contest, some sort of bait. Most tricksters are really good liars or, at least, imaginative ones. We should be looking for good poker faces rather than simply cheaters.”

Jakob drummed his fingers on the bar then scrambled on top. “Ladies and gents, gods and goddesses, most of you know me, if only by reputation that I am a master of forgery and know a bad lie when I see it, but this lovely lady doesn’t believe me. Now, I will give a thousand dollars to any man or woman who can force my hand. Tell me a truth or a lie, and I’ll guess it correctly. If I’m wrong, you have my money and my reputation.”

He jumped to the floor then whispered to Mary. “You might have to help me with your runes.”

Jakob labeled the first two stories lies before the tellers finished framing Did They or Didn’t They? stories, which attracted a crowd. When Jakob hesitated before pronouncing a verdict, Mary sipped her beer to signal a tall tale. A tattoo on her shoulder flashed cold whenever anybody lied. After three more correct answers, Mary helping with the third, players abandoned their pool tables and put the card games on hold. The gods and their relatives crowded the bar, listening and discussing what elements made the stories sound true or false. Each guest had told a tale after an hour, and other than the likes of Reynard, nobody stymied Jakob or suggested an undiscovered trickster. After the last story, Jakob dismissed the crowd.

“Looks like I keep my money. Thank you for your stories—I believe I’ve proved my point.”

Somebody called out, “Let us guess. You tell a story.” Others agreed.

“Let us guess for your money,” Reynard said.

Jakob rubbed his hands together. “If you insist. My sister was seduced by a god and died giving birth to his monstrous child. Truth or lie?”

Mary's tattoo cooled. Reynard called the story true, and another guest claimed it had to be since the gods had been screwing since Time began.

"False," Jakob said. "She committed suicide instead of bearing the child."

Reynard growled and pushed through the listeners, who dispersed, returning to their games. Mary nudged Jakob, and they left the tent. The moon shone whiter than bone, and campfire sparks winked over the temples. The Devil's Quarters emitted a glow colorful as the northern lights. The stretching sands echoed slurred voices and profane shouting. People rode bicycles or speeded on dirt bikes toward the bazaar while others crammed into cars and vans, even sitting on the roofs or crouching in open trunks. The vehicles boomed heavy bass or squealing rock riffs through shattered windows, and neon graffiti tagged which god the riders followed.

"Are you positive it wasn't any of the players?" Jakob asked.

"Pretty sure," Mary said. "I'm sorry—about your sister."

"Does that change your opinion of me? Here I am, making a living off the beings who caused my sister's death."

"In a way, you're getting revenge."

A pickup truck swerved in front of them, spitting dust. Sheet metal shaped like scales had been welded onto the sides and over the cab. A silver dragon head with bloody fangs was screwed onto the hood. Wire rope acted as a tail with tin cans tied to the end. Jakob shouted and followed in the truck's dusty path until it turned. He chatted with the driver then waved Mary over.

"I have one more place to check for tricksters. Of course, I've been wrong so far."

"Lead on. You know the festival better than I do."

He helped her onto the tailgate. A metal joist divided the bed, supporting wings made of soldered wire. They gripped the wire as they jolted along the sandy terrain, and the tin cans rattled worse than a broken muffler. No roads marred the sands, but the truck followed ruts near the bazaar for half a mile then cut across a smooth stretch occupied with stages and platforms. Indian dancers in elaborate costumes twirled and pretended to fight while actors in togas held the Grecian masks for tragedy and humor. A stage half-hidden by grape arbors drew the biggest crowd. The actors were naked, emphasized by their sunburn, and only vines draped over their shoulders—one of Dionysus's Bacchanal dramas.

Mary and Jakob dismounted the dragon truck at the edge of the camps. Industrial work lights lit makeshift rings built of split rail fencing or chain-link. Armored men and women battled while viewers crowded the sidelines and lounged on bleachers, cheering or clapping after each metallic screech. Surrounding the rings, blacksmiths hooked their grinding wheels to batteries and honed blades or offered quick fixes for notched edges. Other vendors hawked weapons blessed by Apollo or Zeus. Tattooists touched up protective spells on warriors still bloody from the last fight and in line for the next. Other brawlers prepared by chugging energy drinks shot with alcohol or swallowing pills.

Elevated box seats overlooked each fight like guard towers. A long window was set in the wall, but the room had been built to keep the interior shadowed. Two of the Devil's wait staff blocked the stairs. Even on the fringe, the gods made their presence felt. More Fallen Angels acted as announcers and referees, but once a fight began, they rarely interfered. Battles ended at the winner's discretion, sometimes lasting until the loser's friends swarmed the ring, but a few warriors fought fair, shaking hands or saluting—the exception. The gods' champions hacked at limbs or swung for the neck, mangling whatever threatened their position while proving their

devotion. Jakob explained that the coliseum in the Devil's Quarters was arranged for gods who had large followings and were willing to pay for spectacle. Since the fights involved professionals, the warriors played it safe, shedding only the required amount of blood to honor their patrons. The real battles happened in these rings where men and women strove for any god's recognition—a bloody business mixed with bad magic, heavy drugs, and dirty tricks.

In the center ring, two men battled. The larger man, taller by a foot, wore a kind of enchanted chainmail, its ringlets unmarred and gleaming. His broadsword's blood channel featured ivylike Celtic runes. The second man went bare-chested but armored with traditional green tattoos shaping an eagle. Instead of a sword, he wielded a spear, the shaft etched with sweeping runes. He used the shaft to parry the sword, slide away the blade, then whack the shaft against the swordsman's helmet.

Mary guessed the armor had been magicked to repel metal, rendering the spearhead useless. She and Jakob climbed the bleachers to the top. Below, the fighters' growls and cracking weapons echoed across the desert, and the spear shaft clashing against the swordsman's breastplate reverberated through the metal seats.

Jakob leaned forward, fixed on the battle. "So what are we looking for?" He flinched as the swordsman barreled into the tattooed man, knocking him against the wooden fence. The sword harmlessly glanced off the tattooed man's shoulder but splintered the railing.

"In a place like this, I'm not sure. He won't be showing off—too much activity down there. He'll probably be sitting alone. Look for some sort of duality, somebody you wouldn't expect to attend a bloody fight."

"Other than us?" Jakob asked.

A waiter scaled the bleachers and handed her a folded notecard. "Odin sends his greetings." He motioned to the nearest box seat then returned to his post.

Mary unfolded the card. *Join me.* She crumpled the note and shivered as if a hand had grazed her spine. She handed Jakob the wadded paper and excused herself. Part of her had been expecting the note all night.

The box seats were cool and lighted with upside down candles on the ceiling. Only Odin and two Valkyries, dressed in traditional chainmail, observed the fight. Without looking at Mary, Odin ordered in growling Old Norse for the Valkyries to wait outside. They stalked past her as if she were a shadow.

Once the door closed, Odin motioned to a chair. She perched on the edge, hands clasped over her knees. He wore a wide-brimmed hat cocked over his missing eye, and a black cloak with ocean-colored lining wrapped around his broad shoulders. He'd let his beard grow longer, flecked with silver. The thick bristles gave him a wolfish appearance. He leaned forward, his cloak slipping off one shoulder, and the rustling fabric released his carrion scent.

Below, the tattooed man had forced the swordsman against the fence and beat at his helmet like a lumberjack. The swordsman sliced at the tattooed man's ribs, but the blow ricocheted off a badge-shaped rune. Another blow to the head caused the swordsman to kneel, but he tossed aside his sword and dove for the tattooed man's legs. He couldn't wriggle from beneath the armor as the swordsman strangled him. The swordsman kicked him in the ribs on his victory walk.

Odin clenched his fist and slammed back in his chair. He struck the armrest, splitting the wood. A Fallen Angel announced the winner as Mars' champion.

"Were you responsible for the other's tattoos?" Mary asked.

“Several, including the one that saved him from a gutting, but the fool doesn’t understand how to use them.” He drew his chair closer so she knew he saw her in profile with a clear view of her back. The window’s light brightened half his face, but his empty eye socket remained a shadow. “In four years, what have you learned?”

“I can use half of the tattoos.”

He leaned over her and scrutinized her ink as if reading the newspaper headlines. “Wrong, your skin holds combinations you have yet to imagine. You’ve only recognized half of them, can use a quarter of those. Still, Loki says they’ve saved you a time or two.”

“Don’t you have anything better than me to talk about over lunch?”

He settled in his chair. “I find it hard to believe he hasn’t beguiled you into his bed yet.”

Mary worried her response might start a fire as she already had with Dionysus, so she focused on the next fight, two women brawling with brass knuckles and nets.

“What do you intend to do about Dionysus? He’s calling for blood as any god would be after your insult.”

She stood and leaned against the window, the cool glass refreshing. “Avoid him until the night ends.”

“You need to win the protection of another god. Do you really want to spend decades looking over your shoulder? Wondering if each beautiful woman you pass on the street is a Maenad? My protection is cheap tonight.”

“Let me guess, the low cost of an hour in the tryst tents?”

He joined her by the window, his cloak brushing her arm, and she shied away. “If that’s all I wanted, I’d take you here.” He rested heavy hands on her shoulders. “I need a new champion to draw fresh followers. One fight in my name, and I’ll take care of Dionysus.”

“I’ve never used a sword. I’m not a warrior.”

Odin skimmed his hand over her back, and she stiffened. “I’ve provided all you need.”

“You know these are defense runes. I’ll handle Dionysus on my own.”

His fingers dug into her skin. “You want to fight, to test yourself. I saw it when you walked among the rings. You may not have a sword, but you’re better than their sloppy tattoos, those mismanaged Healing runes. I’m giving you the opportunity to show off your skills. That’s why Loki brought you here, to test you on our stage.” He fondled her neck. “I can feel your blood stirring, Mary. Don’t deny it. I reward my warriors—it’s in my nature.”

“Fine. If you’ll take care of Dionysus then I’ll fight for you.”

He escorted her down the stairs with a hand on the back of her neck as if collaring a dog. When Jakob noticed them, he started climbing over the bleachers, but Mary shook her head. Odin spoke to one of the Fallen Angels who announced that another warrior would take the Devil’s Challenge.

The crowd abandoned the rings and surrounded a pit covered in sheet metal that shone in the moonlight. Several men heaved aside the coverings, and somebody tossed a torch into the emptiness. It thudded and rolled, throwing sparks, and a shape loomed over it—a man, but furred, his face shadowed by a wolf’s head pulled down like a hood. She recognized the skin from a fake Loki kept in the shop, one of the two Volsung’s pelts, the original Berserkers. They had killed the giant wolves and wore their pelts while massacring hundreds of warriors. The skins still desired bloodshed.

The wolf-man hurled back the torch and howled. His cry sounded like neither man nor animal, but a strangulation of both. The pit had been dug twelve feet deep with wooden shoring. A retractable rope replaced a ladder, though Mary feared such a slow entry would allow the

wolf-man to draw blood. His muzzle pointed straight at her as if he scented his challenger.

Across the pit, Jakob booked bets favoring the wolf-man five to one.

The wolf-man lunged with a shriek like twisting metal. Mary retreated, but Odin caught her arm.

“Your pen and paper stay with me.”

She handed over her notepad and pencil stub, and at Odin’s growl, dug out her prewritten runes. “How do you expect me to fight without my runes?”

He pushed her forward until her toes hung off the edge. “There’s honor to be won—that was the deal. Bring me his skin.”

His steady hand forced her to jump. She landed hard and rolled aside, already scrambling to avoid teeth and claws. The crowd yelled, ordering torches tossed down, for somebody to have the rope ready and a couple of spears.

Three torches landed in the pit’s center, separating Mary from the pacing wolf-man. He hadn’t lunged as she imagined but kept his head raised as if sniffing the air. He unfolded from his crouch, seven feet tall with the wolf skin fitting like armor. The paws encased his hands and feet while the tail flicked, ears swiveled, and nostrils flared.

He lumbered forward. His claws and fangs glittered in the sputtering torchlight. Mary backed into the sand wall then spun aside as he shredded the air. Her Good Luck tattoo flashed hot as a claw nicked her dress. She vaulted over the torches, but he followed, raking her spine. The ferocity of his blows triggered a runic combination layered to look like chainmail, which hardened her skin to armor. He crushed her against the wall, but a snakelike rune helped her squeeze free. Mary darted around the pit, keeping the fire between them. Her back itched, the

runes tightening and stretching her skin as if trying to burst through. He stepped over the torches, his tail dragging through the flames without catching.

She spread her arms to show she carried no weapon. “Can’t you see we’re alike? You have a second skin.” She knelt, then lowered onto her stomach, exposing her back while hiding her untattooed soft spots. “I know your story. You’re starving, so thirsty even blood is better than nothing. You’re trapped in that second skin, imprisoned, cursed to live by instinct, to merely survive instead of enjoying life. I’m like you.”

A paw pinned her neck, the claws pricking, and the damp nose snuffled her skin. She took shallow breaths to quiet her body’s pulsing as her runes clashed with the magic dousing the wolf pelt. She held still, waiting for a mask-shaped rune with eyes like moth wing spots to attract the wolf-man’s gaze and mesmerize him. “I’m trapped in my second skin, too. Maybe you thought it’d be a good idea at first. The wolf skin must’ve been a gift from a god, the ultimate protection from the world.” Her back muscles twinged as magic accelerated along her spine. “That’s what I thought. I figured if I tattooed myself to the point I lost part of my humanity then I’d be shielded from both man and god, but now I attract bigger dangers—just like you are goaded into these fights.”

He nuzzled her hair, his teeth scraping her scalp. She snatched the wolf-man by the ears, and her runes blazed. She rolled, twisting beside him and peeling the skin off his body as if pulling back a veil. She skinned his torso in two tugs, wrapping the fur around her arms, then slid the pelt over her shoulder and lunged. She ripped off the hind paws so the man staggered and fell face first.

Mary held up the oversized skin by the scruff, waiting for the crowd to cheer or send the ladder, but they yelled and pointed at the man—cut him, claw him, end this.

The warrior stood, and though the pointed ears had made him seem taller, he still overshadowed her. Dark hair coated his muscular arms as if he had started to become the wolf. She retreated, trying to keep the skin from tangling around her legs, but it clung to her. Across the pit, Odin stood on the edge, his hat pulled low. His cloak rippled with a shrug.

Mary jerked on the pelt, careful to keep her face free. Her fingers fused with the claws, and pads toughened her palms. Her arms seemed to thicken, grow strong enough to pin a victim.

She feigned right then bolted past the warrior, his fingers gliding over the smooth pelt. Her claws sunk into the sand, sliding, then hooked a support beam. Her feet scrabbled as she swung to another hold. She clawed the crumbling ledge and heaved herself out of the pit at Odin's boots.

The audience backed away, and a few men unsheathed swords. Even without the wolf's head pulled down, Mary felt the effects, a snarl baring her teeth, and shook her hair over her face. She climbed out of the wolf skin and kicked it toward Odin.

"I bet you were just hoping I'd put it on fully."

One of his Valkyries dusted off the fur before offering it to Odin, who held it up, the pelt small in his hands. "A god doesn't hope, he wills it. You followed mine in your own way, as I expected."

She rolled her shoulders as her runes calmed and cooled. "Now you'll take care of Dionysus? When will it be safe to visit the Devil's Quarters?"

He returned her notepad. "Whenever you wish. After a few drinks, Dionysus found it quite funny. He's told the story ten times, and your actions become more flirtatious with each telling. He claims he gave you your magical start." Odin cupped her chin and forced her to meet his eye. "You didn't need me. Fall for that one again, and I'll have to start calling you trickster—the one who is tricked." He patted her cheek and, flanked by his Valkyries, left the pit.

Mary spat in his boot prints. Jakob swaggered over, counting a wad of bills as she massaged her lower back. He offered her a stack.

“I took bets. Five hundred for a three-minute fight doesn’t seem bad at all. Even split?”

“Keep it. I just want a place to clear my head.”

He pocketed the money and pulled open his jacket, displaying a shoulder holster. “Just so you know, I had your back—probably the only place that doesn’t need protection.” He took her hand. “I know a place where we can catch our breath.”

He led her along the fringe, past drunks and addicts with their eyes locked on the stars and beyond naked couples riding each other on Navajo blankets and gurus saluting the moon. The bazaar became just a buzz and the few campsites they neared were quiet except for jazz played softly on a radio. They stopped at a short path lined with candle stubs in Mason jars. Fifty yards into the desert set a white structure, the walls made of canvas. A wooden sign called it the Memory Tent and asked visitors to leave behind their shoes in honor of the dead. Mary slipped off her flats while Jakob shed his shoes and socks. She dug her toes into the cool sand. They padded along the candlelit walkway.

White canvas stretched tight between wooden posts created privacy; sheepskin rugs covered the ground. No ceiling hid the stars, but gauzy strips hung from crisscrossing wires strung overhead. Feathers decorated some strips while others had been dipped in glow paint. Even though enclosed, the area stayed comfortable. A breeze fluttered the gauzy strips so Mary felt nestled beneath willow branches.

Jakob eased onto the sheepskin floor, and sighing, stretched out, clasping his hands behind his head. Mary sat sideways and took a deep breath of the fresh air, free of sweat and incense. The campsite’s radio filled the hush with a saxophone solo.

Jakob turned on his side, his head propped on one hand. “First Loki, then Dionysus, now Odin. You get around.”

“I only know Odin because of my tattoos.”

“May I see them?”

She hesitated then nodded and gathered her hair over one shoulder.

He straightened and shifted behind her. “These are magnificent. I’m afraid I only recognize one or two of the runes.” He stroked her shoulder blade. “Here, the mazelike one. It detects lying, correct?”

She fidgeted beneath his touch. “That’s how I helped you at Reynard’s.”

He traced a tattoo at the base of her neck. “This one is especially beautiful—the runes coming together to form a constellation of a feather. I can sense its power like a thunderhead.”

“It’s a Guidance combination, so I won’t lose my way.”

His hand lingered on her backbone, warming her. “What about these runes etched in the tree trunk. They’re Norse, but what’s their purpose?”

“Those are the eighteen runes of power discovered by Odin. The tattoos give me the ability to harness them, but I’m not a competent enough runist yet. Right now, they provide a foundation for the other protection spells that are too complicated and detailed to function without some sort of base. The trunk supports them.”

He bent over her, his lips brushing her neck. She turned, and he kissed her, a hand caressing her cheek. He filled her with a similar oversweet taste as Dionysus had, and Mary knew who Loki wanted. She’d found him as easily as all the other tricksters.

She placed a hand on his chest. “I’m not looking for a lover.”

He played his finger through her hair. “A human isn’t good enough for you? Even one who has pleased a goddess?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then relax. It’s a lovely full moon, the stars are out, and we have survived the gods.” He trailed his fingers over her collarbone. “So far, we have reason to celebrate.”

She stood, unsteady on stiff legs. “No, it’s better this way.”

He shrugged. “With skin like yours, I suppose you can afford to reject whom you will, but I’m persistent.” He took her arm and escorted her out of the white walls. “Can anything harm you?”

She hesitated. “Bullets,” she lied. “There are a few runes that can help, but not at close range near a vital spot. No combination works completely.”

He squeezed her arm. “Well, I think you are just the person to invent one.”

They paused to slip on their shoes.

“I’m going to check in with Loki,” Mary said. “Let him know I’m still in one piece.”

“No thanks to him. May I join you? You can finally introduce us.”

Mary cast a Tracking rune to guide them, but it took several tries, the rune leading them to Loki’s three most recent sexual partners before locating him behind the Viking longhouse. He bent over a water basin, splashing his face. His hair was disheveled, his bowtie crooked, and blood smeared his collar. He straightened as they approached and wiped his face with a wet rag. A bruise smudged his cheek, and he’d split his lip.

“Did Thor find out about you and his wife?” Mary asked.

He tossed the rag into the basin. “She told him, actually. I made the mistake of mentioning my little prank when I cut off her hair. She’s still angry about that. So, do you have a name for

me?”

“This is Jakob Meers.”

Jakob extended his hand, but Loki only stared.

“You look familiar,” Loki said. “Have we met?”

“No, but you knew my twin sister rather intimately. Remember Abigail?”

“Should I?”

Jakob drew his silenced gun and, as Mary backed away, caught a fistful of her hair. She shifted her weight onto the balls of her feet, bracing against Jakob’s grip. “I should hope so. She carried your child.”

Loki sighed and rubbed his neck. “That’s not unremarkable.”

“You impregnated a girl who never believed in the gods, had no understanding of magic. A nineteen-year-old who couldn’t comprehend why her ultrasound showed her son had fur and fangs.” He raised the gun to Mary’s temple, pressing so hard the silencer cut her, and blood trickled down her jaw. Her muscles tightened as the tattoos sensed blood. “She killed herself because of you.”

“You’ve held onto this for twenty years, hunting me down? What a waste of passion. But congratulations, Mary, you found the trickster.”

“I know I can’t kill a god, but I can kill her. I’ve been watching you these past months. You care about her—a little. Answer me one question, and I’ll let her go. Why did you come for my sister? You had your choice of so many goddesses.”

Loki combed his fingers through his hair and checked his reflection in the basin, straightening his tie. “I don’t remember her well enough to say.”

“C’mon, Loki. You can do better than that. Or I’ll kill her.”

Loki strolled into the desert. “You know what I like about Mary? She doesn’t need saving.”

Mary closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Magic pricked her skin, and her runes released her scent of pomegranates.

Gunsmoke burned her nose. Jakob’s hand fell from her waist, and he staggered, blood surging from a hole in his neck. He clutched at the wound, the gun hitting the sand with a *thud*. Mary steadied him and eased him to the ground. She pulled a prewritten notecard from her belt and pried off his hand then applied the card like a bandage. Blood clouded the paper.

She sat back on her heels. “That closed the wound and numbed your pain, but you need to get to a hospital or find a better healer than me. Will somebody help you?”

Jakob scrambled backward, holding the paper in place, and lurched toward the lighted bazaar.

Mary crossed the sand and joined Loki, who stood, hands in his pockets, examining the stars. She swayed beside him then dropped to her knees, her sticky hands raised slightly and palms up as if praying. She was gasping, almost dry heaving. The blood on her hands glistened, but she forced herself to stare straight ahead at the silhouetted hills. Her breathing slowed.

Loki rested a hand on her head then sat beside her. He licked his thumb and wiped away the wound on her temple as if cleaning off a smudge. “You lied to him, didn’t you? Told him you were susceptible to bullets. Good girl.”

“You knew he was coming for you.”

He offered his handkerchief. “Not him exactly. I’d been warned by a few friends over the years that somebody was searching for me and that he was getting closer. At first, I thought it might be you, but you were too enthralled with me. Last month, somebody tried to break into the shop, so I figured I’d give my attacker his opportunity tonight and provide you with a bit of field experience.”

“How did you know he was a trickster? Jakob isn’t a god or even experienced in the Magical Arts.”

“Nobody tracks me down without being clever, though I expected more than a gun.”

“Maybe that was the plan,” Mary said. “Test you then retreat. He probably guessed I wouldn’t let him die, even if he did try to kill me.” She wadded the handkerchief and buried it in the sand. “Does he have a right to want revenge?”

“She was one of those beautiful country girls looking for a bit of excitement. We met in a bar, and she couldn’t keep her hands off me. We made love in the back of her truck, I left before sunrise, and haven’t thought of her until now.”

A dry breeze chilled Mary, and she hugged herself, shivering. Loki draped his jacket over her shoulders, still warm and enveloping her in his familiar scents of charred wood and spicy incense.

“There were two correct answers to my question,” he said. “One was Jakob, but the second you could have answered the moment I asked. Care to guess?”

“You want me to say I’m a trickster, but I’m not, Loki. I’m not like you or Jakob.”

“You’re an outcast, but you like to show off. You believe you are cleverer than you are. You’re a liar. You flirt when it gets you what you want. You’re a changeling in the way you walk among the humans and the gods. Your very skin is a duality, an amalgamation of humanity and magic. All your choices drive you to a personal goal just like our friend Jakob.”

“You know what makes me different from you? If Jakob had held a gun to your head, I wouldn’t have walked away.”

Loki huffed. “I merely speeded things up, and I wanted to see your reaction.”

“I don’t have that kind of chaos inside.” She stood, brushing the sand off her legs, and handed Loki his jacket. “But I wish I had your impulsiveness, the ability to make choices without considering long-term effects. I do admire that about you.”

Loki grinned and sidled next to her. He offered his arm. “At last, you’ve started to pay attention.”

Mary leaned against him. She felt the moon’s tidal tug along her backbone. “Would you like to get that drink now?”

Coyote Story

Mary received her first case as the Mythopoeic Bureau of Investigation's Trickster Consultant when Coyote walked out of the Pacific Ocean. Nobody had seen Coyote for a hundred and fifty years, and the MBI wanted to know why he left, where he'd gone, and what plans prompted his sudden return. Since she'd lived on the California coast, she visited Badlands Beach with the first responders. Unmarked vehicles overflowed the sandy parking lot amid cars with surfboard racks and family vans. She kicked off her sandals before stepping onto the path between the dunes. Her thin T-shirt, a tank top visible underneath, and her jean shorts allowed her to blend with the beachgoers, unlike the agents who wore dark suits and leather shoes.

She met her assigned partner, Agent Lopez, on the beach ordering photographers in MBI windbreakers around a police-taped square. She stalked toward Mary, waving her back until Mary held up her ID.

Lopez hooked her thumbs in her pockets. "Right, Mary Collins. So it's true what they said at training—you don't have a shadow. Might make it easier hanging around with the gods, but it gives me a bad feeling." She glanced back and shouted a warning at a photographer who leaned his camera over the tape. "I know a dozen guys with years of field experience drooling at their desks right now, but I have orders to consider your opinion, so let's get this over with."

Mary followed her toward the tape. “I have experience, just not with the MBI.”

“Oh, I know, I’ve heard all about your adventures with the gods. The others might be excited, but I say Loki wouldn’t work with a girl like you unless there was more going on. I’d put you on the watch list if I were back in headquarters.”

The tape protected a series of paw prints that trailed from the breakers and curved along the shoreline before morphing into human footprints. Waves washed over the tracks, but they remained sharp and deep. Only one human footprint was preserved on the edge of the tape, the sides crumbling. Apparently the resilience had been lost with the change from canine to man, and other human prints had been trampled before the MBI arrived.

Mary ducked the tape and crouched beside the wet tracks. A wave swirled around her bare feet, burying her toes, but the prints stayed detailed down to claw tips dimpling the sand. An icy sheen coated the indents, and when she skimmed her hand over the prints, cold air frosted her palm. She sketched a compass-shaped Tracking rune and clenched the wadded paper then nestled her fist inside a print. A magnetic tug pointed her hand down shore.

She returned to the other side of the tape, and hot sand crusted her wet feet. “He wouldn’t leave the prints unless he wants us to find him, and he wants a magician or else he would’ve made the rest of his tracks permanent.”

Lopez limped toward the parking lot, her uniform-regulation shoes swamped with sand. “I guessed as much. I’m sure you know Johnson’s Mapping Combination? Pinpoint Coyote and we’ll set up a containment perimeter before sending in a negotiator—not you.”

“Give me a chance,” Mary said. “I understand tricksters like him. I can help you.”

“According to your training record, you’re a show-off, and he’s looking to make some noise if these tracks are any indication. You two together would cause sparks. Right now is our best chance to take him down before anybody realizes who or what he is.”

“You make him sound like a terrorist,” Mary said.

“He’s worse—a Vengeful God. His people have lost their land, and the world has changed since he last walked these shores. He’ll be angry.”

At the parking lot, Mary sketched a triangular rune formation on a map spread across a car hood. She left out a small detail on each rune, rendering the design inert, but she hovered her pencil over the map and stabbed it onto a back road leading into a nature preserve.

“Makes sense,” she said. “Quiet, secluded, a place to hunt.”

Lopez pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number. “You’re staying here. See if you can use the prints to isolate some of his feelings or tap into his emotional state.” She walked away, giving orders over the phone.

Most of the black SUVs peeled out of the parking lot, leaving a local cop to guard the site and the photographers to finish. Mary followed her rune along the beach, the warm breakers washing her ankles. Seagulls cried and collected on the dunes. A few families had set up umbrellas or small pavilions. The families’ shadows mimicked them, stretching up the sand as a mother lifted her daughter over rippling waves or a father hauled a bucket of wet sand for castle fortifications. Surfers lounged on thin blankets or waxed their boards. Out to sea, they bobbed in line. College kids collected driftwood and stacked it beside fire pits. Waterlogged trees stripped of their bark and with branches curving like whales’ ribs were rolled against the cliff, and teenagers smoked while seated on the wide trunks. Their portable stereos hummed with folk guitar. Mary bought a pack of Lucky Strikes and matchbook from a boy in cutoff shorts.

At the beach's end, a ramshackle bar hunkered against a cliff, ancient rock creating the back wall. Open-air seating drew a few swimsuited guests, their beer bottles sweating, but the cardboard sign, *No Wet Bodies*, kept them outside. Five surfers had dragged tables around the corner and ordered beers through an open window while they dried.

After skating with her brother's crew, Mary had easily picked up surfing when her parents moved to the coast. The more mystical bums attracted to Badland's Beach recognized her magic. The bar served regular beach guests but provided a haven for the eccentric, and Mary had befriended the owner Selina, who interpreted dreams. The Tracking rune led her straight to the bar.

She scraped her feet clean before tugging on sandals then slipped off her T-shirt so her back tattoos were partially exposed by her tank top as if they were a passcode. She shouldered through the peeling door. The cliff's shade cooled the room, and large open windows allowed a breeze. The scent of long finished enchantments lingered in the corners and soaked the wood with coastal magic's distinctive smells of fish bones and cold ashes. Most of the guests gathered at the cramped bar—sun-wrinkled men in mesh Navy hats and bandanas. Driftwood sculpted into tables and stools positioned beneath the fly-spotted window screens were empty but for one man in the sunlight, his hands cupped around a carved flagon. The bartender hulked over the plank counter, his tattooed arms ridged with veins.

“Wouldn't you rather sit outside?” he asked.

“Selina isn't working today?”

“Took sick. Five years ago.”

“If you check, you'll see I have an open tab. Mary Jacklight.”

He pulled a black journal from beneath the hand-crank register and slapped it on the counter, producing a puff of dust. He dragged a finger along a list then tapped the page. “Still drink Corona?”

“Mead if you have it. I came to ask Selina if she knew any Coyote stories. Rumor has it this beach is good for a few tales.”

He shook his head and passed her a beer. “You may be on her nice list, but you came with that government crew.”

Mary took her bottle to a knotted driftwood table behind the single man who still stared out the window, blinking in what little sunlight the cliff permitted. Mary shifted the stool so she could lean against the cool wall and sipped her beer.

The man smelled of brine, and his skin looked pruned, his eyes just slits. He was bald except for a few gray wisps covering his ears. Sand spotted his half-buttoned denim shirt. His chest bristled with white hair, and his rolled sleeves exposed boney arms. His fingers lacked nails, the ends red as match heads.

He fidgeted and gnawed on the tip of his thumb. “Coyote, huh? Not many remember that handsome bastard.” His voice had a sandpaper rasp. He coughed, his chest hitching, and he raised the window screen to spit. “What’d you want to know about him?”

Mary dragged her stool to his table. “I heard somebody tell a story this morning about Coyote walking out of the ocean after being gone a century. I wondered what brought him back.”

“First you need to know why he left, but it’s a long story.”

“Then let me buy you dinner.”

The bartender dished up fish stew, a hunk of brown bread, and two more beers. The man dipped the bread into the stew.

“So now, Coyote. Haven’t heard much talk about him, but he always was a popular one with the ladies, even white girls like you. Once he took a white girl on a journey off the edge of the world. The lands were crowded with not only new people but new gods, and Grandmother Earth groaned, unused to the strain. Once only we had walked the lands and guided our people, but the white man brought new spirits, all hungry for the land’s magic. Coyote’s brother Wolf considered going to war against the gods, but Coyote had a better idea and crept away from the war council. He would make a new land for the tribes just like Brother Wolf had done before.

“At the first tribe he came to, he said, ‘I’m going on a long journey to make a new land beyond the white man’s reach, and I need a woman to cook for me and keep my clothes mended. Give me one of your daughters for a wife.’

“A few nights before, the Indians had rescued a white girl from a fire that killed her father and brothers. Since she had nowhere to go, she stayed with the Indians, but that night, Coyote came along, drunk on his own boasting and corn liquor while dressed very fine in a beaded belt and shirt decorated with porcupine quills.

“All the Indians knew going on some foolish quest with Coyote meant certain death for their daughters and decided to send the white girl instead, but they also knew Coyote wouldn’t take such a soft pale face unused to the woods, so they slicked her with grease then covered her in soot and dressed her in their clothes. Even though Coyote isn’t the brightest, he might have noticed if not for the darkness and his drunkenness, so he took that white girl to the coast. Each morning while Coyote slept, she carefully covered herself in soot before starting the cook fire. They visited with every tribe along the way, and Coyote kept boasting he would raise a new land out of the sea after defeating many monsters, and while most tribes didn’t believe him, they always threw a big feast, so Coyote never had to hunt on his way to the sea.

“After many nights, he made camp on a beach much like this one, and the tribes gathered, lighting bonfires so great it made night seem like day. Coyote ate and drank and danced while the tribes prepared a special boat, a *tomol*, with the hull sealed against water and fire, as Coyote ordered. Coyote told stories about how he’d pretended to be white by stealing the paleness off an old birch tree so he could enter the white man’s house of history—a *museum*. They were too stupid to keep their stories safe, guarded by storytellers, and wrote everything down, drew all their maps to keep behind glass so anybody could find their secrets. The maps showed that at the edge of the world, water monsters protected a new land—unsettled since the beasts burned the ships trying to sneak by and dragged them into the Unknown.

“‘If there is only ocean, I’ll raise up a new land like Brother Wolf made this one,’ Coyote said. ‘Then we can choose to make war or peace, whichever we please.’

“Some of the elders thought Coyote too drunk for his own good, but he had defeated monsters before, like Flint and Beaver, so they cheered as their men guided the *tomol* over the breakers then left Coyote and his white girl to the ocean.

“Coyote had eaten and drunk so much it wasn’t long before he fell asleep for two days. When he woke up, he was hungry and thirsty, so he ate half the dried meats and drank up two water skins before he went to sleep again. The next time he woke, he had a great craving for fresh fish and thought he would simply trick one into jumping into his boat as he’d done many times before. He pawed at the water, but the ripples drew no fish and the water was so cold, it made his hand cramp. Only layers of darkness drifted below the rocking waves, and Coyote realized he had traveled beyond his command of the land—off the edge of the world.

“That’s when something glinted on the horizon. Thinking it to be a monster, he anchored some distance away, remembering the drawings of the monsters breaking apart ships—he was

too clever for that. The beast glittered silver and wore a white cap like a snowy mountain. Coyote hailed him, and the creature responded with a voice sharp as cracking lake ice. With a great splash, a slab dropped into the water, and Coyote smiled to himself. ‘The monster is sending his boat for me.’

“As the slab neared, it grew larger, at first as tall as a tepee, then big as an oak tree, and finally, a mountain. Coyote began to tremble, wondering how great the beast must be if this was his boat, but when the icy mountain passed, Coyote leapt on. He slipped and slid, but he dug his nails into the ice, breaking them all off as he crawled. At the top, he saw hundreds of such monsters gathered together like buffalo or white man’s houses, glistening beneath the sun, blinding Coyote—a City of Glass.

“But the ice slab sailed away from the city, and Coyote called to his wife. ‘Hurry! Come get me!’

“She had already paddled near the ice but floated just far enough from the edge that Coyote feared to jump. He cursed, yelled, and stomped his feet so hard the ice cracked, but she waited until he quieted.

“‘I want to bargain, Coyote. Give me my freedom. No longer call me your wife but one of your warriors then I will let you board.’

“He refused, and for three days, the girl guided the boat just out of reach, and he watched as she ate his meat and drank his water until his stomach pleaded with him. His throat was so dry he could barely croak out his promise, but she drew up alongside the ice, and he jumped aboard and devoured the last of their provisions.”

The old man’s sandpaper voice had softened as if the story had worn it smooth, and his gray hair was thickening while his shoulders seemed to broaden. As if released from a spell, Mary

straightened, her sweaty tank top sticking to the wall. The men at the bar had turned, their sagging chins propped on knobbed knuckles, and even the bartender leaned against the counter, gripping his dried-out rag. Only the breakers' rhythm came through the open windows since the sun had dropped behind the cliff. An overhead light glowed above the bar but left the seating in gloom. The others turned away, and two growled for beers, stirring the bartender.

The old man stared into his soup bowl, empty and crusty. "It's too stuffy in here. Why don't you build me a fire? That's where my story should be told." He shuffled outside, his strides lengthening. Mary paid before following him.

She stepped out of her sandals into the cool sand. The beach spread empty except for a group of teenagers gathered around a driftwood fire, and radio tunes drifted between the breakers. He sauntered toward a beached tree propped against the cliff, his movements more lithe and agile. He snapped deadwood branches and stomped off the thicker limbs. Instead of shiny baldness, black hair swished over his ears and neck, and he no longer stooped. He unbuttoned his shirt and draped it over the trunk, which was half as tall as him even rolled on its side. The white bristles across his chest had darkened. He leaned against a branch, huffing, with splintered wood scattered around his bare feet.

Mary scraped a shallow pit then leaned the branches together, forming a tepee. She scribbled a Fire rune, but Coyote spat into the wood. Sparks popped and flames climbed the twigs. The flickering turned him a shade younger, his skin smooth as new leather.

She sat cross-legged with the fire between them. The driftwood burned nearly smokeless and with a salty scent, whether due to Coyote's magic or nature Mary was unsure. Her back ached, probably from the constant usage of her runic tattoos during her two months of MBI training. Mandatory survival exercises had given her a tan, but her nose and cheeks stung. After settling in

at the bar, she'd begun to feel tired, which she blamed on her early California flight. The fire's warmth and the beer's fading buzz made her yawn.

"Now the ice in your paw prints makes sense," Mary said. "No wonder you came to a beach."

He'd grown fingernails but long and curved like claws. He dug a trough until the sand grew wet. "On the ice, I missed the sweet breezes. No meadow grass, no storm winds, just cold. You don't realize that cold has no smell until it consumes everything. It is the absence of other smells, that's arctic air. It traps everything beneath the ice. Here, there's grown a metallic stink. The water smells like foul breath and the sand like an old hide." He stopped digging and tugged free a mole crab. He popped it into his mouth, his fangs flashing as he crunched. "Then again, I always liked to take a good roll in smelly things. How about you?"

She pulled out the cigarette carton she'd bought early and handed it to him. "You haven't finished your story. I want to know what happens to the white girl."

He lit a cigarette off an ember then crawled around the fire to sit near Mary. "Tell me, what do you think happens next?" He took a drag before offering it to Mary.

"I don't smoke anymore."

He held it out until she took it. She blew two smoke rings that nestled together before passing back the cigarette. A bitter taste lingered like a stiff drink.

"I think Coyote's going to be upset when he sees all the ice, but I do admire the white girl. I think her and Coyote will fight it out before he calls her warrior, if ever."

"Well, the next day, they reached the City of Glass. Coyote thought, 'Somebody must live here for the walls are so high.' They found a narrow path, and on either side, the walls rose like glass cliffs with dark shadows swirling in the deep blue. At last, they reached a narrow landing with a path leading upward. They tied the boat, and Coyote made the girl carry his war bundle.

“A great whiteness spread in every direction, empty as the moon. Coyote yipped and danced for he’d found a land for his people. Already, he heard stories of his greatness echoing across the plains.

“Behind them, the walls closed with the *crack* of snapping teeth. Their boat was gone, and the girl moaned. ‘You’ve trapped us!’

“‘I’ll make another. You forget how powerful I am. I will make a whole new world.’

“‘I say you can’t. Your medicine isn’t strong enough.’

“So Coyote pulled a fine dust from his medicine pouch and scattered it over the ice. A forest of saplings rose from the plain, but their leaves hung like icicles and their bark appeared like frost. The girl broke off a branch and crumbled it.

“‘What will we eat? What will keep us warm? We can’t burn these trees or make another boat.’

“So they walked the plain, but the white girl began stumbling and complaining about the cold. She asked Coyote to cut her a bit of his pelt since he had so much to keep him warm. He considered letting the girl freeze since she was acting so troublesome. But who would carry his heavy war bundle? So he cut off a strip of fur and stretched the corners until it blanketed the girl. She wrapped herself and trudged behind him. The stillness frightened her—no trees, squirrels, birds, just the puff of their footsteps. Whiteness stretched like a becalming sea, and she even wondered if she’d died and entered the afterlife.

“That’s when they met the first monster. With a *pop*, the ice opened at their feet, forming a channel brimming with brine. Coyote cursed and stomped and called for the monster who had split the earth to show himself.

“The water churned; a spear pierced the surface, the tip hovering as if poised to throw.

“Coyote scampered back. ‘Quick, quick, Wife! Give me my war bundle!’

“The white girl refused. ‘Not unless you fulfill our agreement and call me Warrior.’

“‘If I am killed, it won’t matter! Give me it!’

“Even though Coyote often angered the girl, she knew she had little chance of surviving without him and offered the bundle.

“A large head breached the water. Coyote had mistaken its horn for a spear. It fixed them with a coal lump eye and hummed.

“Coyote said, ‘I have come here to make a new place for my people. If you close the ice and promise me and my little brothers no harm, then I will not kill you, Monster.’

“The beast’s voice was so deep it trembled the ice. ‘I am not the monster who made the ice part.’

“‘Then show me where this ice monster hides, and I will defeat him so he can no longer trap travelers.’

“The beast hummed and hawed then pointed his horn at the white girl. ‘Give me her to be my wife then I will tell you where the ice monster lives.’

“Coyote dragged the girl to the water. She bit and scratched like a wildcat, and in the tussle, she stole the knife from his war bundle. He pushed her into the channel. The beast dove then rose beneath her so she rode on his head, holding his horn.

“‘Now I will tell you where to find the ice monster. Follow this crack and it will lead you to him. Be careful, for he is a great hunter himself, ready to pounce if you make one slip.’

“The beast began to sink, and the white girl knew she would soon be lost under the ice, so she drew Coyote’s hunting knife and stabbed the beast in the eye. She struck again and again

until steaming blood darkened the water. The beast spun and tried to shake the girl loose before falling with his head on the ice. She scrambled off.

“Coyote yipped and whirled, mocking the beast. ‘Wife, cut off his horn. It will make a good walking stick for me.’

“The girl wrenched Coyote’s knife from the eye. ‘I made my first kill. Now you have to call me Warrior.’

“‘No, you were only protecting your husband as any good wife would. Get me his horn and cut me some meat before I starve! He looks fishy enough to eat.’

“But after falling in the water, the girl was so frozen she could hardly move. Coyote had to cut the horn himself and use some of his medicine to warm her.

“‘See, you are no warrior. A real warrior can take care of himself.’

“They followed the channel as the beast had said. Small hills appeared, pointed like fangs. As they were about to pass between the first hills, a thumping noise echoed over the ice.

“‘It’s a war drum,’ Coyote said. ‘Stay behind me, Wife! I’ve found the monster.’

“The drumming came again, and Coyote crept forward, his bow raised.

“A loud voice resounded among the hills. ‘Who dares pass through this land without an offering?’

“‘I am Coyote, a mighty warrior, and I’ve come to speak with you. Show yourself!’

“‘You already see me. I am in the snow beneath your feet and the ice over your head.’

“While the monster boasted, the girl looked among the icy formations with the eyes of a hunter. Just a few feet ahead of her, she spotted the monster, a small, bony creature with snow white fur and floppy ears. His whiskers twitched every time the hills echoed his words.

“The girl pounced on the hare and gripped him by the scruff even though he clawed her.
‘Here’s your monster.’

“‘Ah, Brother Hare still causing me trouble.’

“The hare gave a hard kick, but the girl held tight. ‘I don’t know anything about Brother Hare. I’m Ukalliuaraq. Let me go, and I’ll help you find the monster you seek.’

“Coyote said, ‘I think we should just skin and roast you after playing disrespectful games with a mighty warrior like me.’

“The hare laughed. ‘A mighty fool is more like it. No warrior would walk the plain dressed as you are, spotted easily as blood on the snow.’

“The girl shook him until his ears flapped. ‘Can you take us to the ice monster?’

“He trembled in her hands. ‘If you promise not to eat me, I’ll do anything. We all know where the ice monster lives.’

“Coyote tied a leather thong to the hare’s hind foot, and the hare led them through the hills then they followed the channel again. They came to a hill with a wide cave opening, and the hare pointed inside.

“‘The ice monster has many holes, but around this time, he lives here. Now untie me!’

“But Coyote clubbed him. ‘I shall have a feast after I defeat the monster. Wife, stay here and prepare my meal.’

“‘Let me come with you and prove myself a warrior.’

“He howled and threatened to beat her if she didn’t obey him, but once his back was turned, she followed him.

“At the cave’s center, a hole in the ceiling shone on a block of ice. Inside it lived a large shadow big as a hill. Coyote raised his bow and strutted forward.

“I’ve come from a faraway land to find you, Ice Monster, for I am a great warrior protecting my people.’

“The shadow didn’t move or speak.

“‘Come fight me!’

“Still the shadow waited. Coyote shot an arrow at the shadow, but the ice broke the shaft. He stomped his feet and howled. ‘Say something! Do something!’ He shot all his arrows, breaking each one. ‘Do you think you are so much better than me?’ He took his knife and stabbed at the icy shadow until the blade snapped.

“The shadow never moved.

“Coyote peered through the ice as if it were a window. The shadow inside was larger than Brother Bear with tusks like Brother Boar but long and thick as tree branches. It could’ve crushed a man beneath its foot.

“Coyote scratched his ears and wondered why such a monster would not fight back.

“The girl stepped from her hiding spot by the entrance. ‘All of them have tricked you. It’s the ice—that’s the monster. The land beneath our feet can defeat anything, even that beast. Our only hope is to return home.’

“This made Coyote angry, and he tried to hit her, but she ran out of the cave.”

Coyote fell silent and stretched. His voice had grown livelier as he talked while Mary’s body felt heavy as if she’d drunk too much wine. To help stay focused, she’d stirred the embers and rearranged the logs so they burned bright. Loosened ash grayed her arms and hands.

Coyote loped toward the waves quieted by low tide. The beach stretched black as the night sky, and the low moon seemed magnified by the empty ocean. Coyote dashed into the surf, kicking his own waves. Mary felt lightheaded as she walked down the beach, and when she

reached the water, a retreating wave made her dizzy, as if she were being pulled into the ocean. She braced her hands against her knees until the sickness passed.

The moon's reflection lit Coyote, highlighting his thick hair, long but tangled. Canine ears crowned his head, and he tore off his pants, exposing a tail flicking between his bare legs. Muscle hardened his body, and waist-high waves failed to move him.

Mary hesitated in the shallows. Her back itched, and her tattoos cued her to watchful eyes. She scanned the silhouetted cliff top for vehicles or flashlights. Not even a seagull moved. The MBI crew must've noticed her disappearance, and perhaps Agent Lopez even had her followed.

Mary waddled beside Coyote, shivering and her breath hitching, but the shock woke her up. She splashed her face and rubbed her arms.

His eyes were colored like a harvest moon, set deep below heavy brows. "Have you heard how I cast the stars?" He slapped the water so droplets glittered in the moonlight.

"You haven't finished the first story. You haven't explained why you disappeared."

"Not disappeared, trapped. The white girl ran up a craggy path leading to the top of the hill. Coyote bounded after her, snapping at her heels, but she stopped at the hill's edge and pointed. Below, the channel widened into a bay where a white man's ship was anchored. A camp was set up on the ice, and the men came and went on dog sleds.

"Coyote forgot his anger at the white girl and thought to himself, 'Those maps were a lie. The white man has traveled everywhere, even here where my medicine is weakest.'

"The white girl begged him to let her go to the camp. 'I'll steal a sled and some food for us—then you must call me Warrior.'

“No, Wife, one of those white men might take you or maybe you will run away. It is getting dark, so we will go back to the cave and sleep together. Tomorrow I will steal from the white man all that we need. Now come keep me warm.’

“But the white girl thought this might be her last chance to prove herself, so she slid down the hillside in a flurry of snow. Coyote was so angry he howled for her, threatening to club her worse than hare, but the white girl disappeared into the gloom.

“Coyote thought he’d teach her a lesson. He’d dress himself like a fierce monster and scare her senseless then she would see she was supposed to be his wife and sleep with him every night. He went back to the cave and stretched the hare’s skin over himself, padding it with snow so he looked twice as big. He used his broken arrows for fangs and claws and sat by the cave entrance, white as the ice. Near dawn, he heard a sled coming, and the white girl stopped in front of the cave and called for him.

“The white men will follow my tracks! We have to run! Come out.’ She’d packed the sled with food, blankets, lanterns, even a rifle which Coyote admired. He was secretly pleased, but the white girl was so troublesome, he wanted to put her in her place, so he reared up with a great roar, scaring the dogs so bad they squealed and tried to bolt, jerking each other back and forth.

“The white girl jumped off the sled and snatched the rifle. She shot Coyote twice, and he fell over with a cry. She kicked away the skin and lowered the gun.

“I should’ve known. The only real monster out here is you. Now I can name myself whatever I wish.’

“She quieted the dogs and turned them back to camp. The gun shots had awakened the snow, and as the white girl raced away, the snow rolled down the hill, trapping Coyote.”

He stopped and tipped his face toward the moon. The incoming tide roughened the water, and Mary staggered with each wave. Her legs trembled, and even though the water felt warm, chills rolled down her arms.

His canine ears flattened, and he closed his eyes as if soaking in the light. “I had a lot of time to think while buried beneath the snow, and I grew so angry I thought I would melt all the ice. Even so far away, I could hear my followers’ cries and feel the sadness of Wolf and my other brothers and sisters. I realized what a fool I’d been to leave. I’d forgotten my purpose to make the land safe for my people even though I was lazy and sometimes stole their food and their women, but I always paid them back. I learned my lesson in the snow. I missed my lands, and it is time for me to make them safe again even if I have to turn the rivers red. But more than anything, I missed the moonrise.”

Coyote howled—not a wolf’s sonorous cry, but a siren’s long shriek broken at the end into piercing yips that branched through Mary’s skull like a migraine. The horizon tilted, sickening her.

She clapped her hands over her ears. “Stop it! What are you doing to me?”

“Doing to you? I’m just telling a story.”

A wave appeared as if called, twice as tall as the others and frothing. Mary braced, but it swept her legs and sucked her down. The undertow flipped her twice and hurled her against the sand, but she knew better than to fight it and waited for the pull to release.

Coyote gripped her shoulders, but instead of raising her, he pushed her against the bottom, his foot digging into her stomach. Her runic tattoos tightened her skin, but they protected against a knife to the ribs or sniper’s bullet, nothing so intimate as drowning. She twisted and kicked, but

the returning wave fought her movements as much as Coyote. Her limbs grew heavy, and she felt as if she were slipping out of her body.

When she opened her eyes, Coyote was dragging her up the beach. She started retching, and he dropped her. She tried to stand but fell to her knees. Her tattoos sputtered then stilled like a clock winding down.

“You’re draining me—that’s why you wanted a magician.”

Coyote dug, pushing sand between his legs. “My words could’ve cast a spell on anyone, sucking them dry like a spider does his fly, but you followed my tracks straight to me just as I hoped. You are a link between the world of followers and world of gods. When I’m done with you, everyone will know I’ve returned and not to play pranks. My story will be on the lips of men, gods, magicians, and my people.”

Mary attempted to stand again but fell backward. Her skin felt exposed without the tattoos’ straining. She searched her pocket for her notepad, but the ocean had soaked the pages and washed away her pencil. “You need me, Coyote. You and the other gods can’t control mankind any longer, and I work for an organization that stops gods like you from causing trouble. They’re waiting on top of that cliff. Probably got crosshairs on you right now, and there’ll be more coming down the beach any second. You touch me, and they’ll put some magicked rounds in your chest. Might not kill you, but it’ll hurt.”

Coyote hauled a deerskin bundle from the hole and unlaced the top. He pulled out a knife and whetstone. “You’re bluffing. Without your magic, all you have is words.” He held the knife to the moon so the blade glittered like ice then drew it across the whetstone.

“That’s what you started the night with—words. So now you have to hear how I ended up on this beach. I had a younger brother I loved more than anyone, and when he died, I went looking

for a new world, an escape. I was wandering around all night, searching for a witch, a god, a monster—anybody who could tell me the magic itching in my fingers was real.”

Her words calmed her breathing, and her body relaxed, settling in the sand. “I found a god who said I had to prove myself first, so I used magic to turn my footprints to ice and walked across a river. But that wasn’t good enough. I just had to show-off. I fell into the river and was trapped beneath my own ice, but I freed myself. I knew magic wasn’t an escape from my brother’s death, but a way to honor him. I had the ability to help others.”

With a grunt, she pushed herself upright. Coyote still honed his knife, the blade emitting a hushing noise. “I learned about the dangerous gods, even met a few and decided I could do my best work making sure the gods didn’t take advantage of mankind. You’re not one of those gods, Coyote. I know it.”

She worked her fingers through the sand, searching for a sharp shell or driftwood hunk—any kind of weapon. “You make us laugh and make us cringe while seeing our hidden desires in your actions.”

Coyote stalked toward her, and Mary tried to crawl away. “You’re a teacher, and we need you now to wake us up, make us think. Going on a killing spree will only turn you into a hunted animal. Let me help you find your followers.”

He straddled her. “Stop your howling. I’m starving, and you can feed me in more ways than one.” He stuck the knife in the sand so the blade touched her throat.

She circled her arms around his neck, gripping fistfuls of his hair, and sank her teeth into his canine ear. He howled and jerked upright, but Mary clung to him, wrapping her legs around his waist. He crushed her into the sand, but she locked her muscles and ground the thin flesh

between her teeth. Blood filled her mouth and threatened to choke her until its heat slid down her throat and burned in her gut, surging through her limbs like adrenaline.

She released him and scrambled for his knife. She gripped it as she'd been taught in her MBI training—blade pointed down but raised to protect her face.

Coyote cradled his ear and snarled. “You think a knife makes you a warrior?”

She wiped blood off her lips and traced a target-shaped rune on the blade. She hurled it, and the knife rotated once before embedding itself in Coyote's chest. He swayed as he wrenched out the blade then crumpled, his eyes turned up to the moon.

Mary staggered to the water. She dropped to her knees in the surf and stuck her fingers down her throat until she vomited Coyote's blood. She rinsed her mouth with seawater. A hum brushed her skin as her tattoos seemed to reawaken, spreading warmth up her spine and into her limbs.

A flashlight bobbed along the beach. Heavy shoes crunched in the sand. Mary snatched Coyote's bloody knife and managed to rise, her feet braced wide apart.

Agent Lopez called out a hello. “I would've come down sooner, but I couldn't tell if you were loving or fighting.”

Mary dropped the knife. She felt lightheaded and sat down, forehead resting on her knees. “It was only you up there?”

Lopez played her light over Coyote. She pulled a pair of rune-etched handcuffs off her belt and secured him. “They're coming. No reason to haul the whole team when I didn't even know where to find you. The local cop saw you heading down this way, so I took a stroll along the cliff just in case. Couldn't believe it when I saw you and Coyote standing in the water. I didn't want to come near in case I spooked him.” She crouched beside Mary and handed her a protein bar. “Rough first day.”

Mary scarfed it in two bites. “I’ve been in tense spots with other gods, but normally they don’t outright try to knife me.”

“You think if you work for the Bureau that any god will be friendly with you again? You’re a threat now—get used to it.”

“What are we even doing here, Lopez? We can’t control the gods.”

“My great grandmother had a terrible fear of this Aztec god Mictlantecuhtli. It got worse as she got older until she wouldn’t leave her bedroom, which was chockfull of crosses and rosaries. She’s the reason I joined the Bureau back in the day. Nobody should live in fear like that. But that’s my story. You need to figure out your own.”

A police siren wailed over the crashing breakers while red and blue lights winked along the cliff. A cluster of flashlights spotted the beach, and Lopez waved her light until they acknowledged her.

She handed Mary the folded map from earlier. “I had a magician buddy look over this. If you ever fool me with bad runes again, I’ll make sure even the gods won’t want to work with you. I had your back this time because you were assigned to my team, but you better start acting like it.” She slapped her on the shoulder. “Day’s not over. Coyote’s your catch, so you get to revive him back at holding—if I remember, all you have to do is step over him three times to raise him. I’m sure he’ll be pleased to see you.”

While Lopez ordered agents to strap Coyote onto a gurney, Mary waded into the ocean. She washed the sand from her struggle off her legs and arms then shook out her hair. She followed Lopez toward the parking lot but paused to pick up Coyote’s war bundle.