

Andromeda
a novel
by Joe Nobel

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Third Movement

Anna Exposed

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London, 1962 (a year and a half later)

Sweat beaded on Anna's forehead and upper lip. She quivered in anticipation of the exotic tortures awaiting her. A pillow under her belly propped up her bottom; legs spread apart, embarrassingly exposing her pussy. Her face lay on top of clean, white linen. She didn't dare look up at her tormentor, but she watched the shadows on the wall behind her cast through the flicker of candle light.

Anna watched the shadow arm rise and snap with a shadow flogger trailing behind. She heard the rush of air and then the smack of heavy leather against her bottom. She felt the sting of all thirty braids against her flesh.

Anna no longer received tender warm-ups with a gentle buckskin flogger, something to

acclimate her to harsher instruments. Everything she received now was in punishment for arbitrary infractions. Sometimes her offenses remain unknown. But on this day she knew her crime: not delivering a sufficiently earth-moving orgasm.

“Ohhh,” she gasped as her mind processed the pain. Her body squirmed, futilely trying to twist out of the flogger’s path. She tested the bonds on her arms and legs once more. “No,” she cried. “Please! It’s too much!”

Then Anna felt the next blow. There would be no mercy for her today.

“I beg you! Please stop! Or at least use a lighter flogger —”

And another blow.

Her whole body shuddered. Anna clenched her teeth, determined to beg no longer. That only gave her tormentor perverse satisfaction.

And her flogging continued.

She tried to count how many lashes she had received, but lost count after twenty-five. And there were many more delivered after that. Her raised butt danced under each throw as she tried to squirm away.

Then, after untold lashes descending upon her burning bottom a new sensation overtook her. It was an old feeling, one of longing, one of need. A feeling that could only be achieved through the tender pain of submission. She ground her pussy into the pillow under her. She rode it up and down, no longer trying to squirm away from the blows, rather, working in unison with them. She was sure she’d come in a few minutes if her torturer didn’t notice this change in her and stop just to be cruel.

But, just when the switch in her mind was flicked on and she needed the torment to continue, the flogging stopped.

Anna knew she was being read like a book.

She felt the bedsprings depress. She felt her tormentor's legs straddle her torso facing backwards. Naked feet tickled her underarms and the sides of her breasts. Loins settled onto her back. Hot, fevered loins. Then fingers started to stroke her bottom, making small circles, then migrating to the middle of her rump. They pulled her cheeks apart, exposing her tiny hole.

"No, not there!" she cried.

Being probed in her bottom wasn't something she particularly liked. Instinctively, she tried to clench her cheeks shut. Still, she felt a finger enter her from behind.

Anna gasped again. This teasing was true torture. She had been so close to orgasm, yet this anal probing only aroused her further without bringing her any closer to climax.

"Please," she cried, but didn't know what she was asking for.

Her tormentor just laughed.

"Don't," Anna murmured when she felt a silicone version of a man's cock being forced into her in place of that finger. Then she felt a second dildo. This one rubbed against her pussy, sliding up and down along her drenched lips. The tip of that toy circled her clit. She cried in delight as it brought her ever so close the precipice.

"Don't you dare come," her torturer ordered.

She stifled an orgasmic moan. She wanted to say that she was so close, that she couldn't help it, but words failed her. Then she felt the member push past her lips and deep inside. She moaned in pleasure as she was penetrated again. As soon as that phallus entered her pussy, she started coming. First, she tried to stop the onslaught as she was ordered, then tried to conceal it.

"You came, didn't you?"

"Ahh, no. No, I didn't," she whimpered.

“Don’t lie. I know you too well.”

“It was only a small one, I promise.”

“It better have been, because I have plans for you. And they require you to be frustrated.” Her tormentor paused, thinking of an apt punishment for Anna. “Perhaps a taste of a riding crop will teach you obedience.”

She wanted to say, “Not that”. But, words wouldn’t form. Instead, she could only wait as her torturer climbed off her and the bed.

Then Anna felt the stinging whoosh of the crop land across both cheeks. Already savagely reddened by the previous flogging, the sting was all the more bitter. Yet, Anna could do nothing but accept each stroke as it fell upon her. And, secretly hoped that it would bring her to another orgasm.

One fall of the crop after another landed across both her cheeks. The two instruments already stuffed into her brought her ever closer to orgasm with every gyration of her body. Squirm as she might, she couldn’t escape the crop. Yet, she didn’t know if she wanted escape. Her breathing became ever more urgent. She fought against the ropes binding her to the posts. She was so close to coming again, if only she could touch herself, or if only her torturer would show mercy and suck her clit — just for a few minutes — she knew she would explode in a heaven-shattering orgasm. But no, she was challenged not to come. Or, perhaps the challenge was to come from the riding crop alone.

Yes, relentless falls of the crop pushed her ever closer to coming. Her breathing grew deeper and faster, so did the severity and frequency of the crop.

She fell into a full orgasmic maelstrom. Anna didn’t remember how many times she actually came as she lay bound, spread out, tied to the four posts. She sighed in contentment when the

waves of pleasure ebbed.

“I hope that taught you a lesson.”

Anna just nodded as she felt the two dildos slowly being removed from her. Her tormentor teased her even as the objects were removed an inch at a time, then pressed back in, and twisted around.. Only once she was freed of them did she realize how tightly they had filled her and had been pressing against each other inside her.

She sighed. Even as her wrists and ankles were released from their rope bonds all she could do was lie there in the middle of the bed. She felt a gentle lotion rubbed onto her bottom. She knew her bottom must be crisscrossed with red lines from the crop, marks that would probably show for a week or more. She felt as if her skin was on fire; and the lotion was cooling and it soothed the burn. The gentle hands then moved up to her back and massaged her there. The built-up tension in her evaporated.

Her tormentor caressed her shoulders, then her neck. Anna just wanted to lie there and soak in this pleasure.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Anna, my dear?” It was a rhetorical question.

“You know I did,” she answered sleepily from the bed.

“You’d better get up, or you’ll doze off and miss dinner.”

“Hold me for a while,” Anna said, slowly turning over.

“Okay, I suppose we have time for that before I start cooking.” A loving hand reached out for her. “Come, sit on my lap.”

Anna winced when she lowered herself onto the waiting lap. She breathed a sigh of relief as her raw bottom settled on soft flesh.

“Tomorrow night I’ll return the favor and torture you,” Anna said.

"I'm working late tomorrow," Liudmila said.

"Then Friday."

"Okay, Friday. I'll be looking forward to it." She kissed Anna on her cheek beside her ear.

Anna pulled away.

"What?" Liudmila said. "I can tie you up and make you come, but I can't kiss you?"

"It's different," Anna sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I love you, but yeah, something like that."

"But, we've kissed before."

"Only when Uri ordered us to."

There was a pause, and neither one spoke.

"You miss him as bad as I do?" Liudmila finally asked.

Anna nodded. She felt a tear in her eye.

"I guess there's no going back," Liudmila said.

"No, there isn't. Even if we wanted to, we couldn't get out of this country. They're watching every move we make."

"Yeah, it's like being slaves all over again. Only now, we have to worry about paying the rent on time."

"Liudi, just hold me for a few minutes."

"Okay, Anna. I will."

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Anna, Liudmila, and Aida did escape from behind the Iron Curtain with the help of the British Consulate. They flew out of Budapest via BEA, British European Air, with hastily arranged diplomatic passports. Thanks to the sympathy they elicited from the male members of

the staff, they flew first class. Anna remembered that flight like it happened yesterday. The girls huddled around their tiny oval window as their jet flew west. Anna didn't exhale until she saw the lights of Vienna float by below them. Only then did she believe she was free.

Thanks to the British social system, they were given a flat in a working-class neighborhood of London. Anna was warned not to return to America. The CIA had labeled her a traitor. The photographs of her sipping coffee at the Gerbeaud with two female KGB agents was evidence enough for American intelligence. The Brits, however, saw things through more sympathetic eyes, and were ready to believe her story of submission and slavery.

The former slaves decided to live together, as they had promised — to never abandon each other. They had already lived successfully together for years. If they could do it under Uri's tyranny, they could do it by themselves as a democracy of three. After all, they'd become a family.

Money was always tight. Their welfare payments barely covered their living expenses. Since they didn't have work permits, there was no way to supplement their income. Aida started going out at night and often didn't come home until the early hours of the morning. When Liudmila and Anna questioned her, she'd just shrug her shoulders and tell them she was out. Guys would buy her drinks and occasionally pub food. At least, she told them, she didn't have to live on a diet of boiled potatoes.

They'd gotten behind on their rent when they miscalculated how much clothes would cost them. After all, they'd left with nothing, only the rags the gods had given them. While Anna and Liudmila sat at the kitchen table lamenting their shortfall, Aida threw a pile of cash on the table. More than enough to make up for the difference.

“Where did you get this?” Liudmila stood and confronted Aida.

“I just got it.” Aida crossed her arms. “Okay?”

“No, it's not okay.” Liudmila said, her voice shaking. “Where did you get it?”

“Some guy just gave it to me.”

“You prostituted yourself, didn't you?”

“None of your business how I got that money. It's there to solve your, our, rent problems.”

“Whore!”

“Look who's talking: the biggest sex pig in the world.”

“At least I never did it for money.”

“Ha, you were his dog. Willing to do anything for him so he'd throw you a scrap of attention.

That makes you the whore.” Aida then stormed out of the room and locked herself in the bathroom, the only place she could get privacy in their small flat.

“If you're sleeping with strangers, you're not sleeping with me. I don't want to get crabs or something from you,” Liudmila yelled after her.

“Okay,” Anna said, remaining quiet until then. “I'll talk to her when tensions simmer down. I'll explain we don't need the money that badly.” But even as she spoke, she realized that they did need the money that badly. She looked at the pile of cash Aida had thrown down, then at the calendar on the refrigerator. They were already a week behind. That would mean their landlord would be stopping by soon, banging on the door. “We'll have to use that money,” Anna said quietly.

It was never the same between Liudmila and Aida after that.

Anna thought back to the time Odin took her time traveling; back to Florence and that girl who was the image of Aida. “Popular,” they had called her. Then she remembered the story Aida told her of how Uri rescued her from a brothel. It was the only thing she knew how to do.

Aida left them two months later. She'd had enough of the cold shoulders and icy stares from her once lover, Liudmila.

"If you must know, there was only one guy." Aida said, as she hastily threw her few possessions into a shopping bag. It was only her and Anna home at the time. "He was always nice to me. He only gave me money to help us make ends meet out of sympathy."

"He's just using you," Anna said.

"Oh, yeah? Then why did he ask me to marry him?" Aida huffed as she threw in the last of her shirts and tied the bag shut.

"Aida, I didn't know. You should have told us. This puts a whole new light on things. Um, what am I saying, I should be congratulating you!"

"Never mind, it's too late," Aida said walking out the door.

"Wait! Don't leave like this. Can we at last meet your fiancé and wish the both of you well?"

"We're leaving this afternoon on a train. We're getting married in his hometown, Stromness, as soon as we arrive. He owns a hotel up there in the Orkneys. And, no, you can't meet him."

"But, Aida —"

"Sorry, Anna," she said, closing the door behind her.

Anna didn't know how she'd break the news to Liudmila when she came back from the grocers.

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Anna and Liudmila continued to share that little apartment in Harlsden, becoming the most unlikely couple. Each night, they would argue over who got to be whipped by whom. Although each would have preferred a man, no man could meet their needs like Uri had, so they gravitated towards each other until they were locked in an orbit that got tighter with every passing month.

Liudmila took a part-time job working under the table at a flower shop beside Jubilee Clock. It was just a short walk from their flat on Furness Road. She took care of the flat and awaited Anna's return from work each night with a hot meal.

Yes, Anna, too, got a job. She was offered a paid position with MI6 to debrief them on her life with a Soviet General. It occurred to Anna that the offer came just as they were behind on their rent again, defeated, sinking deeper into debt, with no choice but to accept their offer.

Each day, Anna would ride the Tube's Bakerloo line from her stop at Willesden Junction down to Waterloo Station. She would pass through security at Century House, MI6 headquarters. Then, she would spend the next eight hours, less two fifteen-minute breaks and an hour for lunch, talking with her debriefers. They would record her conversations on a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and she would talk about her daily life as a slave of General Uri Konstantine. They would ask her to go back and describe every single detail that she could remember. She described sex scene after sex scene for them. When her story was improbable, they would bring her anatomically correct dolls, challenging her to show them how those acts were physically possible. Or she would demonstrate positions for them herself. She would kneel before them to show how Uri made her perform for him. She demonstrated how he preferred oral sex. Then she showed them how she had to bend over and hold her ankles with her knees locked, ready to receive him from behind. They always had her use a dildo on a mannequin for these demonstrations, although she let it be known that she wouldn't mind giving the agents a treat, demonstrating these acts on them. Yes, she was that frustrated.

But her debriefers were more interested in military intelligence, for example, the dates of General Konstantine's trips abroad. Think, Anna, they'd say, when did he leave on that 1960 trip to Cuba ... But that's impossible, Anna, they'd remind her, those dates overlap with

And, then there was Odin.

They may have thought that she was crazy and that she imagined him up. But they seemed to believe that she believed. They'd listen to every lurid detail of the acts that both Uri and Odin performed upon her. She told them of the blur of time when day meant sex with Uri and night meant Odin. She told them of the time that Odin took her time-traveling. She was able to describe the historical details far too accurately for anyone but a professor of ancient history to make up. Then out of nowhere, they asked if by chance Odin took her to any place that was improbable. Valhalla, perhaps. She told them he didn't. Nothing like that. But then she reminded them of how Odin had urged them to escape on that day at the Gerbeaud.

Even as she was telling her escape story, her mind went back to the sex as Uri's slave. She repeated her offer to demonstrate some of the acts she was forced to perform. She so wanted one or more of her handlers to take her — just once. Had her agents not been monitored themselves in the two-way mirror, more than a few of the young men would surely have accepted her offer.

At the end of each day, she would take the Tube back to the Harliden flat, hot and worked up from reliving all of Uri's and Odin's torrid sex. Liudmila would always be waiting for her. As she walked in the door, she would ask Liudi if she had a good day. Liudmila would always tell her yes, but never would ask how hers went. It didn't really matter: there was always a hot, cooked meal waiting for her, and the flat was more or less clean.

Then one day she discovered that she had told her MI6 handlers everything she knew. They had rehashed every detail of her life going back as far as her first childhood memories. They even found out about her mission handler, Andrew Locket, and how she and Andy were clandestine lovers. They had a dossier on Locket. They told her in passing that she wasn't his first or the last, and it was just as well that she wasn't with him any longer. But in general, their

questions offered very little in return. Soon, everything Anna could possibly tell them had been told. All inconsistencies had been reconciled and all possible facts that could be verified, were.

“Liudmila, I think I’m out of a job. I’ve told MI6 everything I can,” Anna said as she cuddled in Liudmila’s arms that night.

“I’m sure you’ll find another one. In the meantime, I can ask for more hours at the flower shop.”

“They made me an offer.”

“Oh? Doing what? Secretarial work?”

“No, as an MI6 agent. They already have a mission in mind for me, if I pass their training program.”

“Doing what?”

“I can’t tell you, it’s classified.”

“Sounds dangerous. Do you have to take it?”

“It’s the only option I have. You know I can’t go back to America. The CIA has photographs of me leaving Uri’s apartment that first time he let me out, and of us sitting in the Gerbeaud. They think you and Aida were KGB agents. And they tell me Andrew Locket won’t help me straighten this mess out. He was the one who labeled me a traitor in the first place. But I won’t be going ill-prepared on any mission. I’m being sent off to train at a super secret facility inside an old fortress somewhere in the Midlands. I’ll only get out on weekends to see you.”

“I’ll miss you, Anna. Be careful.”

Anna’s mission, it turned out, was to return to Hungary and bug Uri’s apartment. She was perfect for the assignment, they told her; she knew the land, she knew the man, and she knew his

habits.

“But the last I heard, he took a post in Vladivostok,” she objected when she got her assignment.

“He didn’t accept the position. He’s still in Budapest. He’s now a diplomat,” they told her. “Same apartment, same habits, a new girl.”

“Only one?” Anna raised an eyebrow.

True to their word, Anna was released from training on weekends. She’d return home to the Harlsden flat, to Liudmila. Friday nights would find the place in a mess, Liudmila would pick up, mumbling vague apologies about having a busy day. Anna would get a headache and feel a tinge of depression as she watched Liudmila clean, a chore she could have done throughout the week. They would then stay in bed late on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Her spirits would improve by Sunday. But just as she was starting to relax, the taxi would come and take her away.

Training was precise and detailed. Already speaking both Hungarian and Russian, her MI6 handlers polished away any traces of an accent in either language. They taught her new techniques for climbing walls; slipping from alley to alley in the cover of dark. She memorized the Budapest street map. She realized that in all the years living there, she had only walked in her own little area in the heart of the city, never venturing over to the Buda side of the Danube — even though everyone told her it was much nicer. Was that a part of Uri’s invisible tether over her?

Anna memorized the locations and paths to the various safe houses where her MI6 handlers would be waiting. They drilled endlessly on getting from any point A to point B until she was able to recite the directions effortlessly.

Then came the trip. She made arrangements for Liudmila to get a pension after her should

she fail to return— something that was highly irregular at the time in Britain. Liudmila saw her off on the BEA flight to Budapest. Anna Singer became Anita Surrey, a purveyor of antiques on a buying mission. It was a persona that would live just until she got through Hungarian customs.

- 3 -

Budapest, June, 1963

It was 11:30 at night. Anna stood in Deak Square looking up at her old apartment on the corner of People's Republic and Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Roads. She watched from behind the trees on the opposite corner of the intersection. The streets were dark with only the occasional pedestrian walking past. The people who came and went seemed freer, a degree less guarded. Anna took advantage of this new openness. She dressed in a revealing leopard-print shirt and black miniskirt. Fishnet stockings and stiletto heels completed the disguise. A common prostitute.

Two guards stood at the main entrance to the building. They were no longer Soviet, just regular Hungarian army. No guards were posted within the foyer. The windows of her old apartment on the third floor were dark — had been all night. It looked like no one was home. Intelligence told her that Uri was out in the countryside, a meeting at a Soviet Army base. Her handlers weren't sure where his current slave was. They argued amongst themselves whether Uri's new girl was there at all; with even less agreement on whether she lived with him full time.

Uri was expected back the following morning. Yet Anna knew from experience that he often had his chauffeur drive through the night to get him home so he could sleep in his own bed, surrounded by warm slaves. She had to decide whether to break in now or wait for another opportunity.

She made her decision to go in now.

She slipped into the archway of the neighboring building when a guard struck a match to light a cigarette. The momentary flash of light dulled his night vision long enough for her to get by. That next building was based on the same general architecture as her old home: a central courtyard surrounded by apartments and was unguarded, so it was easy for her to slip up its marble stairway to the top floor. From there, she ran silently to the other side of the gallery circling the courtyard. With the aid of a rope she had sashed around her waist and a grappling hook in her handbag, she pulled herself up to the roof.

Anna jumped from rooftop to rooftop to land on her old building. She then swung down onto the third-story gallery with the same rope and hook. The British agents believed General Konstantine no longer kept a guard posted by his door. She was relieved to see they were right. Her only remaining qualm was not knowing if the apartment was empty or not. She picked the lock in less than a minute and was across the threshold. She would know in a moment if anyone was home.

Not much had changed, not from what Anna could see by the light of the street lamp below. It appeared that neither Uri nor his new slave had bothered to redecorate after Anna's grand escape.

With the aid of a tiny flashlight, she crept along the train of rooms that made up the backbone of the apartment. Anna planted her listening devices as her MI6 handlers had instructed. She found the most ingenious places for them along the way: cracks in the plaster; missing buttons on the fabric of the sofa; in a cobweb in a corner too high for anyone to bother to reach. And these devices were small, smaller than anything she had seen coming out of the labs at the CIA. Did she fall behind that much on technology while she was enslaved, or were the Brits that much more advanced than the Americans?

For no apparent reason, she felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. Word association brought her back home to America. It was an odd time for these feelings to well up. All of a sudden, she felt abandoned and betrayed by the Americans. Especially by her American handler — and lover — Andrew Locket. To think, to be labeled a traitor. She should have been given a hero's welcome.

She planted her bugs methodically; trying not to let these troubling thoughts distract her. Three in the living room. Three in the dining room. Two in his infamous play room. She continued through the rest of the rooms. At least with Uri, she knew exactly where she stood.

Anna was about to walk into his bedroom but stopped when she heard a creak of the mattress and a quiet sigh. They were almost imperceptible sounds, but they told her someone was there. Anna had been silent so far, fairly certain her footsteps made no squeaks on the floorboards. Whoever was in there, couldn't have heard her moving through the apartment. Standing with her back against the wall she turned to peek around the corner. Her eyes having gotten used to the darkness, she saw the figure of a woman lying on the bed. A faint trickle of light from a street lamp below was all that illuminated the scene.

That woman was tied down, struggling, desperate to free herself. She lay there, bound by ropes that were invisible to Anna's eyes in the dark. But Anna knew they were there by the motions she made in her struggles. Watching her, Anna saw that she wasn't merely trying to squirm free. That, she clearly could not do. The woman's arms were tied together at the wrist. A rope loosely tied her to the top of the headboard. She held something in her hand, a vibrator or dildo.

Anna watched as the woman tried to pleasure herself, but being bound to the bed, and having her arms tied away from her in a sadistically ingenious way, she could not touch herself. At least

not where she wanted to. No doubt, Uri had left her on the verge of orgasm. Lying all day and all night in her own frustration, his new woman was trying very hard to angle the device so it would just touch her. She arched her hips as much as the bondage across her body would allow. She strained the ropes holding her wrist, trying to get just a few centimeters closer to her pussy with the device. Even when she held the toy by the very tip of her fingers, it was just short of the mark.

Uri was clever. He'd thought this out well. No matter what this woman tried, she had no way of reaching her own pussy. Anna knew that this ordeal was not over for his new slave. When her master returned, he'd tease her for hours before letting her come. Uri never played this particular game with Anna, but often did similarly frustrating things with Aida and Liudmila. No, with her, Uri did the opposite. He was more amused by forcing orgasm upon orgasm upon her until she could take it no longer.

"Oh Uri, what is it in your sick little mind that makes you come up with these games?" Anna said to herself.

Anna knew she must forgo his bedroom. Yet a bug there would have been a coup; MI6 would have learned a lot from those bedroom conversations. They would have been able to listen in on his most intimate thoughts as he made casual talk with his slave; learn when he was second-guessing himself, when he was in a position of strength, and when he was bluffing. Anna remembered that kind of pillow talk all too well. Uri told her so much when she wasn't able to do anything with the information. And now the opportunity slipped away yet again.

There was plenty of that pillow talk in the bath, too. She remembered his long soaks in the tub as his girls gathered around, washing his back and legs while attending to his needs. Occasionally, one would climb into the tub with him, either to ride his shaft, or to pleasure him

with her mouth. She looked down the hall to the bathroom. Feelings welled up inside her again. She felt her loins flush with heat. She felt that certain telltale moisture in her panties. Was she regretting her escape?

She fantasized about getting into bed next to that woman and waiting for his return.

Anna shook the thought off, and returned to the here and now. As she crept down the hallway she was thankful that the floors were marble tiled and not the creaky wood of her parent's old house in Watertown, Massachusetts. At least she hoped she was being silent. Once in the bathroom, she planted a bug under the rim of the cast iron bathtub. That only left the kitchen. As she turned, a sharp blow hit her nose.

Anna fell back, crashing against the tub as she tumbled to the floor. The light came on. She was suddenly blinded by the glare from the stark bulb swaying from the ceiling. Then someone was on top of her. She felt a double-fisted punch to the head. Then another. She felt herself being pounded into the floor.

It occurred to her that whoever had turned on the light was equally as blind. Then she remembered the hand-to-hand combat training that MI6 had relentlessly drilled into her. Moments later Anna was on top. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw she was lying atop a naked woman whose wrists were bound together by rope — the slave on the bed.

Anna looked down at the woman whose throat she was strangling. The girl had fear in her soft brown eyes. Her face was delicate with high cheek bones and full lips. She'd be beautiful if she wasn't gasping for air. Anna knew this woman from somewhere.

But where?

Anna thought back to the time Uri took her to the opera. After the performance, they had chatted with the opera star, Sofia Varga.

“I know you,” Anna said.

“And I know you too,” the girl coughed as Anna released the choke-hold around her throat.

“You are the famous ‘Andromeda’ he keeps talking about.”

“He talks about me?”

“He speaks your name in his nightmares. And sometimes he calls out your name when making love. I pretend I don’t notice.” The woman propped herself up on her elbows when Anna backed away. “So, what are you doing back here, Anna?”

Anna climbed off Sofia Varga’s light frame and helped her to her feet, ever cautious of another blow to the head.

“Can I get a drink of water?” Sofia asked. “You really hurt my throat.”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Anna said. “Sorry about that, but you pack quite a punch yourself.” She checked to see if her nose was bleeding.

Anna followed the opera star into the kitchen and watched her pour a glass of water. She drank it slowly with her wrists tied and her hands shaking. Sofia then offered a glass to Anna. Anna took a sip. They sat across from each other at the kitchen table.

“How did you meet?” Anna asked. The more she could keep the woman talking, the less chance there would be of her asking questions, such as: what are you doing here?

“We met at a reception after a concert I gave. Only very high-up party officials got to attend, mostly fat, balding men, very boring. But, there was something about General Konstantine.”

“His animal charm.”

“Yes, I suppose you could put it that way,” Sofia smiled shyly. “It was some years since I saw him last. He told me he was now living alone and asked me out to dinner. After that date, he invited me up to his place.”

“And tied you up?”

“Well, not the first time. But, that started soon after. He asked me to move in with him.”

“And?”

“I told him I couldn’t. I’ve got a career, and my own place. But I told him I could stay the night whenever I’m free.”

“And that was okay with him?”

“It had to be, that was the only choice I gave him.”

“Then you’re not his slave? And, you could slip out of your bonds any time you wanted.”

“Of course I could slip out. What if I had to pee or something? You don’t think I’d allow him to tie me up for real like that for a whole day?”

“You two are just playing games. With me it was real. I was his slave.”

“Ha! You could have escaped any time you wanted to.”

“That’s enough,” Anna said, standing. “I’m going to tie you back to the bed, this time you won’t be able to slip out of your bonds so easily.”

“Hey, let go!” Sofia yelled as Anna grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

As Anna dragged her back to the bedroom, Sofia asked, “So, Anna, what are you doing back here?”

Here it was, the question. Well Sofia, I came to bug his apartment. Anna cleared her throat.

“I came back to see him. I thought he was alone. I was worried for him. But now that I see he has you, I can see I’m not needed.”

“Not needed? He calls out your name instead of mine and you tell me your not needed!”

“I think it’s best I leave, and you not tell him I was here,” Anna said, as she threw Sofia back onto the bed and started tying her wrists to the headboard. This time, in a way she couldn’t

escape.

“Wait a second! You didn’t come to see him at all. You would have knocked at the door. You were creeping around. You came to steal something. I bet you’re working for the CIA again!”

“Believe me, you’re wrong. I’m not here to steal anything, and I’m not with the CIA,” Anna said as she tied off one wrist to the headboard post then started on the other. Okay, technically, she wasn’t lying.

“It felt like you stuck a rusty dagger into his heart when you left. Those were his words,” Sofia said, as Anna backed out of the room.

- - -

Liudmila crumpled a handful of dried meadow flowers in a ceramic bowl. She lit a long wooden match and set them smoldering. She was following the directions from the book she bought at an occult shop. It was far not as good as her mother’s old book of magick that she’d left behind. She was doing spell of protection for Anna.

The smoke hovered around the bowl, refusing to rise. It was supposed to follow a stately path out the window. What little did, rose into Liudmila’s face.

“Anna, be careful,” she muttered. The pattern of the smoke was a bad omen.

Undeterred, Liudmila screeched another chant as a part of this offering to appease the spirits. Smoke soon filled the kitchen in a chaotic jumble. It even seemed to circle her neck, as if so many fingers were choking her.

“This is terrible. Anna’s in trouble.” Liudmila coughed. She knew the spell had more than failed, it was being thrown back into her face. She backed away from the offering bowl, and after hesitating for more than a moment, for what she was contemplating was grave, she flipped through the new book to find a summoning.

She couldn't find anything like the ceremony she had first used to for Odin. Although she remembered how she did it, that particular spell required someone to be bound in the middle of a pentagram. There must be some other way to get that good-for-nothing horny god's attention.

"This is ridiculous," she said after paging through the book twice. She slammed it shut. "Odin isn't even mentioned. How do these English witches expect me to summon a god without decent instructions?"

Liudmila stuck her head out of the open window looking over the back alley.

"Odin!" she yelled at the starless sky. "Anna's in trouble. I can sense something bad is about to happen to her."

"Ahh, shut up, you sodding bird! I'm trying to sleep," an annoyed voice yelled back at her from the dark of the night. A dog barked from somewhere beyond the next alley.

- - -

Anna left the apartment and reversed her steps: up to the roof; a jump across to the next building; and then a dash down the stairs to the ground floor. Once back on the street, she became that prostitute again.

Anna crossed the intersection of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Road, just when Uri's Lada rumbled up the street. She was fully illuminated by his headlights for more than five seconds as his car turned up from Jozsef Attila Road, five seconds that seemed like two hours.

"Did he recognize me?" Anna wondered. "Or was I just a common street walker to him?"

Uri climbed out of the black Lada with one small suitcase. He gave the driver a wave and went in through the archway of his building.

Soon he would unlock the door to his apartment. Soon Sofia would tell him everything. Anna had seconds, just seconds, before he would call out the police, army, and his cadre of clandestine

agents.

“Hurry!” Anna imagined Sofia telling him even as she lay on his bed in bondage. “Anna just left! She can’t be more than a block away.” Then he would remember the prostitute in his headlights and know that she was his beloved Andromeda. Anna broke into a run.

She threw off her stiletto shoes. She regretted doing it even as they tumbled against a wall. Uri’s agents will find them and know she’s running barefoot. And they would know her direction. There were a few MI6 goodies in the heels. A transponder in one, always showing her location, and a smoke-making gadget in the other. The reason for the latter, she didn't know. And why high heels in the first place? Someone at MI6 was watching too many James Bond films.

Anna looked to her left, past the tree-filled Elizabeth Park. The British Consulate was just beyond. As close as it was, she knew she would never make it there. Having learned their lesson, the secret police constantly watched the building. She’d be picked up the moment she approached it. The prostitute’s persona wouldn’t help, her handlers had warned in the strictest of terms. She resisted the urge to gravitate to that closest of refuges. Instead she followed her contingency escape plan and made her way down Jozef Attila Road.

After running for two blocks, she crossed to the other side of the road, ever listening in the silence of the night to be sure that no cars were about to careen around a corner. By now, Uri would have made his the call and his people would mobilize. She would soon expect to see one car after another fan out looking for her. She made it across the street to the hidden shadows of the other side.

The building on the left side of the street had a pedestrian walkway under it with monolithic granite columns supporting it. They'd make for good cover. She heard an engine rumble as she arrived at the end of the block where she'd have to run across an open square to reach the

shadows of the next building.

A car careened in from Roosevelt Square. It slowed to a crawl as it passed by the building in front of her. That building, too, had the same pedestrian arcade. Someone from the car shone a flashlight between the pillars. Anna froze in place, her heart jumped up her throat. She barely remembered to flatten herself against the nearest column.

From her new vantage point against the pillar, she could no longer see the car. But her other senses compensated for her limited vision. She heard the engine as it idled and the tires rolling forward ever so slowly. She saw the reflections of light as the driver checked between every pillar, rolling forward only when satisfied no one was lurking in the shadows. Anna almost cried when the flashlight probed the spaces around her hiding place. She felt her knees melting. She felt the urge to bolt.

“Control yourself,” she mouthed. Then, the flashlight beam moved to the space between the next set of columns, and the next, all the way down to the end of the block.

Those agents should have gotten out and checked the passageway lengthwise, Anna thought. She was glad they were lazy. She heard the car roll forward slowly. She looked back, not breathing, not until the car turned right at the intersection onto Karoly Boulevard, bordering Elizabeth Park. No doubt, they would drive the perimeter of Elizabeth Park then circle back around, knowing she couldn't have gotten far.

Anna ran across the open expanse between the two buildings. Then she made it along the next covered sidewalk much quicker than the first. But soon, there was nowhere but the open for her. She crossed back over to the right side of Jozsef Attila Road and found herself overlooking Roosevelt Square and the Danube.

The night was still and silent. She surveyed the park ahead of her. She wondered if there

could be someone waiting in the shadows. But if she froze now, she knew she would lose. A drop of rain fall on her forehead. Oh great, she thought, just what I need! She crouched and ran — her goal was the cover of a statue in the middle of the park. She crossed the road circling the elongated square. She ran onto the grass median at its center. A few more steps and she would be up against the baroque statue — and into the cover of its shadow.

Anna had seen that statue a thousand times while serving Uri as his slave, but she never paid much attention to it. It was a large stone column, an obelisk, with Ferenc Deak sitting atop. There were four smaller statues at the base, one on each side. Each one was streaked in blue from rain water gracefully aging the metalwork over the years. As soon as she reached the statue, she heard a car rumble into the square. It had entered from the same intersection as she; it was the same car that was searching for her before. She ran around to the north face of the obelisk, out of line of their flashlight beams. Here, the statue at the base was of a woman. She had a scale in one hand and a book of law in the other. She wore a hooded robe. This was Justice. Justice. The word slowly rumbled through her brain like distant thunder on a warm summer's eve. The statue looked gravely down as Anna climbed up onto her, hiding herself between Justice and the marble base supporting Mr. Deak.

Justice. The word wouldn't leave her mind. Is justice what she wanted? How he had used her for his amusement for too many years, and how he must pay. Justice for Uri. That's what he deserved. Or was it that simple? Justice from Uri. Did she deserve a dose of that justice meted out for her, too? After all, she'd had many opportunities to escape, yet she stayed. Had she used Uri for her own amusement, playing out her submissive needs in real life? And when she became tired of the arrangement, she left — on her terms and at a time of her choosing. She left, taking the others with her, convincing them to come with her by souring the domestic mood, albeit

subconsciously.

A new realization dawned on her: she'd left because she had outgrown Uri. Odin had nothing to do with it. At most, he was the catalyst to prod her into action.

The car continued its slow journey along the perimeter of the square. A flashlight hit the statue again. Anna could tell by the changing angle of the shadows that the car was slowly rolling forward, following the traffic direction, inching its way around the square. Soon she would be exposed to the flashlight's probing. Justice would no longer do.

She jumped to the left and sought refuge in the darkness on the west face. Here the statue was of an old man, robed, seated, two small children on either side of him. They were perhaps nine or ten of age, and naked. They both had short hair. One was clearly a boy, showing no shame with his genitals. The other, a girl by inference, had her small triangle between her legs conveniently covered by the corner of the old man's robe.

Why cover the girl and not the boy? If she had designed the statue, she would have had the little girl exposed, too, just for parity. Then she realized that back in America it would be hard to find any statues of naked children, not even in innocent poses like this. Had her sensibilities moved that far away from normal? This statue represented education. Thanks, Uri. Thanks for educating me.

The car curved around the north end of the square. Anna moved left again, keeping in the shadow. A woman with a babe in her arms stood as the south-facing statue. Anna looked at the baby, then the woman — the mother. For some reason she could not understand, tears welled up in her eyes. In a moment, she was sobbing uncontrollably.

Uri had sex with one or another of us every day, Anna said to herself. Yet we never got pregnant, not one of us. She had waited with dread for the day her period wouldn't start, but that

day never came. Eventually, she put the thought further and further from her mind until she forgot the worry completely. Would things have been different if we were a family rather than slaves, with little ones getting under the General's feet? Would children have mellowed him? Uri, why couldn't you get any of us pregnant? Did you fix things so that inconvenient little creatures wouldn't distract from your sexual pleasure?

She scurried left again as the car continued its path around the square. She hoped another one wouldn't appear from the opposite direction. Now she stood on the east-facing side, the side facing Pest, the side where she had started. On this face, a woman with flowing robes sat peering over an open book. Two naked children stood around her, too. Like the statue on the other side, the little boy's penis was visible, yet the girl's genitals were casually covered by the edge of the woman's robe. What are you teaching these children, Anna wondered as she looked into the statue woman's eyes, and, how did I wind up doing it all wrong? What should I have done differently?

Anna then heard the car speed off along the river road heading north along the Danube. Her musings evaporated as quickly as they appeared. She made a dash towards the Chain Bridge. She crossed the road, ran along a stone wall guarding the embankment of the river road and the river itself. From there, she ran up onto the bridge. Anna stayed on the pedestrian walkway, avoiding the auto road. Soon she came across the bridge guards – two granite lions on either side of the road sitting on enormous stone pedestals. The lions looked stoically down at all who entered the bridge. They eyed her with caution. "You may pass," they seemed to tell her.

The footpath took a ninety degree turn to the right making its way around the pedestal. This monolithic granite slab gave Anna one more shadow to hide in. From there, the pathway continued on a straight line over the bridge.

A car screeched to a halt back in Roosevelt Square. Anna craned her neck around the ironwork struts and saw that this was a regular police car, not that unmarked black Lada looking for her. Flashlight beams searched the square, then made a cursory scan of the bridge. But she was hidden from view by the granite column.

Anna took another look back at the police car once the flashlight was turned off. There were two policemen leaning against their car, smoking cigarettes. They seemed content to wait for anyone to show up. They were there to block her escape route if she was heading this way. But they were too late, she was past them. Anna kept going. Slowly. Casually. Like a lonely hooker walking the Budapest streets. She craned her neck to look over the crest of the bridge. Another police car was waiting on the other side, parked in Adam Clark Square. A tunnel crossed under Buda Castle Hill beyond the square, and beyond that was Vienna and then somewhere over the horizon, London.

Right now she just needed to get past the police car on the other side of the bridge. She didn't even need to go as far as the tunnel. A small side street between the river and the tunnel would take her up to the top of Buda Castle Hill where the safe house waited for her. It was close, so tantalizingly close, yet she was trapped between two police blockades.

The two policemen from the far side of the bridge started to stroll towards her. They stopped a couple ahead of her and checked their identification. Perhaps she could get by them with an excuse that she left her papers at home. Maybe offer them blowjobs. No. That wouldn't work; no matter how corrupt the police were, Anna was convinced they were looking for her specifically.

Anna couldn't turn back. Couldn't go ahead. If she jumped, she'd fall to her death in the Danube below. She leaned over the granite wall to her left. There was nothing she could grab onto, no footing, no sill. She turned to her right and thought about climbing over the bridge's

cables of thick plates of solid steel. She would then be on the auto road. True, she could risk running across the road, over the opposite set of cables and to the far walkway. But that wouldn't work. The police, though distracted by the other couple, would spot her dashing across the road.

Anna Singer, Andromeda, stood frozen on the bridge with all her options exhausted. She was just short of its crest. Exposed. A gust of wind blew across her face. She felt the chill through her less-than-adequate clothing. She looked up, not a star in the sky. Another drop of rain hit her face.

“When is it going to finally start raining,” she thought, her outlook was as dejected as the starless sky.

Anna looked at the massive suspension cables one more time, then at the struts running down from them, through steel plates on the bridge floor to supporting girders underneath. Half ran straight down, the rest crisscrossed each other and went under at forty-five degree angles. She looked for anything in the design that might help her, hide her. She focused on the steel plates covering the bridge under the cables. Some plates were massive, three by four feet, but they alternated with plates a third that size. Most were bolted down. But some had a bolt or two missing. She looked desperately for one of the smaller plates to see if there were any with all their bolts missing. She was not disappointed; she soon found one that was just lying there, without anything holding it in place.

Anna put her fingers around that square of iron. It was heavier than she anticipated. She slid it forward, trying to keep the plate silent as it grated on top of the adjacent plate. She pulled herself down the hole head first. As soon as she was through, she wished she would have gone feet first. But, it was already too late, for that by the time she slid down the forty-five degree strut.

Anna clung to the iron work in a most awkward fashion. She'd slid all the way down until her shoulder became jammed against an intersecting strut. She held on with arms embracing the cold steel, lying on that forty-five degree beam, feet dangling above her.

She dared not move even one muscle until she heard the footsteps of the police walk past her and fade into the night.

Anna tried to right herself. She pulled in her legs to kneel on the girder and started to pull herself upright. But, she slipped and tumbling over. It was only by chance that she caught the edge of the girder. She found herself clinging to the truss with only her fingers.

Fatigue hit her, as if all her energy drained to her feet and pulled her downward. Anna clung on but her arms refused to pull her up. She looked down. Although invisible from the dark of the night, she heard the Danube rushing below her. The river made its own unique sounds, a sound which under other circumstances might have been soothing but now filled her with dread at the thought of falling to her death.

“Odin, if I ever needed you, it's now!” Anna whimpered.

This is it, she thought. She took a deep breath and prepared to let go and plunge to the Danube's brown waters below.

She heard the footsteps of the couple the police checked ahead of her. They stopped right above her. They were speaking quietly to each other. “Oh great, I'm going to die while a couple above me is making out,” she moaned.

“Help!” she tried to yell, but produced only an inaudible squeak. She was dizzy. She looked down once more at the Danube as despair filled her and fatigue weighed her down. Anna felt her fingers slowly lose their grip, one at a time, until she could no longer hold on.

Mankind, with its senses of sight, touch, taste, hearing, smell, and limited reasoning power, can detect but a meager slice of the universe. He is imprisoned by time, ever moving forward. In it, he is forced to follow time's stream as it meanders forever into the future. He is blind to all other dimensions of space. Nor, does he hold open the possibility that there may be multiple dimensions of time as well.

Anna had a glimpse of that which exists outside her philosophy. Odin, once summoned from his far-off dimension, had his games with her, then returned the favor in kind by giving her the strength to free herself. Even so close and intimate with him, Anna had not begun to suspect the extent of his power. Besides having the energy of a billion suns coursing through his little finger, he travels through all those multiple dimensions of time the way we mortals walk to the corner store for bread.

And what of life itself? What is it? How can humanity begin to explain the complex depths of the immortal human soul if we cannot even fathom the physical universe around us?

How can the human brain deal with the impossible? What would it do when confronted with something that cannot happen? To survive, would the mind banish this new knowledge in order to remain whole? Are there impossibilities so impossible that even Anna, with her power to see what others force out of their minds, cannot reconcile?

Anna remembered something about hanging from the girders underneath the chain bridge. And she remembered her fingers loosened their grip. She then found herself running again. Yes, there was a discontinuous moment, a lingering doubt, a hiccup in her brain, as she wondered how she got here.

Her bare feet were blistered, stockings having long worn through. Her lungs were burning.

She was exhausted. She ran off the Chain Bridge, past the empty police car, across Clark Square, and up the steep Buda Castle Hill. She ran up the King's way, a set of pedestrian steps, canopied by oaks, that paralleled the serpentine cobblestone street.

A car drove by on the road far below on her right. Both the street and the steps would ultimately lead to Disz Square on top of the hill. But the driver didn't see her and that's what was important. It wasn't a police car, but it could have been filled with Uri's plain-clothes Soviet agents. Then again, it could have been nothing more than a functionary heading home to his apartment up in the posh Castle District.

"Keep moving Anna," she told herself. Yet, her lungs were burning. She couldn't stop now. She was steps away from the safe house.

Anna didn't know how she got to where she was. The events of the night began to take their toll on her sanity. First she was running, then seeking a place to hide, then she was clinging for life. Then what? She didn't remember how she got up from under the bridge; she only remembered that she was running again, as if running was the entirety of her existence.

She was on a steep climb up to the top of Buda Castle Hill. Halfway up, those stairs mercifully turned into an ever-rising, meandering walkway. The road was below her on the right, snaking its own way up. The walls of the castle were above her on the left.

Anna was almost at the top when she saw another flight of stairs beside the castle wall. She ran those three flights of twelve steps each without slowing. Her heart was pounding by the time she reached the top. But she was there, on top of Buda Castle Hill.

"Stupid place to put a safe house," she gasped, as she felt a few more drops of rain.

Anna entered the vast cobblestone plaza on top of the hill; this was Disz Square. It appeared empty. The car that had sped by her was long gone. There were two cars parked at the periphery

of the square. Both were empty. She surveyed the buildings along the plaza paying particular attention to the shadowy doorways. She recited her directions: cross the plaza then take the first side street. The safe house is the second building on the left. Simple.

Walking slowly, she was soon out of the cover of darkness in the middle of the cobblestone square. Misty silence of the night filled her ears. She could hear the blood pulsing in her head. It was louder than the largest train engine.

“Andromeda, my dear,” the voice came from behind. “I’m sorry I missed you at my flat.”

She turned. At first she thought it was her imagination. But no, it was General Uri Konstantine himself. Blood drained from her face. Her universe started spinning. He stood ten paces behind her. It was too dark to read the expression on his face.

“You’re bleeding,” he said, looking down at her feet.

Anna was exposed to him in the street light. He stepped out of the shadows where she could see him. He seemed somehow smaller than she remembered him. Perhaps defeated, if it were possible for General Konstantine to be defeated. Maybe he just looked a few years older. She must look a few years older to him too.

She followed his gaze. Her feet left a trail of blood. “Come, let me bandage them for you. I have some shoes, and clothes worthy of a lady.” He took a step towards her. She backed off a step. All of a sudden, he didn’t seem like a man defeated. He had that twinkle in his eyes; that hint of a smile he had when planning a particularly devious torture for her.

“Stay away from me!” she screamed. Yet, she wondered what it would feel like if he tied her up one more time. How would she react to his visceral touch? With her bound and helpless, and he free to do whatever he chose, how many times would he make her come? How would he tease her with sweet erotic pain? She longed for his embrace; his hold of her: kind yet firm; the way he

positioned her body the way he wanted her; his commanding presence that left no room but to obey, She wondered if she knew how she melted inside at those moments.

“Be practical, my dear.” He took another step in her direction. She snapped out of her wayward thoughts and saw him for what he was.

“Why can’t you leave me alone!” she cried. Her logical mind reminded her about how he’d kidnapped her, sexually used her for his amusement, kept her confined to his apartment until she’d become his docile slave. He’d brainwashed her.

“I did leave you alone. I never bothered Aida at the Prancing Pixie Hotel in Stromness. Nor did I even once intrude on you or Liudmila in your little home on the second floor of 36 Furness Road in Harlsden, London. You two do make the loveliest couple. I never would have thought —”

“You know everything, about all of us!”

“Yet you,” he went on, “have broken into my apartment. You have accosted Sofia. She took her anger out on me and left.”

“Uri, just leave me alone.”

“Me? Leave you alone? My dear, you are the one who came to see me.”

“I was in Budapest on other business ...”

She fumbled in her purse. She had a dagger hidden there. At least she could hold him at bay. As she looked down for it, she felt him tackle her, he on top of her as her back crashed onto the cobblestones. With a clap of thunder in the distance, the sky opened up and the downpour began.

Adrian Somerset reclined in his easy chair. He swirled his brandy and marveled at its exquisite hue. He sniffed the aroma then took a sip into his mouth. Heaven on Earth, he thought

as the brandy encircled his tongue. He looked up at the clock. Two-fifteen in the morning. He decided that the woman spy wasn't going to show up this late at night. Hers was a simple mission: in and out. Century House hadn't notified him that she was delayed, but messages get lost in the bureaucracy all the time. He certainly couldn't go out looking for her. After all she might still show up. He decided to retire after this last drink. He was sure London would send a coded message in the morning. It would say something like, Andromeda had completed her mission and is aboard the scheduled B.E.A. flight home.

Then came the bang on the door. He jumped up, spilling the precious brandy on his sleeve. He tripped over his ottoman as he leapt to the front hallway. The banging continued with its urgent insistence. He fumbled to unlock the door. Adrian opened it to find Anna Singer standing on his stoop. Her clothes were drenched red. Blood covered her hands and face. She held a dagger in her quivering fingers, still dripping crimson. She looked at Adrian Somerset and burst out in hysterical laughter.

"I killed him!" Blood on her face mixed with tears and rain. "Don't you understand, I finally killed that son of a bitch! I stabbed him, and then I stabbed him again through the heart to make sure he was dead." The dagger tumbled from her fingers as she fell to her knees. "He's gone! He's finally out of my life!"

To be continued ...

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Be well, Joe

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