

Andromeda
a novel
by Joe Nobel
by Joseph Molnar

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Forth Movement

Anna Transformed

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4 years later, London, June 1, 1967

“Anna, snap out of it,” Liudmila said. “You’ve been a crabby grouch all day. I don’t want you to ruin the evening for us.”

“Oh, hush,” Anna replied. She was not so much perturbed at Liudmila’s comments or of her being an extra pain in the ass today, but rather because there was a new tune playing on the radio, and Liudmila’s incessant chatter was drowning out the words.

“Michael’s sister is on her way up with those dresses she’s loaning us,” Liudmila reminded Anna. “Be nice to her.” Michael was her new boss at the flower shop. In actuality, the title Second Shift Assistant Manager only meant he catches grief if anything goes wrong. But he,

being smitten with Liudmila, made her time at work a lot easier than it otherwise might have been.

“Aren’t you glad you didn’t tell him to leave you alone?”

“Okay, his sister working for a high-end boutique has its advantages. But he’s a pest. He’s not man enough to ask me out, yet he keeps making this small talk as if he was building up the nerve, but he never gets to the point. And I don’t want to go out with him if he’s a wimp.”

“We’ll never find anyone like Uri again.” Anna felt a stab in her heart when she mentioned his name. That always happens, even after these many years. But this time, the pain was more than figurative; it was a deep, constricting pain in her chest.

“After someone like Uri, I can’t settle for just anyone,” Liudmila said. “I think we’re both spoiled... Anna, are you okay?”

“I just have to sit down for a moment. I’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. We’ve been planning this double date for two weeks. Don’t go and get ill at the last minute.”

“And, you! Don’t get your hopes up. Just because these guys work for MI6 doesn’t mean they’re handsome and daring spies. They’re closer to low-level pencil pushers if you want to know the truth.”

“Don’t knock them. Everyone has to start off somewhere.”

“And some of us get kicked down a few rungs,” Anna said referring to her being demoted and given office duties — barely above clerical level — after killing General Konstantine.

“You were supposed to bug his apartment, not kill him,” her supervisors had chastised after returning from her failed mission. “We wanted to recruit him. How do you get a corpse to work for you!”

“Don’t worry, Anna,” Liudmila pulled her back to the present. “You’ll get out of this slump, you always have.”

“It’s been four years now.”

“You’ll be fine, kiddo —” Liudmila started to say, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. “The dresses are here!” she said as she ran to answer it.

Liudmila returned with two dresses covered in plastic wrap as if they’d come from the dry cleaner’s.

“Mike's sister had to run, so you're spared having to make nicey-nicey talk.” Liudmila threw Anna one of the dress bundles. “Here, this one’s yours. And this one’s mine. Might as well try them on; our dates will be here before we know it.”

Anna stood reluctantly, for she was tired. And she felt light-headed. She’d left work early, just to get some rest before their date. But now, she felt all the more drained of energy.

“Which guy's yours and which is mine?” Anna asked.

“How should I know? They're your colleagues from the spy factory.”

“I think Donald is my date, and Nigel is yours. But it doesn't matter, if you like the other one we can switch.”

Anna took the dress out of its wrapping. The material was shiny and black, what there was of it. It came with a pair of arm-length black gloves and a matching pair of high-heeled black shoes. “Very haute couture,” she said. Then after looking at the label, “A Coco Chanel.” She tried on the dress, and gloves, then the shoes.

Vying for space in front of the mirror, she murmured, “Oh no,” when she saw herself.

“What is it?” Liudmila said, stepping aside; half dressed herself.

“Liudi, I can’t go tonight.”

“What?” Liudmila said. “Why not, that dress looks wonderful on you. It's like it was made just for you.”

“Listen, I've seen this dress before.”

“Yeah, in all the fashion magazines —”

“No. Back at the flat in Budapest. I've had visions; seen things that the rest of you haven't. They appeared mostly in the early days; after Uri took me to be his slave; when he whipped me often. There were two people looking at me. One of them I later recognized as Odin. The other, a woman in a black dress, I never found out who she was. She looked familiar, yet she was no one I knew. But now I know; it was me, eleven years older. Something freaky is going to happen tonight. I just know it. Odin is going to show up —”

“Anna, get a grip! Odin hasn't made an appearance since we escaped. These two guys taking us out sound nice. At least that's how you described them. They're going to take us to dinner, and may I remind you that we haven't had a full meal in a week, not since the grocer cut off my tab. If we play it right, we'll have leftovers to pull us through the weekend. Then they're going to take us to a nice opera. Okay, it wouldn't have been my choice either, but if they're that elegant and high-class there must be something to them.”

“Liudmila, I just don't want to —”

“Anna! We're going! That's final. I'll do your hair and help you with your makeup. But, not another word!”

“Okay,” Anna said, too drained of life to argue.

The evening started horribly and went down from there. Liudmila feared that Anna would sour the mood, then quickly saw this bad date wasn't her fault. Donald talked constantly; he was

opinionated, dead-certain, and plainly wrong most of the time. Nigel just eagerly agreed with his taller friend and alternated between picking his nose when he thought no one was watching, and sticking his finger in his ear. His tie was askew.

The restaurant was dimly lit. Anna found it claustrophobic, and Liudmila started to sneeze from the dust in the red velvet curtains lining the walls. Their dates both had pork chops with mashed potatoes and gobs of gravy. Anna and Liudmila eyed each other, wondering how these two could bolt down so much grease in one sitting. Nigel got a splotch of that gravy on his shirt.

“So, what do you birds do for fun?” Donald asked, giving the girls a rare opportunity to get a word in. “Go out a lot? Clubs 'n such?”

“No, we stay in most of the time,” Liudmila said. “Entertain each other mostly.”

“Yeah? How, Milly?” Donald asked.

“Um, talk mostly.” Liudmila said.

“Listen to the radio because we don't have a telly,” Anna said. “Have pillow fights. That kind of stuff.”

“Cute.” Nigel said, nodding. It was the fifth or sixth word out of his mouth all night.

“Just as long as there's none of that girly-girl stuff going on between you two,” Donald said. “Like in those horrid men's magazines. Should be burned, every last one of them.”

“You said it,” Nigel agreed.

“What do you mean by girly-girl stuff?” Anna asked. She could hardly keep her annoyance under the surface.

“Oh, no offense meant,” Donald said. “I'm sure you two are not like that. I mean kissing and, err hem, other stuff that's supposed to go on between boys and girls, not two girls.”

Anna just rolled her eyes. Liudmila was poised to stand up but Anna's gentle hand on her arm kept her in her seat. Anna didn't know what her lover-friend would do: punch Donald in the mouth, or simply walk out. With one look from her eyes, she told Liudmila, "They're not even worth an answer."

"You two jerks have no idea," Anna thought. "I tie Liudmila to the bed, whip her until her butt turns red, I keep going until she cries. Then I make her come over and over again. The next night she does it to me." Anna wished she had the fortitude to say this directly to them, but was too worn out for a confrontation. "You'll never be men enough to handle us," her thoughts continued. "Unlike my old master; only, I killed him."

The dinner dragged on as Donald continued his tirade about moral degeneracy in England. "Brought about by foreigners. But, certainly not you, Milly," he said to Liudmila. "You're Italian, right?"

"Something like that," Liudmila mumbled. What does he think I am with my blonde hair and Slavic face? She felt her blood pressure rising.

Donald continued his rant as they took a taxi to the Royal Albert Hall for the opera. "Some girls actually perform oral sex. How trashy is that! Almost as degenerate as that girly-girl stuff."

"In that case, you wouldn't think too much of a ménage à trois," Liudmila said, ready to let loose her own tirade.

"Nah, I don't like French food much," Donald said. "Neither does Nigel."

Nigel nodded.

Anna, with a gentle hold on Liudmila's hand, held her back once again.

"Look, we're almost there," Anna said. "I think we arrived a bit early."

"Nothing like being punctual," Donald said.

Anna wished that they could walk through a park and listen to modern music. Songs from that new Beatles album were playing on all the radio stations, something about Sergeant Pepper and his something-something club band. And, to be with two nice guys, not these jerks. Or she'd settle for one strong, virile man, to share between her and Liudmila, if any still existed. She feared she'd killed the last one. "Why'd Uri have to come after me that night?" she wondered, as she felt another pang in her chest.

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Flight of the Valkyries.

The opera was long and torturous, the one by Wagner with magic rings and treasure, and loves lost for a lifetime. And on and on it went. And Anna felt worse with every passing minute.

As the intensity of the music rumbled on, she was sure that she saw Valkyries; Odin's personal handmaidens, mounted on white steeds riding up and down the aisles of the Royal Albert Hall. She assumed they were a part of the show. After they rode down and up one aisle they burst out into the lobby then burst back through another door and continued their search. Yes, they were looking for someone, someone in the audience. Anna realized something strange, no one else was watching them. All other eyes were on the fat lady on stage. Was Anna imagining these mounted riders? Or were they here for her only?

Each of the Valkyries had flaxen blonde hair in a pair of braids cascading down the sides of her neck. They were somewhat like the characters on stage, but authentic. Confident and lean, they sat tall in the saddle wearing black leather bustiers and sandals with leather straps crisscrossing up their legs. Leather padding with protruding metal spikes protected their knees and elbows. Swords hung from their belts.

Legend says that Valkyries look for souls to take after the battle, and only those about to die

see them. “But, my battle ended years ago,” Anna protested. Yet she was sure they were looking for someone — and only she could see them. Anna couldn’t take it any longer. She leaned over and in a hushed whisper asked “Liudi, see the horses?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“What horses, Anna?”]

“Liudi, I have to go for some air.” Anna got up and made her way across the row of knees. This was a good time to leave, the Valkyries had gone, perhaps up to the first balcony to seek their victim. She staggered up the aisle and out into the lobby.

Liudmila followed a few seconds later. Their dates stayed, transfixed on the opera, oblivious to the girls’ distress. By the time Liudmila burst through the swinging double doors, Anna was running furiously back and forth across the lobby as if she were evading an invisible pursuer on horseback.

Anna then collapsed in the middle of the lobby, hands clutching her chest. A crowd of people around the coat check stood and stared.

As Anna lay on the floor, a Valkyrie, invisible to everyone but her, looked down from her mount. Another set of hooves, belonging to the second mounted rider, echoed from the grand stairs leading down from the balconies. Anna couldn’t move. Her heart could take no more. The weight of it bore down on her chest. A firestorm raged in her head. Then a cold numbness overtook her. The ceiling started to spin. So, how many holes does it take to fill the Albert Hall?

A man ordering a drink from the refreshment counter saw her go down. He ran over, letting the glass slip from his hand spilling his amber ale over his white shirt. He knelt over Anna. The Valkyrie waited patiently while the man ministered to her. The second mounted Valkyrie arrived.

She, too, waited.

“Heart attack!” the man said. “I know CPR. Someone call an ambulance.”

Anna saw Liudmila enter her field of vision beside this man. With the ceiling spinning so fast, Anna couldn’t understand why her friend didn’t fall over. She saw Liudmila kneel beside that nice man. The color had drained from her friend’s face and she was crying.

“You!” Liudmila hissed as she recognized the man — the man who was pounding furiously on Anna’s chest. Liudmila confronted him with her eyes. “You’ve killed her!” she screamed. The man ignored her and kept crushing his palms down on Anna’s chest.

“On the contrary, I’m trying to save her!” he said eventually.

Then Liudmila growled the man’s name as if it were a curse.

The name eluded Anna. She heard her friend enunciate the word, but it did not register in her mind. She knew she’d heard the name before. It was a regal and important name. In fact, she should be very familiar with it. But it all escaped her.

Anna looked at the man’s face for the first time. He had the face of a rogue and a scoundrel. Her vision was fading fast. It was getting dark all around her, she couldn’t focus her eyes, and it was very hard to think.

She vaguely recognized that man with a patch over his right eye. Where had she seen him? Perhaps in a dream? Or was he an old lover? She couldn’t place him. She didn’t know whether she should be concerned over that. The woman next to this man was certainly concerned. What was her name? Anna forgot that too. But she remembered that she had shared a lot of pain and joy with this woman. Anna’s mind was in the process of shutting down. Little things were lost to her. Big things became unimportant.

Anna died.

“Anna, don’t leave me!” the woman screamed. “You’re all I have!”

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The first Valkyrie leaned down from the saddle and reached for Anna’s hand. She took it as if it were the most natural thing to do. The firm hand pulled Anna up onto the sturdy war horse. As she nestled in the saddle behind the Valkyrie, Anna became free from the constraints of the living world. She knew this, felt this, all without being told.

The two Valkyries nodded to each other once she was in place. Without a word, they guided their steeds to the grand doorway. Anna looked back at her body lying on the floor. The crying woman and the man with the eye patch both knelt beside it. Now she remembered exactly who they were. How could they have slipped from her mind?

“Liudi! Odin!” she cried, reaching for them even as the Valkyries galloped through the theatre lobby. Neither Odin nor Liudmila looked up.

The Valkyries and their mounts burst forth from the Royal Albert Hall. With a mighty jump, the horses became airborne. Anna held tight, hands clutching the Valkyrie’s waist. They circled London. Anna looked down at the night lights. Then they headed North. Anna looked to her right and saw the other Valkyrie. Her horse galloped on air, or perhaps on wisps of clouds. The wind whipped in Anna’s face, but it didn’t bother her, nor did the thin, cold air of their high altitude.

They flew over the English countryside. Ever northward. Over England, then Scotland. Lights from the towns grew further apart as they left the trappings of civilization behind. Anna saw the moon reflecting off the North Atlantic. They flew over the Orkney Islands. Aida was down there someplace. One of those clumps of lights was the town of Stromness, her new home.

“I hope she’s happy,” Anna thought. The lights floated by below them and they were over open water again. They flew over the Shetlands, and continued over the vast North Atlantic.

Anna clutched her Valkyrie for dear life, holding fast to the leather-clad woman. The Valkyrie stroked her clutching hands.

“I will not let you fall,” the Valkyrie yelled, shouting over the wind. “My name is Róta.”

“I am Anna.”

“Yes, I know who you are,” Róta said. “How would it look if I carried off the wrong fallen.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking souls who fell in battle?”

“You, dear worthy one, your heart died in battle years ago. Death has been festering inside. It was only a matter of time before your body followed.”

To their right, Anna could see the outline of the Norwegian coast. Lights from little fishing villages dotted the fjords. But soon they entered a region that existed on no map. The mountain of the gods lay ahead, rising forth from the cold northern ocean. The city of Asgard lay on its peak.

Róta landed her steed in a clearing surrounded by a circle of erect stones. The other Valkyrie circled above. They called to each other with a war shriek, and her companion galloped off to her next mission.

“Come.” Róta held out a hand for Anna as she dismounted.

Anna let the Valkyrie help her off the saddle.

“So, am I dead?”

Róta smiled at her and said, “I will show you around Asgard.”

Anna followed her Valkyrie guide along the winding path, realizing her question hadn’t been answered. Flaming torches, spaced along their way, kept the steps lit. The grass beyond the path was well manicured. Anna could also make out the shadows of shrubs, bushes, and flower beds beyond the lawns. Leaves that rustled in the breeze told her there were woods beyond in the

darkness.

“We are coming up to one of our hot pools,” Róta said. “You will find many of them scattered around Asgard.”

As they approached, Anna saw a couple making love in the water — a brawny warrior with long blond hair and a well-endowed redheaded girl.

“Our denizens, especially the naughty slave girls, like to avail themselves of the effervescent waters. The bubbles heal whatever ails them. Sometimes the spankings they receive for their sassy behavior are most intense. The waters mend their sore red cheeks and so much more.”

“Oh, you have sex slaves here, too?”

“Of course we do. The Gods and Goddesses love sexually tormenting their slaves.”

“Is that what’s in store for me?”

“Silly mortal. Odin will explain everything in due time. Come, I have more to show you. Unless you’d like to get in and join them.”

Anna shook her head. She wondered if having group sex with strangers so soon after death was the appropriate thing to do.

Róta led Anna along the winding path, past another of the effervescing pools, this one unoccupied. They crested a hill from where Anna could see the ocean. On the eastern horizon, the sky was turning purple announcing the end of night.

She followed Róta down the other side of the hill where their genteel path forked into two. They took the right branch and passed under an arch made of two trees on either side.

“Note this gate well, dear mortal. You have just stepped through a hole in space. If, on our way back, should you go around these trees instead of through them, you will not return to where you started. Rather, you may find yourself hopelessly lost and confused. Asgard exists in many

levels of time and space.”

“I think I can get lost here very easily without those holes in space. But what if I do get lost?”

“If by chance, you should wander off on your own without an escort and find yourself unable to return, seek the help of any God, Goddess, or mortal, be they fallen or living; they will assist you.”

“Oh, great.” Anna looked around as they continued down the path; the lay of the land looked just the same on this side of that hole in space as the other. “What do you mean by ‘fallen or living’?”

“Mortals still believing in the old ways are brought here after their time on Earth is over. But occasionally, the Gods and Goddesses bring up a living mortal, usually to amuse themselves, but once in a while as a reward for a deed well done.”

“Reward?”

“You know, the usual kind of thing: slaying a Frost Giant or a serpent-dragon.”

“Oh.”

“Occasionally, for reasons that are beyond me, the Gods allow mortals to use Asgard as a way of traveling up and down time. Time traders, these are.”

“What do they trade in?”

“Gadgets from the future for antiques or extinct animals from the past, one supposes. You’ll have to ask one yourself.”

“But, how —”

“There is more to time and space than you can imagine, dear mortal. Some portals will take you to places where time runs backwards. ”

“Time can run backwards?”

“And sideways, too.”

“Oh.”

“Traveling about Asgard using the portals is easy, once you get the feel for it. And there are advantages, too. For example, if you’re late for your audience with Odin, instead of running on the most direct path to his chambers, you can take a leisurely stroll through a maze of time-reversed dimensions and arrive respectfully on time.”

They stepped through another hole in the universe and found themselves outside a grand palace. Torches around the perimeter illuminated the intricately carved details of the woodwork. Most depicted brave warriors battling monsters or giants. Torches were also spaced above, running up the walls. They lit dozens of grand spires, each of them reaching for the sky. Sounds of brawling laughter, music and clanking flagons emanated from just beyond the arched wooden doorway.

“This is Odin’s own hall, Valhalla. This is where he entertains the Fallen Worthy. The night’s festivities are underway. You will dine here tonight as a guest. Another Valkyrie will escort you once you get inside. Eat, drink, and allow your soul to rejuvenate; the feast lasts all night.”

“But it’s almost morning. The sun is about to come up.”

“No, my dear mortal. The path we took brought us back several hours. It is just past midnight, and the feast is in its full splendor.”

As Róta opened the grand doorway, the sounds of the Fallen Worthy spilled out like thunder.

“Oh, my!” Anna gasped, as she was led into the vast hall with row upon row of tables of feasting Viking warriors. They brawled, sang, laughed, clanked their wooden flagons, drank, then smashed them down on their tables with hearty thuds. Occasionally, a mug flew across the room and splintered when it hit a wall. And then there were the cries, screams, giggles, and

orgasmic moans of slave girls as they were being taken.

“Am I to be used like this again?” Anna asked as she looked upon a buxom slave girl spread out on a table, held down by three Vikings while a fourth mounted her. If she struggled at all, it was only to wrap her legs around her captor's torso.

“No, silly,” Róta laughed. “Those are slave girls. Your position is among the highest of the high. You are among the Fallen Worthy: one who fell in battle,” her guide said as she handed Anna off to another Valkyrie. “She is Mist. I must attend to other duties. Be well.”

“Come, I will take you to a table,” Mist said. “We do not get many from your age, your people no longer believing in the old ways. Nor do we get many female warriors. But don't worry, you won't be alone. We do get some on occasion. I know the perfect place for you, a corner just for women from around your time. You might feel more comfortable among them. Of course, you are free to join the men and keep whatever company you choose.”

“Am I really dead?” Anna asked again as she looked around while being navigated through the general rowdiness. “I don't feel particularly dead.”

Although most of the fallen around her were Vikings and other assorted barbarians, Anna saw the occasional few who weren't. There were men from the Napoleonic era, several soldiers from World War I, a few more from World War II, and some dressed in uniforms from wars that had not happened yet.

Anna made her way past table upon table, following Mist closely. She was sure she'd be separated from her Valkyrie and be swooped up, mistaken for a serving wench. She imagined the hands of a crude and smelly Viking all over her. But Mist didn't let anything like that happen to her.

Anna was taken by surprise as she passed a table of young men in tweed jackets. They're not

soldiers, she thought. Then she recognized them for who they were. Revolutionaries! Judging from their clothing, they were college students who took to the streets in Budapest, 1956. She gasped as she passed them. Her eyes locked with those of one particularly intense young man. He had wild blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Although she broke her gaze quickly, he followed her with his eyes as she passed. Did she know him from somewhere? Perhaps he was an intern from the Budapest hospital where she'd worked as a cover job. Mist led her through an arched entryway into a different wing of the hall. That was the last she saw of the student revolutionaries.

“This should suit you,” Mist said as they arrived in an alcove with a table of ten women. The table was laid out with platters of boar, roast potatoes, side dishes of all kinds, and pies and puddings for dessert. Each woman had a chalice of wine. Anna’s eyes bulged when she saw the walls decorated with male slaves. Each of them was chained by their wrists and ankles, spread eagle, displaying the full splendor of their muscled bodies. Each of them had a well-endowed erection, red and ready to burst at a moment's teasing. Some of the women hung scarves or trinkets from the cocks.

“Anna, this is Julia,” her Valkyrie said.

“Hello.” Anna took the only remaining free seat across from the other woman. She briefly took her eyes off the men arrayed on the wall when a handsomely muscled slave with a leather collar around his neck served a plate of roast boar for her. He then poured her a chalice of wine.

“Welcome,” Julia replied.

“Um,” Anna said, eyes still transfixed on the male slaves arrayed on the walls.

“Julia died in the Great Patriotic War,” Mist continued. “She was a fighter pilot on the Soviet side, shot down by a Luftwaffe pilot in 1942 as she was holding back the German onslaught.

Anna died in hand-to-hand combat during the Cold War. She received a mortal wound to the heart, which festered in her for years before it took her.”

I did not receive a wound to the heart. I wasn't even scratched, Anna thought. Why do these Valkyries keep saying that?

The women's table had a different atmosphere from the rest of the hall. They talked amongst themselves. Those who wanted to join the men for brawniness and sex did so. Those who didn't, stayed. Occasionally, one or two of their company would go off and join the males in the main hall, only to return much later with glowing smiles on their faces. Of course, a Valkyrie guard kept out the unwanted and unruly horde of male warriors.

“Is this all the women warriors there are?” Anna asked Julia.

“No, there are many other tables like this. All entertaining their private circle of friends. There are perhaps hundreds of thousands of us, but there are so many more male warriors. The Valkyries stand guard to keep us from getting overrun. We go out and take our pleasure among the men at the times of our own choosing.”

So, this is the afterlife, Anna mused. It's the same as living as Uri's sex slave: a never-ending orgy.

Yet, she freely joined the table of women in their feast. She chatted with the girls — mostly with Julia, and mostly small pleasantries. Anna explained that the Cold War didn't take place in the arctic or some other frozen place. She steered the conversation away from telling her the Cold War was between Russia and America. Rather, she asked the Russian pilot about the afterlife. After listening to Julia's explanation, Anna realized that her first impression summed things up well: now she can have all the sex she wants, won't get any sleep, eat and drink as much as she wants, and doesn't have to pay for anything. Yes, this was exactly like being Uri's

sex slave.

“I still worry sometimes,” Julia said. “I left a husband behind. I’m afraid he loved me too much. I fear that he turned bitter at my loss. If Uri should find another woman, he would be too jaded for a normal relationship.”

“Uri?” Anna asked.

“Yes, that is his name; a fine young officer in the Red Army, Lieutenant Uri Konstantine.”

Anna had a flashback to the Gerbeaud Confectioners where Liudmila told her of what she knew of Uri’s past life. This woman, Julia, sitting across from her, was the wife of the man she’d stabbed in the heart. Anna’s bite of roast boar went down the wrong way.

“I just hope that whoever Uri finds, she would be understanding of him and see past his anger at my death,” Julia said. “He needs someone to help him live again. Anna, are you choking? Quick, get her some water!”

“I’m okay,” Anna said, coughing. “It’s just that, um...”

“Yes?”

“Never mind.”

“It’s all so overwhelming, isn’t it?” Julia said looking around at all the delicious male bodies arrayed on the wall, and then at her own male slave on a leash and collar at her feet.

“Um, yes. That’s it. Overwhelming,” Anna said, not looking Julia in the eyes.

“I have just the thing to make you relax,” Julia said. Then she turned to her kneeling slave and said, “Ivan, our new guest needs to be comforted.”

Anna looked over the table and caught only a glimpse of Ivan’s unruly blond hair and the rippling muscles down his back as he crawled under the edge of the tablecloth. Then, a moment later, she felt his tender hands caress her knees. She felt his kiss on her thigh. Anna’s reaction was

to shut her legs and push back her chair.

“Don't worry,” Julia said, taking Anna's two hands into her own. Her hold was gentle yet firm, preventing Anna from pulling her chair back any further.

Another slave, at the order of the woman sitting to her right, stood behind Anna and started gently massaging her shoulders.

Under the table, Ivan spread Anna's legs apart with his firm but gentle push. She felt the kiss of his lips work their way up her inner thigh. She gulped. She looked up to lock eyes with Julia again.

Anna wasn't able to read Julia's expression. It seemed like Julia was drinking in her soul. Anna felt a kiss on her pussy. It was a gentle kiss, but nonetheless it made her jump. She felt the teasing of his lips then his tongue circle her. Anna shuddered. She didn't even know what he looked like, except for that brief view of his back as he disappeared under the table.

Would Uri have been bothered by this kind of under the table, anonymous sex? Anna thought not. It would probably have thrilled him. She gasped as Ivan took her clit between his lips sending Anna's thoughts into disarray, distracting her from what Uri may or may not have done.

The slave standing behind her continued his gentle massage on her back and shoulders. Another slave fed her a ripe strawberry. Julia smiled. The whole table of women was watching her now.

“No,” Anna moaned. Now Ivan's fingers were probing into her, exploring her moist inner treasures. His tongue circled her pearl, teasing and playing with it, sending Anna into a frenzy.

Anna tried to close her legs, shutting her sweet tormentor away from her. But that slave didn't let her; he was too strong and well-versed at these arts. Anna felt her body start to shudder. Then she felt her anonymous lover enter her with his tongue. Anna let out a moan. She held her breath.

She clenched Julia's hands like she was crushing two rocks in her grip. She started to get dizzy.

Anna didn't want to come with all these women and their slaves shackled to the wall looking on. But, she couldn't help it. Ivan's ministrations were too persuasive. It was a weakness she always had, and it always led to one downfall or another. But now that she was dead and in Valhalla, she could all admit that without any self remorse. And orgasms here were twice as vivid as they were on Earth.

Anna screamed. Anna writhed. Anna struggled to free her hands of Julia's grip. Her tormentor, this slave under the table didn't stop.

"He's making me come!" Anna murmured to Julia as she shuddered in the throes of an Asgard-shattering orgasm.

When she was spent, Anna slumped back on her chair and the slaves around her attended to her by pouring a fresh flagon of wine.

"Wow," Anna said with a content sigh. "Can I really be dead?"

"Only Odin can tell you that," Julia said. She released Anna's hands.

No one had given me a definite answer, yet, Anna thought.

"Can you tell the difference between who is dead and who's not?" she asked.

"Sometimes it's obvious. But with you ..." Julia shook her head.

Should Anna confess that she'd killed Uri? Not to mention betraying and abandoning him? After all this woman, whom she had barely met, had just shared her personal slave. It was obvious from the start that she still cared very much for the man she left behind. And the only thing she wanted for Uri was a woman who would understand him.

"Julia, I'm sorry!" Anna blurted as she jumped up and ran out of the alcove. She ran past the Valkyrie guarding the entryway.

The scene she saw was very different than the rowdy chorus of burly Viking warriors. They were all slumped over the tables or passed out on the floor. Some were sleeping in the arms of the sex slaves and wood nymphs. Those that still hung on, were slurring bawdy Viking love songs with ale sloshing from half-empty flagons.

Then Anna heard a rooster crow.

“This way, my dear one,” the Valkyrie guarding the alcove said as she ushered Anna towards door. “The night is over. The feast has ended.”

Anna made her way out the closest door among the mass of hung-over Vikings. Some were so drunk they had to be held up by the shoulders of their comrades. She flowed along with the stumbling, staggering bodies until she found herself outside in the Asgard morning air. She realized she was alone with nowhere to go from here. All the familiar faces at her table were lost in the dispersing crowd. Even if she could find them, she wasn't sure she could face Julia right now. For the first time in Asgard, Anna felt lost and alone.

She wandered up the path — the path she'd come down last night. After a while, all of the night's revelers congealed into groups that were receding from her in all directions. Then she came to a fork in the path. One branch would take her up a hill, the other, down into a valley. She didn't remember which way she came from last night. Instead of wandering off and passing inadvertently through a hole in space and time, she turned to go back to Valhalla.

“Hey, pssst,” she heard a woman's voice calling. “Come here, you seem lost.”

Anna looked around to see who was speaking to her. Just off the valley branch of the path was one of Asgard's effervescent hot pools. A group of men and women were just settling in.

The woman who called to her, a redhead with a fiery mane running down her back, waved at Anna as she stepped into the pool. Her bottom was crisscrossed with cane marks. She was one of

the slaves who were served up for the night's entertainment. And with the caning marks across her rump, she had been used for much more than plain sex.

Yep, just like being Uri's sex slave. Only here, everything heels with a soak in a pool and the slaves are ready to do it all over again.

Anna slipped into the water to join them. She tentatively sat down, not sure if she really belonged with them.

"Are you a new slave?" the redhead asked.

"No, I don't know what I am." Anna tried to smile when she answered. "If it helps, the Valkyries seated me at a table of women warriors."

"Oh, a Fallen Worthy," one of the other girls said.

"In life, I was a sex slave, too," Anna offered. "For a while, anyways."

"Not to worry, we're all equals here in the pool," the redheaded woman said, smiling at Anna as if she were a kindred.

As she spoke, the girl's friend, a brawny male-slave, dunked her into the bubbling hot pool. He then dived under himself. They both came up laughing to take a big breath.

Anna watched these two kiss and slide chin deep into the bubbling water. Then she watched the other slaves break off into couples and threes. Soon intertwined bodies writhed in the pool as the slaves ground themselves against each other.

The red-headed slave girl and her brawny friend floated over to her, one on each side.

"Ever do that as a slave?" the girl asked pointing her chin to a particularly active threesome.

"Yeah," Anna said, not knowing which of the two she should keep an eye on. She was suspicious that they both wanted to be more than just friends.

"How many slaves did your master keep?" the girl asked.

“There were three of us,” Anna said quietly, mesmerized by all the intertwined bodies in various permutations and combinations.

The couple took hold of one of Anna’s arms each and pinned her against the side of the pool.

Anna felt their tender caresses along her thighs under water. Then she felt their hands creep closer towards her delta.

She felt the bubbling hot waters rejuvenate her and in the process, pique her sexual interest all over again. “Yep,” she thought, “a never-ending orgy, just like with Uri.” She felt the lips of her two lovers circle her nipples as she floated in the pool, well on her way to another orgasmic frenzy in Asgard.

- 3 -

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Anna heard from above as she soaked in the pool with her lovers on either side of her. She looked up to see her Valkyrie guide, Mist, standing on the bank. “I was looking for you. I feared you had gotten yourself lost, but I see you are exactly where you belong.”

“But, I, it just happened.” Anna felt she should apologize for some reason.

“Come.” Mist offered Anna a hand out of the water. Anna took it and climbed out of the warmth of the pool. She waved good-bye to the slaves, still soaking and relaxing.

“Good bye, Anna,” her red-headed slave friend said, waving back.

“Find us again,” her male friend said.

“I will show you more of Asgard,” her Valkyrie said, paying no heed to the slaves.

Just as she felt the chill of the morning air, a strange warmth surrounded her. A whirlwind of heat caressed her body. It felt like hundreds of gentle fingers touching her all over. She looked around to see where this phenomenon came from.

“Air spirits,” Mist explained. “They are here to dry you off.”

As soon as Anna was dry, Mist directed her to get dressed in her same little black dress, and led her away from the pool. She showed Anna more of Asgard, which was mostly well-manicured lawns on either side of paths winding between gentle hills. There was the occasional grand palace: a home of this god or or that goddess. Anna soon lost track of the names. Frey, Iduna, Thor, Sif. She did note Frigga and Freya, Odin’s two wives. As she was led past their palaces, Anna had the strangest feeling that Odin had somehow betrayed her by being married — to not one, but two goddesses — while he consorted with her. But, then again, her liaisons had been far from conventional, too.

Mist had lunch brought for the two of them to a clearing that overlooked a vast, cold northern ocean surrounding Asgard. It was served by two young and well-proportioned male slaves. Anna regretted that she was not in the mood for sex at the moment — too exhausted and satisfied to have her interest piqued, and no effervescing pool to entice her libido. She just let the two serve her lunch on a blanket on the grass. Anna watched their muscled bodies in motion as they laid out the plates and flagons, soaking in the view of these two slaves as they served her and Mist their meal.

Late in the afternoon, Anna met a time trader.

“Montana Chang, 2067,” the man in the suede jacket said as he tipped his cowboy hat. Pleased to meet’cha, Ms.”

Anna wondered what a short Chinese fellow was doing with a name like Montana and a cowboy accent. She also wondered about this “Ms.” thing he called her.

“Er, I’m Anna Singer.”

“When’d ya come from?”

“When?”

“Yeah, the year you were in when they brought you up?”

“Oh, I get it. 1967.”

“Cool year, Beatles ‘n all,” cowboy Chang said. “Hey, we’re exactly 100 years apart!”

“So, how did you get up here, Mr. Chang?” Anna asked.

“Slayed me a Frost Giant,” he said, trying hard to be modest. “Was out riding the range, saw this funny looking war hammer, if you could call it that, lying in the grass. So I picked it up and wham, was transported to some other reality. This righteous dude with one eye —”

“Odin?”

“Yep, that's the guy, all right. Anyway, he told me to practice with the hammer because he was going to send me on this mission to kill a Frost Giant, the deadly enemy of the Gods of Asgard. Don’t remember much of the battle. Heck, I don’t remember it at all, but since I didn’t die, I s’pose I won. So, anyway, as a reward, I get to come and go from Asgard as I please. Only thing is I can’t travel more than 100 years in either direction. Your time is as far back as they let me go.”

“That’s two hundred years you can play with. That’s still a lot. So what do you do?”

“I’m taking electronic surveillance equipment back in time. Going to sell them to MI6. That’s British intelligence.”

“I know who MI6 is,” Anna said. “Can I look at one of those bugs?”

“Sure, but be careful, they’re small.” Montana Chang pulled a small box out of his backpack and handed it to Anna.

Anna studied the box. She saw it was made by someone called the Big Ear Company, a

division of EE Intelligence, Inc. of Sacramento, California. Under the name, it read: Serving all your personal and private intelligence needs. When she slid the box open, she saw it contained the same micro-sized device she used in her failed attempt to bug Uri's apartment.

"No wonder those bastards believed my story about Odin so readily!" Anna handed the box back to the Chinese cowboy. "This explains how they had such small listening devices: it's technology from the future."

Things started falling into place for Anna. Had MI6 been keeping her in poverty as a way of controlling her? Did they think she'd be able to summon Odin for them? All she got in return was four wasted years in that run-down flat with Liudmila. Compared to that, the time she spent with Uri was filled with growth and self-enrichment.

"Got to go," Montana said. "I'll miss my time portal. If I don't make it in the next few minutes, the gate is going to swing into a different dimension, and I'll miss my contact with the carrier pigeons."

"You're going to reintroduce carrier pigeons in the future?"

"Nothing so grandiose. Just sell a pair to a private arboretum on the Antarctic Archipelago. That hundred year rule applies to the merchandise I carry, too. It's possible to trade with other time traders, but if the Gods catch me, my days of time hopping are over. I'll be given to a Goddess as a plaything. Some of them can be down-right cruel."

Mist cleared her throat. She didn't want to be hearing this.

"Better be changin' the subject," Montana said, eyeing the Valkyrie. "What did you do to earn your ticket up here?"

"Hmm? Oh, I died of a heart attack." Anna said. "They tell me it's from an earlier battle —"

"You ain't no Fallen Worthy. Is that what they've been tellin' you?"

“Well, no. Not exactly.”

“Best get a straight answer. Which god is looking out for you?”

“Odin.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Actually, I haven’t seen him since I got here. The last I saw of him, he was trying to revive my body back on Earth. That’s when the Valkyries took me.”

“You may not be dead,” Montana told her. “If your heart stops, the Valkyries will take you. They don’t rest on ceremony and wait for brain function to shut down. If Odin was with your body, and like you said, trying to revive you, then you’re neither a living traveler like me, nor among the Fallen Worthy.”

“But I’ve been here for a day already. Brain function can’t survive that long without blood circulation.”

“Time’s a funny thing in Asgard. Oh, I gotta go. Time portal’s a waitin’.” Montana tipped his Stetson to Anna.

“Um, thanks for clearing this all up,” Anna said, even more confused than before. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Montana Chang.”

“Likewise, Anna Singer.”

“Come,” Mist said when the time traveling cowboy turned away.

Anna watched the slight man run down the path and disappear where she guessed his time portal lay.

“So, am I or am I not?” Anna asked Mist.

“Róta and Screech were ordered to bring you by Odin himself.”

“Where is Odin?”

“He is still on Earth, trying to start your heart.”

They walked along in silence. Anna asked no more questions, and Mist offered no more information. From a hilltop the two of them watched a Viking battle — two groups re-enacting the day they died.

“Soon the feast will start in Valhalla,” Mist said, as the battle wound down. “Tonight you'll be expected to arrive on time. The feast starts when the slave girls are let out of their cages and handed to the Fallen Worthy. From the pleasure you took from the slaves in the pool this morning, this should amuse you. You may even partake of them.”

“Thanks, but no.”

“The slaves don't have the right to refuse.”

Anna felt her head spin, hearing this from her Valkyrie — the part about slaves not having the right to refuse. She imagined what it would be like to be handed around, and taken so wantonly. She hoped that the Valkyrie couldn't sense the temperature rise in her loins, but feared her guide was reading her like a book. This embarrassed her.

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The solstice sun was sitting on the horizon above the endless ocean when they arrived at Valhalla. Although the night's orgy had not yet started, chaos was all around them as burly warriors of times long past made their way to the countless rows of wooden tables. These men arrived none the worse for re-enacting their final battle and deaths. Spry and sassy wood nymphs led each group of Vikings to their places. Whenever a warrior tried to pinch a nipple or grab a handful of rump, the lithe nymph would dance out of the way with the slightest motion and slap the crude hand. She'd giggle, and tell him with a tsk-tsk that the slave girls would be available soon.

Anna heard a moan from above. She looked up to the ceiling. Row upon row of wrought iron cages hung from the wood beam rafters, each one containing a naked slave girl. Directly above her, she could only see each girl's legs and bottom as they sat cross-legged in their round little cages. Looking further down the rows, she the slave girls eyeing the warriors as the hall filled up. Some were waving at their would-be conquerors, smiling and winking to be chosen. Others had the look of dread at their imminent ravagement. One was crying as she clung with white knuckled grips to the bars of her cage.

Just when Anna noticed a series of empty cages further down the hall, Mist ushered her aside to make way for a line of slave girls in tow. They wore leather collars with leashes connecting them in a chain. A perky little wood nymph, who clearly enjoyed her duties, led them. Two Valkyries trailed the line, pulling one reluctant slave along who dug her feet in every step of the way.

The Valkyries eventually got tired of that girl's resistance and threw her across one of the wooden tables. It happened just a few steps away from Anna, so she got a front row view of Valkyrie discipline. One Valkyrie sat on the girl's back, holding her down, while the other produced a long leather quirt from her belt and started whipping the slave's bottom. She didn't stop until the girl gave up struggling and lay compliantly on the table. Only after she was submissive and humbled was she was led away to catch up with the rest of her line.

Anna could see tears well up in her eyes. "Oh, my," she gasped.

"Remember," Mist whispered, "every one of these girls is here as her final reward in the afterlife."

"What?"

"They all chose to live eternity as sex slaves."

“But, why would they —”

“Anna, you of all people have to ask?”

Anna had no answer. She wondered if she might be mistaken for a slave girl. Her sex grew hotter at the prospect. It was the same betrayal by her body that Uri first found so fascinating.

“Come, let’s follow them and watch as they’re lifted up into their cages,” Mist said, grabbing Anna’s hand. She didn’t give Anna a chance to protest, but then again, Anna put up no resistance.

The hall filled quickly as she and her Valkyrie made their way along the aisles between the tables. Serving wenches set flagons of ale and platters of roast boar. Songs from one tribe competed with those of others. They caught up with the chain of slave girls. By then, their leashes and collars had been removed, and the two Valkyries leading them were lifting the girls into their cages one at a time. Once a girl was in, a Valkyrie would close the cage bottom, and she could do nothing more but look down at the hall filling around her.

When the girls were all lifted into place, there was one empty cage left in that row. Mist and the two other Valkyries turned their eyes towards Anna.

“No!” Anna said, backing away. “I don’t want this!”

“Don’t want what?” Mist asked.

“The cage.”

“No one said anything about putting you in a cage; a night of sexual abandonment; all your lusts fulfilled,” Mist said. “Look at you, Andromeda.”

She called me Andromeda.

“You’re hot and wet.”

“I am not!” Anna replied defensively.

Mist looked at her, seeing right through her.

“No,” Anna said. She knew she had lost. Or maybe she had finally won. “Yes,” she quivered.

Mist held Anna while the other two Valkyries pulled her black dress off. Mist then lifted Anna into the remaining cage. She winked at Anna as the bottom latched shut.

Before Anna knew what was happening, she too was looking down at the hall with barbarians. Now that she was locked in place with her fate sealed, the waiting became the worst part.

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The steady beat of a gigantic drum silenced the hall. The warriors who were still standing, quickly took their places at a table. Then the voice of a Valkyrie, standing at the head of the hall said “Let the night’s orgy begin. Warriors through all time, followers in the Assier and Vannier gods and goddesses, Odin’s Fallen Worthy, I offer you food, drink, and pleasure slaves for your amusement!”

A horn sounded, heralding the night’s activities to begin. At that moment the cage latches opened at once. The doors swung down, and the slave girls, including Anna, fell into the arms of Viking warriors below.

Anna screamed as she fell. She wasn’t the only one. A rugged-faced Viking caught her in his arms. It was happening all too fast for her.

“You’re a pretty one,” Anna heard him say. Somehow, she was able to understand ancient Norse.

“I, err, let’s talk about this first,” she stammered in her new-found tongue.

But her new skill in languages was no help. She found herself planted on the table to kneel on all fours. There was not much to talk about, not as far as the Vikings around her were concerned. Placed between flagons of ale and platters of roast boar, she became another dish to

be consumed.

Hands fondled her from all directions. A Viking entered her from behind holding her firm with both hands on her hips. Another one directed her mouth over his organ. She realized that she was meant to be a pleasure slave all along. And if that was to be her fate, then she would be a slave forever.

Stuffed full at both ends, she had no choice but to comply with these barbarians wishes and give herself over to them. As one finished with her, another took his place. As the night progressed, she was turned over and around countless times and positioned in more ways than she could remember.

She found herself on her back with her legs held apart in firm grips. Three Vikings took her at once and there were many more around her, on all sides. She felt her nipples being caressed by two fevered cocks. She grabbed hold of each and rubbed them against her breasts. As she held them, she stroked each one up and down, slowly at first, then faster, with increasing fury which echoed the building lust within her.

As each of her ravagers spent himself, there was another to take his place. She seldom saw who was using her so wantonly. She soon lost herself in the delirium of body after body using her and one wave of pleasure coming after the next without end.

Anna thought back to the pleasures she, Aida, and Liudmila bestowed upon their master. TShe was just one of three then, with all their attention being directed upon one man. Now, she was the center of attention. No planning, no scheming, freed to let go of all her concerns and worries. She wondered if the Vikings knew it, or if they even cared how much she was taking, and they giving. But now she had no control, and she realized only now how much control she had over Uri in his bed. In fact, the more girls he called for his night's pleasure, the more she

could subtly direct the scene.

Anna didn't know exactly when it happened, but as the night wore on, she realized she was no longer being taken by the Fallen Worthy. No, somewhere along the night, the Vikings had their fill of her and the Gods of Asgard took their places. Just as before, she was being taken with a fevered abandon, but something had changed. It was a feeling like the size of members inside her were greater than a galaxy. And still somehow, she was able to take them all. Was she stretched to some cosmic scale? Her body felt the same size and shape as it had before. It had to have been some trick, something akin to an optical illusion. She knew, she felt, as they each pushed in and out of her, that each of them had more power within him than a billion suns. As the unfathomable energy coursed through her body, she worried at first that she would short out like an overloaded fuse. But nothing of the sort happened. The gods guarded her psyche as they took their pleasure. Anna wondered all along which of the Gods was taking her. Was it Thor? Frey? Maybe even Odin?

Then as fast as that impossible cosmic feeling rolled over her, it had ended. She again found herself on that oaken table in Valhalla with one real and corporeal god on top of her. She looked around the hall with her head hanging off the edge of the table, her view upside down. The orgy had spent itself. Many Vikings snored, with elbows propping up their bearded heads. Some sat with wood nymphs on their knees who tried to coax their tired, reluctant organs back to life. Other Vikings watched quietly as Anna and her god made love. Anna looked up to see who was that god. Her eyes focused on the salt and peppered beard and the eye patch.

“Odin!” she gasped. She reached for him. A euphoria filled her as she returned to her senses. And she felt him inside her, gently pushing into her depths and then back out again.

Anna thought back again to that time in her life when she was Uri's sex slave. It wasn't such

a bad time after all. Before she could get lost in her musings, she felt another orgasm envelop her, the likes of which she had not experienced before. As it crested, she grabbed Odin's arms and held onto his back with her legs, pulling him into her as far as she could.

"Uri, hold me, I'm coming!" Anna screamed.

Odin pretended not to hear.

Anna realized too late whose name she'd called, and with that, a spell was broken. After she waned, Odin rolled off her. They lay next to each other, she, cradling his head against her breasts. She was working up the courage to say something in apology, but before she could speak the rooster crowed, heralding the end of the night's festivities.

"Come," Odin said. "I will take you to wash up in one of the hot pools, then I have much to show you."

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Odin waited for Anna while she bathed. She allowed herself only a few minutes in the water to soak away the abuse her body received during the orgy, ever conscious of him standing above her, waiting. Like her Valkyrie guide the day before, he gave her a hand up climbing out of the pool.

"Am I dead?" Anna asked as Odin offered the black dress, draped across his arm, freshly cleaned and pressed. "I don't feel dead. I feel like I have a real body. I think you just abducted me. First Uri, now you. I'm not all that beautiful. Why me? What is it with guys anyway? Always, always, stealing me off for themselves as a plaything!"

"Slow down," Odin said. "You're not even asking the right questions." He handed her the black shoes, silk stockings, and arm length gloves. For some reason Odin wanted her to look like she did the night she died, if that indeed is what had happened to her. Maybe he just liked her in

that dress.

“What are the right questions?” Anna asked.

“Let me show you something,” Odin sighed. “Look down upon Earth.”

“How?”

“Look with my vision.” Odin stroked the side of her face with the back of his finger. “Relax, focus, and you will see.”

Anna’s view of Asgard faded. She then saw an ambulance navigate London’s nighttime streets. Her view changed, and she was watching the scene unfold inside the ambulance cab. She, Anna, was the center of attention. Paramedics were furiously trying to keep her alive.

“Stay with us, love!” one of them yelled. “Don't you give up!”

Liudmila sat in the passenger seat, eyes red from crying.

The vision evaporated as suddenly as it came. Anna was back in Asgard again.

“Is that happening now?” She grabbed Odin’s arm to steady herself.

“The word ‘now’ doesn’t mean the what you think it means here in Asgard. Time is a funny thing. Gods do not see time linearly like you mortals. Time is just another dimension to be navigated. I exist in the day of Vikings as I am in the far future where we Gods battle the evil Frost Giants, a battle in which we ultimately die.”

“You know everything that’s going to happen?”

“I do.”

“You will die in the future?”

“I did say that. It will be during the time of Ragnarok when evil wraps its tentacles around the throat of humanity.”

“So, if you know all this, why would you allow yourself to die in the future?”

“Although we have almost limitless power, we do have limitations. Limitations you can’t possibly fathom.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“The point, Anna? Are you asking me why do we even bother to live if the future is preordained? No surprises? Just awaiting our inevitable downfall?”

“I suppose,” she shrugged.

“For you mortals, life and time aren’t laid out before you.” Odin turned from her and became somber. “You don’t see that everything is fixed. You keep on struggling pathetically under the illusion of free will. It’s so fantastic to watch you, so immense are your toils and so futile. I see this, lifetime after lifetime.” He turned back to look her in the eye. “And your struggles to live are what sustain us.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to be doing now, struggling to live?”

“I would if I was in your place.” He changed back to his usual flippant tone.

“And am I?” she asked. “Struggling to stay alive?”

“Your body is clinging to life. But, you’re not in your body.”

“Are you telling me I have a choice between living and dying?”

“Very good!” Odin said. “Don’t worry. Most mortals in your place are even slower on the uptake.”

“Fuck you,” she hissed. “If you want me to live, you shouldn’t have shown me these pleasures Asgard has to offer for all eternity.”

“Anna, you don’t want to die. Look at your life. You’ve spent too many years as Uri Konstantine’s sex toy. He kidnapped you as soon as you started your career. Once you managed to free yourself, you’ve been trying to rebuild your life. But habits and conditioning are hard to

break. MI6 was no help to you, keeping you under their thumb. And let's not even talk about Liudmila, the woman you once despised most. Remember you swore one day to extract vengeance upon her? Now look — she's the only friend you have left." He paused. "Whatever happened to that sweet revenge you were going to extract on her for nearly raping you that first day in the General's service?"

"I was looking for the right moment. Then after I was made governess, revenge became less important."

"Funny, Liudmila thinks you've taken your revenge on her many times over. But she said nothing because of the awe she holds you in."

"No, I don't believe it."

"You never asked," Odin said. "Did you give up your will to live along the way?"

"No I haven't. And I don't want to die now, either." She wiped a tear away from her cheek.

"Odin, let me live!" She found that she was pleading.

"You would rather give up the pleasures of Asgard?"

"Yes!" she said, now crying.

"That's good to hear." Odin took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "But whether you live or die is up to you, not me. I can only guide you." He took her by the hand and led her away from the pool. They walked down a winding path. Soon the trees disappeared and they found themselves on an open tundra.

They were no longer in Asgard. Somewhere along the path, they had crossed another one of those holes in space and time.

"Where are we?" Anna asked.

"A place called Niflheim. This is where those which are not worthy spend eternity. I have

something to show you.” He pointed with a nod of his head. Up ahead on the desolate steppe, a place too bleak to be anywhere on Earth. There lay some smoldering wreckage. It was too far away for Anna to make out the details. Black soot rose from where a fire had once burned out of control. As they walked towards it Anna could better see the twisted structure. Splintered wooden beams, blackened by fire, rose towards the sky like perverted spires. Once they crested the last rise, Anna saw it was the wreckage of an airplane, its nose buried into the frozen tundra and its tail pointed to the sky.

As they approached the wreckage, Anna saw it was a World War II era Soviet fighter. A red star was painted on a panel that the fire hadn’t destroyed. Odin led her on a slow walk around the airplane.

“Here lays a Lavochkin-Gorbunov-Gudkov, a LaGG 3,” Odin said. “It was no match for the German Messerschmitt that shot her down.” When they almost made a full circle around the spire, Odin stopped and looked down. Anna followed his gaze. The charred body of an airman lay in a pool of body fat, once melted, now congealed upon the tundra. Anna gasped. She turned away, almost retching.

“Anna, be strong.” Odin put his arms around her shoulder. “I want you to take a look again. Take a good look.”

Anna tried to do as she was told. She turned and looked at the grizzled remains of the pilot.

“Who was that?” she asked.

Odin pointed to a headstone. Either Anna hadn’t noticed it before, or it hadn’t been there. In Cyrillic letters it read: “Lieutenant Julia Konstantine, 1917 – 1941.” There was a Soviet Star etched above the name.

“That’s Julia, Uri’s lost wife!” Anna shrieked. “I ate dinner with her my first night in

Asgard.”

“Did you tell her you killed her husband?”

Anna’s face turned white.

“Did you tell her you stabbed him in the heart once he was already down?”

Anna turned away from Odin. She turned away from the charred body and the wreckage. She threw up then fell to her knees.

“Stand up,” Odin said. He helped her to her feet.

She saw he had a chalice in his hand. “Water,” he told her. “Clean your mouth out. And, blow your nose.” He handed her a silk kerchief after she took a drink. “Come, there’s just one more thing I have to show you here. After that, we shall leave this desolate place.”

They walked ten paces away from the wreckage. Anna hadn’t noticed until now that the ground was frozen with Odin’s magic insulating her.

“Do you see anything?” He asked, looking down at the ground.

“No.”

“Use my vision again.” He gently touched the back of his forefinger against her temple.

“Look down,” Odin said. “Look just below the surface.”

Anna looked upon her old master, General Uri Konstantine, buried in the frozen mud. “Oh no!” she gasped again. “What’s he doing here?”

“This is his hell,” Odin said. “He did not earn a place among the Fallen Worthy. He is damned to spend eternity here in this frozen mud.”

“Why are you showing me this? Did I send him here?” Anna took a step back.

“Ask yourself, what did he do to you,” Odin bore his gaze into her as if he were dissecting her soul.

“He, he, you know what he did!” Anna stammered. “But does he deserve this kind of punishment?”

“What would be a more appropriate punishment? For you to throw a hissy-fit and deny him his blow jobs for a week? No, he’s here because he kidnapped you and made you his sex slave. Is that true?”

“Yes. But ...”

“But?” Odin waited for her to continue; only, words wouldn’t form for her. Finally Odin said, “Had he lived longer he may have, and I stress the word ‘may’, have earned redemption.”

She stared at Uri frozen in the ground. Frozen mud filled his mouth, filled his nostrils, and choked him in his throat. Root tendrils had started growing under his eye lids.

His fingers were locked forever in a clawing motion as he tried at one time so desperately to break free of his hell. It occurred to her, that just as she was rejuvenated every time she bathed, he too was being kept whole in order to feel the pain of the frozen tundra with every nerve ending in his body. And there was no way out for him.

“Is he to be frozen here for all eternity?”

Odin nodded.

“Is he aware? Is he in pain?”

Odin nodded again.

She stared at him. She didn’t know what to say. Was he deserving of such a cruel hell?

“What are you trying to do to me?” she lashed out at Odin. “Why are you showing me all this? Yes, it’s true, he kidnapped me and two other women and made us his sex toys. You are right! He deserves to be here!”

“Is that what you think?”

“Yes!” Anna said a little too adamantly.

“I don't believe you.” He took her by the fingers and led her away.” Come.”

“Where are you taking me now?” Anna asked, shaking with a sudden chill. Anna didn't know if she should cry or scream. Just then, she could do neither.

“No place you haven't been before.” Odin took her arm and together they stepped through a hole in time. “But now you will see things with open eyes.”

- 5 -

Anna knew exactly when and where she was. It was November, 1956 all over again. Odin had transported them back in time to her first interrogation with General Konstantine. She and Odin stood against the back wall of Uri's office. Anna looked on as she saw herself, her past self, hanging by chains from the ceiling.

“Come now, my dear!” the general said with an annoyed tone. He stood behind her with his whip in hand.

“I told you a dozen times already,” the Anna from the past sobbed. “I'm Anna Singer. I'm an aid worker on an exchange visa. I've been here in Budapest for two months. I don't know anything about this stupid revolution.” Then she mumbled something about coming from Watertown, Massachusetts.

Anna Future and Odin watched as Uri continued his interrogation and soon confronted Anna with the recording of Andrew Locket's telephone call to her, the call that gave her away.

“This Locket of yours, he must have been the stupidest spy ever,” Odin said. “Your rendezvous had already been arranged, he didn't have to confirm. And he knew the phone was tapped. It looks like he set you up!”

“No, Odin, Andrew would never do that. You see, we were — how can I put this — we were

intimate.”

“You were a fun mistress for Locket. But it was time for him to move on to another girl. What a convenient way to get rid of you — giving you up to the Soviets.”

“Odin, you’re wrong. Andrew would never do that to me.”

Odin turned back to the interrogation of Anna Past. “Let’s watch, there’s more.”

Anna held Odin’s arm tight, fingers digging into flesh as she watched her past self being hoisted up so she could barely stand on tiptoes with her high-heeled shoes. To relive this was traumatic. To relive it looking on as a third person brought her psyche to edge of the abyss.

“When I saw two people looking at me, I thought I was going mad,” Anna whispered.

“No. You were quite sane,” Odin said. “Actually no one sees us, not because they can’t, because they won’t. What we are, you and me standing here, would shatter their illusions of reality. Therefore, they refuse their eyes. Absolutely refuse. I am surprised at your past self’s clarity. I admire that. You saw us here, even if it was just a glimpse.”

Odin and Anna continued watching the interrogation as lash after lash caught the past Anna’s back.

Anna remembered how she held out long enough for Andrew to get away. She saw it all again, this time she stood behind Uri, watching him calculate every throw of the whip, watching the tip just touch her skin, and watching her past self dance on the chains with each crack. Each throw of the whip had been expertly placed, but at that time she didn’t know Uri’s skill. Only the last few throws actually cut the outer layer of skin, and those left but the slimmest lines of raised flesh.

Anna watched her past self as Uri made light conversation, or so she thought, until she slipped and revealed that she was indeed a CIA agent.

She watched as Uri touched her between the legs. She couldn't believe how receptive she had been, even after the whipping she'd received and the cruel stance he'd forced her take for so long.

"I knew he played my emotions. But, was I really like that?"

"Oh yes," Odin said. "You are a very special lady. It's no wonder Uri fell instantly in love with you."

"He what!"

Odin shushed Anna as they watched Uri pleasure her past self with his hand between her legs as she hung from the chains. Anna could do nothing more than watch open-mouth as she climaxed while suspended from the ceiling.

"You must admit, from his point of view, this was rather amusing," Odin said. Then he added, "It wasn't selfish greed that ultimately convinced General Konstantine to whisk you away for himself."

They watched as Anna Past held out long enough for Locket to get away. General Konstantine was visibly disturbed when he learned he'd missed the rendezvous time and lost a chance at his rival.

"Guard, take her away!" he called out.

"What!" the past Anna cried. "I thought you were going to let me go."

"If I'd have received a satisfactory answer," he snapped.

Future Anna and Odin watched as the past Anna was led out by a guard. General Konstanine sat back in his swivel chair. He propped his elbows on the desk and buried his head in his hands.

"We shall step forward one day and watch the rest of this interaction," Odin told her.

The light and shadows changed in the room. Anna realized he had whisked her ahead in time.

General Uri Konstantine was still sitting at his desk, but was now leafing through a dossier. He scribbled notes in the margins.

A guard shoved Anna into his office. She was naked except for a blanket around her shoulders.

“Good morning, Andromeda,” he said as she stood two paces in front of his desk.

“Good morning, sir,” Anna replied. “How was your night? Mine was hell, thank you.”

Anna watched as General Konstantine leafed through the pages of the report. And she watched her past self fidget while standing naked at attention.

“At least you had a bed,” he said. “I slept here on this desk. I gave you my only blanket.” He scribbled a note in the margin of one of the pages. “Anna, this has just arrived from Moscow. It has some interesting information about you.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Yesterday, I had intended to let you go.”

“But?”

“Information has come to me which would make your release undesirable.” He made another note on the next page. “I have decided what to do with you. It will seem to the outside world that you’ve disappeared in the churn of this revolution. You will, instead, be taken to my flat here in Budapest where you will live among my household staff.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“I most certainly am. This will be easier for you if you accept your new lot in life with the grace and dignity I know you have inside,” The General said as he closed the report, stood up, and walked around the desk to her.

“And what will I be doing for you in your apartment?” Anna asked.

“You will amuse me,” the General said.

Anna knew what was going to happen next. She watched her past self slap General Uri Konstantine across the face.

“That was brave of you,” Odin said. “What did he do to you next?”

“He tied me to his desk and gave me a caning,” Anna said.

“What are you going to do with me?” her past self asked.

“Lie face down over the desk,” General Konstantine said casually as he fished through the desk’s top drawer.

General Konstantine made his Anna count the strikes of the cane. He also threatened to start all over again if she would squirm or jump. Future Anna watched her past self lie as still as she could and count off the smacks across her bottom.

“Anna, look, there’s your dossier,” Odin said, pointing to the folder on the desk under Anna’s naked left breast. “It’s got everything Uri knows about you.” Then to the Anna Past he casually said, “Mind if we look at that?”

“Odin, I thought you couldn’t talk to her?” Anna future said.

“She knows we’re here,” Odin told her. “She just doesn’t know whether to believe her eyes.” He had trouble pulling the folder out from under Past Anna’s sweaty skin. The folder stuck to her skin so he simply pulled the pages of the report out from within.

Past Anna could do nothing more than count off the General’s caning. But she watched in confusion as Odin and her future self leafed through the papers.

“That’s not my dossier. That’s Locket’s,” Anna said as she flipping through the file.

“Only at the end does it mention me, and only as being his next liaison.”

“You were a very small fish,” Odin said. “General Konstantine wouldn’t even have bothered

with you if he wasn't smitten by you from the start.”

“He let Locket get away so he could toy with me?” she wondered.

“Loki,” Odin corrected. “The mischief maker. Uri would never have been able to catch that rascal. He’s one of us. A god.”

“What?”

“A god. Loki, the doer of good and the doer evil. Loki, the betrayer.” Odin shook his head.

“Uri was hopelessly outclassed by him. Yet all Loki wanted was to just come down to Earth for a little fun.” Odin flipped through a few more pages of Uri’s notes. “Look, read this.”

Andrew Locket has been investigated by his own government for the disappearances of at least three agents in his charge, Judy Miller, 1950, Mary Wallen, 1952, and Donna Graff, 1953. He has been suspected of turning each agent over to a foreign power. Judy Miller, executed in Peking. Mary Wallen, executed in Moscow. Donna Graff, executed in Havana.

“According to Uri’s thinking, this Locket wasn’t just an opponent, he was an evil agent. And he was right. Loki had crossed the line. He was no longer just making his usual mischief, he was doing evil. Real evil. Uri kept you in his care for your safety,” Odin said. “He knew Locket, Loki, would kill you if you returned from your mission.”

“What!” Anna’s perception of her whole life from that day onward had changed. It was like the cornerstones of her very existence was knocked out from under her.

“Why would Andy, that is Loki, do that to me? We were lovers, he promised he’d marry me.”

“Are you still that naive, my dear? Loki was playing The Game. As a god, he could take on as many lovers as he chose. But as a CIA operative he had to keep his relationships discreet. Each time he found a new woman, he had to get rid of the old one in a convenient way. And what he seemed to enjoy the most was turning them over to foreign powers. If any of them made it out

alive, like a few women not in Uri's dossier, he arranged accidents for them once back in America. The Game."

"So you're saying that Uri saved me from Loki?" Anna said, her head swimming at the revelations. "But does that excuse Uri for making me his slave?"

"Uri wasn't a saint," Odin said. "For saving your life he felt entitled to take you unto himself. And, yes, he was harsh in extracting his payment."

"But, he had no right." Anna was lost for words.

"No he didn't have a right! That's why he's damned to spend eternity in the frozen mud."

"This changes everything." She felt a tear drip down her cheek. She tried to take it all in. She wanted to know one simple thing. "Odin, tell me, was Uri good or evil?"

"The question is not about Uri. It is about you," Odin said as if he were reading her mind. "Come. There's more to show you."

"I can't take any more," Anna said. "Please stop!"

"We've lost her," the paramedic in the London ambulance said.

"No! It can't be." Liudmila, crawled her way back to Anna from the passenger seat. "She can't be gone!" Liudmila started pounding on Anna's chest. "You can't die, you fuckin' cunt!"

"Hey, you can't come back here." The paramedic pulled Liudmila away as she kicked and screamed.

"Okay, try again," the other paramedic said. He pushed down on her chest. "Damn you, don't you go! Can't you see how you'll be missed! 'ang on, love!"

"I've got a heartbeat!" the first one said, listening on his stethoscope. "This bird's still alive! Sod it, Jack, drive faster!"

“Hang on, Anna!” Liudmila cried hysterically. “Please hang on.”

- - -

Anna found herself in another familiar place, her flat in Budapest.

“You've brought me to that first morning at his apartment, haven't you?” she asked, not very surprised.

He didn't answer her. They stood in the living room. A section of rope lay on the floor next to a rubber dildo. Odin picked it up and examined it. He shook his head and placed it on the low coffee table.

“The one memory of this place I didn't want to relive,” Anna said. She felt bile churn in her stomach. “I'm glad you didn't make me watch the part when they attacked me.”

“No point,” Odin said. He took her hand and led her down the hallway.

She heard voices from the past coming from the bathroom, mostly Liudmila screaming about the twenty lashes Anna deserved. Uri's response was calm and measured.

She saw her past self led by Uri out from the bathroom and into the bedroom. Anna was surprised to see how she had marched with her head held high.

“Do you remember what happened in the bathroom, Anna?” Odin asked.

“You know I remember perfectly well. I gave him a blowjob, okay?” Before he could ask her to elaborate, she said, “It was my way of fighting back.”

“As was acquiescing to his whip?”

“Alright, he got to me. He saved me when those two tried to rape me. So I was willing to accept whatever he wanted of me.”

“Is that when you fell in love with him?”

“I did not fall in love with him then!” Anna said.

Odin looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll admit, I thought he was kinda okay,” she said. “But I was not in love with him.”

“That must have happened a few days later. I mean, going from kinda okay to the throes of lustful love.”

“Odin, shut up.” Anna couldn’t believe what she’d just said to the father of the gods, especially at a time she was being judged. If she wasn’t careful, he might damn her to the same fate as Uri.

Odin pretended not to hear. “Come,” he said.

She followed him into the bedroom. Her past self was already leaning over the bed on her knees, her bottom prominently displayed. Liudi and Aida stood off to the side. Uri rummaged a trunk for his whip.

“Was my bum really that fat?” Anna whispered.

Odin just rolled his eyes.

He led her around to the other side of the bed. They sat on the edge on either side of her past self.

She watched Uri throw the first crack of his whip. Then she saw her past self realize she was not alone.

“I see us, again,” Anna said to Odin.

“Yes. You do,” Odin said. He took the past Anna’s hand in his. The future Anna did likewise. She wondered if it would be okay to touch her past self, as if doing so would blow up the universe or something. Nothing out of the ordinary happened, not unless she considered time traveling with an ancient god out of the ordinary.

“Do you see them?” her past self asked.

“There are a few red spots, but no broken skin,” Liudmila answered, thinking the question was about whip marks.

Anna looked up and saw Liudmila was in tears.

“She’s ashamed of what she did to you,” Odin said.

Liudmila kept reaching over to hold Uri’s arm in an attempt to get him to stop. He pushed her away each time.

“See, he’s doing this to you to put Liudmila and Aida back in their places,” Odin commented.

“I couldn’t see she was acting that way,” Anna said. “I wish I’d known that. Liudi and I could have become friends a lot sooner.”

“Who are you people?” her past self asked, interrupting their conversation.

“Just a typical master with his two slaves,” Uri answered, thinking the question was directed toward him.

“Three slaves now,” Liudmila corrected.

“Is that right, Andromeda?” Uri asked. “Three?”

“Of course,” the past Anna answered. “Three.”

“What did you just say?” Odin asked the future Anna. “Did you just declare yourself his slave?”

“What?” Anna cried. “No!” But then she realized it was true.

“In your mind, this is when you submitted to him. This is when you became his. You took twenty lashes because, if you didn’t, you’d disappoint your new master. Once you realized you were in no real danger, this life of submission began to intrigue you.”

Anna wanted to say yes, it was all true, but she couldn’t speak.

“We have seen enough here,” Odin said. “There is more to show you else-when.”

Anna future reluctantly stood and took Odin by the hand. As they stepped out of this time and into the future, she heard her past self call, "More! Whip me more!" She remembered all she wanted then was the sensory stimulus to see her invisible intruders again, but realized what her words must have sounded like to Uri. Any doubt he had up to then about taking her as his slave must have evaporated at that moment.

- - -

Odin showed Anna various scenes as her life as Uri's sex slave. As they looked on from the corner of the bedroom, her past self sometime noticed them, other time she didn't. Anna realized something watching herself and Uri together, he was always attentive to her; always watched for signs of distress, especially when he tied her up and teased her. He never took her beyond that hidden threshold which would turn his game of dominance into abuse.

He always made sure she was satisfied in their lovemaking. Living through it the first time, she'd thought his virility had more to do with owning three women and showing them that he could outlast them all. But now she saw differently as she looked on during those tender, languid hours of aftercare. He'd tend to her sore bottom, massage ointment in it if he left a sting. He'd cuddle her and held her in his arms. She watched her past self relax with a blissful smile time after time.

"Odin, why couldn't he tell me he was protecting me?"

"You wouldn't have believed him," he answered. "And his authoritarian style doesn't allow for explanations."

"I didn't realize how happy I was in his arms."

"All the more reason for him not to say anything."

"He should have talked to me."

“Maybe if he did, he wouldn’t be spending the rest of time in the frozen mud.”

“Why is it men never talk?” Anna huffed.

“Come, let us step forward,” Odin said.

- - -

The scene changed again. Anna found herself on the street outside her flat. It was a pleasant, warm day, early in the summer.

“Odin, I know where we are. Something strange is about to happen!” Anna said.

“Nonsense, this is when he let you out for the first time. Look, there you are. See how confused you are. You can’t decide if you should escape or perform the errand he assigned for you. What did he send you to buy?”

“Bread. But listen. There’s going to be explosions. And I think it was Locket, um, I mean Loki — Oh, no! There he is across the street —”

“Anna, stay here, out of the way!” Odin snapped as he looked in the same direction. “What’s he doing here?”

They saw that wiry figure, with his hands in his trench coat pocket, casually walking towards the past Anna. Like before, she couldn’t focus on his face, but this time around she knew who it was.

“You don’t belong here!” Odin growled as he ran into the street.

Loki turned. He gave the sweetest, most innocent smile. Anna could see the smile, see it despite the fog around his head. But, now wiser and stronger, she didn’t fall for his charming hypnotics.

And, neither did Odin. He didn’t wait for Loki to speak. With a crack of thunder, an arc of electricity, brighter than the sun, shot out of Odin’s pointing finger and hit Loki in the chest. Loki

fell back against the building wall, but was only stunned for a moment.

He too, shot a bolt of energy back at Odin. By some power beyond Anna's fathom, Odin deflected Loki's shot and sent the energy scattering up to the sky. Anna covered her ears at the boom. No one else on the street seemed to notice. Pedestrians meandered between the two gods shooting bolts of energy at each other. A young mother pushing a pram strolled past Loki as he aimed his next bolt.

Only the two Annas noticed. Anna from the future watched the ensuing battle from the opposite side walk. Past Anna shrieked and dropped her loaf of bread and ran into the street to get out of the way of the melee. A truck, pattering along, belching black fumes, screeched to a stop, narrowly missing her. The driver swore at Anna, oblivious of the lightning charges flying around him.

When the past Anna made it to the other side, a stray bolt of energy hit the closest lamp post, sending shards of glass raining down on her. As that energy coursed down the iron pole to dissipate in the ground, some of it arced across at Anna. She shrieked in contorted agony, then fainted.

Anna ran over to herself. She knelt down and cradled her past self's head.

“What happened?” her past self asked when she opened her eyes. She seemed to be too dazed to realize who was tending to her.

“Relax, you'll be alright,” the future Anna said. She looked up to see Odin, now standing eye to eye with Loki. The two were yelling at each other. Anna could understand the Assier language of the gods, and this bothered her not knowing how she acquired this new knowledge so fast, especially since it took her many years in Uri's apartment to learn French, Russian, and Hungarian.

Odin said, "... then come back to Asgard and stand before the gods."

"You joke, Allfather!" Loki laughed. "Let's drop the pretenses."

"Then you admit your betrayal!"

"If you're just realizing that now, you are more naïve than I thought."

Odin grabbed Loki by the collar of his trench coat and pushed him against the brick wall.

Only, he didn't hit the wall. He and Odin fell through it.

Anna felt the tension of the gods dissipate and a calm return to the street. Yet, it was only she and her past self that noticed. Every one else on the street continued on their way as if nothing had happened.

"Anna!" Uri shouted.

Anna turned her head. The call wasn't for her, but for her past self lying in her arms.

He, Liudmila, and Aida ran towards them. "What happened to her?" Uri asked.

Anna, the future Anna, realized they were talking to her. They saw her! Would they recognize her for who she is? She let her past self's head rest back on the ground and ran off.

"Hey, wait!" Liudmila called after her.

But as Anna turned back for a moment, she saw the three of them were tending to their Anna. Uri lifted her in his arms and ran with her around the corner to their building's entry.

Anna realized she was alone. Was she abandoned in the past? Would Odin return for her? Would she be left here, a non-person, to fend for herself? This part hadn't been planned by Odin. No, he was surprised, too. She lived through this once, she should have said something, warned him. But one thing led another and she'd been confused and overwhelmed.

Anna crossed the street and walked down to where Odin and Loki disappeared. She felt the faintest traces of that god-like energy in the space around her. It was the same feeling as in the

melee, and that same feeling of misproportion while the gods took her back in Valhalla.

She touched the wall with the tip of her fingers.

Only she didn't touch the wall. Her fingers fell through it, and before she could pull back, her whole body was sucked into a place beyond space and time.

The feeling of stepping through a hole in space and time got disquieting after she did it a few times in Asgard. It felt like she was pushed with a oomph in a direction that is neither vertical, diagonal, nor horizontal. As Anna fell through the wall, that strange feeling cascaded through her, multiplied a thousand-fold, and jarred her to her soul. It felt like she was falling through one space/time hole after another and somehow gaining speed in her free-fall. Where ever she was going, she knew it was far from her own world.

Anna tried to claw out, but there was no “space” around her. She wondered how long she'd be here, but the word “time” didn't apply to where she was.

When she landed, Anna knew it was in some place small. She didn't know how she knew this. She had followed a path of least resistance to get here; without knowing how she knew that either. She wasn't alone.

“Hello, sweetie,” a menacing voice spoke.

“Who's there?” Anna cried in the dark.

Then there was light, light all around her, a featureless, glowing wall in every direction. Anna couldn't tell if it was two feet or two light-years from her. She floated the center of a sphere and couldn't see who else was with her.

A laugh came from behind.

“Odin, are you there?”

“Odin is not here.”

“Loki?”

“Why not call me Andy? You always have before.”

“Where am I? What's happening?”

“Odin betrayed you.”

“No, he'd never —”

“You're inconsequential to him.”

“I don't believe you!”

“He wanted me trapped in this —” the voice hesitated “— place; this universe barely larger than a living room. But you conveniently fell through, too. When he saw his only choices were to let me go or trap you too, well, you see what he decided.” He chuckled, seeing dark humor in the situation. “Yes, it appears there's no way out for either of us. But, at least I have a plaything to torment for all eternity.”

“No!” Anna cried, still not seeing where Loki's voice came from. He was always behind her, no matter how she tried to turn in the center of this bubble of a universe.

She felt him from behind, on her shoulder. It wasn't a hand, but a clammy-cold tentacle snaking its way down her front. Then she felt another, on her other shoulder; it wound around her neck.

“Did he tell you that I am half frost giant? No? Then he couldn't have told you that I am the union of him and a frost giantess.”

Anna reached to pull the tentacle away from her neck, but two more wrapped around each wrist, holding her in place. Then more encircled her. Two gripped her legs and pulled them apart. One circled her midriff, squeezing her. And one —

“No, not there!” Anna gasped as she tried to turn away from his, its, steel-like hold.

Loki laughed.

“This is what the frost giant half of me looks like,” he said with clinical detachment. “Do you like what you see? Think back to all the times we made love.”

“No!” Anna coughed again.

“You humans are so delicate. I must remember not to kill you. I shall have nothing to play with. Don't worry. You will die eventually, and I shall devour your soul, playing with it inside of me for eons until there is nothing left of you but pain. But for now, there is plenty of strength in your body and I can torment your flesh.”

She screamed as a tentacle pushed her panties aside and penetrated her. Why would Odin abandon me like this? she lamented.

“You are not alone,” a voice echoed from deep within her psyche.

“Odin? Is that you? What do you want me to do?”

“You are not here,” the voice said.

“I am not here?” Anna repeated. Then aloud, for Loki, “I am not here!”

“What!” Loki snapped back. He released his tentacled grip over her. “What kind of foolishness is this?” he said fuming.

“I never was here,” Anna said with resolve, echoing the words bubbling up from deep within her mind.

Loki swung her around to face him. But before he could turn her half way around, another singular thought popped into her mind. “The word.” It was a single point, a beginning, an end, all in one. Nothing but a point in her mind. A black hole and a big bang, all in one. It pulled Anna in, not her body, but her psyche. Her thoughts, her mind, her soul all fell through that single point. Then, that singularity exploded before Loki could follow her.

Anna then felt buffeted by that same feeling of passing through too many space/time holes too quickly. But this time, she didn't have a body. And then, she was whole again, like the experience never happened.

“What? Where am I? What happened?” a very real Anna asked as she slumped in Odin's arms on that sunny sidewalk in Budapest.

“That was the only way I could trap him. But I'd never abandon you.”

“I knew you wouldn't.”

“You are shaken. I must find a place for you to calm down.” Odin led her by the arm down the sidewalk to a small outdoor cafe half a block away.

“How did you get me out?” Anna asked, still stunned.

“It never happened,” Odin answered.

“Then, it was a dream?”

“No, it was real. But I changed time, so it never happened.”

“Huh?”

“It had been real once. Then, it was no longer real.”

“Now I'm all the more confused.”

Odin pulled out a chair for her when they arrived at that sidewalk cafe.

“Sit,” he said. “We'll have coffee and some pastries. You can regain your composure. We shall then return to Asgard where you can rest for a few days before we continue.”

“You brought me on this journey to show me something. Let's finish what you started,” Anna said. Then she hugged him. “Thanks for pulling me out of that,” she thought for words, “hole.”

He kissed her on the forehead.

Just then the waiter came to take their order. If he thought Odin to be oddly dressed in his

threadbare blue wizard robe, he didn't say anything.

- - -

After her respite of coffee and pastries, Anna found herself thrown into another time and place once again. Now she was standing at the halfway point on the Chain Bridge connecting Buda with Pest. Buda was on her left, with Buda Castle Hill rising above the river bank. Pest was on her right with the Parliament standing ahead of her, with its red star above the center dome. The Danube flowed below. It was a cool spring night. The starless sky was overcast with low clouds reflecting back the city's limited street lights. A few drops of rain hit the pavement around her. No traffic crossed the bridge, only the occasional pedestrian. A couple strolled by. They did not notice her or Odin.

"What time did you take me to?" she asked, though she feared she knew the answer already.

"Look that way." Odin nodded towards the Pest side. She followed his gaze to Roosevelt Square. She saw a figure in the shadows dart across the grass and run up to the Chain Bridge.

"Do you know now?"

"Yes," she said. "It's 1963. You've skipped ahead five years. This is when I escaped from Uri, not the first time with the girls, but the second time. This is when I had been sent back by MI6 to bug his apartment. I hadn't counted on Uri's new girl, that Sofia the opera singer, to catch me."

This is when things had gone wrong for her. Or perhaps things went wrong years before and events came to their nexus on this bridge. There were things that she had forgotten about this night, things she pushed back in the recesses of her mind.

"Are you going to make me relive everything?" she asked.

Odin didn't answer, no longer playing the caring lover or the father figure who rescued her a few minutes ago. Or, was it five years ago?

They watched as police cars stopped on each side of the river. The past Anna ran desperately onto the bridge. Flanked by police on either side, she had gotten the idea of hiding inside the bridge's trusses. Past Anna removed a steel plate leading to the belly of the bridge. Future Anna saw her flop down the hole she created. She couldn't see the position her past self was in. But, she remembered that she had slid down and jammed her shoulder against intersecting struts.

"Your MI6 handlers prepared you well for this mission," Odin said. "But you miscalculated your limits. You didn't know how stressed you were. You didn't know you were on the last of your adrenaline." The two peered over the edge of the bridge to see the past Anna attempt to right herself and then slip and tumble over to end up dangling by her fingers. "You seemed to be doing well at first. You really looked like you could have made it. But, look into your eyes now: fatigue, dread, despair, resignation."

Anna looked down at her past self clinging with her fingers to the cold steel.

"How did you get out of this?" Odin asked.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Did something so bizarre happen that you were forced to put it out of your mind?" Odin prompted her.

"Help!" they heard the past Anna's plea.

Future Anna looked at Odin. "Does she see us?" she asked him in a murmur.

"I know someone's up there!" past Anna called out, hanging from the bridge. "I can hear you speaking."

Anna and Odin looked at each other, then they looked down into the hole.

"Please, I'm slipping," past Anna said, her voice was shaking.

"Could I speak with my other self?" Anna wondered aloud.

“I don't know who you are or why you're here,” her past self cried up. Her eyes spoke of the desperation of someone on their final gambit. “But I've seen you before. You were there in the shadows watching me. You always wore that same evening dress. I thought maybe you weren't real, yet you are! Please help, I can't hang on any longer.”

“I'm coming.” Future Anna climbed down the hole onto the girder. This time she did it with grace and landed feet-first on a horizontal beam. She took hold of a vertical truss with one hand and reached down with the other to grab her past self's hand. “Grab hold.”

“I can't let go. I'll fall!” the hanging Anna cried.

“I'll grab your wrist.” Anna stretched her arm as far as she could without losing her own balance.

“I'm slipping,” past Anna cried.

“Odin, help!” Anna shouted, anger welling up in her as she saw the god staring down at them. “You brought me here, you prick. You've toyed with my life ever since we made the mistake of summoning you. Do something useful, and help me pull her up. Or are you as much of an asshole as Loki?”

“Very well,” Odin said, almost with a yawn. He then materialized beside her on the girder. His faded blue robe swayed in the wind making him look otherworldly. They each took hold of one of past Anna's wrists and pulled her up beside them.

They stood on the ironwork of the bridge's underbelly — all three of them looking at each other silently.

Past Anna stared at Odin, surprised, yet not surprised to see him here. Then she looked at her future self. “You're me!” she gasped. She touched the other Anna's face. Her mysterious woman in the black dress wasn't a phantom or a figment of delirium, but a flesh and blood person. As she

marveled at her other self, and Odin's trickery to cause this, the past Anna lost her balance and fell backwards off the truss.

Future Anna reached to grab her but their fingers missed. Past Anna screamed as she fell towards the rushing water below.

The Annas looked each other in the eye. There was nothing her future self could do to save past Anna. Then, faster than mortals can imagine, Odin reached a handsbreadth further and grabbed the falling Anna by the fingers. She hung suspended over the Danube as she held on to Odin's hand.

Odin lifted her back onto the girder. He then helped the two Annas climb up onto the bridge's pedestrian path. He appeared standing next to them without climbing through the hole.

"Odin, tell me what's going on!" the past Anna said pointing to her other self.

"Yes, I do see you're beside yourself in consternation," Odin said. "Both of you!"

The Annas looked at him with furled eyebrows, not amused.

"Don't you have to get to your safe house?" Odin said, trying hard to stifle his grin and present a serious voice. "Never mind what you just saw."

Odin's directive penetrated the past Anna's brain only as a god's word could. She immediately obeyed his command and forgot what she saw — the entire experience evaporating from her short term memory. The safe house was all that remained for her as a singular goal.

Past Anna turned and started running again. They watched her turn back, she couldn't see Odin and her other self. She ran off, clearly confused, into the dark.

"So this is what built up to my heart attack." Future Anna said. "Seeing me rescuing myself?"

"There's more," Odin said.

"More?" When she turned back to him, she saw a rotary telephone sitting on the bridge's

granite wall. It was a bulky black model that had seen better days. Odin picked up the handset and started dialing.

“I hope my call gets through. This communist run telephone system is atrocious.” He finished the number and waited for the phone to ring.

Anna stared at the telephone wire snaking under the bridge. “This is absurd,” she said.

“Someone from the future gave me a phone that’s got no wire coming out,” Odin said, ear to receiver. “It’ll also take your photograph and plays a mean game of backgammon.”

“Now I know you’re teasing —”

“Hello?” A woman on the other end answered, Anna could hear the voice in the earpiece clearly even though it was against Odin’s head. It was Sofia, Uri’s new girl.

“I would like to speak with the General, please,” Odin said.

“Uri, come to the phone,” Sofia said. “Don’t mope. I don’t care how wonderful Anna is. If you don’t put her out of your mind right now you can forget about me. Pull yourself out of your depression and take your damn phone call.” Then they heard shouting and something hitting a wall. “That’s it. I’m leaving. Here’s your fucking phone.”

“Yes?” Uri finally answered.

“Andromeda is heading up Buda Castle Hill.”

“Who’s this? How do you know?”

“Hurry,” Odin said, then hung up. The telephone disappeared between his fingers as he slammed the handle onto the cradle.

“You sent him after me!” Anna couldn’t believe what he just did. “Every man I’ve ever let near me has screwed me over! And I don’t mean the sex. What did you do that for? I would have made it to the safe house! I never would have killed him. And, you couldn’t blame me for

sending him to Hell!” She collapsed against his body and started pounding his chest with ineffectual blows. Anna cried hysterically, “You bastard, you.” He pulled her body to his and hugged her.

“Stop. Stop.” He cradled her head. She kept crying. “I had to bring this to a close, whatever that may be. If I didn’t, your lives would have intertwined over the years. Your love and hate for him would have consumed you, and his love for you would have shriveled his soul to a point that his damnation would be a thousand-fold more severe.”

When Anna stopped sobbing, all Odin said was, “Take my hand.”

“No.” Anna was barely audible.

Nonetheless, he took hold of her and pulled her into another place, once again.

This time, it was the on top of Buda Castle Hill, in the middle of Disz Square. All the street lamps but one at the far end of the square were out. The sound of a car’s engine broke the silence of the night. A Lada pulled into the square. It was Uri. His chauffeur wasn't with him. He drove past the two interlopers from the future, not seeing them. It occurred to Anna that he could have run them over. Odin wouldn’t have been hurt, but she would have been killed.

Anna didn’t have time to ponder what would happen if she died afer she was already dead. No sooner did Uri park his car and hid in the shadows, than past Anna staggered into the square. She was exhausted and had been crying. She didn’t see Uri standing in the shadows as she surveyed the square. The past Anna took a deep breath and stepped into the open of the square.

“Andromeda, my dear.” Uri spoke, just as future Anna remembered he would. “I’m sorry I missed you at the flat.”

Anna saw the look of dread on her past self’s face.

“You’er bleeding,” Uri said looking down at the past Anna's feet.

Both Annas followed his gaze. Past Anna's feet left a trail of blood. "Come, let me bandage them for you. I have some shoes for you, and clothes worthy of a lady." He took a step towards her. She backed away.

Anna remembered those words: syllable for syllable.

"Stay away from me!" her past self cried.

"Come," Odin whispered to his Anna. "Let's take a peek in the car while they're talking. I'm curious to see what he brought with him?" They looked into the back seat while Uri and past Anna argued. "Hmmm, shoes, pants, your shirt, a jacket he once gave you: things you left behind when you escaped. He kept them all these years. Interesting. Oh, and look, a first aid kit. He really was going to bandage your bleeding feet."

"Why can't you leave me alone!" they heard past Anna plead.

"I did leave you alone..." Uri answered her.

"I don't think he meant to hurt you," Odin said.

"Why else would he be here?" Anna couldn't believe Odin's revelation.

"He's here alone. No Soviet agents, Hungarian police, not even his driver. But, he did remember to bring the change of clothes for you. Did he say anything threatening so far?"

"No, but ..." Anna said. "It's not what he said. It's, it's, him!"

They watched as Uri walked towards the past Anna. His arms were open. Her past self pulled a dagger from her bag and plunged it into his chest.

"Andromeda! No!" Uri gasped as he collapsed onto the cobblestones.

"You prick!" the past Anna fell on him. "Look what you made me do to you." She started to cry.

"Anna, why!" Uri wheezed.

“He was only there to help you get away,” Odin said. “And perhaps look at you one more time. Watch, you’re about to plunge the knife into him again. This time, it will be the heart. You will kill him. And since he’s already down, you can’t even call it self defense. Watch, you’re about to commit murder. And you know what will happen to him next: he’ll be condemned to an eternity in the frozen mud. Pity, I saw the possibility for redemption in him — had he lived.”

“Stop!” Anna cried, shrieking out into the night.

Odin thought she was directing her plea to him, but Anna’s words were too loud to be meant for his ears.

“What!” The past Anna looked up. She saw her future self standing next to Odin. “You again!” This time in history, she recalled what had transpired on the bridge. “Are you following me? And you too, Odin?”

“Look at me! I’m you,” future Anna said. “I mean, you’re me. I’m from the future. You’re going to have to live with what you’re about to do. I mean, I’m going to have to live with what I did.”

“But he ...” her past self said, lost for words.

“I know you’re conflicted about him. Anna, it’s okay to love him!”

The dagger fell through past Anna’s fingers. It tumbled off Uri’s bleeding chest to land beside him on the cobblestones.

“I see it now.” Future Anna walked towards her past self. “When I killed him — when you’re going to kill him — this ate away at me. This is what killed me!”

“But he, he, deserves ...” Her past self didn’t know what to do, what to think. She looked at her future self, at Uri, then at Odin.

“What do you deserve? What do I deserve?” future Anna said. “I don’t know what will

happen if you let him live, but I know the future history of letting him die. Don't kill him!"

"Will you two help me!"

Blood gurgled from Uri's mouth.

"You died?" the past Anna asked her future self. "Are you dead? A ghost?"

"I don't know. I'm just as confused as you." Future Anna knelt beside Uri. "We've got to save him!"

Odin yanked his Anna back to her feet and turned her around to face him. "What are you doing?" There was fear in his eyes. "I brought you here to understand, not change things."

"You've given me this chance to change the past and reclaim my life. Don't stand in my way!"

"Anna, listen to me." Odin's voice quivered for the first time. "Don't change things."

"Odin, you're afraid!" Anna said. "And I know what you're afraid of, you time traveling god! You told me so yourself. You said I'd be surprised at your limitations. I know what they are. Since you can travel up and down time, everything is preordained for you. You know how everything will turn out. You don't have free will. Ha! Look at you, a god so powerful, yet you don't have free will! Well, I do, and I'm going to use it!"

"Anna, you don't know what you're about to do."

"Oh, yes, I do!"

"Anna, I implore you, don't," he said. "You've no idea of what changes you're about to unleash across the dimensions."

"I don't think you can stop me," Anna said. "If you could, you'd have done it already." She turned back to her past self and Uri. "Help me get Uri to his car," she told her past self as she took Uri by the shoulders. "We're taking him to a hospital."

The two of them picked up the bleeding general and dragged him into the back seat. The two Annas sped off, the past Anna in the back seat cradling her former lover's head while the future Anna drove. She looked in the rearview as she careened out of Disz Square to see Odin recede into the night, his shoulder slumped in defeat.

- - -

The medics at St. Janos Hospital pulled the bleeding general from the back of his car. The two Annas followed his gurney inside. They got as far as the double swinging doors of the operating room. An attendant in grimy hospital whites blocking their way pointed to a bench in the corridor. They listened in silence from the other side of the door for any clues in the frantic murmurs of the doctors.

The two looked at each other. Neither spoke. Neither knowing what to say in a situation like this.

Anna wondered about the past version of herself sitting next to her. Would Uri betray her and turn her in? Or worse yet, would he enslave her all over again. She also worried about her own state. Was she marooned in the past, stuck behind the Iron Curtain once again, as a persona non grata? Could Odin be capable of stranding her here? Perhaps she should have been nicer to him when she told him to fuck off. Could it be that he was right, and she didn't know the ramifications of what she was doing?

The two Annas held hands, fingers intertwined in nervous grips.

Future Anna thought back to her last encounter with Uri. Not as it unfolded only a few minutes ago, but as it happened four years back. After stabbing General Konstantine through the heart and killing him, she had completed her run to the safehouse. When she showed up on its doorstep in hysterics, the agent cleaned her up and gave her a brandy to calm her nerves.

Only now, her past self wasn't crying at the safe house. She wasn't blathering about how she killed her lover. Rather, she was in a very opposite direction, sitting on a bench in a hospital hallway, waiting on a still living Uri Konstantine. Furthermore, four years ago, she certainly hadn't been holding hands with a time-traveling version of herself wearing a little black evening dress.

This was the classic time traveler's paradox that she'd read about in the pulp science fiction magazines of her teen years. It was something that the universe ought not to have allowed happen. Yet, the universe didn't seem to care. Aside from the frantic work on the other side of the swinging double doors, it seemed a quiet, ordinary night.

"We're losing him," someone shouted.

Hearing that, future Anna feared what she had done was all for naught. What did she get for her efforts, to be stranded in a place in time that had never happened, and Uri would still be dead?

"No, we still have him," the medic exclaimed. "Yes, yes, I think we have him!"

"We're losing her!" someone from another, far off place said. A place that was distant, yet not distant at all. She felt that familiar, disquieting feeling of stepping through a hole in space and time once again, yet this time she didn't move. She only notices she was no longer holding onto her other self's hand. "No, we still have her. Yes, yes, I think we have her!" Anna opened her eyes to look up at the emergency room staff frantically scurrying around her. She was now the one lying in the emergency room "We've got her," someone said. "Welcome back! We thought we'd lost you."

Anna looked around. This was not the run-down hospital in Budapest, but a clean, well-lit modern ER.

“Don't try to talk,” the doctor looking down upon her said. “Blink if you understand me.”

Anna blinked twice.

“Is it over?” she wondered. “Am I back in London? Back in 1967?” She took a deep breath.

I'm alive, she thought. Odin, thank you! I'm so sorry for what I said to you”

They soon wheeled her to a room and a team of orderlies lifted her on her bed.

“Your husband has been notified and he's on his way,” the head nurse with frizzy blond hair said when all the orderlies but one had left.

“Husband? But, I'm not —”

“I spoke to him myself. He left Stow as soon as he heard and should be here in Boston any time now. I bet he's stuck in rush-hour traffic.”

“Boston?” Anna looked up at the nurse. “You mean London!”

“Just relax,” the nurse said. “Try to get some sleep. We'll be monitoring you.”

“Where am I?” she asked, panicking.

“Brigham and Woman's Hospital,” the nurse answered. “We're not far from the MFA where you collapsed. You were very lucky to get here so fast.”

“MFA? That's the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston? But I collapsed in the Royal Albert Hall in London!”

“It's natural to be confused, dear.” The frizzy-haired nurse smiled. She patted the back of Anna's hand, then left.

That's when she noticed the remaining orderly adjusting the window blinds. Even from behind, Anna recognized him immediately.

“Odin! What have you done!”

“What I did!” He turned. “It's what you did!” He was out of place in his blue hospital scrubs.

He now sported a short yet scraggly beard but he still wore his eye patch.

“Why am I in Boston? And what husband?”

“When you changed your past you changed your future as well. Think of the **ramifications you’ve caused.**” He sat on the corner of her bed. “The fellow gods and goddesses were not amused by the ripple in time you caused. I had my explaining to do. Being the Allfather was no protection. They censured me.” He looked up to the sky and shook his head. “When you didn’t kill Uri this time around, you changed a lot of things uptime. Everything in your lightcone from then on had to be rewritten.”

“But, what’s going on?”

“You have two memories up to this point. Your original memory from that night you killed Uri through the night you died from your heart attack at the opera in London. And you have a new set of memories going forward from the night you didn’t kill Uri up until you had a heart attack while visiting the museum in Boston. Which, incidentally, you survived. I persuaded the gods not to take away your old memories. The memories of this new reality will come flooding in as you need them.”

“Who did I marry?” she asked. Just then, that specific memory surfaced. “Him! No, Odin! Anything but that!”

Just then she heard a commotion in the hall. Someone was arguing with the head nurse. She recognized the voice.

“Alright, alright! You can go in, but don’t get her excited!” the nurse said.

The door to her room burst open. Uri Konstantine, disheveled and pale from worry, rushed in.

“Andromeda!” He fell to his knees by her bedside. A tear ran down his cheek. “I was so

afraid for you!” He took her hand and kissed it.

Odin nodded discreetly and left the room. She looked back at him with confusion. A hint of anger surfaced in her towards the god. But, it all evaporated when she saw Uri, her tormentor, her master, now her husband, crying at the side of her bed.

“Mrs. Konstantine,” the nurse said. “Just call if you need to rest. We’ll take your husband out and explain what he needs to do to care for you when he takes you home.”

“No, it’s okay,” Anna said weakly, very unsure of herself. “I want him here.” She stroked his head as he continued his tender kisses.

- - -

A week later she returned to their farm in Stow, Massachusetts. Looking around, it was all new, yet it was the house she and Uri lived in for two years. They'd found it together after he defected and moved to America with her. He carried her to their bedroom. Their bedroom. Those words had a curious, comfortable ring. She saw that their bed was a king-sized four-poster made of oak. Of course it was; they'd picked it out together. He put her in the middle and pulled the covers up to her chin.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine. Just let me rest a little while.”

“I’ll start cooking dinner, then. I’m sure you’re sick of hospital food.” He kissed her forehead and left.

Uri can cook?

The little black dress hung draped on a chair in the corner. It was the only thing she'd brought back with her from a time that used to exist. That dress was the only proof that she wasn't crazy, and that she was a living, breathing genuine paradox in time.

A Polaroid photograph lay on the night stand. She reached over to pick it up. It was on top of a letter and an envelope mailed from England. The photograph was of Liudmila holding a newborn in a hospital room. A young man with unruly hair was next to her. They were both beaming. There was a bunch of roses in the background. Liudmila was still in a hospital gown.

More memories came flooding back, this time of Liudmila. She's married (no way!) to Michael, that guy that had the crush on her at the flower shop! This photo came with her newest letter, in which she wrote about her new baby! In previous letters, she'd told Anna all about Michael. The way she described him, Michael seemed so right for her, the anchor she so very much needed. She remembered when this latest letter arrived — just a few days before her heart attack. She was so happy for Liudmila. She read the letter again for the first time.

My dearest Anna,

Let me present Anna Spears. The newest addition to our family. Michael and I talked it over and I hope you don't mind that we named her after you. She is just twelve hours old in this photograph. But by the time I'm getting around to write, it's two weeks after she was born. She hasn't slept through a night yet! I hope she will soon. At least I get to sleep during the day. Poor Michael is going to work every day with bags under his eyes. Now the details. Anna was born on the 1st of May at 4:05 in the morning. She's 6 lb. 6 oz. She's already very inquisitive. I hope she doesn't grow up to be a spy!

Lots of love to you and ... him.

Liudmila, Michael, and Anna

P.S. Please visit us in London ... he can come too, I'm not mad at him anymore!

Anna put the letter back on the night stand. She smiled at the notion of a reunion between Liudmila and Uri. How the sparks would fly. As she placed the letter back, she noticed the book

she was about to lay it on. She exchanged it for the letter.

Of course, Uri's latest book. She remembered that too; what a firestorm it caused, exposing Soviet atrocities in Eastern Europe. How he'd changed after defecting. Or, maybe he didn't change and she got to see a new facet of him. He now occasionally consults for Amnesty International as an expert on the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union. And, he's a new writer making a name for himself. She thought back to his first book and how had exposed the notorious double agent Andrew Locket, and it exposed Locket's lie that Anna had defected to the Soviets. What a scandal it caused. By that time, Locket had risen to be second in command at the CIA and was in line for the top position. Now an international fugitive, Andrew Locket had disappeared without a trace.

"Loki or Locket, or whoever you are, Odin will catch up with you one day and put you back in that bubble for keeps," she sighed to herself. "At least, thanks to Uri, you can never come back using your 'Locket' disguise."

Anna felt in her heart that her days of being intertwined with the gods were over. Loki would be Odin's battle, not hers. And Odin was probably out of her life too, now that she had achieved that release she asked for so long ago.

She heard Uri clattering in the kitchen. He must have dropped a pan. A smile crossed her face as she fell back on to her pillow. She studied the four posts of the gigantic oak bed. Delicious memories came flooding back of this new life. She craned her head to look at the matching oak trunk sitting at the foot of the bed just to make sure it was really there. She smiled at the thought of all those deviously wonderful toys waiting inside for her.

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