

Silver and Sea-Foam

By Keith E. McComb

“Okay, Charles, what’s up?” I said as I limped into his studio. “You sounded pretty excited on the phone.”

“Oh, girlfriend, you wouldn’t believe it! I think I’ve done my life’s greatest work!” He paused, thinking for a moment, cleared his throat and continued in a much more sedate, and less lilting voice. “I must be excited about this if I slipped in to that mode of speech, Davin. Damn, I hate sounding like a stereotypical gay man.”

I laughed. “But you are a stereotypical gay man, Charles!” He gave me a look that might have been threatening if his eyes hadn’t been twinkling and he hadn’t started chuckling. “Seriously, though, what did you do that has you so excited?”

“I took a job from a woman who wanted a statue made. She was the model for it. I want to show the finished work to you. She knows that I was planning on showing you the finished product, and has no problems with that, even though it’s a nude.” He grinned at me. “Which answers the questions you always ask me when I show you a statue.”

He walked over to the roughly seven foot tall canvas covered thing in the middle of his studio and yanked the canvas off. Under the canvas was an astonishing sculpture. I started at the face, and was surprised to recognize her. “Holy...this is Cytherea! She asked you to do a statue of her?”

“Yep. Called me this generation’s Michelangelo, and insisted that I do the work.”

I started to examine the job minutely, although not for the sexual reason some might think. I’m a fellow artist, only in precious metals, rather than various stone media. (Nowhere as good as Charles, in my opinion. Not in the ballpark. Hell, different stadiums.) The very first thing I noticed was that I could not find a single mark attributable to chisels or any other tools. Were it not for the color and coolness of the marble, you would almost expect her to look down at you and say, “Do you mind not resting your hand on my bum?” I laughed as I realized that was exactly where my hand was sitting. As I explored the workmanship, I said, “Personality-wise, Charles, what’s she like?”

“I think you’ll like her, Davin. Sense of humor like nobody’s business which was attractive enough that she was even affecting *me* slightly.”

“Yeah, but a sense of humor isn’t everything, Charles.”

“It’s a lot, but I agree. She listens, Dav. I don’t know how else to explain it. She talks to you, and somewhere in there, you realize that she’s stopped talking, and you’ve been talking. I’ll tell you, Dav - that woman could almost interest me in women.” He snorted. “It wouldn’t last, though. I have a roving eye for the men.”

I laughed. “Quite the endorsement, Charles.” I found that I was still caressing the stone, as if it were a lover. Yeah, right. “Tell you the truth, Charles, if she’s even a tenth as beautiful inside as this statue makes her outside look, I’d marry her in a heartbeat.”

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“Careful, I just might hold you to that,” a voice said. The voice was ... how do I describe it? Her voice was liquid smoke. Now take that smoke, and add in the description ‘a voice like a horny angel’, and you’ll understand exactly what the voice did to me when the mystery speaker spoke, which is why I didn’t turn around immediately.

Still facing the statue, I said, “Cytherea, I presume?”

“Yes, Davin. I’m Cytherea, and no, I’m not offended, either by your comments or by the erection you don’t want me to see,” she laughed. This woman could probably cure physiological impotence just by speaking with that voice, and laughing like that.

“Umm, is that utterly natural for you to talk like that, or is it possible to tone it down a bit?” I asked with a laugh, hoping that I wasn’t offending her.

“Is this better?” she responded. The voice still carried the raw power and sensuality it had, but I wasn’t in danger of having a certain accident anymore just from listening to her.

“Much,” I replied, turning finally. Staring at this dusky beauty for a few moments, I blurted, “How do you say that a statue is absolutely perfect in every way, but still doesn’t do the model justice?” I blinked when I realized what I’d said. “I’m sorry. You probably get opening lines like that on a regular basis.”

“Yes, but this is the first time I’ve heard it said sincerely.” She smiled at me. “How is it you know of a model whose work is barely on the edge of fame in Europe?”

“I read, and I scout the Internet for interesting stuff. Someone sent me a photo of a drop-dead gorgeous woman on the French Riviera, and labelled it simply Cytherea. Some picture sites came up, as well as a link to your site. Pardon me for saying this, but sure as heck need a new designer. You’re not going to draw people in with that site.”

“You’re pardoned. I’m very new at web design. I should have waited, I guess, but I was so excited at the concept of having my own web site that I threw something together.”

I looked up. “What’s strike three?” I asked the sky.

“Don’t you have to go through strikes one and two first?” she asked, laughing. She stopped and was obviously thinking before she said, “I want you to stop this thought process where it is right now. I have not been offended by either. In fact, if you can suggest a good web designer, I’d appreciate it.”

Charles started laughing. “Girl, you’re talking to him! What you say I do to stone, he does to web sites. On top of that, you should see him with gold and silver!”

“Oh?” she said, obviously interested. “You’re a smith?” She was reacting quite interestingly to *that* little bit of information, because her voice had dropped back into the danger zone, as well as ...

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Before I go any further, let me explain an oddity about being around her. Something might be terribly obvious about this woman, but you might not notice it for an hour, if ever. Such was the case with the outfit she was wearing. I knew that she was completely dressed, but somehow had never noted exactly what she was wearing. (And with a body like hers, you'd think I'd have been staring enough to know the exact pattern on her clothes and the weave of the material.) Only now did I note that she was wearing a wrap of just the perfect shade of grey to properly set off her skin. I also noted that ... well, let's say that she was showing pointed interest in my hobby choice, and leave it at that, okay?

"I've been called that," I replied. "I work in bits, bytes, and metals. Not at the same time, of course." I chuckled. "Although there have been times I've wanted to melt down a particular computer and make it into something useful - like slag. I tinker."

Charles snorted derisively and walked over to the wall. I cringed as I realized what he was about to show her. "This, girlfriend, is a solid silver dagger the boy made for me. You look at that and tell me he's a tinkerer." He handed her the blade carefully, and she took it equally as carefully. The blade in question was twelve inches long, with the handle and hilt adding another six inches. The handle was wrapped in soft leather, followed with silver wire to help secure the leather. The blade was etched with intricate scrollwork.

"My goodness," she breathed. "How much did this cost you to buy from him, Charles? It must have been a fortune!"

"This jerk gave it to me for free, because I said I liked it! Could'a sold it for three hundred, easily, and I *know* that's *way* on the low end, 'cause I was once offered a thousand as a starting offer! And he gives me the damn fool thing! Not to mention the set of silver stone working tools, even though silver is supposed to be too soft for this kind of work."

"Is this representative of your work?"

"I admit that it's probably one of my better pieces."

Charles started laughing. "Pull the other one, Davin!" Turning back to her, he said, "Over there is a sword that he made that goes with this shaving knife here. Wouldn't let him give me that one. Had a hell of a fight over it, as well. What it took to get him to let me pay for his materials and time...girl, this boy is stubborn!"

"Look," I said to Charles, "you're my friend. I made the sword with the intention of it being the companion piece to your dagger. The only reason I wouldn't give it to you was that you threatened to destroy it if I made it a gift. Some effort went into that thing."

"Which means you valued your own work, Davin. And *that* is what I was trying to teach you." We looked at Cytherea, who was murmuring something under her breath. She looked up at us when she noticed that we were looking at her.

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“Sorry. I was just murmuring that Hephaestus could have used friends like Charles here. With my family history, you’d understand why Greek mythology is so important.” She laughed. “You could probably chalk it up to crazy relatives.” She walked over to the statue finally, and ran her own hands along it, looking ecstatic as she did. Grinning, she turned back to Charles and said, “Perfect work. You’ll be getting a bonus for this.”

He shrugged. “If you think it’s worth it.”

I couldn’t hold back the snort. “‘Life’s greatest work’. And now it’s ‘if you think it’s worth it’. Hah! Who’s denigrating their work now, buddy boy?”

Cytherea watched this with some amusement, giggling at the end. “One would think you were lovers, the way you’re carrying on.” Charles’ eyes looked ... elsewhere, and he began whistling tunelessly. Her eyebrows rose to the ceiling. “Bi?” she asked me.

“Experimentation. Figured if I was going to, it ought to be with the one guy I trusted that much. It was okay, but not for a regular thing, as far as I was concerned. This goofball kept breaking into song, though. ‘Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I’ve found you...’” Charles was trying to look angelic, and Cytherea had to reach for a chair, she was laughing so hard.

“Oh my, I haven’t laughed like that in years!” she finally was able to gasp out. “Thank you both.”

I looked at Charles and grinned. “She thinks I’m joking, I’ll bet,” I grinned at him.

“No, I don’t. Remember, I’ve been modeling for this pleasantly insane man. One day, when I was feeling really out of sorts, he subjected me to his one man...”

“Oh my gods - he didn’t. The one-man-all-girl revue?” She nodded. “Charles, you know that’s against the Geneva Conventions!”

“Have you ever taken that thing on stage?” she asked him. “You’d make a killing with that routine.”

“I’m hurt,” he said. “I’m a genuine artist, and you both denigrate my talents.” He looked horribly affronted, but we could see him sneaking peeks at us out of the corner of his eye. Cytherea took her cues from me, even though she was definitely confused, and ignored his reaction. Very shortly, we started to hear snorts coming from him, which became a case of the giggles. “I can never hold that for long.” He looked back to her. “Honestly, I’m worried that it’s too good, and that it would eat into my sculpture time doing shows.”

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She nodded, chuckling. “I can understand that. So, in a blatant attempt to get this conversation back on to something involving the business at hand - how do we get this to my house?”

“Don’t worry about that, honey,” Charles said. “I’ve got some friends that are utterly trustworthy that I can get to move this for me. All you’ll have to do is tell me where it’s going.”

“Is it too much to hope that Davin here will be one of the movers?” she asked with an amused leer.

In response, I did the one thing I never do with someone I just met. I lifted my pants-leg, showing the prosthetic. “It’s why I wear summer weight pants in the summer, rather than shorts. I don’t like everyone staring. Best I could do for you would be foreman of the job.” I looked over to Charles. “Just wondering, Charles. You were complaining when I got here that you were sounding like a bad imitation of the stereotypical gay man, and yet you’ve slid back into the speech pattern and all the phrases. What’s going on?”

“I can let my hair down around her,” was all he said.

“Davin, would you come out to my house and help place the thing? You seem to have an artistic eye, and I can’t say I’m going to complain about the view. I know where I want it, but that may not be optimal placement for it. You’ll understand when you see it. I’ll pay handsomely for your time.”

What I wanted to say was, “Dear lady, just the time in your presence is payment enough,” but I knew she heard far too much of that from guys trying to bed a model. Instead, I simply said, “I don’t need to be paid to basically say, ‘Duh, put rock here, guys’. That’s really all I’d be doing.”

How does someone manage to look so alluring when they’re angry at you? However it’s done, she was doing it as she said, “You know damned well that there’s more to it than that! If you don’t want to do it, then tell me you don’t want to.” She scowled.

I wanted to kiss her, she looked so good. “It’s not that. I’m willing to help; it’s just that I don’t think about it. There’s no training I went through. I just look, visualize, and go from there. It’s hard to think about accepting payment for that.” I paused. “Look, it sounds like a line, and it probably is, but would you accept paying me by letting me take you to dinner afterwards?”

“Wait a second - your payment is to spend money on me? That doesn’t make sense.”

I laughed. “Sure it does. I can’t see it being very likely that you and I could end up as lovers at any point - you’re going to be a household name in a few years, and I’m an idiot.” I punctuated my comment by reaching down and slapping my prosthetic leg.

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“However, after having spent a few hours of extremely enjoyable time with you, people might stop thinking of me as ‘that guy who lost his leg’, and more as a normal guy.”

The look she was giving me was no longer alluring. I had an ineffable sense of intense danger, and it took everything I had not to hunker down and look for a foxhole to hide in. Somehow, I kept my cool and made my exit, saying, “If you want me to foreman, I will. Charles knows how to reach me.” I left as fast as I could move without looking like I was trying to escape.

On the drive home, I thought to myself, *Why did you have to prove yourself right? You call yourself an idiot, and then insult the woman. ‘Oh yes, I’ll hang out with you because it makes me look better.’ Jerk.* I looked up as I heard a rumble in the sky. *Oh, great. The weatherman got it wrong again. Well, I might as well put the top up.* I hit the switch, and the fabric top got about halfway up, and then the motor seized. Right then, the downpour started. We’re talking raindrops the size of golf balls here, too. (Well, to be honest, small marbles.) “Anything else?” I asked in annoyance, looking at the sky.

I awoke in the hospital, with Charles standing over me. “What happened?” I croaked.

“You apparently came within about six feet of being struck by lightning. Hit the road in front of you, and you crashed. Surprisingly enough, most of the damage was cosmetic. You’ll need new doors, and the top is shot, but nothing was done to the chassis.”

“How long have I been out?” I asked incredulously, “if you know all that about the car?”

“More than a day. The docs were getting a little worried, since that’s usually a sign of serious damage. But, you showed signs of coming around a while ago. Actually, you did wake up, and answered some questions, but went right back to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and thought hard. Now that he mentioned it, I could vaguely remember that dream, and that I thought it was a boring one. “Okay, yeah. Well, how did the delivery go? Or haven’t you delivered it yet?”

“Not yet. She was ready to disembowel you, and I informed her that she ought to know the facts before trying to kill you. I then told her about the motorcycle and the reaction afterward.”

“Great, now I’ve got her pity? That’s just...”

“Actually, she screamed something, and ran outdoors. That’s when I learned about the freak storm. She was just kneeling in a puddle, crying.”

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“Why?” That was one of the more unusual reactions my story has ever caused, I had to admit.

“She didn’t say. She’s also been haunting the hospital. I’d better go out and tell her you’re awake.” No sooner had he opened the door to leave than she came through the door.

“Oh good, Davin, you’re awake. I really need to talk to you.”

“First things first,” I said, “no pity. I get too much of that when people find out my story.”

“You’re not going to get pity,” she snapped back at me. “I understand handicaps better than most people do, and you’re obviously doing well at taking care of yourself.” She took a deep breath, and my heart monitor chirped a bit faster. She’d changed clothes, and was wearing shorts and a cut-off T-shirt. It certainly looked to me from the way she’d bounced into the room that she was not relying on external support mechanisms. She smiled at the reaction. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, although I’d imagine you get a lot of that kind of reaction. Hell, I’ll admit that I had that shot of you at the Riviera blown up to poster size.”

“I appreciate it more from a guy who’s not trying to get into my pants. Shorts, in this case.” I opened my mouth, but she cut me off. “I’m not saying you don’t *want* to be there; just that it’s not your main aim.” I had to nod in agreement. “I’m not going to tell you my family history just yet, but suffice it to say that it was a little odd by most people’s standards.”

“Well, I can be a little odd, by most people’s standards, so that’s okay,” I laughed, and got a smile in return. “What had you wanted to say to me, though?”

She stopped moving for a moment, and looked at me, not in anger, but thinking something through. “That can actually wait, now that I see you’re in better shape than I thought. I can tell you that, maybe over dinner? After you help with getting the statue in at my house?”

“Should I bring a change of clothes?” I asked, making it as obvious as I could that the leer I put in my voice was mostly put-on. (Hey, I really wanted to grab her, pull her down on the bed, and really set the heart monitor off, so there was going to be something serious in there.)

“Bring a couple,” she said, laughing. “If it goes late enough, I may give you a bed to sleep in overnight. Besides, if I’ve taken your measure, you’ll get dirty just trying to help them to the best of your ability.”

“Somebody’s been telling tales out of school,” I said chidingly to Charles, only to discover that he’d left the room. “Whoops! You’re a very distracting lady, Cytherea. I usually notice things like that.”

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“I do my best,” she said, putting *that* voice back into use. Let’s just say that the heart monitor wasn’t the only obvious response to her use of it. She smiled and sat down on the bed. “You’ll probably only be in here another couple days. I’ll be here waiting for you when you get out.” She kissed my cheek and walked out. The little swish of her hips, and the way the loose shorts sat on her was ... astounding, to say the least. I might have seen her statue, which was a nude, but I *really* wanted to see the real thing.

How does one have a house that size, and that configuration, and still manage to keep it out of the newspapers? The architecture was Greek, and it made me think of the way a Greek temple *should* have looked, especially if it were truly an abode, rather than a meeting place. I got there an hour before the movers were supposed to, as she requested.

She was in shorts and cut-off T-shirt again, as if prepared to help the workmen herself. I frowned at what I wanted to say, because I didn’t know how to say it in a way that wouldn’t offend. Well, more precisely, I was afraid that mentioning it would offend; not that she was that sensitive. I decided to bite the bullet. “Cytherea, I need to tell you something, and I don’t want you to take it wrong. I think you need to change clothes. You’re distracting the hell out of me in that outfit, and if you keep wearing it, and have to bend over with that top, I guarantee you that your statue is going to end up resembling a mixture of the Venus de Milo and Winged Victory.”

She laughed and said, “Well, I could always take it off and do a Janet Jackson, with you as the unknown pair of hands.” I laughed with her, and smiled inwardly as I contemplated that idea. “Follow me, Davin. I need to head to get a bikini bra, and we’ll be going in the direction I want it placed.” She started walking with that delicious little swish to her hips, and I was hard pressed to keep my eyes on the road, so to speak. To keep from walking into something as she walked, I moved up alongside her. Her eyebrows rose, and I got the oddest feeling that I had just passed a test of some sort.

She walked to a wall and reached out to some of the wonderful work in the walls. These were not flat walls; they were extremely ornate, but somehow not overdone. These walls would not have looked good any other way. I was surprised to see that she had somehow managed to hide an armoire in these walls! She reached in and pulled out a bikini - both parts. “Umm, something tells me that *I’m* going to be distracted, knowing that there’s only you under those shorts.”

“I can put the bottoms on as well, if you’d prefer.” As I nodded, her hands went to the waistband and started to push them down. I spun quickly, and she laughed. “I’m a model; I’m used to nudity and near nudity, Davin.”

“I’m an average horny male. I’m not used to gorgeous models hanging around me. ‘Nuff said?” I laughed in return.

“And I’m not used to someone caring about my feelings on the matter, Davin.” She pulled my head back a little and kissed my cheek. “I’m dressed now, Davin. I don’t bounce as much anymore.” I turned, and she was, in fact, wearing the bikini bra (obvious

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because she was still holding the shirt in her hand), and I could see the strings from the panties snaking up to her waist. *That woman's cleavage would probably kill a man with a heart condition.*

“Put your shirt on and show me where you were thinking of putting the statue,” I said, still grinning at the thought I’d had. She grinned back at me and slid it on while she led me further back in the house. “This place is huge!” I exclaimed. “Where are the border guards?”

“On vacation. Careful though, if we come back any other way, you might have to show your passport.”

I love this woman's sense of humor. “Didn’t know I’d need it.” We stepped into an area I really don’t know how to describe. It had a great hall sort of feel, but it was open to the air, because I could feel the warm breeze. Columns made a fairly large circle on the ground, and I noted that the floor was apparently polished marble, highly decorative, and must have taken forever to put in, especially with the ornate compass rose, accurately aligned. “Oh boy, we’re going to have a problem trying to keep these floors from getting scuffed.”

“Don’t worry about it. If they get scuffed up, they get scuffed. They can always be polished again. Point is, I want it in here somewhere. I was contemplating putting it in one of the large niches.”

I did a slow turn, taking the place in carefully. I then closed my eyes and did it again, imagining it in various places. I kept coming back to the north point of the compass rose. “Is there any reason not to place it on the north point of the compass rose, facing toward the center of the rose? I keep seeing that as a perfect placement for that statue, especially since I get the feel that it’s not the only one you’re going to have made. Besides, it allows you to greet anyone coming into this area. Well, it will do the greeting, but you know what I mean.”

“You’re right about that. And you know, I think you’re right about the placement.” She smiled an odd smile, took my arm, and started to lead me back toward the front of the house. “They should be here soon, and then we can have dinner after we both clean up.” Since such things are always a cue in my life, the doorbell rang. I hadn’t noticed a damned bell when I came to the front door.

That statue was a lot heavier than it looked, which was a real tribute to Charles’ work. You honestly would have sworn, from looking at it, that it couldn’t weigh much more than she really did. It’s marble. By the time we had it in place, none of us was wearing a stitch above the waist, and we were too damned tired to care about it. I knew I was tired when I watched a drop of sweat roll down from her neck, onto her left breast, and drop off her nipple, all in what should have been a particularly alluring way, and I couldn’t muster the energy to think about maybe contemplating the idea of becoming aroused.

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The floor was miraculously unscuffed, which we all cheered half-heartedly, because that was the reason we were so tired. When she had seen that we were making every effort to get the thing carried to its home, rather than sliding it, she shook her head, stripped off the loose T-shirt, and climbed in the fray with us. She had risen another several notches in my book with that move, and somehow became more realistic and more unattainable at the same time. She'd managed to lose the bra in a maneuver she couldn't have set up if she'd tried to. At one point, when we'd set 'her' (the statue, obviously) down, she stood, and caught the string across her back on 'her' hand. Not knowing this, she took a step away, and we heard a "r-r-r-rip!" We looked to see two triangles hanging over her still covered breasts, the remains of the bra string, and a piece of string hanging off 'her' hand. She shrugged, put the T-shirt back on, and peeled off the remains of the bra. The shirt came off after ours had, when it was sticking to her such that it wasn't hiding anything anyway.

We finally stepped into the entryway to examine our handiwork, and Mark (one of the workmen) said, "Miss, if you weren't standing right next to me, I'd swear, from that lighting, that it was you out there, waiting to greet someone." He cocked his head a bit. "Someone you love, I'd say."

"I was thinking about a dream I had. I don't know if you believe in it, but it felt like a true dream. I met my true love in that dream." I won't overuse the word more than it already has been, but do I need to say what kind of a look she had on her face?

"I understand you completely," he said. "Don't laugh, but I've always felt I met my wife because of Aphrodite. I'd asked to meet the woman meant for me, and to make me worthy of her. I stopped drinking and smoking, and took to healthier pursuits. Had a dream one night about jogging in the park, and running into a beautiful woman because I was watching an angel on roller skates." He laughed. "It happened that way exactly. Someone with the most realistic wings I've ever seen skated by, and I turned to look at her. Since I was still running, I ran into the woman who became my wife. Turns out she'd been running that route because she'd had the same dream, and was following that angel. I thank Aphrodite every day I get to wake up next to my own personal goddess."

She was smiling, and I thought I heard her saying something under her breath, but I couldn't catch it. Louder, she said, "I'd offer you a photo of myself, but your wife probably wouldn't appreciate that."

"No offense, miss, but my wife has you beat all hollow. She'd just see the picture as proof that I met you."

I'd met Gina before, and I smiled. She was possibly the most beautiful woman I had ever met in my life, and I could honestly say that none of it was physical. We'd both undergone disfiguring injuries, but I'd gotten lucky and had one that was able to hidden for the most part. She'd been attacked when she was younger by a rival for Mark's affections, and had been splashed with acid. Mark stayed by her side, and as far as he's concerned, her looks never changed. (The girl in question committed suicide when she realized that her plan hadn't worked.) I was Gina's personal pet project, trying to

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improve my outlook on life. We both had lost, and both had gained. I now had the time to do my crafting, since I could no longer ride a motorcycle. She'd lost the 'friends' who had been hanging out with the prettiest girl around, but had gained an outlook on life that most people never achieve, and a devoted husband.

I could see Kevin practically bursting at the seams. As tired as he was, he really wanted that photo of Cytherea. She looked at them both and said, "I'll give you a choice, too. I have all sorts of publicity photos. I'll show them to you, and you pick one out. I'll autograph it for you, too, if only to prove that you knew me before I was famous," she laughed. We grabbed our shirts and headed back toward the front door. She stopped at a different armoire and pulled out a T-shirt, which she slipped over her head. Her timing was excellent, because we were almost rested enough to start caring that there was a half-nude woman in the room with us. At the room, before she opened the door, she said, "Forgive the number of pictures. My last agent thought I should have a number of them. I fired him when I realized that he was hoping to go into a side business selling some of them. I just don't feel right destroying what is actually some excellent photographic artwork." When the door opened, we saw what she meant. There had to have been close to a hundred different photos of her in there, and she looked sheepish.

It was funny a few moments later, when I watched Kevin trying to decide. There was a particularly beautiful and erotic photo of her, and a much more demure one, equally as beautiful. Finally, he decided on the demure photo. She surprised him by pulling out the other one, and autographing that one, 'To Kevin, who knows how to make a girl feel special'. She thought for a second, laughed, and added, 'And who has a great pair of hands'. He blushed furiously as he accepted the photo from her, in a hard folder, to prevent crumpling it. Mark ended up picking one of her in a costume with wings. "It'll make us both think of the angel on roller skates." She signed his 'We know who the true angel is, don't we, Gina?'

She led them both to the door, and saw them off with warm kisses on the cheek. She turned to me as they drove off and said, "Follow me. We both need showers after that workout, and they're off this way." She started peeling as we walked, dropping clothes en route. By the time she stopped and pointed toward a door, I was finally seeing the real thing, as I'd asked for earlier. "No, don't worry. I'm not going to step into your shower with you. But, there are two shower areas in there, so you *are* following me in through *this* door." Once inside, she peeled off to the right, so I immediately turned left.

The area was a sybarite's dream. There was a hot tub, a sauna, steam room, shower area, and even a room to help you get a tan if you wanted. I saw a massage table against one wall, and I could see that I was only scratching the surface of it. I stepped into the shower and found everything I could need, so I scrubbed off the sweat and grime of the move.

It was only as I was climbing out of the hot tub and stepping back into the shower for a cool down that I realized that I'd left my clothes out in the front room. *Damn it! Now I either have to walk out front in nothing but a towel, or I find someone to bring them to me. Argh.* I looked around, and discovered that there were no towels. As I

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reached the edge of the area, I understood why as a warm breeze, both powerful and gentle, dried me almost instantaneously. *Well, now I have to find my clothes.* I turned and discovered that my sweaty clothes were missing as well. *Umm. Well, that puts an interesting spin on things. How in hell do I walk that distance to the front room?*

I looked around the room for a while, and discovered that everything was either attached to the wall, or too bulky to use as a shield of some sort. (I was not going to explain to anyone how I'd broken four million dollars worth of things at her house because I was walking naked with a bench in front of me.) That being the case, I walked to the door and called for Cytherea. No response. I tried this several times before I realized that there wasn't going to be a response. *With luck, she'll at least enjoy the sight, and not be turned off by my artificial leg.* Taking a deep breath, I stepped purposefully from the room and strode quickly toward the front of the house. I'd thought that the house was big before, but the distance was surprisingly small this time.

As I approached the front door, I heard crying. As I reached a point where I could see, I saw her kneeling in front of my bag, dressed as I was. "I miss you, my love. If I'd only seen what I had when you were around, but I was an idiot." She sniffed. "I miss you so much. I miss you all. I..." She never finished the thought, because she started to cry again. Not little sniffles either; great wracking sobs tore through her, and I rushed to her side. She threw her arms around my neck, and cried as if her soul were being torn from her body in great bloody chunks.

It turned dangerous for me when she was no longer in great distress, and had slowed down to sniffles, because I began noticing that I was no longer holding a person in distress, but someone who defined the term 'woman'. By sheer force of will, I kept my body from reacting. She, on the other hand, noticed my change in demeanor. "What's the matter?" she sniffed as she smiled weakly at me. "Crying women make you horny?"

"Not if I can help it," I chuckled, also rather weakly. "I refuse to even contemplate the incredibly bad form involved in taking advantage of someone when they're down. Pun intended. All of them."

She let go of me and stepped away. She stared at me long enough that I was actually getting a little uncomfortable. "You'll do, Davin; you'll do." She was grinning widely now, and as she turned and walked the couple steps to my bag, it seemed as if there was a spring in that step. "Here. Go get dressed. We have a dinner to deal with."

She changed into some outfit that can really only be described as velvety silver-blue spray paint. It hugged her curves the way Lance Armstrong rides the Tour de France - carefully, and tenaciously. Her eyes sparkled as she saw my dress clothes, which were put to shame by her outfit. "So would you rather eat here, or at a nice little restaurant I know in town?"

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“When have you had time to cook?” I asked, expecting a reference to the servants she had to have in a house this size.

“I make time,” she laughed. “Really! I’ve got a little workshop out in back where I do it. Sometimes it gets away from me, and that’s why keys disappear and show up where you’ve already looked.” She said it in a dead serious voice, but her eyes sparkled with her unvoiced laughter.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the serious tone, and when I’d finished, she was smiling. “Seriously, though, I could very easily prepare something, or we could visit a restaurant.”

“Which would you prefer?”

“You can be infuriating, you know that? This is my payment, remember? Dinner. And I’m paying for it, by the way, one way or another. You choose.”

I quashed the thought that immediately came to mind, which was, *As much as I’d like to see you in the kitchen in nothing but an apron...* Instead, I said, “I think maybe a restaurant. Less distraction for you.”

“And you. You sure you wouldn’t rather see me in the kitchen wearing nothing but an apron and a smile?” she giggled.

After goggling at her for a moment, I recovered enough to say, “If you want intelligent conversation, then a restaurant is the way to go. If you want to clean drool off your floor, the apron route is your choice.”

“No, I expect I’d clean the drool by showering. Restaurant it is, then. Anything you can’t eat?”

“I’m glad you phrased it that way. If you’d asked if there was anything I couldn’t stomach, I’d have a lot of answers. Nothing I’ve ever discovered that I’m allergic to, to be honest.”

“Mind if I choose the restaurant, then?”

“Go ahead.” I looked out a window and realized that it was late enough that we might have trouble, and said so. She simply smiled, and led me to her garage. This garage held five cars, all in perfect shape.

“I owe you a vehicle, after the other day,” she said. “See anything you like?” She paused. “Of a vehicular nature, to be precise.” She giggled. “I already know your probable original answer.”

“You’re onto me,” I laughed. “I..”

“Not yet,” I actually heard her whisper.

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“... umm ... I ... as far as ... umm ... as far as cars go, I think I like them all.” I walked around and looked at them for a moment, and found myself drawn to, of all things, a Volkswagen Bug she’d somehow gotten her hands on. It needed some work - hell, it needed a lot of work. I wasn’t afraid of that, though. I’d helped rebuild one of these engines from the ground up a few years ago. Still had the book we’d used. I walked around again, and looked closer at it. “Heh. Yes, a 1400 cc engine!” (Don’t understand how this car being like this jibes with my comment of them all being in perfect shape? You’re not someone who enjoys working on one of the best cars ever made.)

“What’s so special about that engine?” she asked with a puzzled smile.

“It just so happens that the 1400 cc engine from a VW can be rebuilt into a Porsche 914 engine, dear lady. Rebuild the body, rebuild the engine, and surprise the hell out of anyone at a stoplight when this VW leaves them in the dust.” I laughed. “Sorry. I enjoy working on things. Things to do with my hands. Mechanic, smith of passable talent, even my web design career can be seen as something I do with my hands.”

“It’s more something you do with your mind,” she said, “and your method of bringing it to the world is through your hands.”

“Now you’re trying to make me sound like an artist,” I chuckled.

“You are. I’ve seen that dagger you made. I know professionals who couldn’t have done that well, and that isn’t hyperbole, Davin. You have true skill. The Volkswagen is yours. Your car was repaired, I know, but...how do I explain this?” She furrowed her pretty brow.

“You feel responsible for the accident that I had, since it happened so shortly after the stupid statement I made, and which you rightly became angry at me for.” I paused, furrowing my own brow. “...at me for...’ Is that even good grammar?”

She scowled slightly. “I have a right to feel responsible, but if I told you why, you’d think I was insane.”

“Try me.”

She got the most evil smile on her face and said, “If I do that, Davin, we’ll never get to dinner.” Laughing at the contortions my face must have undergone, she added, “Later. Get in the Lamborghini. I’ll drive.”

“Yeah, you’d better, since you actually know where we’re going,” I chuckled.

A few minutes later, I was dealing with a new distraction. The car was a convertible, like mine, and her skirt was loose enough to be played with by the air currents that sneak through a vehicle like that. That woman has the best legs of anyone I’ve seen.

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“You can put your hand on my leg if you want to, Davin.”

“In dead honesty, Cytherea, I’m afraid my hand would start to roam if I did.”

“I’m hoping it would, sexy.”

“I doubt I’d survive that crash, dear lady,” I laughed.

“True. Be an interesting chalk outline the police would be drawing, though,” she laughed in return. I suddenly noticed that we were pulling into the airport. “I have a small jet here.”

“We’re flying to the restaurant?” I asked incredulously.

“Hope you like Greek food,” she smiled.

“I thought maybe we were going to Los Angeles or something,” I said a little while later, as I looked at the expanse of clouds below us. It was a full moon, so visibility was incredible.

“Well, I did make a comment about Greek food,” she chuckled. “And where else are you going to find authentic Greek food?”

“I don’t even speak the language!”

“Don’t worry. I do.”

“Y’know, that makes me wonder something about you. I listen to you, and there’s an extremely faint hint of an accent from you, but you still tend to speak with the accent that some call American Broadcast English. And you speak the idioms perfectly, but you’re from Europe. What’s the explanation?”

She looked at me for a long time. “Let’s just say that I have an interesting family, and leave it at that. I promise to explain later, but I want you at full capacity for that. We’re both very tired, and this jet has sleeping quarters. We can even sleep separately, if you’d like.”

“Given the innuendo that’s been flying between us, let’s just say that it’s *safest* if I sleep alone.”

She laughed. “Understood. Neither of us would like to sleep alone, but it’s best that we do.” She led me to the small staterooms set aside for sleeping, which somehow managed to look spacious anyway. (Designers can do wonders.) We both headed inside our respective rooms, and I was unconscious in a matter of minutes.

I awoke some unknown time later, feeling more refreshed, but not completely. I heard voices in the hallway. “Are you sure this is a smart thing to do, dear sister mine?”

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“I have to,” came Cytherea’s response. “You never left, but the others simply faded away. I think they’re coming back, and I think he’s the key to proving it.”

“So you think he can lead you to them?”

“In a manner of speaking, cousin.”

The conversation was odd enough that I chose to get up. I strapped on my leg and pulled a bathrobe on, and then opened the door to the hallway. Cytherea was in the most astounding nightgown I’d ever seen; sort of a Greek toga thing, leaving one dusky breast bare. Her companion was, swear to whomever you want me to, Paul Schaeffer’s twin. He was in the loudest Hawaiian shirt I have ever seen, with Bermuda shorts that made the shirt look normal. He was leaning on an intricate cane that looked as if it had something snaking up its length. He looked at me and said, “Hef! Long time no see!” and came over and hugged me. Letting me go, he looked back at her and said, “Well, gotta go! See you later!” His clothes morphed into a toga similar to hers, and he tossed the cane into the air, catching it in its middle. It had morphed into a Caduceus in the air, and he ran for the wall of the jet. He passed through it, and I saw him wave at me from the outside of the plane. I closed my eyes, rubbed them, and shook my head in disbelief. Opening them again, I found I was in my bed on the jet. “What a weird dream,” I muttered, and rolled back over to sleep.

“I think you watched a little too much Disney, Davin,” she laughed. “Paul Schaeffer?” She brought the coffee cup to her lips, a smile that was both cute and sultry on those lips.

“I told you it was a weird dream,” I laughed. My own coffee was raised in a mock toast to her. “I mean, what in hell does ‘Hef!’ mean? I certainly don’t own the Playboy mansion.”

“I’m flattered by your dream though, and it’s a great segue into some of what I wanted to tell you.” She snorted. “My real name, rather than the stage name I use, actually *is* Aphrodite. I thought that was a little bit arrogant for modeling, so I decided that I’d use an alternate name, one not so well known.”

“Makes sense to me. Obviously fairly successful in your modeling career, if you can afford a house in the States and a jet.”

She blushed. “Actually, that comes from some family holdings. I have access to a surprising amount of resources.”

“I won’t even begin to ask, if only because it’s none of my business. I can be a nosy sort, so I have to keep from asking questions about things that I have no right to know.” I laughed. “Besides, that would sound like I was trying to find out how wealthy you are, and I really don’t give a damn about that.”

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She gave me a long look, and I could actually feel the weight of her assessing my statement. Finally, she said, “You know, if I heard anyone else say that, I’d say it was bullshit. From you, it’s a statement of fact. Odd. Why don’t you care?”

I looked at her for a moment, and then shrugged. “Money won’t keep you warm on a cold winter night unless you burn it, and then you’re sort of defeating the purpose of having it, aren’t you? To be honest, if I were going to meet someone like you, I’d prefer that you not have all that wealth at your command, because you’ll probably always have that little thing running through the back of your mind wondering if I’m really involved with you to try to get your money.”

Her response surprised me. “Let’s take a walk.” She paid the bill and we left the restaurant. It was a nice little seaside place, and we headed in the direction of the beach. Somewhere along the line I found her hand in mine, and I worked very hard at not reacting, because I rather enjoyed it. Finally, we reached the edge of the water. “I’m going swimming. Care to join me?” With that, she peeled the dress over her head and walked out into the surf. The image was ... well, the only word that really fits is ‘archetypical’. She really looked like the goddess Aphrodite, only returning to the sea, rather than coming from it.

With the water halfway up her thighs, she turned and took my breath away as the wind arose just enough to send her hair flowing. I took the moment to seal that picture in my brain, because I could already tell that a sculpture of my own was going to arise from it. She smiled. “Come on in, Davin. The water’s warm, and it won’t give your leg a problem.” She grinned. “Besides, I need to tell you something, and it’s easier out here.”

Shrugging, I rather carefully undressed, knowing full well my reaction was not going to subside before I stood again. I set the artificial leg beside my clothes and hopped into the water. She was right; it was blood warm. “I didn’t think that the water was this warm here in Greece.”

She smiled. “Turn around and look at the beach, Davin. It will set the stage for something I need to tell you.” Turning as she directed, my jaw hit the water. “You and I know that we didn’t go climbing over rocks to get here, right?” I nodded numbly. “We aren’t in Greece anymore, Davin. We’re ... well, we’re elsewhere, because I need to admit something to you.” The reason for this surprise was the fact that we had walked across sand to get to the beach, but we were now looking at a sandy section of beach surrounded by some of the most impassable sharp rock boulders it has ever been my displeasure to see. I looked at her for a second and changed my opinion of the rocks. I liked them there, because it meant that the only way people were going to bother us was by boat.

“You don’t need to worry about boats, Davin. They don’t come here.”

“Where are we?” I asked, getting more puzzled by the moment. This was at least the second time I could recall her speaking as if she’d read my mind.

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“I’ve read your mind more than twice, Davin. I’ve done it since we first met. After all, no one ever verbally stated that Mark’s wife’s name is Gina. You thought about what a beautiful woman she is, as did Mark. You, Davin, are an unusual man, and I think I understand why.” She looked at me with a smouldering look, and I ended up winning a hard-fought battle. What I really wanted to do was take her in my arms and use the reaction she’d caused for some extremely frantic sex that might or might not get classified as rape. What I did was to stand my ground, but it was definitely not an easy thing. “To me, that proves it. I just unloaded my full potential at you, and we aren’t floating in the surf, screwing our brains out. If I did that to a human being, I’d be enjoying the hell out of myself now.” Okay, not rape.

“I thought I was human,” I said with a grin.

“I thought so too until you started acting oddly around me. You thought of it as being a gentleman, but it was actually you resisting my powers of sexual persuasion.”

I scowled at her, but mentally, a little guy with angel wings was smacking me with a harp. *Excuse me, jerk, but you’re somewhere that you know you couldn’t have walked to. She’s read your mind more than once. Allow that she might have powers of persuasion, okay?*

She was giggling, and it was a pleasant sight. “You have some of the most interesting mental imagery, Davin. An angel beating you up with a harp?”

“Part of me wants to think that you’re pleasantly potty, my dear woman, but then I look at those rocks. Okay, so you have the power of persuasion, sexually speaking. I just happen to be strong willed.”

She gave me one of those ‘Oh, it’s going to be one of *those* conversations, is it?’ looks. “There’s a reason my name is Aphrodite, Davin. My father, such as he was, was Uranus. My brother is Zeus. Hermes was who you saw last night, in that really loud shirt? He was really there.” I was pleased - she knew how to properly pronounce Zeus’s grand-dad’s name: oo-RAH-nos.

I sighed and bounced a little closer to shore, where I sat down in the surf. I sighed deeply, and somewhat unhappily. “I can buy that you’re telepathic, and I can buy that you have the power of sexual empathic projection. A goddess, though? As beautiful as you are, you’re no goddess.”

She huffed prettily at me. “And you know this how?” she asked in a tone both annoyed and amused.

“If the gods existed, why haven’t they had a stronger influence on the world? Why isn’t Ares driving the nations onward to war? Well, maybe that’s a bad example,” I chuckled. “How about this - why haven’t their been more unusually powered individuals out there? With how difficult it was for Zeus to keep it under his toga, the planet should be overrun with demigods by now. Hermes seems to be around as the god of fast flower delivery, but who remembers him as the god of thieves and liars - and healers?”

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“You know your Greek mythology - most people think of Aesclepius or Apollo, mainly because of the Hippocratic Oath, depending on the version they quote. Has it occurred to you that they disappeared when their followers did? A few have always remembered some of us, but my family, other than Hermes, just ... faded.” A tear fell from her eye.

“Is that why you were crying earlier? Over their loss?”

“Mainly over my husband’s loss. Hephaestus was a wonderful husband, but I played around on him, especially with Ares. He could understand with worshippers, because that was an occasional part of the worship, but not with family. So, when they started to fade, he went as well.” She was beginning to cry in earnest now, and she came over by me, sat, and threw her arms around me, sobbing painfully again.

I know she can read me, but I can’t help thinking about it. She’s in so much pain, but I can’t believe that she’s a goddess. She’s tearing her heart out over a delusion. But how do I help her? Damn it!

Finally, her sobbing subsided, and I suddenly realized something. We had lain back on the sand in order to let her cry on my shoulder. I suddenly realized that I was staring at the water’s surface - from what should be the wrong side. I also realized, before I panicked, that I was breathing normally. “Okay, so you have the power to let others breathe underwater,” I marvelled.

“I came from the ocean, beloved. One of my titles is ‘Sea-born One’. Of course I can breathe underwater. And I sure as hell can make sure someone else can breathe underwater too.” She sat up, her head breaking the surface of the water.

I’ll admit that the view from beneath the waves was wonderful, and I fought the notion to start something ... interesting, if only because she was recovering again from her crying. I sat up as well, and realized that I was *not* coughing water out of my lungs. “You called me ‘beloved’,” I said with some wonder. “Why would you be interested in a fool like me? I’ve managed at least once to offend the hell out of you, and you know that I think your belief that you are the goddess Aphrodite is a delusion.”

“Well, after your friend Chuck told me about your past, I realized that my anger was misplaced. That’s why I went screaming outdoors. If I hadn’t reacted when I did, you’d be dead right now, because I couldn’t stop that lightning bolt. I just barely deflected it.” She held up a hand to prevent me from speaking. “I’ll prove that I can do that sort of thing, Davin. See that rock that looks vaguely like a skull with horns? I’m going to use lightning to carve it into a form more to my liking.” I noted as she said it that she had a slight smile, and that certain indicators showed a peaked interest in the proceedings, shall we say?

I looked to the sky, and noticed that it was a gorgeous black sky with more stars than anyone is used to seeing near a city. Suddenly, without any clouds appearing in the sky, lightning exploded about thirty times in unusually rapid succession, striking that rock every time. When the smoke cleared, it was now about eight feet tall, as opposed to

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its original twelve, and it was a statue of a muscular man. Very detailed, and very muscular. *All* the muscles on the body were extremely detailed, if you catch my drift. (If you still don't understand, let's just say that if he were real, I'd have some seriously stiff competition for her attention. I'm not getting any more blunt than that.)

Finally, I had to look at her, because I was looking in shock at the statue she had just made. (I will also admit that I was vaguely interested in what I was seeing, and let's leave it at that.) "Okay, so you *do* have weather control. And emotion control. And water breathing. Something tells me that joking comment about making time was not entirely a joke?"

"Well, I can ... well, stepping between the seconds is probably the best description for it. All of us in the Pantheon could. It's quite possible that's where they all went - they stepped between and chose to never come back." She scowled, and I found myself having a particularly odd reaction to it - rather than getting worried, either for me or for her, I was getting aroused. "I need to prove my divinity to you, but if I did it the one way I can think of, and my theory happens to be wrong, then I will have irrevocably caused your brain to stop functioning."

In a somewhat huskier voice than I would have liked, I joked, "Can I assume that it would go squirting out of my ears? Or would that be the wrong body part?"

She took a long look at me, and gasped. Suddenly, the intense pressure I had been feeling dialed back to just a pleasant interest in the beautiful nude woman before me. "I'm sorry, Davin. I was concentrating so hard on proving my divinity to you that I was getting some leakage, and you were about ready to explode because of it."

"Why is it so important that I believe you?"

"Multiple ones come to mind, but the most important is something that I suspect about you. Think back to what Hermes called you, and don't think bunnies; think hammer and anvil."

I closed my eyes, puzzled beyond belief. *What could Hef have to do with a hammer and anvil?* I happened to look at her for a moment. *Well, a large enough anvil could be used as a bed...stop that!* I scolded myself. She was biting her lower lip, and I was being given a pointed reminder of her telepathic abilities. *The only thing I keep coming back to is the goddess Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus.* I thought the pronunciation the same way she'd spoken it, and it suddenly struck me. Hephaestus. Hef-FAY-stoos. Hef, for short. I looked up at her again, and she was tapping the tip of her nose with a smile. "Why? Because I happen to be a smith who happens to walk lame when I'm wearing my leg?"

"You do work that masters of the craft would have trouble duplicating, dear Davin. I know; I've traveled the world. Have you ever seen scrollwork as intricate as yours anywhere else?"

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“No, but I don’t stay current with everyone else’s work. I just do what I like to do.”

“So you don’t do the smithing as a profession, but you do it far better than acknowledged masters? As a hobby? The person who offered Charles money for that dagger would have been cheating him at the ten thousand dollar amount that he finally stopped at.” She stopped and took a deep breath, and I applauded, hoping to head off the chewing out it looked like I was about to get. She bowed, but continued as soon as she stood. “Remember those silver stone-working tools? I was watching him. He uses those for his sculpture work.”

“He can’t. They’re too soft. Besides, they’re as shiny and unscathed as the day I gave them to him.”

“Trust me; I know silver. He uses them. He uses them for the important work, he told me. He was using them to create that statue you helped me move. Now, how did you manage to make silver so hard that pounding it against rock with hammer blows shows no sign of wear-and-tear on the tools?”

“I don’t know,” I said, scowling. “I know they were silver when they left my workshop. How they became harder than molybdenum steel is beyond me.”

“Whereas, if you happen to be Hephaestus returned, it makes perfect sense.” She smiled at me.

“How do we prove that without me squirting my brains from my ears?”

She smiled a sad smile. “Come with me.” We walked up the beach slightly, and I watched the configuration change. I also noted the statue she’d built moving. At my startlement, she smiled and said, “The companion to Charles’ statue.” It was then that I looked at it clearly.

“That’s my face!” I squeaked.

“Your body, too, if you’ll admit it.” She smiled. “Proportionally enlarged, of course.”

“I’ll say. I’ve never been that big, locally speaking,” I laughed.

“It’s proportional, lover-boy. Yes, you are,” she giggled. “I’ll admit some very intriguing thoughts are percolating through my system, but I won’t act on them just yet.” Her voice was beginning to take on the ‘horny angel’ tone again.

Ahead of us, at the top of a hill, was a smallish building. Well, smallish compared to her house, but I was starting to think that Washington, D.C. was smaller than her house. It was open to the air, and as soon as we stepped across the threshold, we could feel the forge’s heat. “Interesting,” she said. “All it’s ever done for me was light a small fire. This place either recognize’s its master, or recognizes that you’re a smith.”

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“So this was Hephaestus’ own forge?” I asked. *Wait a minute - am I buying into this now?*

“Yes, this was my husband’s forge.” A tear fell from her eye onto the anvil, and steam rose. She ran her hand along the length of it, and I could hear sizzling flesh, and smell it too.

I slapped her hand away angrily, and pulled her hand up to look at it. The burning was severe. “Why did you do that?”

“I drove my husband away. Once I truly understood what I had done, I swore that I’d pay somehow, and this is one way of doing that. I will not heal it on my own.”

I found tears coming to my own eyes, and they fell upon her burns. A voice that was not mine said through my mouth, “Beloved one, you need not do that. We both needed to grow. You were not ready to leave, and I could not stay. I did not understand the drives that your demesnes forced upon you.” In awe, I watched as the burns healed before my eyes.

“Dearest?” she asked, her emotions entirely in her eyes. Hope was foremost among them.

“Not at the moment, Aphrodite - whoever it was who spoke through me disappeared again after healing you. Evidence leads me to believe that it was Hephaestus.” I watched the pain enter her eyes, and closed my own for a moment. *It hurts to see her in such pain. I wish I were Hephaestus, just to keep those tears away.* I turned to look at the rest of the place, because to look at her would undoubtedly bring more pain than the human heart can bear.

Wait - what was the anvil doing being that damned hot? That shouldn’t be the case. I walked closer to the anvil and held my hand over it. Nothing. I continued to move my hand lower, until I was finally touching it, and discovered that it was cool to the touch. “What in the name of the great gerbil god Ding is going on here?” I blurted.

I heard Aphrodite snort behind me. She still had tears in her eyes, but she was starting to giggle. “What was that?” she asked in a sort of hiccupy way.

“Sorry,” I laughed back. “Just an expression of disbelief I picked up from a friend a ways back.” Turning serious, I continued, “This confuses me, though. I watched this burn your hand not two minutes ago, and now it’s cool enough for me to touch it?”

“It’s a focus, Davin. One of many that he used.” She frowned momentarily. “Grab something from the fire, and start working it. Make me a sword of purest gold.”

Without even thinking, I grabbed tongs and pulled a red hot ingot from the flames. With my other hand, I grabbed a sledge and began hammering at the metal. I was in the groove immediately. I even closed my eyes for a moment as I worked the

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metal, imagining it turning to fine gold with every stroke of the hammer. Grinning, I opened my eyes again, plunging the bar back into the flames.

This process was repeated a few times, and the shape of a sword became more and more evident. I'd stripped to the waist while the metal was heating at one point, and I looked up at her to see her unabashedly ogling me. This was new experience for me, to be honest. As I continued to work the metal, I asked the question that had been bothering me for a bit. "A couple times, I did things that made you react as if I'd passed a test. Was I just reading too much into things, or were you testing me?"

"I've been testing you, Davin. I have been trying like crazy to drive *you* crazy with lust. Like walking down that hallway, and you came up alongside me, rather than watch me walk. If you'd been a normal human, we never would have gotten that far, and I'd have been on the floor enjoying myself in a non-solo endeavor, if you catch my drift. Multiple times, when you could have let things happen, and had a very enjoyable romp with me, you've shown me a great deal of respect. Whether or not you turn out to be my husband returned, I want to know you better, Davin." She blushed deeply. "Do you remember what you said before you met me?"

I unfocused for a moment, and then smiled. "Yes, I do."

"Is that offer still open?" She looked demurely at me.

"Would you want to saddle yourself with a mere mortal?"

"No matter what you say, Davin, there is nothing 'mere' about you. Look down at the metal you're working."

I did, and damn near dropped it. I was now staring at a sword, complete with scroll working in a metal that, if it wasn't gold, sure as hell looked like it. I closed my eyes again and thought about what had happened, and another consciousness intruded on my mind as I thought.

I am who you think I am, Davin, and I am not. My wife is correct, and she is not. To be more precise, for what I wish to say, my widow is both correct and incorrect. I am that which used to be Hephaestus. My family and I, save Hermes and Aphrodite, choose to leave this world that no longer believed in us. There are not words to describe what we did ... stepping between the moments, spreading ourselves upon the winds, taking our ball and going home, the voice chuckled mentally. Life ... "there" is boring, though, and we are coming back. Slowly, and painfully in some cases, but we are returning.

"Where do I enter into this then?" I asked out loud. She looked at me, but realized that I was talking to someone else, and she sat carefully, curiosity etched intently on her face.

I must apologize to you, Davin, for I am ultimately the cause of the loss of your leg. You are the form I will return in.

Silver and Sea-Foam

By Keith E. McComb

“Ex-squeeze me? Don’t I get a say in this?”

Again, apologies are due. You will not be subsumed, Davin. You will remain Davin. My essence will meld with yours, though, if you so choose. There was a brief pause. You have called on me many times in your life without knowing it. You would simply be aware of my presence. Not two sharing one body, but one - Davin, and only Davin, with the memories of what I was.

Keeping my mouth resolutely closed, I thought, *So you’re dead in the end. No existence at all. If I agree, you disappear forever.*

No. I will live forever. In you. You will be both avatar and god, Davin, rather than simply avatar. Now the decision is yours.

I have made my decision. Now it is time for her to make her own decision. I opened my eyes and looked at Aphrodite. She was breathtakingly beautiful, as always. “Sea-Born Daughter,” I said to her in my own voice, “I need to ask you a question. I need you to think long and hard about it, too. It’s deadly serious. If you were forced to choose between me or getting your husband back, which would you choose?”

She stared at me. “Is that who you were speaking with? Hephaestus? Is that the rules? Either of the men I love, but not both? Answer me this before I give my answer - would choosing either make the other disappear forever? That personality simply stops existing?”

“Assume that it is so,” I replied. “Also assume a window of opportunity that can not return.”

“And that window is now?” At my nod, tears began to form in her eyes. “Then I ask that you give my time to mourn the loss of my beloved Hephaestus, dearest Davin, for I can not countenance the loss of so vibrant and perfect a man just to recapture something I squandered once.” She began to cry in earnest.

I took her into my arms and lifted her face. “Please forgive my cruelty, Aphrodite, but I needed to know something, and your answer was far beyond my dreams. My choosing to accept Hephaestus does not destroy me, but complete me. In fact, it was already complete when I asked you the questions I just did.”

“I choose you, Davin. I can not live in the past, but I will mourn for what I threw away all those years ago.”

I called on that other part of myself, newly found and accepted, and chuckled as I realized just what to do. “Beloved, you need not mourn,” I said, running my fingers from her ear to her neck in a peculiar gesture. She gasped, and her knees buckled, so the arm I had slid around her waist had been an excellent idea.

“How did you know to do that to me, Davin?” she panted in my ear.

Silver and Sea-Foam

By Keith E. McComb

“As I said, oh beautiful one of the sea, mourning Hephaestus is unnecessary. I am he, and he is me, and we are we together,” I quasi-chanted. I brought her lips to my own, kissing her as I had wanted to since meeting her. She melted into my arms, and as I did that unusual gesture against her neck, I whispered, “Yes, my dear Cytherea, the offer is still open, if you’ll have me.”

The wedding was performed by a Justice of the Peace, since we both thought that a church wedding was probably a good excuse for more lightning bolts. Charles was my groomsman, since both he and Aphrodite insisted that she was marrying the best man. A very few eyebrows were raised on my side of the aisle (so to speak) when the J.P. asked “Do you, Aphrodite Pandemos, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?” (Everyone laughed when she replied, “Yes, as often as physically possible,” with a grin.) Obviously I wasn’t the only one with a surprising knowledge of Greek mythology.

The statues both reside at the temple now. (Yes, her home was her temple, and it ranges over a vast area. Each part of it is small, but as a whole ... it *is* larger than Washington, D.C..) It’s caused no end of consternation amongst groups such as the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims Of the Paranormal (CSICOP), since the temple can verifiably be in one location one day, and not there another day. Also, the statues have a tendency to change. How do they change? Remember that they were crafted as exact duplicates of their models.

We’re just wondering - is her statue is going to show at the same time she does?

THE END