

REBIRTH

BETS DAVIES

CHAPTER ONE

A four-year-old girl in green overalls ran by as Gavin leaned on the marble wall next to a door marked “No Admittance”. She joined a trailing line of children, that looked like the vertebrae of a skeleton housed here at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Natural History. The door opened with a whoosh of dusty air. With a grin, Gavin pushed away from the wall. His innards, which had been a cramped ball since July, relaxed.

Topher slid out the door and rolled his eyes. He brushed his white blond hair that stood in a puppy fluff. “Hey—okay. All potsherds counted. Sorry, Gav. I thought you were coming in later. If you’d told me ahead of time you were coming, I could have avoided work.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Gavin pulled Topher into a bear hug. Topher crushed Gavin’s ribs back.

He let go and punched Gavin. “So what’s up? You call me the week class begins and announce you are coming down for the week.” Topher hooked his thumb to the right, toward a hall.

Gavin fell into pace beside him. “Nothing. I didn’t feel like going back to school.”

On one side a coral spray lay dead in its case. On the other side, the awkward hump of a dodo’s body stood amidst other birds. Topher stopped in front of a glassed case in which stuffed birds stood next to their stuffed toy counterparts. A toucan lay in a feeble lump, upside down, while above him Toucan Sam smiled next to a box of Fruit Loops. Topher scratched one wide cheekbone. “So this has nothing to do with your dog dying and your girlfriend screwing someone else a week later in July? If that was nothing, I wasted a lot of minutes on my cell every night talking to you. You should have bought a truck to go with your country song life.”

“He had a stroke—not much choice,” Gavin eeked out. “They killed him without me.”

“Gav, they didn’t have Bethany’s number? Did you even tell them her last name?”

He had not told his parents Bethany’s first name till after the relationship had ended.

“He was my puppy.” Gavin set his hands to his eyes, aware of feet in hard shoes ticking past him as he fought tears in front of Roadrunner. “I raised him—he was always there for me. He had that disgusting, old stuffed frog he loved so much—carried it everywhere and wouldn’t let Rufus eat it. What am I supposed to do with that thing now?”

“I know.” Topher set a hand to his shoulder. “How old was he?”

Topher knew how old Leslie the Dog was, had been. The edges of Gavin’s lips touched on a smile. “Twelve,” he sighed. “Not bad for a midsized dog.”

“How is Leslie the Man, anyway?” Topher let his hand drop from Gavin.

Gavin shrugged. He half expected Opus to bang on the glass side of his box with indignant wing stubs. “Uncle Les is good. We haven’t gotten a call from rehab or jail since we saw him at Christmas.”

Leslie the Dog’s brown eyelashes had fluttered over blue eyes the night Uncle Leslie had stolen Leslie the Dog off a chain, emaciated and matted. “I can’t believe I was with that bitch when Leslie the

Dog died. If he'd waited one more week, I would have been around. If she'd cheated on me one week before, I wouldn't have been with her."

"Again."

"What?"

Topher leaned against the glass wall. "Again. You need an 'again' in there. More than once. So it goes—she cheated on you again. Or, you were with her again."

Gavin glared at Topher, and turned back down the hall. "Screw you."

"It's not my fault you are attracted to skanks," Topher laughed.

"Look—" Gavin got as far as opening his mouth before a naked Bethany, shrugging her shoulders, came into his mind. "Fine. Bethany's a skank. The others weren't."

"Don't get me started on the other two." Topher set his hand on Gavin's back.

"Bite me." Gavin grinned. "Okay. Seth."

"I thought I politely suggested we discuss something other than our sex—"

"Really? I didn't get that." Gavin's mirth allowed him to let go of the summer.

"—especially my sex life. Anyway, you know I never dated Seth."

"What do you call—"

"I don't call it, okay?" Topher's jaw muscle twitched.

"But he was a prick." Gavin knocked into him. "Speaking of, how's whatshisface?"

"You really aren't getting the whole moving on from relationships. It's Alec." Topher slapped down the word. "He's the same. Cuter maybe. I look forward to sleeping with him."

Gavin jerked to a halt. "You haven't?"

With a shake of his head, Topher motioned Gavin forward. "Come on. I want to show you something."

"But—" Gavin trailed after Topher. For some reason, the mollusks had faded into antique watches opposite the birds. Gavin stilled before he labled his emotion confusion "—but—it's been, like, a month. Isn't that your all time high?"

"None of your business," Topher ahemmed.

A man with gray hair that would have made Einstein proud trudged past them.

"Two whole years of college I slept with nobody, right?" Topher's eyes squinted into half moons. "Okay. Almost nobody."

"And," Topher lingered on the word as he pointed to doors at the end of the hall, "I have not done anything with Candace."

Cloth banners hung over the entryways. A black and green background swirled around a girl's pointed face with deep blue eyes and red hair. "People of the Bog," framed her face. A sign sat in front: "Exhibition in progress."

"This looks cool. When's it open? Candace just shares your apartment, Toph."

"I could have Candace if I wanted to. It opens next week." He pushed the door open.

Gavin stared at Topher as his words' echoes faded away. Topher laughed. "I work here. I know people. The point is I've changed—after years of therapy footed by Father."

Gavin snorted, but stepped past Topher and into near darkness. "Okay. Whatever." Gavin put a hand on Topher's arm when Topher passed him. His thoughts strayed to his own miserable failure at therapy. He removed his hand from Topher's arm. With the light from a case, he could see some worn pots and a rock that could be a tool. "What'd you do? Blow a guard? Are you going to talk at me about potsherds?"

“No and no,” Topher answered in a mild voice as he stared down at the case, light highlighting his face. “This is much cooler. Haven’t you ever heard of bog people?”

“No.” Gavin trailed his finger along the series of cases. He moved through refined pots with black detailing and tools that looked more like knives. A soft glow caught his eye and he stopped before an opaque amber necklace. The fossilized sap drank the light.

“Beautiful,” he breathed. “Amber would love that.”

“Yeah. I thought she might—and I thought bog people were mysterious and macabre enough so that your sister might know—or Andrew.” Topher walked up beside him. “Bog people are just that—people found in peat bogs. They—well, the short way around is that the bogs preserve them. They look completely normal—only a little shriveled and dark brown.”

“Dad doesn’t talk about anthropology anymore. And Amber is mostly over her macabre phase. Do they have any people here?” Gavin picked up pace, only checking to see that the cases were too small to hold a shriveled body. A brass horn looped about like something from *Happy Birthday to You* by Doctor Seuss. Gavin paused to stare at the engraved metal. He glanced at the plaque below. “It’s a reproduction. When were bog people around?” Then he spat out, “you will never be serious about Alec.”

He listened to his words while beside him Topher stood, muscles loose at Gavin’s prognosis. He didn’t need to keep bringing up Alec. Perhaps he kept at it because Topher had dismantled Gavin’s relationship. His relationship to Bethany that no longer existed.

“Pity. Andrew was my inspiration to be an anthropologist.” Topher sucked on his cheeks. “It’s hard to tell when people started getting dumped into bogs, but they kept on doing it right until around Christianity taking over an area. Why won’t I ever be serious about Alec?”

Gavin pulled himself away from the horn and moved on. He tried to put together some statement besides, “I don’t like the way you describe him.” He lingered by a piece of fabric that, though faded, still showed a complex pattern of yellow. “How old is this?”

“Iron Age, I think.” Topher’s eyes fell on Gavin instead of the case. Gavin shifted. Topher pulled away his gaze. “Here’s for the mystery and macabre: It isn’t like they fell into pools of peat water on their way home. Most of them were killed violently—sometimes tortured. One theory is that they were human sacrifices. Alec?”

“You’re shitting me.” Gavin ignored Alec till he had something besides this queasy unrest. “Where are these guys found?”

The hum of the lights in the cases and the gentle sound of Topher breathing were his only answers. Gavin fidgeted as the two sounds blended together. “Alec is shallow.” Gavin ran his hand around the case’s edge. “You said so. And he’s nineteen. You are a grad student. Does he even go to school?”

“Bog people are found in Europe.” Topher tapped the glass. “They aren’t found so much anymore because now people have peat cutting machines. These two were found recently in Ireland, though. No, Alec does not go to school; I said he was shallow sometimes, but then, so am I; and it is not a big age gap—nineteen and twenty-four. You are only a year older.”

Gavin pushed off the case and took a quick two steps ahead. Fifteen and eighteen was a bigger maturity gap, and that had not bothered Topher then. After backing away a few more steps, Gavin rallied to look into Topher’s eyes and see if that was what he had meant.

As he brushed past, Topher didn’t glance at Gavin. “Up a few cases—here.”

In the case, a gaunt face looked like old bronze. The man curled on his side. Slight bristles surrounded his nose and mouth, but the hair from his head was gone. His closed eyes looked like he had just shut them for a minute.

“He looks real. I mean—he is real.” Gavin turned his head this way and that. “I mean—how long has he been dead?”

“Iron age.” Topher set a hand on the top of the case. “His throat was slit and his nipples cut off. But get this—he had manicured nails. Weird, huh? Besides, Alec is gorgeous.”

“How do you know he will sleep with you?” Gavin stuck to his argument because the blunt stubbornness in his skull wouldn’t let him do anything else. He chose this argument because he hoped Topher would derail into his usual bragging.

“Please.” Topher raised his eyebrows.

Hiding his smile, Gavin tried to discern where the man’s throat had been slit.

“He’s given me a couple of opportunities.” Topher stuck his hands in his pockets. “But I didn’t take them—saint that I now am. When did you know me not to get what I want?”

Gavin froze. Five years and he still had moments when he held his breath if Topher strayed too near—

Topher smiled. “Girls, boys—okay. I have some trouble with straight boys.”

Gavin’s mouth went dry. An old sense of sadness invaded him.

“But it doesn’t bother me so much anymore.” Topher gave a nonchalant shrug. “I have to take leak. Stay here—right here—until I get back. No touching anything.”

“Okay.” Gavin did not watch Topher go, but when his footsteps faded, Gavin turned farther into the darkness. He needed to do something and not think more than follow directions. Light pooled across the floor as he came to the last turn. Cases crowded the walls in bizarre mazes, but in the center, a case stood like a glass coffin. Inside, he could faintly see a shape. A tall sign stood behind it with the girl’s face he had seen on the banner. Against the case—he squinted—against the case a piece of glass leaned. It was the size of the coffin’s lid. Almost as if—Gavin took a step into the room.

A roaring overtook his body. A feeling like the buzz of a magnified static shock shot through his nerves. His muscles spasmed and dropped him to his knees. The air sucked out of his lungs. His eyes flashed blind, but he couldn’t tell if it had become very light or very dark.

Then his heart beat its next fast thud. He knelt on cold stone. He still stared at the glass case. As his hearing came back, something inside the case squeaked.

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Her body fizzled with warmth as if she once again stuck her hand into a woman’s womb. Only all of her had gotten sucked in. In her dreams this happened—a woman’s wide gape swallowed her. She tried to gasp. Something was wrong with her throat. A lot was wrong with all of her. She picked up the warmth and infested her body with it. Her throat expanded. Her skull knit together. She had to muck about with her insides, which had gone off without her, since she was unsure what went into a person, but the warmth led the way.

While her body became whole again, something wound around her, making her feel as claustrophobic as a spider’s meal. She struggled. Her arms and legs banged into a hard surface. Then the world swam away from her. Pain jumped into her bones. Energy blew backwards through her soul. The bindings frayed.

Her heart stuttered, and then beat again. Hardness still surrounded her. She opened her mouth to scream. It came out a blunted squeak. She opened her eyes. A smooth expanse of white floated high above her. A gold circle of light gave off neither the heat of sun nor fire.

With another breath, memory sluiced over her. All the image gave her was a holy pool's dark waters. Chanting had wrapped around her, and as she had breathed what she knew to be her last breaths, she had not bothered to listen to the sacred words she had always wanted to know. Her soul had been as calm as the pool of water she would soon become a part of. What she had done had been the only thing in her life that made it worthwhile.

She tapped at the clear mineral surrounding her. It was like glass—but no glass could be so big, so smooth.

She had chosen to go to sacrifice. She struggled with what had been wrong. There had been wrongness. She would have been an odd candidate for a festival sacrifice. But whatever it was, giving her to the Gods would have insured Their help. So she must be with the Gods. This was not how she had pictured the world of the Gods. She was a little foggy on what she expected, but this was not it. For one, shouldn't someone be around?

A shadow fell across her. Ah. She had only needed to ask. She sat up, and then muffled another squeak. The creature was built as if a man, but thin. Its skin was almost a loam shade—as if tanned all summer long. The eyes were pools of pitch. Spiky blue covered its head. She supposed it was hair. The creature didn't breathe. It jerked its head away. The leather shaded skin deepened with a tinge of red.

She bit her lip. She had offended it already. That ought to frighten her more than it did, but she was already dead, after all. Plus, it was a ridiculous creature. Without looking back at her, the creature removed the baggy garment it wore for a shirt and handed it to her. She took it. New clothes must be a symbol that she did something she should. Even if it was an ugly garment. It was brown.

She glanced up. The creature had turned its back on her. This wasn't going well. She pulled the garment over her head to prove she could do as she should. Maybe she would get a colored garment later. Maybe the Gods did not wear bright garments if their hair was so bright.

She touched its bare shoulder. She could see its shoulder blade and the vertebrae through the soft skin. It jumped and turned around. She could see collarbones and she swore ribs. This was not a warrior of the Gods. This was not a God she knew. Its body looked as soft as a child not yet of age. Something flashed on its chest. It made slurred, nasal noises. Her chilled blood bubbled. She had no idea what it said. She balled her shaking fists. "I am sorry—I do not know that. What are you?"

It shook its head. More nasal noises. She took a deep breath. So if she was in the land of the Gods, then it must speak the language of the Gods. Perhaps she would have to be a baby all over again to learn such things. With a gulp, she gazed down at her arms and legs. She sighed. They were still the same strong limbs. At least she did not have to go into this world shaped like a child as this creature must.

Its silver pendant caught her eye again. But right then, it reached out its hands to her. She stood, leaned over the mineral wall, and put her hands on its shoulders. It stiffened, but took her around the waist. With a grunt, it lifted her. She jumped on top of the wall in an attempt to aid it. With a stagger, it set her on the ground. She stumbled, bashing into it.

It righted both of them and mumbled something else at her. She shook her head, annoyance constricting the chill from her veins. She had been impatient to speak what she wanted when she was four. She was seventeen and this was intolerable. She ducked her head to hide the 'v' forming between

her eyes. Its garment fell past her knees. It had no form. She struggled to lift her hair out of the tight neck. The ‘v’ between her eyes got deeper. There had better be a chance for her to earn better clothing later.

She adjusted her expression—eyebrows slightly up, small smile, not looking it directly in the eye. That should serve for obedience. The creature walked backwards and waved its hands at her. She fought to keep her face in the obedient position. It herded her like a sheep. Nodding, she walked after it. Once she followed, it walked quickly, causing her to trot to keep up. She would just stop, but no druid had explained what happened to people who refused to die correctly.

It turned so fast she nearly ran into it. She spat, “what are you doing?”

It shook its head. “Ga-vin.” It pointed to itself.

Her first real smile since she had died firmed her lips. That had sounded like a word. She didn’t know the word, but it was a word. Either the creature was named Gavin, or it was a Gavin. The second must be true because no creature would give its name away like that. “Gavin.” She pointed to its chest. A small smile flickered over its lips, and it strode on.

When she started forward, it felt as though her spine tugged backwards. Bitterness invaded her body. She shook, and yanked. The pull loosened. She staggered. She turned, a nauseated uneasiness pervading her. The room expanded around her. Smooth white stone threaded with gray banded her feet. Boxes made mazes around the edge. Her eye caught on a sign, standing next to the mineral case where she had awakened. She could make out squiggles that must be writing, though she had barely seen writing in her life, and a face on green and black background. Her mouth fell open. The cheeks were too full. The hair a darker red. The eyes deep blue. But it was her.

It must mark her passage into this world. Her eyes now must be blue. The druids must have held back the information that the Gods’ color was blue. That explained the Gavin’s hair. A hand with skin as soft as a new baby’s slid into hers. She jumped. The Gavin hauled her onwards, making noises over its shoulder. She still craned back towards the banner when “come on,” tapped at her eardrums. She whipped around, but the Gavin was now quiet. Its jaw ticked.

She must be good at this language. The traders said there were some languages they could never learn. She had been right in thinking she would have made an excellent trader. She pattered after the Gavin as quickly as she could. She would learn. She trained every muscle in her body to the effort. But the Gavin wasn’t saying anything.

It pulled her into a dimmer hall. She scrubbed her eyes. Along one side of the hall, clear mineral covered boxes. She tapped the mineral. The Gods would have such a useful thing. A gold torque caught her eye. She squashed the Gavin’s hand. It ignored her and kept pulling. That torque was a sacrificial good. She was in a hall of sacrificial goods. This place must be where sacrificed people and things emerged into the world of the Gods—the holding paddock for the sacrificed. She glanced at the back of the Gavin’s head. The Gavin was a spirit that brought through the objects. It was her guide.

She settled into determined steps. Soon she would be in death proper. All would make sense again. The Gavin pushed through doors that looked to be large plates of the mineral surrounded by metal. It held the door open for her with ease. She poked the door. Her eyes widened. Either the door was hung inhumanly well, or the Gavin was stronger than it looked. When she glanced back, her nerves ate at her. The same painting of her fell over the cloth on each door. Maybe the Gods celebrated her sacrifice. Maybe They waited for her.

The druids had acted as if her death was enough to communicate with the Gods. They had never hinted that she would be expected to say something about her people's plight. If she was supposed to—she sifted her mind till it ached, but she could not come up with why she had been sacrificed. Only the wan sound of two children crying, and someone coughing.

A long hall stretched out. Mineral fronts lined the sides. The Gavin continued to pull her, but she caught sight of fantastic birds, frozen in time. One dominated its case—a brilliant blue with a tail as long as its body ruffled in color at the end. Perhaps this was what the Gods did with the things They hunted. Perhaps these birds had been sacrificed, and sat frozen till someone came to bring them through, like the Gavin had come for her.

The Gavin yanked her hand again. She stumbled out of the hall. She froze. A room dwarfed her. Figures had been painted right on the wall, far across the room. A wide stone fence surrounded the center. The Gavin prodded her to one side of the stone fence. Stairs. But stairs that went on forever. In life, there might have been a stair or two at the front stoop, but these stairs tumbled over one another to reach into the bowels of the earth. Her head went dizzy. She could see stone columns with spirits wandering among them to the sides of the cavernous hole. She dug in her heels when the Gavin dragged her towards the stairs.

The people here were all as strange as the Gavin. Their clothes were more outlandish—that old one wore all gray. A spirit the size of a child not yet of age stood at the edge of the pit. The small spirit's hair was black as tar and fell down to its hips. Its dress was bright white. The small spirit turned towards her. She jerked back. Its skin was polished gold and its eyes didn't fit into its cheekbones.

She turned away, reminding herself that Gods did not always look human. Her Gavin did not look human. She stepped up her pace after her Gavin. She had always prided herself on her flexibility. She would flex into this world if it took bending herself out of shape.

“Okay.” The Gavin's voice swirled. “Less . . . elevator, anyway.” He changed course.

The Gavin stuck his finger against the wall by a section of metal work. Stylized flowers climbed up the dark metal. She cocked her head. Then the metal split open. It sank into the walls. She gulped hard as she looked into the tiny, bronze room beyond, but she let her Gavin lead her in. The Gods could make doors disappear if They wanted to. No reason to panic.

The doors slipped closed again, appearing from the walls. She tried to regulate her breathing. The Gavin had trapped them in a small box of metal. Then the Gavin pushed a white circle on the wall. It glowed. Her body dropped. Her guts floated above her, but she floated down. She could almost feel the air below her. She ground her teeth not to scream at the Gavin what had it done.

“Hey—hey—all right.” The Gavin's words garbled as it touched her hair.

She shouldn't have balked at the steps. Then her mind and guts were back in her shivering body. The doors disappeared again. She would not let herself breathe too hard. She squared her shoulders and stepped out of the box. The world she had seen was gone. Instead she stared down a hallway. Three doors opened off to the left. A short barricade stood to the right. Gray boxes reared on the surface. A spirit wearing a dark blue shirt rocked upright out of its chair. It had the breasts of a woman.

She forced her face serene—as if disappearing rooms were part of a life she understood. She would understand it.

“Shit.”

She glanced up in alarm when her Gavin spat the word. Wrenching her mind around again, she tried to find meaning. Her brain felt turned inside out. Feces—it had said feces. It swore. She ran up beside it, but the Gavin barely glanced at her. Its dark eyes narrowed at the blue spirit stalking towards them. It was shorter than the Gavin, though taller than her. There was gray in the hair, and the creature had circles beneath its eyes. Holding tightly to her Gavin's hand, she smiled at the new creature. It did not smile back.

“Let me talk.” The Gavin pressed his other hand in front of her.

She gaped. The words were still ugly and nasal, but the words made a whole sentence. If it hadn't been for the angry, approaching creature, she might have grinned. Before it reached them, it spouted nasal noises at a much faster clip than her Gavin. Her Gavin returned in kind, noises washing over each other like waves. She held onto her Gavin's hand till warmth stuck them together. So her Gavin had been trying to make its speech easier for her. That stabilized a small core in her body.

She stared at the new spirit's bound breasts. It was shaped female. Perhaps it was a female spirit. That might mean the Gavin had a sex, too. She stared at his bony chest. The pants made it difficult to be sure—but she would have to guess the Gavin was a male.

The female creature waved its arms the Gavin's length while walking towards them. She was not supposed to be with the Gavin. The Gavin did something wrong. The Gavin held up his hand. “. . . gave her . . . my shirt.” The Gavin gesticulated with his free hand.

The shirt was the problem. He should have worn a different garment to give her. Or perhaps she was not yet supposed to have clothing. She glared at the offending shirt. Maybe giving it back to the Gavin would solve the problem. Something flashed around the other creature's neck. A small pendant on a chain. She stood on her tiptoes and squinted. A crossroads. The sign of a traveler. This spirit stood at the crossroads to true death. Beyond those doors lay the lands of the Gods. The Gavin ran his fingers through his blue hair. The Gavin spoke for her.

She twisted her bare feet. All the spirits wore shoes of very fine stitching. Her Gavin must have given her the shirt because he felt for her. She sucked on a lip and conjured his face those first moments. Her Gavin had been embarrassed. She stifled a laugh, stuffing her fist into her mouth. Her Gavin and the angry, crossroads creature both stared at her. She subsided. What an odd thing to be embarrassed about. She stretched her ears till she thought they would bleed.

“Her dress was white—” Her Gavin's voice dripped with pleading.

She was not sure she liked that. She had never worn a white dress.

“Just—if you have a tampon, a pad?” The Gavin's words pressed now.

She did not know “tampon” and she was too unsure of what kind of pad the Gavin meant.

But the crossroads creature's tight mouth spread in a smile. “A 7-Eleven is to the left.”

Her Gavin cleared his throat. “She speaks Spanish. I'm sorry. She doesn't understand much English. ¿Vamos a 7-Eleven?”

Her brain made another twist as if it was kneaded dough, and the words drifted into sense. He asked her to go to 7-Eleven—odd. The druids had always said three was the number of the Gods. He told the creature she could not speak the language. She felt as if the floor settled beneath her feet. She reached through a tangle of thoughts. “Thank you.”

The crossroads spirit stretched her smile farther. The Gavin blinked at her with those black pools of eyes. She grinned at him. The crossroads creature returned to her barricade.

The Gavin hauled her towards the doors. “I didn’t know you could speak. Why didn’t you say you could speak? What the hell have you been speaking?” The Gavin muttered, but she found all the right words.

They crossed an arched space before three more doors appeared—three, as it should be.

“Not before.” She pressed her skull to shape the words. “Now. More later.”

The Gavin jerked a nod. He pushed open a metal door for her. Sunlight blared. A roaring noise rushed through her ears. With black flowers eating her vision, she stepped into the Gods’ world. The stone beneath her feet heated her calluses. It was rough, and a strange shade of grayish white. The door whooshed shut. The Gavin brushed past her with “come on.”

Her breath left her. The world was hard. Metal huts zoomed on coal black wheels. They made slick roars as if propelled by mighty beasts. People sat inside the huts. Chariots—very fast chariots with winds or spirit horses. She was not adept enough to see them yet. The road they careened about on was shining black as well—smooth as a river. More gray walk tracked to either side of the road and more spirit creatures walked along them. Her heart shrank. She would never see real people again.

She pushed her breath even. She was here now. There was nothing to do but flow as a river did. At the same time, anger curdled her muscles that the druids had said nothing of any of this when they had said they prepared her for the afterlife. She had expected a grand forest. She had expected the Gods, and her family. Not some Gavin creature. Wait—she had remembered two things she had not before. The Gods’ forest, and her family.

She bit her cheeks in an attempt to clear the mists around her family. A ruddy man with a peeling nose laughed. Then he was the gray of a dead mushroom. His breaths whistled. The crying of children followed him.

“Would you come on?” The Gavin squinted either at the sun or her slowness.

She gasped as if the whistling came from her lungs, not Ambias’s. Ambias—her husband. He had died the afternoon she had gone to help Evern through labor.

“Ambias. Ambias, Ambias, Ambias,” she repeated his name with each step. It did not help. She felt nothing for Ambias or his death. Perhaps, a wan regret she had been gone for his death. But she struggled to be happy she had been there for his life.

“Come on.” The Gavin reached out as if he might snatch her hand again, but she clutched her fists to herself.

“Where is Ambias?” She leaned away from him.

“Who? What? Look—do you want me to help you? You need help.” The Gavin rolled his eyes. Then he shaped a gentle smile to his lips. “The museum was not a good place for you. We will find some place for you.”

She felt her face pull into a tight lipped scowl that she could not get rid of. She should get rid of it. If “museum” was where she had been, it had not been a good place. The druids had lied. She could not take out her anger on the Gavin. He was the only thing that had helped her. Look how resilient and at the same time pliant she had been. Her language flowed with the ease of his, though hers had a lilt. She had awakened with bare scraps of what had been before. Now she knew her husband’s name, and that he had died of sickness. She pushed away the wails surrounding him. She did not want to know if she had had children. In sickness, the children always died first. She shook herself.

If the Gavin could live in this world, so could she. And he was right. She needed his help. But if she met a dead druid here, she would scald him with words over the order's smug secrecy. "Yes." She stretched her face out of her scowl. "Yes. Thank you. I need your help."

"All right." The Gavin grinned at her, showing off inhumanly even teeth. "Good. We're doing good. Listen to you talk now."

She weighed the words for condescension. Perhaps, the Gavin's words held an attempt to comfort, even if he did sound as if he thought her a daft child. She moved from one foot to the other on the sun baked stone. She acted like a daft child. If this was his job every time someone was sacrificed, she felt for the Gavin. She nodded and glanced up at the Gavin through her lashes. He nodded back and walked again. Following, she bit her tongue to keep from asking all the questions that backed up as she looked from the strange chariots to the stone infested world.

When she looked back, the museum stretched up as if it would blot out the sun. All around her buildings spread out and up. Vegetation hugged the ground. Trees cropped up now and then, but were mostly trapped within white stone.

Gavin stopped, hovering at the edge of the road. His face danced one way and the other. Just as she was about to ask what he stopped for, he stepped into the road. She gasped. Spirit chariots bore down on him from both sides. She vacillated. She closed her eyes, and then she forced them open. She darted after the Gavin as fast as she could manage without tripping.

Here, the chariots lined the road in slumber. The Gavin stopped in front of one of the chariots. She glanced at the Gavin and back at the chariot, trying to decide if she needed to reassign him greater importance if he owned such a thing. It was a light blue, too.

The Gavin opened a door in the chariot's wall. Half of the door was blue painted metal, but the upper half was clear mineral. She slid onto the seat. The whole chariot breathed with heat. Next to the heat in the chariot, the air outside felt chilled. The Gavin wheeled a small lever around. The mineral disappeared. She jerked back. She stuck her hand through the gap. He sighed at her. Then he closed her door, and walked around to the other side of the chariot. He got in and made the mineral on his door disappear.

The Gavin had a wheel at an angle in front of him. She did not have a wheel. A large pane of slanted mineral encased the front. The chariot's blue nose extended beyond that.

"Right." The Gavin pulled a jangling series of metal bits out of a fold in his clothes. The Gavin stuck one of the metal bits into the base of the wheel and turned it. At the same time the spirit beasts roared into life below her, a cacophony launched at her from all around. A series of voices pronounced, "Billy the Mou—" before her Gavin pushed a small knob in a box in the front of the chariot. The voices disappeared.

"Don't like Frank Zappa?" Her Gavin asked her.

She pulled her hands from her ears slowly, giving her Gavin a sideways glance. Frank Zappa might be the black box, the noise, or some new figure in death the druids had neglected to tell her about. She shook her head a hair in case this was the wrong answer.

Her Gavin shook his head, too. "Philistine."

Opening her mouth to ask about Frank Zappa and Philistine, she shut it again. Her Gavin had gotten upset when she asked about Ambias. Asking about things that belonged to her Gavin couldn't make him happy. She tried for something neutral. "Chariot?"

Her Gavin's dark eyes went wide. Then he put his face in his hand, and his shoulders shook. The laugh that came sounded like a series of hiccups. "Um," her Gavin choked, "car. It's a—car."

Chariots must not belong in the world of the dead. Or maybe they were very low class here. “Car.” She patted the car.

The Gavin took a deep breath. He jerked a stick between them. With one hand, the Gavin spun the wheel, looking behind him. The car jerked sharply backwards. She started and looked backwards. The car was now at a tilt. The Gavin ground his jaw. “Bastard parked me in.”

Best just to nod at this, and find something to hold. There was a handle on the car.

“Don’t touch—you’ll fall out.” Her Gavin gave a tired blink.

Then he jerked the stick again. He turned the wheel around and the car bumped forward. The wheel went back around the other way. And they went back. The wheel turned around again. Forward. Back, forward, back, forward. She got this. The wheel controlled the car. Round reins. Her body slammed back against the seat when the Gavin pulled out into the stream of other cars. The roar intensified around them. Air buffeted her. Her head no longer had any relation to her body. Nausea swelled her throat. She closed her eyes.

“Hey—hey. You okay?” Her Gavin shouted. “If you are carsick, keep your eyes open.”

She shook her head and was sorry, since even her skin felt nauseated. She rolled into the door as they spun around another curve. Holding onto the seat, she clenched her teeth.

“Okay—just—puke out the window if you have to puke.”

She didn’t dare nod. Her Gavin was amazing to steer through his illness. Maybe Gavins didn’t get sick while swerving around faster than she had ever moved in her life. For a while she tried to keep track of their movements. But she had the feeling she was circling.

“Finally. Damn.”

She opened her eyes as the Gavin slammed out of his side of the car, right near where other cars flew by. He opened her door. She stepped out. The ground wiggled around. She swallowed vomit.

“You’ll be fine now we’re out of the car,” the Gavin promised.

The cars lined up here, too. The buildings were thin compared to how they towered towards the sky. Clear mineral plates were inset in every house. The Gavin hopped up three grey steps and shouldered through a wood door. To their left was a door, but the Gavin ignored that and jogged up stairs. She followed, her stomach swaying. She stared at shoes on a mat. They were very fine shoes for the most part, of leather with tiny stitches. Some of them had tilted blocks on the bottom. More and more, she had to admit that the Gavin must have some status. Next to her, the Gavin pressed a door open.

“Yes!” He balled his hand into a fist and stepped through.

She poked her head around the corner. The room beyond had high white walls. Wood floors stretched out. On a complicated red rug, a short table sat. On a huge cushion, folded in half on a wood frame, another spirit curled up. The spirit stared at something on the table. It had short, wine colored hair. Short cropped hair. She wondered what this spirit’s crime had been. They were scant, but the creature had breasts. She must be a female.

There was another room to their left. The Gavin must be important. She sidled towards the room. The Gavin caught her arm and turned to the female creature.

“Candace—hi, I—”

“Hey, Gavin. Topher said you’d be coming in sometime today—who’s that? Is she wearing your shirt?” The female creature’s face wrinkled into laughter.

They were back to the shirt issue. But now she had a new name to add—it was a name. The female—Candace did not say “the Topher” or “the Gavin.” They gave away names all over the place, and she no longer knew what her guide might be now that she knew who he might be.

“No—she’s just. It’s hard to explain, Candace.” The—Gavin shuffled.

“Hey,” Candace laughed, standing, “I live with Topher. You do not have to explain who you bring home. I’ll clear out. Just use Topher’s bed, okay?”

Candace slung a bag over her shoulder and walked out while Gavin garbled, “no it’s not—I’m not—we’re not—it’s so not—”

She held onto her—Gavin’s hand. He rubbed the back of his rapidly coloring neck. She snuffled a laugh. Watching him, it occurred to her for the first time that she might have been sacrificed to the right Gods. Gavin might have raided her, like cattle or women from living times. She tried to force herself into anger, but she kept laughing while the Gavin hung his head more and turned redder. He let go of her hand as if it were a hot coal.

“I wonder why Toph hasn’t called.” Gavin juggled something in the fold in his pants. He pulled out a slim rectangle. “Oh, shit!” Gavin groaned. “It’s off—it’s off. I never turned it back on when we left the museum. Jesus. He will kill me.”

Shock yanked her up straight. She had not realized it was so easy to lose a life in death. Perhaps one could be killed over and over again and so it happened quite often. It still sounded unpleasant. Worry knotted her muscles, along with surprise at the worry.

She looked up at Gavin. His hand was stuffed in his hair, but he did not look like one condemned to death. It must be hyperbole. She tried to relax while convincing herself she had been worried for her own future, not worried about Gavin who may have stolen her to wife. That was what should be worrying her, but she felt more curiosity that a man—a spirit—should raid her, and instead of raping her, look mortified when the possibility of sex arose.

He touched the rectangle. It glowed. Several more pokes went by. Gavin’s slouch deepened while he stared at the rectangle. He glanced down at her and gave a forced laugh. “He’s called me, like, ten times. He must be furious.”

She cocked her head on one side. She had been with Gavin and not heard any calling. The concept of the glow holding calls from some ways away intrigued her, but her nerves kept twisting at the mention of this angry Topher. If his bed was here this must be his home. Perhaps the Gavin worked for him. Perhaps the—Gavin had stolen her for him.

She shook herself and edged closer to the Gavin, stewing up her curiosity. Gavin stuck the rectangle to his face. She crowded him to hear a whirring beep. Then what could only be a voice—an angry voice—muffled into Gavin’s ear.

“I’m sorry, Toph—”

The angry voice returned.

“Let me expla—”

More angry voice. She stood on her tiptoes to try to make out the words. The spirits must have something to carry their voices—other spirits. Birds, or butterflies. Topher was not in the slim shape, so he must speak through it.

“Yeah—well. I know you did. I just turned it back on. I haven’t listened to them yet—”

She chewed on her lip, knowing what she was about to do should not be done, but she wanted to test Gavin’s limits. Standing on her toes, she grabbed the shiny object. She stuck it to her head the way Gavin had done. “Hello?”

“What the hell?” A baritone sounded as if he stood next to her. “Stop shouting.”

“Give me—” Gavin reached for the phone but she pushed him away with one hand.

“Hi. Toph?” She tried in a quieter voice, pleased with this skill.

“Give me back to Gavin.” The voice sounded as if it gritted its teeth.

She handed the oblong back, smiling as the Gavin only gave her a glare.

“Yeah—Toph. What?”

Now that she had him standing here, she could address what had been bothering her about the Gavin—his pendant. She picked it off his chest. A copper snake made a ring within the pendant’s circle. The snake was in fine detail.

“Don’t touch.” Gavin pushed her hand away without looking down from his conversation. “No—Toph, no. Shit. I don’t know how to—”

“Who gave this?” She asked while he paused.

“Toph,” Gavin panted. “No—not you, Toph. Look—I can’t explain. Come home—you’ll see—what?” He shifted his weight. “Yeah, Candace let us in. Please, I’m begging you, hang up the phone and come home.” He scrubbed his face. “What are you doing on the bus? Whatever. Just get here. Bye.”

So this was Toph’s house. And Toph had given the pendant—of fine quality, though not gold. She sidled towards a large wood frame that surrounded enameled boxes. Above them hung a rectangle of black mineral. It must be a shrine. She reached towards it.

“Don’t—” Gavin snapped. “Don’t touch. Don’t touch anything. Just—sit on the futon.”

He pointed. Futon meant large folded cushion. She sat. Gavin sat next to her. He set his elbows on his knees and stuffed his head in his hands.

She chewed on her lip. Candace and Gavin and Toph throwing their names about had tugged at a jagged hole inside her. She had no name. If she settled down and thought till her brain bled, she could come up with what she had been called in life. But that hardly was appropriate in her new world. She had a whole different existence. She needed a different name.

A flotsam of memory bubbled up. A druid had named her. She needed someone important to name her again. Her esophagus clenched. She ought to wait for Toph. He owned this clean, magically lit, large home. And he could upset Gavin. But that was it—he had upset Gavin. And she had upset Toph. That did not leave her in a good place to ask for a name.

But Gavin—he had a car, and had brought her here. He owned a talking oblong. And she could bully him. She turned with a crisp twist towards Gavin. She spoke in a careful voice that she hoped sounded, at this point, humble. “Gavin.” She considered not using his name, but she needed all the power she could get. “Name me.”

“What?” Gavin’s voice slid with annoyance. “No. You have your own name.” He scratched his blue head. “What is your name, anyway?”

“No.” She forced her voice calm. “I need a new name. I need a name for death.”

Gavin banged his head into the table. “Please don’t tell me you think you are dead.”

She nodded, her bones going brittle at his taut tone. “Yes. I—”

“God. Toph will destroy me. He will never talk to me again. He will—”

He was swearing by a nameless god and threatening himself with Toph again. But if Toph was this dangerous, Gavin couldn’t want her to meet Toph nameless. “Name? I need a name if I am to meet Toph.”

“I think that is the least of our problems.” Gavin leaned over to fish at a set of racks beside the futon. He pulled a thick rectangle out. “Great. Why does Topher even own this?” He stuck his head over the side again. “For God’s sake, he has all of them. Even the ARC for *Drowned Writing Group*.” He held up the rectangle.

On it was a painting of a stylized tree, and some wiggling lines—must be writing. She decided not to think about how “Drowned,” “Writing,” and “Group” fit together and nodded.

“*Eden Ugsome*.” Gavin raised his eyebrows. “My mom’s—Violet Lewis’s a writer.”

She gaped. He opened the rectangle. It was filled with rectangles so thin, she could barely see the edges. Black lines covered them. Unsteadiness overcame her. Racks of rectangles surrounded her. She did not know there was so much writing in the world. Topher and Gavin must be very learned. Perhaps they were the druids of the dead.

“Here.” Gavin held the rectangle open. “Eve. Your name is Eve.”

“What does it mean?” She pulled her composure together.

“Beats me—God. You are so high maintenance. ‘Mother over all’, or something.”

She sorted back through her fractured memories. A baby’s cry came back to her again and again. It was never the same baby. Women screamed. She shook her head. “Not Eve.”

“Oh for—all right. It’s your name. Mary, Martha?”

“What do they mean?” She clipped her words.

“I have no idea—” He made a whiney noise. “I just want to—”

He looked over at her. Her gaze flickered to him hesitantly through her eyelashes.

He slammed back against the futon. “Fine. Okay. We’ll do every name in here—ah. I know this one. Don’t think you’ll want it, but I do know it: Jobi. It is the female form of Job. It means one who has been through many trials. Or has had much hardship.”

She mouthed the name. Jobi. She could not remember them, but she could feel burdens mounting up over her life. She could not say she had had many hardships compared to most. But most of her life, she had a lingering bitter taste, had not amused her. “Yes. Jobi is good.”

“Thank you so much.” Gavin threw the rectangle on the table.

He slammed his shoes onto the table after it. His feet jiggled so the table shook. He chewed his nails. Jobi watched, stunned, as he yanked on a hangnail. Ambias was so—high maintenance? Was that how to use it?—about his nails.

The hangnail gave way. Blood welled. “Damn.” He didn’t have his heart in his curse.

A smile crept up Jobi’s cheeks.

Gavin blinked. “What?” When she stifled her mirth, he laughed, “come on, what?”

“You bite your nails.” She touched the blood.

Her body fizzled over warm. Her breath panted. Her eyes filmed red. When they cleared, Gavin stared at her with whites surrounding his pitch eyes. Now that she looked him in the eye in the proper light, she noted his eyes were dark brown. She sat back on the futon. He wiped away the blood on his finger. Both of them choked.

The finger’s skin was unblemished.

* * * * *

Topher slammed up the steps to his apartment. An eel of sweat swam down his cheek. For once, Topher wished he had not kept to his code of black clothing. At the top of the stairs he bent to remove

his shoes. He stared at the knotted laces on his boots. “Screw Candace.” Barely stopping to turn the doorknob, he rammed his shoulder into his door and walked into his apartment already speaking. “Gav? This had better be good—you little shithead—”

Gavin peeked around the hall. “Toph—sorry, Toph. Sh.”

With his whispered words, Gavin motioned to Topher. Topher ground his teeth, glancing around for the girl he had heard on his phone. Gavin was not wearing a shirt. Topher’s stomach lurched. Past the stairs, Gavin hung at one side of Topher’s bedroom doorway. Inside, a girl with red gold hair bounced on Topher’s bed. She wore Gavin’s shirt. Topher sagged against the doorframe. That thud in his chest had to do with having geared himself up for a bonding week with Gavin. His irritation was at Gavin’s rudeness.

“I hope you like laundry.” His voice was steady but he couldn’t keep out the barb. “Those were my last clean sheets.”

Gavin’s eyes stuck to the girl. Around his loose mouth, his skin was dusky. Topher cracked his knuckles, but Gavin did not look up, though Gavin had called Topher out on more than one occasion that he cracked his knuckles only when he was angry. The girl opened his bedside stand. Topher bit his tongue. She would have to pick that drawer. He glanced at the empty spot on his bedside stand and back at the drawer. But she didn’t take out anything. Topher examined the not quite defined look to her nose and jaw. Surprise splashed over him. Out of that surprise, and not because of that barb, Topher cleared his throat. “Jesus, Gav. What is she? Fourteen, fifteen? Jailbait is dangerous.”

Gavin’s face came alive. He stared at Topher. Topher averted his eyes. He had not wanted Gavin to stop glazing enough for Topher to stick his foot as far down his throat as he had. He had only been eighteen. It wasn’t as if he had slept with Gavin—all intentions aside. And Topher had loved Gavin, and, Christ, Topher needed to get off this too familiar line of rationalizations and pretend he had never thought them.

Topher cleared his throat. “So, you met at the museum? Why didn’t you tell me over the phone? I wouldn’t have come home.”

“No!” Gavin startled, his eyes flitting back to the girl. “It’s just—Toph, she’s weird.”

The last hour’s adrenaline dropped from Topher. “She’s a one night stand, Gav.” He almost managed gentle. “Personality is not high on the list of qualities.”

“No!” Gavin turned red.

Topher juggled between if that meant she was not a one afternoon stand, and he’d feel better, or if Gavin intended on lugging this girl around for a week, and Topher’d feel worse.

“No—” Gavin grabbed Topher’s arm. “I found her naked in the bog exhibit, so I gave her my shirt and brought her here because she shouldn’t have been in the museum like that—”

Topher bit his lip to keep from laughing. Gavin couldn’t stop trying to save the world. Only this time he had brought home a human instead of the usual mutt. A whole human should worry Topher more, but, after all, they could always drop her off at a shelter, and Topher could truthfully assure Gavin euthanasia was not in her future.

“—she doesn’t speak right and she thinks—look!” Gavin held up his hand.

“You finally stopped biting your nails?” Topher quirked his eyebrow at Gavin. “Gavin, it’s okay. Candace does work with homeless shelters and I’m sure—”

“Toph, you moron.” Gavin shook his head. “Jobi—Toph’s here. I want to show him.”

The girl bounced off the bed. Topher rolled his eyes at her downcast eyes. As if she hadn't been listening. "What's with the name?"

"Huh?" Gavin fished in his pocket.

"Jobi—I've never heard—" Topher gave Jobi a thin smile. He had to look down a foot. Her eyes scattered his way a few times, but she just shifted in front of Gavin.

"I'm Topher." Topher brushed a stray hair away from her face, all the while telling himself he should not flirt with a crazy girl.

"I know." Then she did stare.

"Oh. I, uh, named her Jobi. She wouldn't accept a name unless I could tell her what it meant. Almost all I remembered out of *Eden Ugsome*." Gavin glared. "Why do you have my mom's books? You never told me you read those. Why haven't I ever seen them?"

"I knew you didn't like them. I like them." Topher snagged onto Gavin's normal tone.

"It's not that I don't like them—I think she's a good writer." Gavin retrieved a pocketknife from his jeans and flicked open the blade. "But you try getting asked constantly if you were a hustler. You know, it says 'fiction' on the cover for a reason. Stupid *Mutt's Gut*."

Topher choked on laughter. The blade rested against Gavin's arm.

"Uh, Gav?" He reached for the blade. "Um—Gavin, wait!"

Gavin twisted in the blade. Blood oozed down Gavin's arm. Topher tried to grab Gavin's arm and his knife all at once, but Gavin elbowed him in the gut. "Are you watching?" Gavin turned on him.

Topher concentrated on breathing. He needed his energy to kick Gavin's ass. With a grimace, Jobi stuck her finger into Gavin's cut. Topher's skin rolled over in goose bumps. Each goose bump felt as if it jolted. He wrenched upright, jaw dropping. Jobi removed her finger. Gavin spit on his cut. Then Gavin wiped away the spit.

Topher was aware Gavin's arm had no cut anywhere on it. He was aware of it, he could tell it to himself, and still he stared. The information fell off his brain. The image pooled at the bottom of his skull and kicked in the fear living in his brainstem.

He stopped looking at the arm, hoping the cut would come back. The cut was still gone. Jobi was still there. He opened his mouth. He turned around. He avoided the front door, which pulled like a strong magnet, telling him he could walk out and never come back. Ever.

He reached into the kitchen's highest shelf. He stumbled to the glass cupboard holding his 37-year-old Macallen, glad he had decided not to drink it, despite Alec often asking him. Unexplained phenomena, shock and good malt went well together. He was sure of few things right now, but alcohol, he was sure of. He grabbed three glasses. He lit an American Spirit, grimacing at the taste. He put up with a lot for Gavin's sake. Jobi left all else in the dust.

Back to the malt. He poured three doubles, congratulating himself he had not drunk the Macallen on his birthday when Alec had given it to him. He had told Alec that he had drunk too much cheap booze already to appreciate anything else that night, but the scotch had shocked him. That was only the second time he and Alec had been on anything near a date, and the price of this stuff was ridiculous—even conceding that Alec liked to throw his parents' money around. An image of Gavin's arm popped back into Topher's head. He shook. Once his breath was a bit steadier, he downed one of the malts, then refilled it.

Back to the malt. He picked up the three glasses while juggling the bottle. If he'd drunk the Macallen when Alec gave it to him, he would have felt some—Gavin's bloody arm tumbled everything in Topher's mind. He closed his eyes.

Think of the damn Macallen. He would have felt Alec had a right to Topher's passing out body. And he had done waking up to puke on someone he didn't remember having sex with. Gavin hunched on the futon. Jobi poked Topher's entertainment center. Topher plunked down the Macallen and three glasses. He drained his, and took a long draw on his cigarette. He examined the red gold mound of hair that was Jobi. Besides, Gavin was right. Topher would never take Alec seriously.

"You are taking this well," Topher finally commented.

Gavin chewed his recently perfect nails. "I've had a little longer. We both almost fainted the first time it happened. But it keeps working. That's the deepest I've gone—"

Topher's fear boomeranged into anger. He grabbed Gavin. "This time? Deepest. You do not do this anymore. I don't care if she heals you. You are hurting yourself."

"Right. I see your point. I just felt better to be all scientific about it at first."

"Cutting yourself is not scientific." Topher shoved Gavin. "Find some rats, cut them equally, allow one rat to heal naturally and have Jobi pet the other one—that's scientific."

Gavin lunged upright. "I would not hurt a rat! Do you know how smart—"

"Apparently smarter than you, since they aren't cutting themselves," Topher spat back.

Gavin's eyebrows fell into his eyes. He went back to chewing his nail.

"What?" Topher sighed, one eye on Jobi, who kneeed towards the table.

"I'm trying to think if you are right," Gavin said through nail. "About rats not hurting themselves. They're pretty sophis—"

"Gavin?"

"Yeah?"

"Drink your damn malt."

Gavin picked up his glass and stuck a hand over the third. "Don't give her that."

Topher moved the malt in question, taking a sip. He stared at Jobi staring at him. "No. One of us has to stay clear headed." Four shots down, his muscles relaxed and grew warm. He resisted the urge to cut himself to see if Jobi could do it again. He made a mental inventory of his body, but couldn't come up with anything for her to heal. Her lip protruded. She smiled at him sideways through her wafting curls.

Topher laughed. "I can do that, too, baby."

The smile disappeared. "You are Topher?"

"Yes. That would be me."

"Gavin must answer to you?" She tilted her head to Gavin, who coughed on malt.

A grin tugged Topher's lips.

"If you say 'yes', I will kick your ass." Gavin's eyes watered. "This is really good scotch, by the way."

Topher paused, and resumed smiling. "Isn't it, though? Alec has good taste."

While Gavin glared at the bottle's label, Jobi sat down next to Topher. Her hand pulled up in hesitant tugs, but finally landed on his hair. "Your hair. It is blond."

"Last time I checked." Topher glanced to where Gavin drained his malt and poured another with a nonchalance that didn't work well on Gavin.

"But his is blue." Jobi's voice went tight. "And Candace's—it was red like wine."

“I believe high school ends the phase of interesting hair color choices.”

“Screw you.” Gavin kept the malt near his lips. “It’s dye, Jobi. We dye our hair.”

“Like cloth?” Jobi’s voice tapped with unease.

“Like cloth.” Gavin nodded.

“So why is Topher’s skin like skin and your skin is like brown clay—are you so tan? Do you not burn?” Jobi recovered to demand.

“I don’t think he’s been in the sun all summer, bastard.” Topher sipped malt. Good malt. Maybe he shouldn’t waste it by belting it. “Gav has that Black Welsh heritage. His skin is darker than my darkest tan. Stop drinking so much.” He removed the bottle from Gavin’s vicinity. “You have no tolerance. I thought you meant the healing, but is this the weird?”

Gavin drained his glass. “Jobi, where are we?”

“The world of the Gods.” Jobi did not miss a beat. “I am dead. You are spirits.”

Topher let Jobi’s words dribble off his greasy brain. This time not even his brainstem was interested. He had topped out at Jobi healing Gavin. Instead, he turned his head on one side to again measure the shape of Jobi’s face. The odd, sharp heart filled with a small nose still growing into adulthood. If the heart shape was a little fuller. The skin a little darker. The hair a little redder. “Blue eyes,” he breathed.

“What?” Gavin leaned around Topher.

“Yes,” Jobi said. “My eyes are now blue.”

“No, sweetheart. They’re hazel, but—” Topher shuffled through the mess of papers teetering atop his coffee table. He blamed Candace for their existence, even while noting most of them were his. Thinking of the papers was a good way not to think about what he looked for. Though thinking what he was thinking came easier than it should have. That healing had blown a gasket in him. Unless it was the malt. He picked up the green and black swirled pamphlet. Red hair surrounded blue eyes. He held the pamphlet in front of Gavin. “Look familiar?”

“Toph.” Gavin’s muscles tensed. “Toph—this is for the exhibit. This is the bog girl.”

Topher swerved to stub out his cigarette, since Jobi followed the ember with her fingers. He pulled out another cigarette and lit it, eyeing Jobi staring at the smoke he exhaled. “Explains why she thinks she’s dead. And how you found her.”

“Toph, this so does not begin to explain how I found her. She should be shriveled and dead. How did she get like this?” Gavin’s whisper cracked. “And what about the healing?”

“Hey, I’m stretching to believe in someone coming back from the dead. How they come back from the dead—what they can do back from the dead. Not my department.”

Jobi picked at the weave on the futon, but her head tilted towards them.

“No.” Gavin gurgled. “No. Tell me how—read *The Golden Bough* eight—”

“Four.” Topher snorted smoke.

“—whatever, you mythology freak. How? People do not spontaneously come back alive after being dead over two thousand years.” Gavin gripped Topher’s arm.

“Okay—if you read mythology, you would know people have died and come back to life and died again all over the place. Um—Osiris. Or—okay, no brainer, Christ.”

“If you are telling me she is the next incarnation of Christ, I am taking your scotch away.” Gavin craned around Topher to look at Jobi.

“No.” Topher shook his head, pleased with the way his brain had recovered from its greasing.

“No. She died three or four hundred years before Christ, so she couldn’t be him. Unless you go with

the time-as-a-pool, not a line, theory. Gav, it's Ockham's Razor. Or that Sherlock Holmes thing about take away all things that are not true, and whatever is left over is your answer. You are all right with the healing. Why do you freak now?"

"You murdered that quote." Gavin dropped his head in his hands. Without looking up, he grabbed the pamphlet from Topher to stare at it with creased brows. "I was in shock, okay? I cut my arm open again and again, for Christ's sake."

Topher put a hand on Gavin's back. Jobi sniffed at Topher's cigarette butt. Topher took the cigarette butt from her and gave her his cigarette instead.

"But," she hesitated, "you breathe smoke. You belong at Beltain."

"No." Topher guided her hand to her mouth. "People smoke for fun. And addiction."

She glared at the cigarette from all sides. She stuck it in her mouth and mashed the end.

"Let up a little, and inhale." Topher put his finger beneath her sinking chin.

Gavin rubbed his hands through his hair. Jobi inhaled and coughed so hard she dropped the cigarette. It burned a hole in the futon cover.

"Ah, damn it." Topher nabbed the cigarette. "Candace will love that." Then he laughed.

Gavin lifted his head. He looked as though circles had grown beneath his eyes while he had had his head down. "All right. You tell her then."

Jobi pulled a strand of hair. "You talk as if I cannot hear you."

"What?" Gavin stuck his head around Topher.

"Yeah—what?" Topher set a hand on Gavin's head.

"Do you think I am dumb? Or a child? Or do you think I am still so poor in your language as to not understand you?" Jobi's voice took on a gravel edge.

Gavin melted down to the floor. "Shit."

"Um—" Topher raised his eyebrows. The sand in her sand and seaweed eyes was hot. The seaweed was dead. Topher shrugged and handed her his malt. "All three, really."

"You do not think you are in the land of the Gods. You do not think you are spirits." Jobi took a sip of the malt and coughed. "This burns. Then what is this place?" Jobi's voice cut. "What are you? Perhaps you do not realize you are spirits because you never lived."

"Jobi, kid." Gavin put one hand on her diminutive toe. "We are alive. I know we are alive. We are students—not spirits. Nothing looks familiar because you have been dead thousands of years. You are across the sea from where you died."

"Nothing is across the sea," Jobi whispered. "The world ends."

"No. The world is round—" Topher tugged his hair "—Jesus Christ. We'll be explaining the rest of our lives."

"Why should I believe you?" Jobi squeezed his leg.

"Why should we lie?" Gavin's voice petered out.

Jobi's hand quivered. Her breath wheezed faster and faster.

"Hey." Gavin gathered her in his arms. She glommed onto Gavin. "Hey. It's okay. I promise. We will figure this out. We will figure this out with you."

"No!" Jobi shook Gavin. "Do you not understand? I was dead, and yet I was not with the Gods. Where is my husband? Where are my children? What happened to my town?"

Topher poured what must have been a quadruple. He smoothed her hair. "Jobi, Gavin had to name you. Did you remember your name?" He experimented.

She blinked, tears on her eyes' lenses refusing to fall. "No."

“What did you remember?” Topher prayed he wasn’t about to make the situation worse.

“I was sacrificed. Nothing more.” She turned away.

His eyes widening, Gavin looked over Jobi’s head at Topher. “Jobi? If you don’t remember your life, isn’t it possible you don’t remember when you were with the gods? That you were with them, but they took your memory when you came alive again?”

Jobi hiccupped into Gavin’s shoulder, but gave a slight nod. Gavin rocked her back and forth, humming, “‘hush little babe, don’t say a word / Daddy’s gonna buy you a mockingbird’.”

Her muscles loosened. Topher applied himself to his malt. Gavin switched to “Que Sera, Sera”. Jobi’s voice emerged, quiet but smooth as polished granite, “then why am I here?”

* * * * *

Annie’s shoulder shook as if someone tried to wake her. All of her shook in a sick vibration. Her insides felt melted. Shrugging off the hand on her shoulder, Annie doubled onto her knees while her stomach poured out its contents. Through her ears’ pounding, she heard a man’s voice. “Whoa—ma’am—are you okay?”

Her lungs could barely inflate. She opened her eyes. A blond mustached face stared. “You shouldn’t be in here. The exhibit is closed.” The mustache bobbed.

Marshalling her will, Annie reached out a quivering hand. The man leaned down. Annie shoved her hand around his neck. With an inward wrench, she sucked the sweet life from him. Her lungs sighed. Her bones grew strong. Annie dropped the white, stiff corpse of the museum guard. She put her hand in her vomit. The bog girl. Annie had succeeded. She had felt the heartbeat. Annie fingered the bindings surrounding the girl. The connection felt tenuous.

The life. A life had walked into Annie binding the bog girl to her. Magic had blown backwards through Annie, dragging with it most of the life force she had not invested in the bog girl. Annie pressed her eyes closed. She could have been out for minutes, hours, or days. Panic at ripped her heart. She lost her balance, and landed in the vomit. “Becca?” She hacked.

She crawled to the shadowed wall where she had left her daughter. Annie could feel the stasis spell—the spell that she could hold through sleep—had slipped under the magic’s barrage. She touched Becca’s cold flesh—hard with the rigor Annie had tried so hard to keep from Becca. Annie held Becca’s stiff body in her arms. Too numb for the tears she wanted, Annie slumped against the floor with the force of her failure.

No. It was not a failure. The bog girl lived. She still had the power Annie needed. Annie simply had to track her. The binding pulsed with a spotty light all through the city, not much beyond. She should have known that. The girl would not be able to get far.

Annie stroked the fine wisps of Becca’s fawn hair that had not fallen out during chemo. Annie smoothed the Tyrannosaurus Rex shirt that had always been Becca’s favorite. Becca had just wanted to be a normal girl and go to school like the big kids. She had missed kindergarten by a year. Annie forced Becca a hair more into death, until her muscles unclenched. Annie reached for her back sling. She set a hand to Becca’s cheek, crooning, “soon, baby, I promise you, soon.” While settling Becca’s soothing weight onto her back, Annie sang in a stripped alto, “‘hush little babe, and don’t say a word / Mama’s gonna buy you a mocking bird’.”