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APOTHEOSIS

Carrie Richerson

I paused with my hand on the door of the tavern and took a deep breath. It didn't help; it just bypassed my lungs and settled in with the icy knot that used to be my gut. This night had been a long time coming and everything, *everything* rode on what waited for me inside. Don't you dare screw up, I warned myself. I tugged the zipper on my jacket up tight under my chin and opened the door.

I spared the interior a quick glance as I sauntered toward the bar. The bartender/owner watched my approach with a blank face and alert eyes -- and one hand out of sight under the counter. I'd staked the place out long enough to know that he liked to run a well-behaved establishment. In my leather jacket, dark jeans and sneaks I looked like some biker moll wannabe: trouble on the hoof. I disarmed him with a tired smile and put a bill of a respectable denomination on the bar as I asked for a draft. My politeness and my money did the trick. As he moved to the tap to pull my beer I wondered what his protection-of-choice under the counter might be. A scattergun? Or perhaps something more intimate -- a baseball bat? He looked like the no-nonsense type. Probably a riot gun. And you could be sure it was properly licensed.

He could have no idea just how dangerous I was. If he had known, he would have emptied the pump gun into me when I opened the door. But then again, he didn't know the greater danger that was already inside. If his luck held, he'd never find out.

He set a foaming mug and my change down before me. I left the bills on the bar as I moved to a small booth by the front window. By the time I had settled into the seat the money had disappeared and the bartender was wiping glasses again.

I dawdled over the beer and pretended to watch the winter darkness outside the window. The neon advertising attached to the inside of the glass pulsed in a tasteful and reassuring pink/blue double beat, but none of the few passers-by were seduced. They trudged heads down and collars up through the cold, dodging scattered slush piles. No doubt thinking of warmth, of home. Well, so would we all, if we could.

This tavern was warm enough, cozy and dimly lit, all dark wood and old, heavy furnishings. It had a muted, untrendy class. Only a handful of people were in residence this early on a weekday night. The background music was an eclectic mix of light classical, progressive jazz, and meditative electronics, not quite frothy enough to be libeled as New Age. There was no TV, praise the powers, and the place was too far off the beaten path to be a hangout of *Homo singleus* . Two couples carried on self-absorbed conversations in the other booths, and a loner hunched over something potent at a small table at the back. The loner was my guy.

Giddiness welled up in me, and my hand trembled as I set my beer down on its coaster. To have my quarry, the man I had been tracking for so very long, so close was far more intoxicating than any liquor could be.

He'd half turned his chair to put his back to the room, telegraphing inaccessibility. From my angle I could see a burly longshoreman's body and the profile of a sullen face: bristling eyebrows, a pugnacious nose, and an in-your-face chin. Coarse salt-and-pepper hair curled from under the edges of a greasy dockworker's cap. The same gray-touched hair matted the muscular forearms, but couldn't completely conceal the trceries of faded blue tattoos. An old knife scar notched the back of one massive hand. His isolationist gesture seemed unnecessary; only a fool would approach a man like that uninvited.

I smiled, admiring the appearance he had chosen. The scar was an especially nice touch. He looked like an habitual drunk and an experienced brawler. I knew he was neither.

An antique mirror hung on the wall over his table. From time to time he glanced up and used it as I was using the glare-mirrored window beside me: to study the reflections of the other patrons in the bar. Once his eyes almost pinned mine as I stole a look around, but I let my gaze wander on. I wondered if he had guessed who I was, why I was there. It didn't matter. Now that I had made it this far I knew he would let me make my play. He would be curious, if nothing else.

He lifted a finger to the bartender. I rose and drifted toward the bar with my empty mug. The barman was pouring a double Irish as I laid a hundred dollar bill on the polished wood. "Make it two." My voice was pitched for his ears alone.

His gaze moved from the bill to my face and back to the bill as he thought it over. When he reached under the bar I braced myself for the riot gun, but he came up with another glass. I let go a silent breath and added another hundred atop the first. The bartender nodded imperceptibly and palmed the cash as I picked up the filled glasses. Whatever happened now, he would stay out of it.

My man didn't bother to look surprised as I set a glass down in front of him and settled into the chair beside his. Perhaps my transactions at the bar had been reflected in the mirror. This time my hand was rock steady as I lifted my glass. I took a long swallow of the pale amber whiskey and felt Irish courage melt some of the ice in my belly. *Careful.*

He spoke as I lowered my glass. His tone was as flat and bored as his gray eyes. "I prefer to drink alone." There was no menace in his voice. There was no need.

I shook my head. "I know who you are," I said, watching for a reaction.

All I got was a raised eyebrow. The triteness of my words hung in the air between us like smoke. I flushed with anger as he reached for his whiskey.

I pinned his wrist to the table. He didn't try to pull away. The knife I drew from the pocket of my jacket opened with an almost inaudible click. My back shielded us from view as I stroked the razor-sharp blade across his callused palm. The flesh parted widely, bloodlessly.

For a long moment we both stared at the cut, he as fascinated as I. A drop of clear fluid gathered in the deep furrow. I sighed and released his wrist, closed and pocketed the knife. He pursed his lips and considered me as he dabbed at his hand with a napkin. The cut was already closing. Exhaustion washed through me. It had taken so long....

"So." It was a meditative rumble from that barrel chest. Then, gently, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

I looked inside myself and found only a bleak, frozen determination. "No."

The corners of his eyes crinkled with silent amusement. "Perhaps we should take this conversation elsewhere," he suggested. I followed him out into the chill darkness.

We were somewhere near the docks. The air stank of salt and rotten fish guts, spiced with pitch. A few streets away the ugly orange of sodium vapor lamps blazed over industrial yards and loading cranes, but we turned our steps toward the darker byways. My companion seemed to have no particular destination in mind, and was in no hurry to speak. I kept pace and waited.

In some grimy alley he finally stopped and looked down at me. "What is your name?" I thought he was mocking me, but his face was serious.

What did I care for names anymore? But somewhere, way back when, I had had one. I groped, fished up a dim memory. "Maria." Perhaps it was mine, perhaps not. It would serve.

"Maria," he repeated, turning the name over on his tongue like the whiskey. He grinned. "You can call me David."

I snorted, unimpressed.

"How long have you been looking for me?" he asked. His gaze had turned inward, and the battered features he wore had undergone a subtle shift. Now his profile looked somehow classical, patrician.

I shivered as an icy thread of air worked its way under my jacket and down the back of my neck. "I can't remember a time when I wasn't looking for you. Maybe my whole life."

"Follow me and I will make you' ... what?" he mused. He focused on me again. "Others have found me, you know."

It hurt to breathe. "How many?" I whispered.

"Twelve." His gaze was clinical.

"Then I am the last!" I wanted to trumpet my triumph to the stars. His chuckle stopped me.

"If ... *if* I choose to accept you." He was grinning again, watching my reaction.

Rage flared. The thought that I might have come this far only to be played with and rejected.... Despite everything I knew about him -- proving, I suppose, that I didn't fear him at all -- I grabbed his shirt front, and with a strength only he could have guessed I had, I spun him around and slammed his back against the alleyway bricks. Others had died, instantly and without appeal, for lesser offenses, but I think he was still testing me, goading me. " *You will not refuse me!*" I hissed into his face.

His eyes had no depth, no color. I saw only my own reflection. "Show me," he commanded.

Anger still fueled me. I yanked down the zipper on my jacket and shrugged it off. I wasn't wearing a shirt. The chill raised goosebumps over my shoulders and back; it can still do that, even after all these years. The cavern beneath my left breast yawned dark and empty, silent and cold.

I had affected him at last. His eyes kindled, as austere and avid as a monk in rapture. I shuddered as his fingers traced the crisp, blackened edges of the hole. Then he pressed his whole hand inside.

I screamed. Sweat drenched me. Pleasure such as I had never known shocked through me and nailed me to the ground. Long ago, in some other existence, I had known sexual ecstasies; they were dim shadows compared to the transports I felt now.

David's eyes were half-lidded with pleasure; beneath the crescents his pupils were red-hot tunnels into another universe. In such intimate connection I could at last see through the illusion in which he had wrapped himself to his true glory. Flames haloed his head; his face blazed like a hundred suns; vast, glittering wings stretched wide overhead. Electric-blue symbols of power writhed across his chest and arms. His beauty brought tears to my eyes -- I, who had not cried since, since.... I gripped his arm to keep from fainting. "Father!" I wept.

We were so consumed with our pleasure that we never heard the whispers and sniggers of our approaching audience. Only when a studded leather glove landed hard on my shoulder did I wake to this reality again.

"Hey, baby, how 'bout letting us in on this action?" The street indian leered beneath an iridescent mohawk; implanted scales warpainted his cheeks and forehead. He and his two fellow braves had decorated their biker leathers with feathers and shells in their gang colors. They looked like exotic plumed serpents incongruously placed in that dingy alley.

All they could see was a middle-aged working stiff copping a feel off a tart's breast. Now they wanted to make it a gang bang. Their youthful arrogance assumed the three of them were more than a match even for David's hulking build.

"Mohawk" frowned at my serene smile and tried to yank me away from David. He would have had more luck trying to move the alleyway wall. The serrated studs on his glove cut into my skin; the trickle of blood that coiled down my breast was as easy to read as tea leaves at the bottom of a cup.

Freedom: that was the boy's key. A minor chord in his stormy eyes; a deeper, yearning wail in the blood that pulsed in his neck. I could feel David's equal yearning to give the boy his heart's desire. David smiled at the lad and reached a golden talon up to touch the center of his patterned forehead. Blood erupted from the boy's eyes, nose, and ears. He opened his mouth to scream and choked as his heart burst into his throat.

The second boy was all frost: white bleached hair, white leather jacket, white-on-white warpaint; even the irises of his eyes had been bleached white. He was so beautiful I had to claim him for my own. I grasped his arm and pulled him close, smothered his protests with my lips. I savored the skunky taste of his despairing sweat; the sphincter-loosening bitterness of his terror; the metallic, salt spiciness of his blood. His cool exterior camouflaged a molten core: he burned with rages unvented, lusts unsated, ambitions unsatisfied. When I released him, he flamed up white like a moth in a candle. Pale ash sifted over my feet.

The last turned to run, but David's will trapped him in amber light. Fear had stripped away his toughness, and it was possible to see how young he really was. Little more than a child, but he understood that he was going to die. Tears streamed down his painted cheeks as he sobbed "Ohjesusohjesusohjesus" like a mantra. "Not this time," David whispered as he grasped one outflung hand. I clasped the other, completing the circuit.

Instantly I *knew* this lost boy, his every weal and woe. Cast out of a broken home, brutalized by a culture at war with itself, he could not separate his hate for those who abused him from his love and his need. Ah, poor youth, divided allegiances are always the most cruel.

Leathers, feathers, and chains flashed away to reveal the perfection of the naked human. But his destiny was written in his flesh; as he wailed, a fissure, straight-edged as a razor cut, opened at his sternum and spread upward and downward. He stared in horror as his guts spilled steaming into the cold night. His scream lofted as sweet and pure as a cherub's praises, until the fissure cracked the chest cavity and his lungs deflated with a wet slap. When the aortic trunk ruptured blood fountained into the air and fell back as pink snow. From genitals to skull crest he split, like a ripe fruit under the grocer's knife. His eyes issued a mute, stereoptic appeal before the last connection between the hemispheres of the brain parted. The two halves of the body leaned together like tired sentinels until David and I released the hands, then crumpled to the pavement.

The death of sentiment is the beginning of real love.

The bodies burned with pale, witchy flames. I had never felt so fulfilled. Only then did David withdraw his hand from my chest. Cupped in his palm, afloat on a crimson lake, was a tiny, perfectly-formed human heart. It beat with a slow, hypnotic rhythm. Within the fluttering valves ruby highlights gleamed.

Marveling, I bent low over the treasure and wrapped my lips around it. For a moment it rested on my tongue; I felt its cool pulse against my cheeks. Then I opened my throat and let it slide down. David emptied his hand over my head; the flaming blood etched words of power upon my shining skin. Then at last I did throw back my head and howl my triumph to the cold, dead stars.

"Come, my daughter." My Lord held out his hand to me. Beneath my feet the paving stones shuddered and cracked; all across the city, infants expired in their cribs, poets screamed and went mad, dogs began to howl and buildings to crumble. My transfigured face shed a radiance the color of molten copper over my unfurling wings. "Tonight my reign begins," He said, "and there is much to do."

The skies were ours; we took to them.