

Goddess

by Jon Hansen

From the instant the goddess walked in, Ben couldn't take his eyes off her. Where other customers tracked in dirty imprints of their snow boots, she trailed rose petals, curling pink on the dirty linoleum. Not that she even *wore* boots, of course; her feet were bare, as was the rest of her, save for a few spans of strategically placed white silk. She wasn't the first divine creature Ben had seen, of course; he must have served a half-dozen avatars and godlings this week alone, more since they started serving Jamaican Blue. But this one. Oh, this one had power, made all the more compelling by the grey January morning squatting outside.

Automatically Ben set a tall dark espresso on the counter. Without a word the goddess took it, sweetened it by swirling one long finger in it, then strolled to the table at the window. She didn't offer to pay. Ben didn't ask. Horatio, the owner, had told him not to. "If you don't give them an offering, they'll never come back," he said whenever someone asked why. He thought deities were good for business, especially after a fiery-eyed war god had cracked open the skull of a would-be robber one Tuesday night. Ben didn't see an advantage to non-paying customers, divine or not, but sometimes they performed a minor miracle in place of a tip.

After a few minutes the whole coffeehouse began to smell like oranges and spices, the rich odors mingling with the scent of coffee. The bleakness outside seemed to fall away, and Ben found himself smiling a wide, goofy smile. He wiped at the counter with more enthusiasm than usual, then went to bus the tables left cluttered by the morning crowd.

He had several cups clinking together in the busbucket when she spoke. The air rippled with the force of the divine: "You are happy in your work?" Ben's skin crawled at the small of his back. He stopped, forced himself to look over at her. She was smiling at him, face radiant and mysterious.

With an effort he kept smiling. "Content, really."

"Then what pleases you so?" She took a sip, eyes fixed on him.

A slow turn shuddered through his brain. Why was she talking to *him*? True, he was the only other person there, but still. Other deities had spoken to him at times, true. But the key emphasis was *to* him, as if issuing proclamations from a cloud chariot. No interaction required, no response needed except to say, "As you command."

The realization she was trying to engage him in small talk gripped him with terror. Every myth said that the divine caused serious trouble when they took an interest in mortals. He had an urge to make up something to deflect her interest, or just walk away, but knew it would be a mistake. Lying to a deity would be bad. Ignoring one would be worse. Much worse. He took a deep breath, then let it out with the words, "It's just having you here."

The goddess laughed, the sound ringing drops of crystal sun. "I am very pleased to hear that." She set the cup down and stood, muscles rippling in her near naked splendor. Ben inhaled, sharp. He stiffened in an instant, then felt himself blush.

She glided closer to lay a warm hand on his arm. All the hair on Ben's arm stood up, electrified by her closeness. He discovered he was staring down at her chest, two tanned and magnificent breasts barely hidden behind the thin silk. He closed his eyes and willed himself not to drop the busbucket.

She whispered, a soft breeze in his ear. "You are charming, mortal, and not unattractive. It would delight me to retire to some place more private with you, removed from the harshness of this world."

He knew what she meant. Steady breaths. Tell the truth. "I am extremely flattered, but I cannot. As I said, I am content."

"Are you quite certain?" Now her hand stroked up the side of his arm, trailing those long fingers of hers. His heart pounded in his chest, so loud he'd have thought it impossible, considering to where all the blood in his body had rushed. Another minute of this might kill him.

Another breath. "I am certain," said Ben. The touch left his arm. He stood still, concentrating on his breathing until finally, he opened his eyes.

She was gone. Her cup rested on the table. From the ceramic bottom a cluster of small blue flowers had sprouted. He set it beside the tip jar, then finished cleaning.

After a bit some new, mortal, customers walked in, and Ben began to feel her presence lessened a bit. At three he went home, riding his bike down the center of snowplowed streets, watching for cars not watching for him, breathing out small clouds as he pedaled. Fifteen minutes later he hoisted his bike onto his front porch. It was a rental by the campus, a little shotgun house, shabby but nice. He propped the bike against the porch rail, reasonably confident no bike thieves would be out in this weather, then went inside. He hung his coat and scarf and black knit hat on the hooks by the door, then looked into the living room.

Kathryn dozed on the couch, under the green and black checked wool blanket they had bought a couple years ago on a spring break trip to San Diego, before their wedding, before their transplanting to middle America and grad school and domestic existence.

Ben stood in the doorway, watching her. She was everything the goddess was not: small and winter-pale and a little flabby in her softer places. She opened her eyes then and smiled, long and lazy, making her look like a mischievous six year old. "Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself," he said, then smiled back, with more love in his heart for her than it ever held for the distant spring.