

Paranormal Mates Society: Matchmaker's Match

Willa Okati

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Chapter One

“No! No, no, no! Look, how many times do I have to tell you? The question is not ‘will they’ talk about sex. The question is, ‘when will they’ talk about sex? Do I have to spell it out for this crowd? S-E-X. You know, the thing none of you are ever going to enjoy again unless you make -- this -- work?”

A crowd of demons, sulfurous, scaly, and one hundred percent scared shitless, cowered beneath a view screen covering the outside wall of their boss’s office. Not middle management either. The Big Boss. Larger than life and more than miffed. Positively pissed off.

They could tell because he was smiling. Satan’s smile never boded well. The Boss knew as much, and put the facial tics to best effect by saving them for special occasions, when someone’s soles were about to fry.

And since they, the dread creatures of the Pit charged with -- what was it, again? *Customer Surface?* -- in Lucifer’s newest scheme, had been called together for a meeting that started with their chief of operations being blown into chewy chunks, they didn’t think it would go uphill from there.

* * *

Scratch drummed three fingers on his view screen. “I am not about to have my entire plan blown out of the lake of fire because of some spineless, brainless, hornless, one-eyed purple people eater morons! Do you know how much time I’ve put into PMS?”

“The -- the monthly affliction of women?” Frajni the Horrendous quavered.

A piece of cold pizza decorated with pepperoni and mold flew through the air and bounced just above Frajni’s three horns. The missile thunked home between the demon’s eyes, which crossed as he stumbled, staggered, and fell down, out cold, which

was saying something in Hell.

"Anyone else have any questions? No? Good. Okay, demons, I'm going over it one last time. This is what you do when a new sucker signs up, so you better have the protocol down.

"One: get their credit info. Full checks. I want everything from how much they're worth to how much they're gonna be worth. Ever. Understand?

"Two: run a cross-check on what kind of powers they have. I didn't log fifty-seven point five hours worth of admin time just to have someone fry my computers with a thunderbolt when they get mad.

"Yes, they're going to be angry. In case you forgot, angry is the point. What, you thought this was about making people *happy*?

"Third, and most important: no one finds out who I am, or why I'm doing this. You breathe one sulfur-scented word to anyone outside this Hellhole and I'll toast you on your own pitchforks. Are we clear?"

A select group of demons -- massive warty creatures decorated with dripping horns and multiple eyes -- crowded together in a tight huddle, making a serious effort to look small as possible and properly humble.

The effect was unbelievably silly. Kind of like King Kong trying to play chimpanzee. Scratch leaned forward in his computer chair, ignoring its squeaks and wobbles from one broken leg. "I asked you if we were clear. A question needs an answer, boys. I'm waiting, and I do not have all millennium. Talk!"

"Yes, Lord," quavered a demon with more muscles than a wrestling pro. "We obey your commands."

"Oh, I'm sure of that. You're real go-getters, every one of you. Too bad you have this problem with actually doing anything right." Scratch glowered at the cowering creatures of nightmare and legend.

"Master, please, have mercy!"

"Mercy? Right." Scratch laughed. The demons trembled. Somewhere on earth, a three-headed calf was born.

His face fell back into dark, threatening lines. "Mercy," he repeated, drawing the word out like Hell's finest burned salt-water taffy. "How quickly they forget. Refresher course: I don't do mercy. I do business. I also do pain. Also, just to remind you, I'm not much on stupid questions."

"Master, no!"

"Bye-bye, brain-dead bogey head." Scratch moved his mouse pointer over a desktop icon labeled *incinerate*. One click hoisted Mr. Big-and-Bad smack on his own petard.

Or, in this case, melted him into a puddle of yellow goo that looked like recycled toad pâté.

The demons squeaked and did a quick two-step away from their fallen comrade. Unfortunately, this meant they couldn't cling together like little girls.

Scratch glowered. Lightning zigzagged over the demons' heads. A deafening crack of thunder shook the walls of Hell. "One more thing. I'll be a really nice guy and tell you this one last time. It's not 'master.' It's not 'the prince of darkness.' Not 'the father of lies,' 'the morning star,' or even 'sir.' It's Scratch. Not 'the old Scratch.' Just Scratch. As far as anyone out there knows, I'm an ordinary Joe, a computer geek in charge of some seriously stupid lackeys. Peons. Employees. Whatever. I'm the good guy around here. Mr. Go-To."

"Yes! Yes, Mas -- Scratch. Just-Scratch."

Criminy. Well, getting that far with this crowd was a decent morning's work.

"Fine. Get out there. Everyone has a cube. Find it, park your butts in front of the computers, and don't leave unless I say you can go. You're customer service for PMS, Incorporated, and it's up to you to make our no-life, loser clients think they're happy until the hammer falls."

"Master, I mean, Scratch, please, a question?" A goaty variety of Hell-spawn groveled without looking up to meet Scratch's eyes on the teleconferencing monitor.

"Let me guess. You don't understand something."

"The cubes, your Dark Lordship. What did we do to deserve placement in five-

by-five boxes with gray felt walls, designed to be adjusted yet welded in place?"

Scratch shrugged. "This is Hell. You expected a corner office with a view? Idiot. Get to work."

Their exit speed would have impressed Scratch if he hadn't been more or less beyond blasé about, well, everything. Hell wasn't big on entertainment, and watching condemned souls do the hokey-pokey on hot coals got old after the first couple centuries.

Boredom was why he'd come up with PMS. Both kinds, in point of fact, but more recently the computer dating service for the few creatures of fantasy and legend still walking the Earth. They'd do anything to fall in love or even have one good moment with someone who understood where they were coming from. Lonely and desperate for sympathetic company.

Easy, easy pickings. Dangle the "perfect match" bait as candy on his hook. Reel them in. Partner them with profiles so unbelievably wrong they'd swear off love forever.

At least, that was the plan. Might work out, might not. His test run between a fire imp and a mermaid had actually been amusing. Poor bastard imp was so desperate for a lay he jumped into the ocean and, well... he'd made a nice sizzle, going out.

Scratch grinned his most pleasant grin, took a screen shot of himself, and uploaded it to every demon's computer as a background and screen saver. For fun, he burned in the scrolling text: *I'm watching you*. He cocked his head to catch the sound of terrified screams coming from the cube farm he'd built over a tar pit and nodded in satisfaction.

He clicked on the minimized tab that brought up a display of the PMS gateway web page. The counter of users logging on looked like a bomb countdown in reverse, numbers ticking up and up and up.

Not a bad morning's work. Reasonably satisfied for the moment, Scratch rolled back from his main computer station and across the cluttered room to snag a lightweight laptop and resume his current run-through game of "Death By Humvee 4."

He'd almost made it to SUV level. With any luck, he'd get to start mowing down mopeds soon.

What was he, besides the fallen angel of legend? A guy who moved with the times. He'd taken his lumps and figured, since it looked like he wasn't going to find a "get out of jail free" card in his e-mail anytime soon, he might as well have some fun.

Not much else to do when you were alone. Always alone.

"Just another day in paradise," he muttered, picking up a joystick. "Me, myself, I, and a Hell full of demons too dumb to figure out what WWW stands for. Let's rock."

"Meow."

Scratch blinked. "Okay, that's new."

He glanced down to see not a demon, but what looked exactly like an innocent tomcat. Seriously big for its breed, not quite bobcat size but not too far off. White with a spattering of black spots. The beastie trilled at him again, way too innocent-sounding for anything interested in a visit to Hell. Or its Master, all things considered.

Tail lifted high to show off its goodies, the cat picked a finicky path through the mess of papers, junk food wrappers, tangles of wire and bits of demon strewn across the floor of Scratch's sanctum sanctorum. Finding no clean, empty spaces, it plopped down on both hind legs and began to wash one forepaw while shooting Scratch a dirty look.

You didn't have to speak Feline to get the message loud and clear: *Yecch*.

"Yeah, well, me? Not much on the kind of company who really cares about how long it's been since Housekeeping made a stop." Scratch thought. "Or since I flash-fried the last demon who knew what a vacuum cleaner was."

The cat began to purr. "Fried does not equal food," Scratch informed it, returning to his game. He felt the green eyes roaming over his present form, examining him from horns to toes.

Way too curious.

If he's a cat for real, I'll start eating pussy again. Scratch smirked. *Whoever's playing games, they're a class-A dumbbell.* Did they actually expect Scratch to believe a grade-

normal Earth cat could find its way down where he lived? Sure. Contrary to the old-school belief, felines weren't exactly his friends. They didn't like the competition.

Scratch focused on his game -- or pretended to. "So," he said, one corner of his mouth turning up. "How'd you get down here? Not that I know for sure who you are, but I'm gonna bet Loki."

He glanced at the cat, who was staring at him as if he'd just taken away the best dead mouse ever. "Been a long time, Jokester."

"Well, you're no fun," the cat said sourly. The air rippled as it changed shape, shivering from feline to human-approximate. A man in his early thirties sporting long spiky hair and something tunic-shaped. Might have been in Nordic fashion a couple millennia ago.

"Here's some advice for free," Scratch said, returning to his game. "Go shopping. Quickly. It's safe to say Asgard hasn't been the look for a while. At least discover the softer side of --"

"How did you know?" Loki snapped, getting to his feet. "Thor's balls, this place is disgusting."

"You expected what in Hell? Five-star awards for sanitation?"

"Stop dodging the point."

"Spoilsport." Scratch lifted his shoulders without looking away from the laptop's monitor. "I had a hunch. Besides, the way today's been going, it pretty much makes sense for an old enemy to show up, looking to pick a fight. So. You want to go, Trick?"

"Don't call me 'Trick.' Never call me 'Trick'." Loki shuddered. "Your penchant for nicknames is appalling."

"Yeah. I'm a real pain in the ass sometimes."

Loki folded his arms, scowling. "You'd be wise, little fallen angel, to show respect to those who are still gods among men."

"Right, uh-huh. So, how many people still think you might be real?" Scratch flickered with black light, his eyes emptying into deep, dark wells of absolute nothingness. He glanced at Loki, smiling at how the little old god tried to hide his

flinch.

"Thought so. Now," Scratch said softly, "how many people know for damn sure I exist?"

Loki drew back. Doubt crossed the face of the Trickster.

"Want to play games with me now?" Scratch asked, his grin lingering like the ghost of a nightmare. "You think you can take me on?"

Loki cleared his throat. He tried to meet Scratch's level stare, but had to look away. "No."

"Wise choice. Now scram, huh? I'm busy."

"Yes. I'd heard about your latest scheme. It's quite the talk of --"

Scratch let a little more of the faux humanity drain from his eyes. Just like water down a drain. A darker shade of damnation. He didn't say a word. Didn't have to.

Loki paled. "I suspect you'd rather be left alone though," he said. "Very well. I have no need to stay. I've seen enough to satisfy me."

Scratch nodded once, up and down, very slowly. Smiling. "Careful with the first step. It's a doozy."

"First step? I --"

One keystroke and a hole opened up beneath Loki's feet. With a seriously undignified yelp, like a man who's just slipped on a banana peel and can't believe karma has the balls, the Trickster plummeted down, down, down. Scratch stared at the pit as it slowly closed.

"I figured I'd see you again some day," he said. "You should have remembered, though... curiosity kills the cat. Or in this case, dumps it headfirst into the demon latrines. Kind of a shame we're enemies, you know? Guys like us should network. But, eh, what do I know?"

Scratch leaned back and took another look at the steadily rising counter of logged-in PMS clients. Tick, tick, tick; up, up, up.

Suckers.

* * *

Several million miles below Scratch's Hellish hackery, as the metaphysical crow flew, and as far from where he'd landed as he could make it in one single, horrified leap, Loki quivered with the threat of an impending nervous breakdown. Gagging, he ripped and tore at his clothes in an effort to get them off, away, and possibly destroyed as fast as possible.

Finally naked, if still smeared with demonic effluvia and things best not thought about, Loki wrapped both arms around his chest and shuddered with disgust.

Shit! The little fallen angel had dared drop him -- *him!* -- down a U-bend!

In days gone by, no one would have had the nerve. They'd respected and feared him more than any nasty-tempered outcast from Heaven, as well they should have.

And yet, no matter how it galled Loki to admit it, Scratch had been right. He'd gotten lazy. Spent too much time away from the playing fields. Men had forgotten the games Loki could play with their lives.

He began to grin, white teeth sparkling in the near-pitch darkness.

"You think yourself better than me?" Loki asked, peering up the porthole he'd fallen through. "We'll see about that, scorpion. I think it's time for a small lesson in manners."

Loki clapped his hands together and vanished in a cloud of smoke, headed for the first vacant five-star shower he could find.

He'd just clean up a bit, and then he'd see what was what. They all would.

He knew exactly how to make Scratch pay for his insult.

Loki's laughter shook the earth he soared through, causing a tectonic shift that would, sooner rather than later, result in a tsunami off Greenland.

Oops.

* * *

Far and away, a creature, man-like in form, tall and solid as the grove of trees he knelt among, leaned on the hilt of his fiery sword and gazed up at the sky. Beautiful and fierce, a lion running free in Central Park.

Someone had, very politely, requested a word with him... after his own fashion.

This did not involve any audible communication.

As he listened to his summoner's request, the being made no sound. Not even the whisper of drawing or expelling breath.

He needed neither.

Long moments passed as the not-quite-human communed with something higher than the clouds. His expression never wavered, nor did he flinch away from the flickering flames of his blade as they climbed high enough to lick at his hands.

Finally, he nodded. Stood, and slid the sword into a scabbard on his back.

Then, snapping open a set of six bronze wings, he took flight. Not upwards, to dance in the clouds, as one might expect.

Down.

A long, long way down.

He had a job to do.

Chapter Two

Scratch sorted through his morning mail brought to him by the three-inch-high ghost of a bulldog. It whimpered, tail between its legs, as it offered him a mouthful of soggy envelopes.

“Good boy,” he said absently, reaching down to pet the dog’s vaporous head. It whined and scampered away through the mess on Scratch’s floor.

Scratch watched it go with idle curiosity. “Always something new,” he muttered. The dog had shown up maybe twenty, thirty Earth years ago, scared out of its pea-sized canine mind, and hadn’t gotten any less skittish with time. He had yet to figure out the whole story, but somewhere out there a mailman with deeply scarred calves was laughing his ass off.

Sometimes the depths to which humans could sink impressed him.

All the same, if anyone ever asked Scratch about the plastic bag of Doggy Delite Bakon Bitez hidden just out of sight but still in reach, he’d deny its existence to his last days and flash fry anyone who’d dared bring them up.

He’d already had enough PMS for one day. He’d matched a spider princess with a bug-phobic Yeti, an exotic dancer who used music as her magic to a preacher deaf as a stone, and a were-bird to a were-sloth. After those, the “regular” Joes and Janes were pretty dull.

“Screw it,” he said, switching off the PMS observation monitor but keeping the server running. Just in case, right?

Besides which, he had better things to do, or wish he could do. He’d loaded up his favorite porn site, full of ripped, naked men with huge cocks poised to jack themselves off for his pleasure. And a quick call to a fast-food joint Above brought him a bag full of greasy faux Mexican fast food.

Porn and cholesterol. It got no better.

I call an official ten-minute break, or I would if I'd actually been working. He figured after the push, deadlines, and countless hours of programming he'd put into PMS, he deserved some slacker time.

* * *

A crumpled piece of paper lying next to one of Scratch's overflowing trash bins shifted, rocking back and forth as if it were laughing.

As a matter of fact, it was.

Or rather, Loki had been caught with such a fit of giggles he couldn't hold still a moment longer. Disguising himself as a discarded, badly spelled memo written in purple crayon from a lesser demon -- a stroke of genius, if he did say so himself.

As for how he'd gotten in, not even Satan would notice a flea, once attached to a mail-dog's hide, hop off and scuttle away. When Scratch had been distracted by the porn streaming onto his computer, Loki had shifted shape.

I am, and do remain, he exulted, *number one with a prank. You'll soon regret your insults, Scratch. No one shames Loki and lives to tell the tale.*

Fine, he's immortal. He'll live. Nonetheless, he'll be toasting on his own pitchfork before I'm finished here.

Loki manifested a pair of eyes in the shape of a double set of parentheses and peeked up at one of Scratch's security feeds. More precisely, the one that treated them to a view of the Dark Road, with its thronging crowd of damned souls pushing and shoving their way into Hell.

There appeared to be, approaching from the rear, someone clearing a path. Most of the condemned tended toward crankiness, and cutting in line wasn't taken lightly.

For this fellow, they moved at speed. After all, someone a good few feet taller than your average human, waving a fiery sword about like a blind man's cane, was probably someone best not tangled with, even after death.

If he'd had hands in this form, Loki would have rubbed them together and cackled in glee.

It appears to me the Devil is being called to pay his due. In other words: show time. Loki wiggled in delight.

* * *

Few things annoyed Scratch more than being interrupted in the middle of a good session of love with his sinister hand. So it was that when a klaxon began to blare and pop-eyed demons dialed up emergency HellIM windows chiming at him like a clock-maker's workshop gone mad, it pissed Scratch off more than it usually would.

He bypassed crankiness and went straight to rage. X-ing out each HellIM window as it popped up, he put the whole gaggle on block, then picked up a system-wide microphone, bellowing, "What the *Heaven* are you idiots doing now?"

A chorus of terrified squeals and insane clattering clamor started instantly. Scratch rolled his eyes and flicked on the view screen.

He smiled down at his demons.

They shut up, most in mid-wail. Wide eyes stared at him from shaking Hellspawn the size of small mountains.

"Let's try it again," Scratch said, every inch the kind and patient employer, just to see how many of the monsters would faint. He counted. Three. Not bad, although, of course, he'd done better. "One of you. Just one. How about the golden calf in the middle? Start talking."

"M-m-master?" the ex-idol peeped. "M-m-me?"

Scratch inclined his head gently, adding an extra note of boyishness to his grin. "It's all right, Bessie," he said, as if his intent were to soothe.

Two more demons toppled.

Much better.

"Bessie? I'm waiting."

The golden calf swallowed its cud but, possibly motivated by the death glares from its fellows, spoke up in a small voice. "An angel, Master. There's an angel come to Hell, on the broad road of damnation."

Scratch blinked. "You mean a fallen angel? Someone else up there copped

'tude?"

"No, Master." Bessie's brown eyes grew wide enough to show a ring of white around its irises. "A true angel of Heaven. He has wings, all six, and a sword of fire."

Scratch let that sink in. "Uh-huh." He tapped his fingers in a staccato rhythm on one knee. "And this Clarence type is on his way. Coming here. Now."

Bessie nodded.

"Do you know who sent him?"

The demons glanced at one another. "No?" Bessie ventured.

"Wrong answer."

Click!

Scratch wouldn't put an end to the old milk cow, but for the moment, it made a great statue, its mouth frozen in a moo of terror. He admired the sculpture briefly, then leaned forward, every last trace of gentle good humor gone. A negative cloud of dark halo swarmed over his skin, smoldering across his face with searing heat.

"Find. Out," he said, low and dangerous, and switched the outer view screen off.

He knew better than to trust his crew of pea-brains to get anything accomplished. That would mean they, oh, had an ounce of common sense between them. Sure. And the angel with a fiery sword was there to hand-deliver an invitation back inside the pearly gates.

"When you want something done right, or possibly done to death," Scratch muttered, re-routing his vid-cam to an infrequently used feed, "you do it yourself."

He grinned again, for his own pleasure, shimmered once with black fire, and punched a final keystroke.

* * *

Loki-the-paper-wad wriggled. *Yes, yes, yes! I knew he wouldn't fail to rise to such a tasty bait!*

Now, for a better view...

He rolled to the right, peeped out through purple crayon eyes, and gazed up gleefully at Scratch's dust-covered monitor.

Ahh. Much better.

* * *

The angel didn't bother speaking as he calmly but firmly made his way through the ranks of dead souls on their way to Limbo, Purgatory, or a lake of flame, depending on individual belief systems. After a few well-considered, gently insistent nudges to semi-corporeal backsides with the tip of his sword, the majority decided it would be wise to step aside.

A horde of demons rushing out of Satan's rusty iron gates, however, did not display the same native intelligence, nor any sense of self-preservation.

Never once changing expression from placid blankness, the angel simply lifted his sword and cut the scaly nightmare beasts down easily as swatting flies. His blade slid through their hides with the ease of a hot knife cutting slices of soft cheese.

They snarled at him, slavering yellow-green froth from opened jaws with an overabundance of teeth.

He gazed back, thoroughly unimpressed and not bothering to hide it. If need be, he'd remain in place until every one of the former host lay bleeding at his feet. Whatever he deemed necessary to provoke their master out of hiding.

The man he'd come to see.

"You mind telling me what in the Mases you think you're doing?" a young male voice with a trace of New York snapped above the angel's head. "Hey! I'm talking to you, stupid. Nooo, not down there. Up here. Look up. I'm betting you know how. Come on, come on, come on!" Fingers snapped impatiently.

With a complete lack of hurry, the angel glanced up to a flat-screen monitor mounted above the gates to Hell. He tilted his head slightly, which was, for him, the equivalent of pop-eyes and a dropped jaw. Scratch did not look... quite... as he had often been described.

No crimson skin, no cloven hooves for hands; neither fangs nor scarlet eyes; not a fallen angel of immense but miserably grieved beauty or a snarling, disfigured beast.

He looked, actually, more or less like a disheveled mortal who shaved when he

felt like it, had a penchant for James Dean's mode of dress, and wore rectangular-shaped black plastic glasses. With the exception of two small, gilded horns, Lucifer looked... ordinary.

Attractive, to be certain, but not the force of nature he had been led to expect.

It threw his plans a little askew. Fortunately, thinking on his feet while never revealing a glimmer of his thoughts happened to be one of the angel's specialties. He planted his fiery sword point down in the dirt, leaned on the hilt. Patiently waiting, utterly silent.

The Devil blinked at him. Not surprisingly, he would have been prepared for the voice of God delivering an unpleasant message in no uncertain terms. "You -- hey, you are an angel, right?"

The angel nodded.

Satan glanced to his left and to his right. "Don't tell me they figured out a way to get a Candid Camera crew down here," he mumbled. "You're not so much what I'd... so, the androgynous look is out of style Upstairs?"

The angel shrugged.

"Not much with the small talk, are you?"

Shrug.

Satan, the angel was pleased to note, seemed still further thrown off track by his continuing silence. Almost, one might say, unnerved.

"You have a reason for being here?" he asked, eyeballing the angel up and down.

Shrug.

"Can't you talk?"

Shrug.

The Devil made a huffing sound of impatience. His glasses slid down his nose to be sharply pushed back into place with one finger. He stared at the angel for a long moment, thoughts beyond the ken of any other being obviously churning away at light-speed behind his eyes.

Finally, he spoke again. "So, you want to come up here for a meet? Man to -- er --

demon to angel?" He made a come-hither gesture with his finger. "*Mi casa es su casa.*"

The angel smiled and disappeared from his place before the gates to Hell, reappearing seconds later in the middle of the Devil's private domain. The place was positively reminiscent of Dali and Escher with its peculiar geography and mutable nature, and had a dash of Warhol as well, the angel decided, flapping his wings to clear them of dust.

He didn't notice a crumpled ball of crayon-scribbled paper go tumbling over and over in the breeze to land near his feet. He folded his hands together on the pommel of his sword, grip loose and ready for swinging if necessary.

The Devil, wiry and tough in the flesh, flicked a few strands of dark hair out of his eyes. "Don't tell me," he said dryly, "Let me guess. Someone wants a word with me, and you're here to deliver the message."

The angel nodded.

"Problem being, the way I see it -- you don't talk. Jabber. Flap your lips. So, to make this an even better day, I have to figure out what the message is. Am I on the right track here?"

Nod.

"Isn't that just jim-dandy." The Devil sighed. "Okay, fine. You mind if I check the stats on a little web project first?"

Shake.

"Great. Won't take a second. Clear off a chair, if you can find one, and sit down." Satan turned, the movement casual, but the stiffness of his shoulders betraying him.

The angel considered his Enemy's actions and decided he had no idea what to do next. Therefore, sitting seemed as good an option as any. He scanned the piled-high chairs and discarded clearing one off as a bad idea. He'd never fit in one anyway. He checked the floor next, deciding it wouldn't be too bad to sit on top of scattered printouts. Near his foot, he spotted a reasonably clean ball of thick construction paper. He frowned at the thing, instinctively not liking it. The double parentheses reminded him uncomfortably of eyes, staring greedily out at the room.

Chapter Three

The angel sat quietly on Satan's floor. Silence hadn't been his native tongue, but he not-spoke it with efficient fluency. He found the skill came in handy during any number of situations. Quiet unnerved the talkative, and caused their lips to part and spill out secrets like falling rain. A somber hush chilled the souls of the guilty, making them feel without fail they'd been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Failing to rise to an enemy's bait drove them absolutely insane.

In this case, the angel merely hoped it lent him an air of purpose that suitably masked his puzzlement. When he had accepted his assignment, the prospective employer had not bothered to fill him in on some finer details. Details he felt, with a sting of annoyance, he would have been far better off being aware of.

For example, the fact that Satan called himself "Scratch." That he'd remade himself over in the image of a modern mortal man with a taste for computers, junk food, and pornography.

Rather... the angel tilted his head again... *intriguing* pornography, indeed. As yet, his own augmented anatomy seemed to be behaving itself. Augmentation it simply would not do to let the Enemy know about.

Or the Man Upstairs, for that matter.

Androgyny remained quite in style within reach of St. Peter's gimlet glare. However, as a roving "free agent," the angel had taken advantage of certain loopholes, technicalities, and ended up a bit... different, one might say. If one were able to speak between gasps of outrage, or peculiarly inflamed perversity of hormones.

Hormones, yes. Testosterone for one. If he'd known they were part and parcel of a "package," he might have taken a different fork in the road. Pheromones tended to make one's body act in the strangest of ways, with or without the mind's consent.

By the glassy seas, why hadn't anyone told him Scratch's current appearance just happened to be... attractive?

Perhaps they hadn't thought he would find the intellectual look appealing. They had been wrong. Native cunning and the knowledge of how to use it made a devastating aphrodisiac, and when combined with an apparent vanity that had led Scratch to shape himself with defined abdominal muscles and long runner's legs...

The angel suspected he might well be in trouble.

Ah, yes, there went his anatomy, misbehaving itself.

He would have prayed Scratch should take no notice, but deemed bringing his plight to the attention of higher powers somewhat unwise.

Sighing, the angel shifted uneasily and spun the point of his flaming sword where he'd wedged it through the ball of crayoned paper on Scratch's floor. He frowned.

What *was* that peculiar squealing, and from whence did it hail?

* * *

He was up to something. Had to be up to something. No angel set so much as a single pearly-pink piggie on the Brimstone Path without a -- well -- "damned" good reason.

Scratch didn't trust the silently hulking presence behind him. As far as he was concerned, turning his back on the angel showed who had the biggest balls on Hell and Earth, yes sirree. Of course, size didn't matter when said organs were trying to crawl back up into the safety of a guy's innards.

Scratch shivered. New, different, and not a pleasant sensation. He couldn't help it though. A guy -- angel -- like this set the hairs on his neck bristling like a wet hedgehog's spikes.

Carefully, carefully, Scratch manifested a tiny single eye beneath the fall of tousled hair on the back of his skull. He got a single peep at the angel, sitting ever so patient and calm behind his flaming sword, before the creature in question met his "gaze" and held it steady.

Zap! Scratch popped the eye out of existence. Too late though. He could *feel* the angel smirking, even if it would never show up on his solemn face. His rugged... roughly chiseled... all but leonine... completely gorgeous... face...

Oh, crap. Scratch manipulated his mouse, navigating carefully but with the greatest of ease through a minefield of spam e-mail, HellIM requests for technical assistance, and clumsy attempts at flirting with him from genuinely fugly PMS customers. Deleted the whole shebang while trying not to think about the angel's face, much less the creature's powerful chest, corded arms, rock-hard stomach, or legs like strangely attractive redwoods. The fifth time he caught himself trying to think of a synonym for "bulge," he gave up.

Fine. He turns me on. Someone up there better be satisfied. Mission accomplished. But get this clear: I do not give up the golden ticket without a fight.

He clicked and deleted, clicked and saved, cursed his disobedient loins currently sitting up to beg for attention, and kept a careful watch on the angel.

Ashes, I just wish I knew who sent him here. Then I might know who to kill later, but for now, I'd love to get a clue about this guy's weaknesses. He's got to have at least one.

Scratch saw his eyes, reflected in the monitor, turn dark with the black halo of the damned. *Trust me. I know. There's always a reason when someone draws battle lines in the sand between Me and Them.*

He'd figure it out.

In the meantime, though... "Hey, you hear that weird squealing? Sounds like a stuck pig."

* * *

Loki knew the meaning of pain. Quite well, in point of fact. Had he not spent ages upon ages being tortured at the whim of Odin himself? Tied to a rock with half-human entrails, sticky-wet and never quite cooling down from blood heat. A snake dangling above his head, venom dripping from fangs roughly the size of harpoons.

He'd had Sigyn, of course, on and off, styling herself as his "wife." They weren't on what one might call speaking terms, yet some odd quirk of loyalty, or delight in his

punishment that went so far as wanting a front-row seat, had moved her to join him in his cavern. She'd even held a bowl beneath the drooling poison, catching the viscous strands of toxin before they dribbled into his eyes.

A small bowl. One she'd had to walk away and empty rather frequently. An errand she seemed to perform with tremendous slowness of motion.

He never *saw* her smile or *heard* her laugh, but there are certain things a man simply knew. A heart, once he'd had a look inside, would forever after be an open book to him.

Sigyn's pages were full of revenge poetry.

Loki shuddered for three reasons: first, remembering the searing pain of the snake's venom. Second, recalling Sigyn's atrocious grasp of meter and rhyme.

Third, possibly the most important and certainly the most relevant, the bloody, massive, fiery sword planted through the general area of his guts, insofar as he had guts while in the shape of a crumpled wad of paper.

For some reason, he had yet to burst into flame. He supposed Scratch would have ignition-resistant writing materials though. However, his crayon wax was melting and dripping to cool in violet puddles from a Jackson Pollock best-selling nightmare on the floor. If not engulfed by flame, Loki found himself most certainly feeling the heat. Unpleasantly.

He whined again as he tried to slither away from the sword's point. No luck. Too much obvious movement would give the game away, or he'd be tempted to tear himself in half just to gain freedom. Dissolving into a cloud of mist and floating free, his preferred method of dealing with pointy objects thrust through his innards, was not a viable option.

Who would have suspected a holy weapon could foul up his powers of changing shape? Crossovers between pantheons were not in any rules of play he'd ever read. Not that he tended to obey the rules, but that was beside the point.

Point. Ah-ha-ha-ha. Loki winced.

Right, enough was quite enough. When he managed to wiggle loose, Loki

decided he'd be having a word with this angel. Preferably several. Loud ones. Followed by the breaking of a sword across his knee to be used as a spanking switch.

And then, with regard to Scratch, he'd --

Loki paused to sniff the air. What was that peculiar smell?

Oh, blast.

* * *

Okay, that was it. Final straw, the one that cracked the camel's back. Scratch didn't do sitting around, waiting for the Enemy to strike first. He bit before they could sink fangs, punched before their hands had time to fist up, and yanked the rugs out from beneath any leagues of extraordinary sycophants before they got a good running start.

So. No more sitting around, no matter how many sets of creeps this angel gave him. Time for the Old Scratch to make his move.

He grinned an *extra-special* grin. Far above, in Denmark, a major dairy farm's herd began producing curdled yogurt mid-milking.

Let's get this party started.

Lesson the first: always keep 'em guessing. That he could handle. Scratch was good at taking people by surprise.

He kick-swung around in his computer chair. It creaked in protest, but he ignored the sound. "You hungry?"

The angel blinked. Scratch compared the reaction to past behavior, and decided it'd be roughly equivalent to "Who? What? Huh?"

Good enough for a start.

Scratch scooted himself, chair and all, over to a small work table piled high with junk mail, fast-food leftovers, and some plans for a 3-D double-sided tetragonal jigsaw puzzle which claimed, when put together, would be in the shape of Marilyn Monroe. Totally unsolvable, yeah, but that was more or less the point. Scratch cleared off a space and started rummaging.

"Hungry, I asked. You know, as in food? Snack time? Or are angels still not into

between meal munchies?" He chuckled, rifling through a Burger Boom bag for leftover French fries. They were only a few weeks old. "I got all kinds of stuff around here. Anything you could ask for. What profit the whole world if you can't enjoy a good pizza, huh?"

The angel tilted its head.

"Knock it off, already. You're making my ears ring with all the nonstop yakkety-yak."

The angel blinked. Again.

Scratch hid his grin this time. He also scooted his chair just a bit forward to hide his male body's definite reaction to a guy that ripped looking confused as a lost puppy. *Down!* he ordered his cock. *Down, I said! Bad boy!*

He would have sworn the organ in question blew him a metaphorical raspberry before boinging up like it was enjoying quality trampoline time. *Traitor. And, hello? Since when do I get a boner off the harps and halos crowd?*

Ecch. Hardly bore thinking about.

Scratch distracted himself by digging around again, finally coming up with an unopened packet of plastic utensils. "Sorry about the mess," he said offhandedly, knowing with painful precision just how hard nonstop chatter about Absolutely Nothing Important would jerk the chains of a strong silent type. "The Big Guy Upstairs didn't really budget in domestic staff as such, you know?"

He paused, fingering his chin. "Actually, I take it back. I did have this one demon a few years back. Far as I could tell, female, or at least she liked to pretend the gender. Smartest beastie ever damned to the Pit, let me tell you." Scratch whistled. "That dame cracked like a whip. Sometimes I almost started thinking she might launch her own counter-attack on Hell."

Scratch leaned back, drawing out his story far longer than strictly necessary, mostly because he *thought* he saw one corner of the angel's left eye developing a tiny tic. "Still, I figured keeping her around was worth a little worry. Never knew an idea doll like her. The things she could do with dried macaroni, glitter, and an empty egg

carton... amazing.

"Sent her up to Earth maybe a decade ago. Two? I can't remember. Anyway, last I heard she got a syndicated TV show and she's having a royal ball. Torture's her specialty. She shows hopeless housewives how to make an eeeeeeeeelegant window treatment out of ragbag scraps and offers DIY shortcuts to recipes a frikkin' graduate of French cooking school couldn't handle without growing three extra arms."

Scratch sighed fondly. "She's got six hundred and forty-seven complete and total nervous breakdowns to her cred." He pretended to wipe away a tear. "I do miss her."

The tic at the corner of the angel's eye was no longer by any means a figment of Scratch's imagination. *Score!*

He turned his attention back to the plastic ware. "Would you look at this," he said, turning a cellophane packet of the things over and over in his hands. "Never say I don't know the value of creativity. Let me introduce you to true evil."

Tearing the wrapper open, Scratch brandished his brain-child high. "My good sir, I present to you... the spork."

The angel's eye spasmed mid-tic.

"Fabulous, huh?" Scratch asked, just barely keeping down an attack of the giggles. "Is it a spoon or is it a fork? Men have gone insane trying to figure that one. Also from trying to use them for eating." He petted the brittle white plastic. "Good times, man, good times. But eh, well. Back to the hunt."

Even though he figured he was enjoying himself way too much for this not to come to a messy end, no way Scratch could stop now. Always had been a design flaw in his nature.

So, Scratch kept up a running commentary as he rifled through bags and boxes. "Got half a burrito here, only sort of fuzzy... no? Hey, how about some fried chicken -- no, wait, sorry, nothing left but bones. Kinda greenish. I could do you a slice of cold anchovy pizza."

He paused for effect. "Or, hey, the ultimate snack food: instant ramen. Hey? Hmm?"

In the utter stillness, Scratch could have sworn he heard that dromedary's vertebrae snapping like cheap rice cereal.

The angel whipped his fiery sword out of the ground, flicking aside a smoldering wad of paper it had skewered, and held the sharp blade aimed straight at Scratch's head, ready to throw.

"Whoa, big guy, take it easy, huh? No ramen." Scratch dropped the neon packet, then put his hands together and twiddled the thumbs. "Let's try this instead of food then," he said, voice low. Glancing up through spiky eyelashes, he said, "Tell me who sent you and why, or I'll nuke a cup of soup and pour it down your throat. And they say I don't move with the times. Morons. We clear about this?"

The angel glared.

Scratch glared back. "I asked you, are we clear here?" Black fire flickered around his head. "I should warn you, I'm not a fan of waiting."

And the angel said... nothing.

* * *

Loki bounced across the floor, smothering his own flames with frantic squeaks of pain and dismay, no longer caring if Scratch or the angel saw him on the move.

He'd rolled several feet before he remembered he could change shape now. Deliberately, he chose a form with arms, a diminutive toy T-Rex, so he could smack himself in the forehead.

Then again, if confronted over playing the fool, Loki suspected he would be exonerated after pointing to the extenuating circumstances. Actually, it might make a fine joke if he gave it the right spin...

But first, to the situation at hand. Loki cocked his tiny reptilian head and peered at the two male-type beings, devil and angel, facing down over a table of the worst petty torture devices ever visited on mankind. Especially the ramen.

Loki shuddered. By Odin's one eye and both of Thor's basketball-sized nuts, he'd always suspected some truly twisted mind lay behind the invention of the horrifying snack in question. Why else would it be so inexpensive and so foul, yet addictive as

crack cocaine all at once?

Pay attention! Are you growing senile? Look at them, old god. Look!

Loki looked... and laughed. Oh, but this was just priceless! Hidden beneath a tabletop and a sturdy, oversized tunic, respectively, both angel and devil sported paranormally impressive erections. Cocks all but pointing at one another, straining at their tethers.

Better than he'd dared hope for. Love had been his intent, turning Scratch's weapon back against him, but lust? Lust would do quite nicely. Perhaps better.

Let's see what happens when we increase the frequency just a bit. Say, up to eleven.

Loki scratched a set of tiny runes in the floor with one molded claw. A little trick Freyja had taught him ages past, in return for a favor. It worked well enough on mortals; he didn't see why it wouldn't have the same effect on those that lived forever. After all, its purpose was merely to remove all of one's inhibitions. Get people to let their hair down, so to speak. Or their horns, in this case.

Loki completed the rune set and watched it begin to glow. Above him, the angel and Scratch froze in place, save for their heads slowly rising, gazes locking in a stare intense enough to be almost frightening.

Almost, Loki insisted to himself, swallowing hard all the same. He scuttled back a few dino-steps, just in case.

A good thing, as it turned out.

* * *

Scratch stared at the angel.

The angel stared back.

A light sweat broke out on Scratch's forehead.

The angel's skin flushed dark.

Scratch's zipper broke.

The angel stood. Throwing down his fiery sword, he took three steps to cross the room and yanked Scratch out of his seat with one seriously large fist.

"What are you --" Scratch began to stammer, then stopped.

Words were kind of difficult to shape when there was a tongue, not your own, mind you, jammed down your throat.

I should probably not be enjoying this quite so much, Scratch thought vaguely. Hey, while he's distracted, bet I can grab that sword out of his other hand and... oh, oops, not a sword.

The angel snarled in Scratch's ear before biting the lobe.

"Well, as they say down here," Scratch muttered, "the Hell with it. And by the way, just what took you so long anyhow?"

Chapter Four

Surprisingly enough, there were no Words from On High, thundering down indignant, disgusted wrath.

Shockingly, Hell fell silent, as if all the demons had decided the better part of curiosity was opting for nap-time.

The cause was probably a natural reaction to reality bending on itself and the Devil falling for an angel. Scratch didn't care. He'd just re-discovered what a shameless slut he could be with proper motivation. For example, the offer of actual, sticky, real sex involving his personal person. Pretty much a turn-on no matter who was offering.

So, he'd never figured to get a lay out of a player for the Manger Squad. Didn't mean he was about to turn down a free orgasm when it came served up on a silver plate. Answers could wait. Scratch couldn't.

How many *centuries* --?

He'd do the math later. Right now? He was busy.

The angel had torn away Scratch's worn T-shirt easily as wet tissues, tossing the rags aside and leaving him bare from the waist up. *You had to stop there? The jeans, guy, jeans! Take a hint!*

Scratch complained in silence, however, his mouth being otherwise occupied. Very well occupied, namely by a pair of angelic lips and a tongue which, given how they never exercised themselves in talking, had surprising but definite talent when it came to deep, wet, raunchy kissing.

The angel reached up and jabbed his fiery sword -- the metal one -- into Scratch's overhead lights. *Poof!* Instant darkness surrounded both Heavenly Host and devil, minus a blue glow from dozens of computer screens.

Kinda romantic, in a bizarre way, Scratch thought dizzily, before the angel sucked a

lower lip into his mouth and reduced his thought processes to, *Bibble!*

Huge, strong hands plowed down Scratch's back. He arched, shameless, as the angel grabbed his ass and began to squeeze. Scratch heard a rough rumble of satisfaction, and mentally thanked whatever passed for goodness he'd taken the "vain" road when shaping his present form. Great abs and a tight butt? Absolute necessities.

Judging from the angel's reaction, mostly the other variety of sword jabbing Scratch in the cleft of his thigh, Mr. Wings would be inclined to agree.

Also, not inclined to make this slow or romantic, which suited Scratch just fine. Who needed hearts and flowers when you could have a good nine inches up your hole or in your mouth?

So I'm not a poet. Sue me.

Scratch rolled his head around on his neck as the angel parted his thighs with ruthless hands. The jeans tore more like wet cardboard than sopping tissues, but hey, they were off in a jiffy. He wasn't gonna complain, especially seeing as how the angel was then letting Scratch's own hands help him scrabble open his hard-wearing canvas trousers and push them down.

Scratch caught the angel's cock in his hands, muffling a gulp. The guy was size-proportionate. Tall as a mountain, built like a boulder, and endowed like a stalactite. Or possibly a rhino. Scratch never minded mixing metaphors when they applied.

"Whoa," he said, measuring the cock with all ten fingers. "What are you, kidding? And who the Heaven did your upgrade because, I have to tell you, don't believe everything you see in *Playgirl* is real or anatomically correct, 'cause I -- *ack!*"

Ignoring Scratch's commentary on the size of his equipment, the angel had opted to simply pick him up easily as a kitten and dump him across the cluttered table. Didn't even bother to sweep the junk off first. Scratch found himself nose-to-nose with a strangely smug-looking spork.

He didn't pay it much attention. Apparently, the angel could see just fine in the mostly-dark, and he wasn't one to waste good fucking time. Zeroing in, a dart to the bulls-eye, he parted the cheeks of Scratch's ass and dived in. A cool, wet tongue rasped

at his pucker, sadly virginal for far too long, and proceeded, with seriously perverted and fervent energy, to rim like a thousand-dollar hooker.

Scratch yowled in surprise and almost turned inside out. Hard but not cruel, the angel smacked his ass with the flat of one hand.

Guess he wants me to be quiet. Okay, I can do quiet. I can. Sure. No problem.

I --

"Gyarrrrrrrrgh!" Scratch howled as the angel began to fuck him with his tongue.

* * *

Loki-Rex had ducked behind one leg of the table, out of the reach of huge and holy feet in solid boots, but hadn't been able to resist a cockroach scuttle across the way for a better view.

And, oh my, what a view it was.

He had often heard the descriptor "bugged-out eyes." However, he'd never seen anything that made his own sockets bulge with equal parts shock, glee, and... well, all right, more than a little voyeuristic arousal.

Loki was only male, after all. His gender was known for appreciating a good show. This looked to be one fit for recording in the grand annals of history.

He stared, amazed and delighted, and knew he could be no happier.

Popcorn would have been nice though.

* * *

The angel flipped Scratch over, sprawling the Devil's naked male form ass-first over a cascade of memoranda. He spared a brief thought to wonder if even he, with his "unusual" rank and privileges, would be doomed to damnation for what he planned on doing -- yet somehow, he couldn't seem to care enough to stop.

He paused long enough to scrabble for a tiny, dust-covered bottle of mouthwash he thought he'd seen earlier, beneath the chicken bones -- yes! Swish, swish, wipe the lips, spit -- and there, sanitized and ready for further action. He wasted no time.

With his cleansed mouth soon fused to Scratch's, the angel reached down to grab a handful of demonic horn -- so to speak. Ah, yes, there it was, easy to find. Nicely

sized, though naturally smaller than his own. He measured it by finger spans, enjoying Scratch's yelps and yowls. He took his time at the task. A job worth doing was, after all, worth doing well.

He found himself surprised to discover Scratch had a pulse, blood throbbing through the length and breadth of his horn. A glance proved it to be deeply rosy, swollen fit to burst, and smeared with sticky strings seeping from the uncut tip.

He approved.

The angel dragged his fingers hard and heavy around a few strands of pre-come, then shoved them into his mouth for a taste. The flavor exploded with wasabi burn, tandoori spice, and the bitter scorch of raw cloves. He couldn't hold back a small groan of enjoyment.

Beneath him, Scratch managed a breathless laugh. "What, you like your meat charred?"

Frowning, the angel took one last lick at his forefinger. Charred? Not the word he would have chosen. But now, he found himself curious. What would he taste like to the Enemy?

A question deserved an answer.

The angel vaulted onto the table gracefully as a dancer, landing with one huge bare knee on either side of Scratch's well-built shoulders.

Scratch stared up at him, mind clearly attempting to work at its usual processing speed but hindered by the natural male regression into a troglodyte when hormones started running high enough. "Rruh?" he questioned, lips parting to form the sound.

It could have been considered an invitation. The angel didn't feel inclined to debate technicalities. Especially not with such a well-shaped mouth already opening up. He nudged his cock against the plumpness of Scratch's lower lip, painting it with his own over-anxious drops of seed.

Scratch stared at him, boggling. As much as he would have liked to slide his sword deep in, over the teeth and past the gums, the angel drew back and waited.

After a moment, he nudged Scratch and gave him a meaningful glare.

"Oh," Scratch said, peculiarly breathless. "Got it." The tip of a red tongue flickered out to swipe the drops of angelic semen from his mouth. The smears of holy seed left behind small burned spots, but as Scratch didn't seem worried by them, the angel decided not to dwell.

He had better things to contemplate, such as the way Scratch's eyes rolled back into his head, his mouth fell wide open, a rattling groan of impending orgasm burst from his throat, and his hips jerked up in sync with the arch of his spine.

The angel suspected Scratch rather enjoyed his taste.

Scratch was kind enough to confirm his theory. "What are you," he panted, "made of chocolate-covered opium? More!"

The angel shook his head. Perhaps later, or another time. At the moment, he had other plans.

Scratch raised his eyes hopefully. "How about you fuck me then?"

The angel grinned. He nodded.

"Hallelujah," Scratch whimpered. "And by the way, hurry it up!"

The angel gave him a look that indicated he'd been planning on that very thing.

Then, he got on with the show. Chances were he would indeed be punished for his violations; therefore, he would violate with a right good will and make it a roll in the spreadsheets neither would ever forget, come what might...

* * *

Loki boggled. *Oh. Oh, my.*

I didn't know that particular position was possible, given the limitations of human form.

If I had known Freyja's runes held so much power, I might well have put them to good use in my favor long before this!

Speaking of which, Loki glanced across the room to be certain his carved spell still glowed with sufficient power.

He blinked at what he saw.

Uh-oh.

* * *

Dignity? So long as no demons were playing Peeping Damien, Scratch decided pride could go get bent. He didn't want *anything* putting a stop to this.

The angel was kissing him again, strong, sharp teeth worrying at the skin just above Scratch's impatient cock. Not to worry, though. His hand slid down the pulsating length of Scratch's seriously horny horn, callused and rough as sandpaper. He knew exactly how to play the game man-style. It hurt like yowzah, and he knew from hurt, but also, it felt so good he let out a caterwaul of approval.

Thing was, much as Scratch hated the notion, if the angel didn't stop now, he was headed on a one-way power-jet track to shooting his brains out via his cock. Then it'd be over. Too soon. He wasn't gonna stand for that, or lie down as the case might be.

"Hey, cowboy!" Scratch managed to growl. "You in a hurry to cross the finish line? Ease up!" He bucked his hips, gyrating hard against the angel's hand. His own clever fingers, too nimble to play fair, stole down and got a nice solid grip on the angel's, er, sword.

The Heavenly being's eyes crossed. Scratch grinned. Apparently hours "wasted" playing video games did help with hand-eye coordination, after all. Who'd have thought?

He fondled the angel's cock, still shell shocked by the size but getting used to things. Already synced up with anticipation, truth be told. The thought of a cock like that one, a massive snake of an erection hard as chiseled granite, shoving up inside him -- deep, rough, merciless...

Scratch wondered if he might not actually see stars for the first time in millennia.

"Get on," he panted, "with the good stuff. Okay? Foreplay, check. Now how about you --"

A small growl rumbled in the angel's chest. Scratch shut up. Fast. Mostly because as the angel made one of his rare noises, his baseball mitt of a fist squeezed Scratch's cock like it was a banana he wanted to pop out of its skin. Scratch didn't need the angel to speak his piece out loud. He figured it went something like, "Push me one more time and I'll tear off both cock and balls and feed them to you. Understand?"

Sweet mamma, yes.

So he got off on pain. He was *Satan*. Pain was his game.

The delicious threat of abuse sent a cascade of shudders ripping through his stomach. Deliberately, Scratch grunted and pushed harder into the angel's hand. His eyes glittered and teeth gleamed as he rasped, "Threat? Or promise?"

The angel snapped.

About time too.

Huge, rough hands reached down to grab Scratch's ass and spread him wide. Fingers shoved inside his all-but-virginal hole, the trimmed nails sharp as little knives. No lube, no condom, no need, eh?

Scratch rolled with the pain like a sailor re-learning how to walk on sea legs, releasing high-pitched yelps of horny impatience. "Harder," he ordered. "Go on! What're you afraid of?"

The angel caught Scratch's chin between two fingers of his free hand. The power in his gaze captured the Devil and held him still for a long moment. Wanting know if Scratch was sure he wanted to do this with him.

"Idiot." Scratch burst into flame. Literal flame. Handy party trick, and it got his point across. No pain, no charring, and it definitely impressed the current audience of one. He twisted, writhed, flipped, and slithered his legs up and over the angel's shoulders. Heels to Jesus, hallelujah, amen! "What do *you* think?"

The angel closed his eyes. Probably praying in thanks or for absolution. Most likely both.

Not that Scratch cared. The tip of a holy fuck tool was pressing against him, ready to slide into home base.

Prayers could wait.

Scratch arched *just* right and impaled himself on the angel's cock. Six sets of wings flew straight upwards in shock, and the angel's eyes popped open.

He stared at Scratch in utter disbelief.

Then he shrugged, and finally, finally, got on with the thrusting action.

After that, Scratch more or less forgot his own name, never mind where he was or who he was with.

The quest was on. Two immortal warriors on pilgrimage in search of the almighty orgasm, an orgasm straight from the Almighty. Their mingled howls all but raised the roof on Hell's antechamber, echoing off the walls. A casual observer might think they were slaughtering each other, and maybe they were. Who cared?

Grasping both of Scratch's hands in one of his, the angel pinned them above Scratch's head on the table while he gave a live-action lesson on just how to ride inhuman cock. Scratch felt things rip and tear deep inside himself, sharp enough to make his eyes water, and it was just -- so -- good. Just what he'd needed -- wanted -- burned after, for way too long.

Still, Scratch knew no matter what the plan, neither one of them was gonna last much longer. Felt too good, it'd been too long -- so when the angel groaned mid-thrust, balls drawing up tight beneath his cock, Scratch let his own need for speed out to play. Nothing better than coming in tandem with a great top, like they had some hidden charge between their bodies that kicked in exactly -- as -- needed --

* * *

The sounds angel and devil made as they orgasmed would have woken the dead and sent them running for cover deeper than six feet under. Closer to home, it shocked Loki, his own hand rather busy at the moment with a most excellent wank, into losing control.

Completely losing control.

As in, materializing, full-size, naked, spent cock dangling in his hand and belly coated with spunk, on the floor of Scratch's computer haven.

He felt two sets of eyes on him. Amazed, disbelieving eyes.

Also, a rising sense of powerful wrath pointed in his general direction.

He dared to peek up. At any other time, he would have applauded at the sight of flushed, tangled limbs, thoroughly tousled hair damp with sweat, and chests heaving from the power of climax.

Still a tempting notion, or would have been if the angel hadn't been reaching for his fiery sword, and Scratch aiming a spork at Loki's head.

Loki struggled for a convincing lie, but even he knew when he'd been bested at his own game.

"Well, damn," he sighed, sitting back. "Was it good for you too?"

Chapter Five

On further consideration, it might have been wise to say nothing at all -- if the way the spork almost snapped in Scratch's grip was anything to judge by.

Loki swallowed nervously, scooting backwards on his half-naked ass. One hand for leverage, one hand up in the classic gesture of, "See? I'm unarmed, helpless and quite willing to cooperate. Provided, of course, you don't bury, plunge, or insert those unpleasantly sharp-looking weapons anywhere that either has nerve endings or a sad tendency to bleed, please and thank you."

Scratch didn't seem inclined to mercy. His dark halo appeared, swirling with a rainbow miasma of dull mud and dried-blood crimson, a bit like the rainbow in a gasoline spill from a car engine.

The angel regarded Loki with a face blank as a store mannequin's. At the moment, a type to be featured in a porn emporium's back window, but otherwise still and emotionless as the surface of a stagnant lake.

Loki attempted a smile. "Do be reasonable, gentlemen. I've an excellent reason for being here." He thought quickly and grabbed up an old standard. "You see, you're in terrible danger. I've been sent to warn you."

"Loki?"

"Yes, Scratch?"

"You really, really deserve this. I only wish it'd hurt more."

"I beg your par -- *ow!*" The spork, hurled with precision and force, buried itself surprisingly deep just below navel level in Loki's stomach. "That hurt, you prick!" he snapped, looking up just in time to see --

The angel, still calm as a force of nature, looking down at Scratch. Absolutely nothing resembling emotion appeared on his face as he moved his arm slightly up and

across with perfect precision. The sword in his fist burned a sudden, cerulean blue.

"Scratch," Loki had time to say, earning himself a puzzled look. Not the direction Scratch should have glanced.

If he'd looked upwards instead, he might have seen and been able to stop the angel's arm as it arced down, slicing his fiery blade clean as butter through Scratch's neck and deep into the table beneath.

The Devil's eyes opened wide as flesh parted from flesh. Smooth as silk, and almost as elegant as a surgeon's first incision save for the particularly unappealing meaty crunch of metal through bone. Loki almost fancied he caught a twist of disgust on Scratch's lips even as they gaped wide with shock.

Still pressing down with his blade, the angel shook his head. He looked somewhat close to grieved by his actions. As would a mother to her newborn child, he lowered his face and pressed a gentle kiss to Scratch's forehead.

Then, with an even gentler flick of forefinger and thumb beneath Scratch's chin, the angel knocked his severed head off the table. Thumping to the floor, it bounced and rolled like an oddly angular rubber ball, coming at last to a nauseating, wet *splat* atop an empty, flattened bag of microwave popcorn.

"Not quite the sort of afterglow a man expects," Loki murmured, staring at the severed head, which was a little too close to his foot for comfort. "Heated skin, running sweat, sticky sexual fluids, yes. Blood, generally not. Decapitation is somewhat rare, to say the... least." Unable to stop himself, he prodded Scratch's slack cheek with one toe.

Scratch's dull eyes stared back at him with the stupidity of the well and truly deceased.

Loki shivered. "I must admit I'm curious," he said. "Do you generally finish your assignments with a bit of hearty slaughtering? Or is this was what you came to do in the first place, and found sexual congress the only way to work around Scratch's sense of self-preservation? Males do tend toward stupidity if an orgasm is in the offing." He scratched the back of his neck, which was prickling in a way he was certain he did not like. "You have no answer for me?"

The angel gave Loki a long, expressionless look with no hint of sorrow or regret. He slipped backwards off Scratch's limp body, landing on his feet gracefully as a cat. A large cat. What out-ranked a lion?

Much to Loki's discontent, the angel kept his gaze fixed on him as he retrieved his bloodied sword with one massive fist on the hilt. It'd sunk deep into the old wood of Scratch's table, which gave it up with some reluctance, a screech and a groan, but near-zero effort on the angel's part.

Folding his wings, the Heavenly being picked up a scrap of Scratch's shredded T-shirt and began to clean the length of the blade. Loki scooted back a few more feet. Mind you, he had seen many a dreadful thing in his time -- had, in point of fact, caused most of them and stayed to enjoy the show. A naked angel, splattered with blood and semen, wiping down his flaming sword with the remnants of a Stones concert shirt proved a bit more disconcerting than even one of the Asgard could handle.

He'd be blasted if the sight didn't bring a pain to his stomach.

Pain? Stomach? Oh, wait, yes. Loki reached down and tugged Scratch's plastic projectile utensil out of his belly. Retrieval proved rather painful and surprisingly... red. "Quite an arm on that old fellow," he said, tucking the spork into a pocket.

The weapon used to strike Scratch's last blow would fetch quite a price as a conversation piece in any number of circles. Loki might be feeling a touch of nausea, but he had not grown stupid with his shock.

Come to think on it, a few more souvenirs might not go amiss. Loki nudged Scratch's severed head a second time, thoughtful. "Would you mind if I helped myself to a few locks of hair?" he asked. "Possibly a horn -- or two? All in the name of free enterprise, you know. As in, now you're dead it would be free to me, and I could make a successful enterprise out of selling you off piecemeal."

The angel paused in his diligent sword-cleansing to quirk an eyebrow at Loki.

"Here, don't look at a fellow like that," Loki protested. "He's dead, isn't he? Shuffled cleanly off the immortal coils?"

The angel narrowed his eyes.

Loki squirmed. "I don't suppose you'd be kind enough to turn around while I make myself decent?"

The angel wasn't. At all. Rather, he scanned Loki up and down, as if he were a butcher and Loki a prime beef carcass... a not-unexpectedly displeasing mental image, all things considered.

His sword burned a tad brighter and hotter. Perking up, as it were.

"Your blade has a taste for blood, I presume?" Loki asked, summoning up his best 'harmless' smile. "Tell me, is it sentient? I've always had a sort of curiosity about the weapons of the Host."

The angel continued to show no reaction whatsoever.

Loki squirmed. He'd never thought anyone could best Odin when it came to staring a fellow down, one eye notwithstanding, but this angel could give the old Norse a run for his gold.

However, aside from continuing to absently polish his sword, the angel made no move. Right -- that was it. Loki had always known cowardice to be the cunning flipside of valor. He who turned and ran away lived to fight another day, yes?

"I'll just be on my way," he said cheerfully. "But I do think I'll take a few odds and bobs with me. You've no need of them, I'm sure, and I don't believe Scratch is in a position to protest."

Scratch's eyes popped open and blazed at Loki. Literally. "You wanna bet?"

Loki screamed like a little girl.

The angel blinked.

"Give me a break," Scratch grumbled. "Did you actually think that would kill me? Please." His disembodied head rocked disturbingly from side to side. He laughed, a thoroughly unsettling peal of mirth considering the source and situation. "You two? You got a lot to learn about me. Flaming swords, decapitation, give me a *break*..."

Loki and the angel watched in fascinated horror as Scratch's corpse rolled off his work table, landing lightly on the balls of its feet. It shook itself dog-fashion, droplets of blood and semen flying off. Then, as if this were perfectly natural, the body began to

stumble towards Scratch's head.

Loki realized, vaguely, that the entity in question was continuing to bitch *sotto voce* all the while. "You know, a guy like me really needs to spend time working on glammers. Glammers, that's what I need. Make one of my Hell-spawn look halfway attractive, right? Get my rocks off with someone who's got a decent pair of balls, but not the kind that lead to playing guillotine master. Speaking of which, way to kill the afterglow, jerk."

Scratch glared up at the angel, who looked very close to dumbfounded. He snorted in disgust. "Gorgeous and stupid, huh? Figures. I always fall for the dumb ones -- well, granted they have a decent cock or a nice set of boobs. Possibly both. I'm not picky. If a guy has to have every hair curled just right, he'll never get laid, and I'm here to tell you the opportunities are few and far between in Hell, in case you hadn't guessed."

Scratch's head hopped forward a few squelchy, bouncing feet to meet his body halfway. Loki made a small noise, which, to his dismay, sounded much like a mouse caught in a trap.

"Like you've never seen this trick before," Scratch scoffed.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't."

"No kidding? Huh. Remind me never to teach you how it's done." Scratch's smile turned nasty as his hands reached down to gather up his head. "Don't leave yet, kids. It's just the intermission."

"Pardon?"

Scratch balanced his head on the stump of his neck, paused, and said, "In case you're wondering -- this does hurt like a sumbitch."

He inhaled a wet, gargling breath that rattled deep down in his lungs. Strands of skin extended, spaghetti-fashion, from stump to stump and lashed themselves together. A flicker of flame, the smell of cheap hot dogs scorching over a campfire, and Scratch was whole once more.

Wincing, he cracked his neck joints. "I really hate it when someone tries to kill

me," he mused, poking at the join site.

Too quickly for angel or old god to follow his movements, Scratch flung a letter opener at one and a broken shard of CD-R at the other. He grinned as both made choking noises when the missiles hit home and sank in deep. "Score."

Loki stared at Scratch with disbelief, while the angel slowly, silently folded to his knees in a definite state of anguish.

Scratch leaned back against his table, folded his arms, and smirked. "Bet you didn't see those coming."

"And I very well never may see myself coming again," Loki croaked. Despite knowing a peek at the damage would only increase the pain, he couldn't resist glancing down. Yes, Scratch's projectile had landed exactly where he had feared.

Fortunately, nothing had been severed. Yet.

The angel whimpered.

Scratch raised an eyebrow. "You cut off my head..." he said, his voice trailing off. "Seemed like fair payback to me."

He rummaged through the clutter on his table until, with a small, satisfied grunt, he emerged with two broken No. 2 pencil stubs and brandished them high. "I wonder how hard I'd have to throw something blunt to make a decent puncture?" he mused aloud, tossing the pencils up in the air and catching them, juggling aimlessly.

"May I request you not attempt to find out?"

"Nope." Scratch's attention riveted itself to the pencils, tracking their lazy arcs through the air. He sent one hurtling toward the angel and knocked his flaming sword skittering out of an already loosened grasp.

He smiled. Loki was beginning to appreciate why man and beast alike feared Scratch's smiles. "So," he said. "How about we start with the basics? Great sex, killer technique, no pun intended, but I'd really, really love to know how an angel got working parts, learned how to use them, and didn't mind applying those skills to someone currently of the same gender."

Loki began to crab-crawl backwards. *Odin, Freyja, Thor, let him not notice me...*

No such luck. Another pencil stub zoomed across the way to score the top of Loki's scalp. "You're not going anywhere." Scratch cut him a narrow glance, dark as bitumen and pitch. "Got a few questions for you too, as it happens. Why did you pick now to come around for a visit? I'm doubting you just missed me. Why did you come back and play Peeping god while I was having my fun, as long as it lasted? And, most important, would those scratches on the floor be one of Freyja's little love spells?"

Loki gulped. "Er... yes?"

Scratch sighed. "Figured as much." He bit his lip, as lost if in thought. "Okay. How do you want to die?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Die. End it all. Take that final leap into the great wide open. I'm talking to both of you, by the way, just so we're clear. You came into my home, took advantage of my good nature, cut off my head, and played around with spell casting. Me, I'm not the forgiving sort." The broken pencils zoomed back into Scratch's hand. He made a fist around them and squeezed. Wood crumbled into ashes and fell through his fingers in a powdered flurry.

He looked up. "I learned a long, long time ago that when you ask for forgiveness, you usually get the shaft. Not the fun kind, either."

Again, neither being saw Scratch move, but only registered a flash of motion before Scratch had both pinned against a wall. The fact that both were taller in their current forms, as well as bulkier, mattered not a whit. He held them high and fast by the neck, easily as rag dolls.

He sighed. "You know, it's kind of a shame. We could have made some beautiful music together, and hey, I remember you weren't so bad yourself one upon a time, Loki-boy. But you had to go and screw with me."

Scratch looked from face to face. So far as Loki could tell, the angel remained expressionless -- unless -- was it his imagination, or did his eyes give a small twitch? The briefest of glances in Loki's direction.

An idea popped into his mind. Divine inspiration? It would be a laughable

concept under normal circumstances, but Loki did not deem this a good day to die.

He licked his lips, slow and languid. "It isn't too late," he suggested in a voice low and sibilant as curls of smoke.

Scratch frowned. "Say what, now?"

"One always has several choices close to hand," Loki crooned. He let his eyelids droop over a flare of feigned desire. "And a last request is traditional."

"What are you talking about?"

Loki was in the middle of forming his next sentence when that which he'd least expected came to pass: the angel opened his mouth.

"Sex," the angel said. "All three of us. One good fuck for the road. Deal?"

Chapter Six

“Huh.”

Scratch didn't feel too inclined to release either Loki or the angel from where he'd pinned them to his wall. Granted, there had been an urge to yelp and jump back when Flyboy opened his lips and used them to make actual words, so hey, Scratch figured he could give himself a pat on the back for hanging tough.

It sounded like such a good idea he went ahead, extruded a third arm, and thumped himself between the shoulder blades. Loki made a strange peeping sound, and while the angel had returned to his usual Joe Stoic deal, he did raise one eyebrow a couple centimeters.

Probably because Scratch hadn't bothered to waste energy making the arm look overly human.

But meh, what did he care? He raised his stalky, hard-shelled new appendage and gave his prisoners a cheerful wave. “How's it hanging?” he asked, smiling at each in turn.

Loki swallowed, but to give him credit, Trickster did look to be getting over his attack of the inner X chromosome. He even managed a decent glare. “You do realize you look as if you've sprouted a lobster claw.”

“Yeah?” Curious, Scratch angled the arm to peer at it. “You think?”

“Plucked from a tank, boiled alive, and served up on a tawdry Melmac plate with pretensions of fine china.” Loki added a dash of 'sneer' to his expression. “Is it your intent to frighten us with such a ridiculous thing?”

“Scare you? Nah.” Scratch sucked his third arm back inside the human shell he wore. “If I wanted to scare you, I'd do this.”

He dropped his mask and let them see, just for a moment, his true face. The one

he'd been forbidden to wear when he fell from Heaven. He could only abide its burn for seconds, but now seemed like a great time to show the visage off.

Loki gaped, lips first frozen open, then struggling for words. The angel's gaze never wavered. His only sign of acknowledgement was a single crystal tear slipping from one eye to evaporate on his cheek.

Scratch was... beautiful.

"They didn't call me the Morningstar for nothing, boys," Scratch said, almost under his breath. "Cleopatra? Helen of Troy? Alexander? David? They had nothing on me. *Nothing*. In those days, we could walk whatever worlds we wanted -- you do know there's more than one -- and do anything we liked with whoever tickled our livers."

Curls of sunlight gold tumbled against Scratch's cheeks as he stared at his captives through eyes he knew, he remembered, were an unimaginably beautiful blue. The deepest shade of blue ever painted by a master's hand.

"I was crafted special. The best and most beautiful of all. To look at me was to want me, and to want me was to burn for me. One glance and anyone I wanted craved me like no drug on earth, then or now, from opium to Ecstasy. I had it all. Everything I wanted. Anyone I wanted."

The memory of his long-lost halo began to fade. Scratch's hair straightened and darkened into coal black. Irises shaded from heartbreaking blue to the dead dullness of a raven's corpse, spreading to cover the surface of his eyes. Diamond pupils of blood red popped open in their centers.

He couldn't see it happening, but he knew what it looked like. He'd watched it before in mirrors, in the surface of still waters, and had it etched fire-deep in his memory. From mortality to Glory, falling down to damnation. Wasn't pretty. Not even the rough-and-tumble good looks he liked to dress up in.

"So now you know who I am," he said in a voice like a heart going flat-line. "The package deal. And here's the kicker: I'm stuck here, like this, forever remembering who I was and what I looked like, and not able to do a thing about making amends.

"You, Loki, you can be whatever you want, go wherever, do anything, and

what's the worst you get? A few centuries playing with snakes. Is that fair? Don't think so. But hey, I didn't make the rules for your Ass Guard."

"Asgard," Loki croaked. He was staring at Scratch with a mixture of horror and hey, cool, some respect.

"Whatever. And you, Wing-Fling, looks to me like you figured out a way to bend the rules I tried to break. Got yourself a great package in more ways than one, and you know how to use the goods inside. But you still have the wings, and you still work the mission. Got to admit, it confuses me."

Scratch tightened his grip until he heard vertebrae creak. "I don't like being confused."

Loki made a garbled noise. Scratch shook himself wet-dog style, melting back into his generally preferred physical shape. "Oh, hey, sorry. You wanted to say something?" He pressed harder. "I can't really imagine it's anything I'm interested in hearing."

"Will you listen to me then?"

"Crap! Stop *doing* that!" Scratch glared at the angel. Implacable, naturally. "Either start talking as a habit, or keep your trap shut, okay? Otherwise we might find out if a heart attack kills me when a sword won't."

The angel half-smiled. "I'm not a man of many words."

Scratch rolled his eyes. "Where's my trophy for Understatement of the Year?"

"A preference for silence doesn't mean I'm stupid, or unable to speak when I want." The angel gave his solid shoulders a roll and popped out of Scratch's grasp.

"Hey!"

"Sorry. You'd rather I stayed put and played the victim?"

"Well, not now," Scratch grumbled. "Was all that just you humoring me?"

"More or less." The angel's lips quirked. "I do think Loki's in some discomfort, though."

"One out of two." Scratch glanced back at Loki. And cracked up. The old god's form shifted and melted like cheap gelatin. Watch it wiggle, watch it jiggle, then pop

right back into shape. He made it halfway to a baker's dozen of forms that could slip loose or break the Devil's grip on his throat, but no dice. His form always reverted to default.

"Having trouble?" Scratch asked innocently.

If looks could kill... but then again, none of the three in that room could really die, as such. Granted, the knowledge made holding Loki up like a moose head pointless except for the entertainment value, but what the heck.

"You want down?" Scratch smiled. Loki paled, but managed to nod.

"You want down?" he repeated. Loki glared, nodding again.

"What's the magic word?"

Loki hissed.

"Uh-uh-uh. Strike one. Try again."

"I would," the angel said diffidently. He'd turned aside to polish his sword.

"What is it with the Host and elbow grease?"

The angel shrugged.

"Great, it's quiet time again. Fine." Scratch turned back to Loki. "Tick tock, old god. I can't kill you, granted, but I know for a fact and according to Odin, the one-eyed bastard, I can make you wish for death."

Loki gargled out something like a sigh. His eyes telegraphed: *I can't speak, you moron. Exactly what do you want me to do?*

"Use your imagination."

Scratch could hear Loki's teeth grinding. Murder in his eyes, the Trickster raised both hands and clasped them together as if praying Christian fashion.

"Good enough." Scratch dropped Loki, without warning or ceremony, to tumble into a tangled heap of arms and legs on the floor. He turned his back to walk away.

"That, gentlemen, concludes today's entertainment," he said, sitting down at his computer and pulling up the PMS control console. "Which, just in case you were wondering, means 'scram.' I have business."

The angel peered over his shoulder. Scratch backhanded him in the chiseled jaw

without looking. "Snooping? Not appreciated."

He heard Loki scrambling awkwardly to his feet. Then, a few squelching noises. Silence. Some grinding sounds.

"Damn."

"Problems?" Scratch asked, bored. "It's like listening to someone try and hot-wire a 1962 P.O.S."

Loki frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Piece. Of..."

"Oh."

"Yep." *Click, tap, click.*

"Odd you should make such an apposite comparison."

Scratch allowed himself a tiny grin. "Having trouble getting it up, up and away?" He clicked on the site counter to get an idea of the day's take of suckers in search of true love. Huh. Didn't seem to want to load. The hourglass of doom taunted him, hovering in the middle of his screen.

"I appear to be... stuck," Loki admitted.

"Yeah? Join the club."

"I cannot change shape, you simpleton!"

"Bummer." *Click, click.*

"Well?"

"Well, what? You think I can do something about your issues? Find a therapist."

The angel laid a solid, surprisingly warm hand on Scratch's shoulder, squeezing with gentle insistence.

"I," Scratch gritted, "do not help people. Why aren't you getting this? You want someone who'll give a hand to a friend in need? Dig around the sofa for a quarter and call someone who cares."

The hourglass mocked him. "Piece of junk!" Scratch smacked the side of his monitor. "Work!"

"Scratch." The angel's voice was quiet. "I should tell you something."

"Unless you're serious about one for the road? You have nothing I want to hear."

Firm lips grazed the side of Scratch's throat. A tongue flickered out to draw a wet, nasty pattern on his skin. "Actually," the angel murmured, "I was, and am."

Scratch stopped in his tracks. He tried to speak, had to swallow a knot of utter *huh?* and finally came out with, "Say what now?"

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"You're serious?"

Nod.

"Huh." Scratch rubbed the back of his neck. "Enjoy a quality snit, or get fucked a second time in the same century. Choices, choices." He sighed. "Fine, I'm easy. Way too easy. I'll play along -- if you tell me who sent you. Although, I'm pretty sure I can guess. Loki? You up to talking speed yet?"

"After a fashion," Loki grated. Sounded painful. "Let me be the first to assure you I did not send this most peculiar angel to you. I merely spotted him on his way, and thought to make use of him."

Scratch heard Loki staggering closer, step by unsteady step. "However, I would also like to inform you that I had absolutely nothing to do with what happened once he arrived."

"And you just doodled Freyja's love runes because you were what, bored?" Scratch stared very, very intently at the rotating hourglass. He drummed his fingers on his mouse pad.

"No. I had intended to infect you both with unholy lust." Loki sounded sour as raw persimmons. "I had thought my ploy successful, but in the angel's first lunge at your person, he ran through the spell and knocked it all to buggery. Literally. The magic died. He kept on going. So did you, as a matter of fact."

Scratch snapped. He spun around his chair, staring. "Wait a second. You mean it wasn't a trick?"

Loki looked as sour as he'd sounded. "At least not one of mine," he admitted, rubbing his bruised neck. "If someone else is playing games, I know not who, nor why."

"You're... telling the truth." Scratch shook his head to clear it. "Son of a... you're telling the truth." He laughed without a trace of humor. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"Yes, well, that makes two of us." Loki glowered. "If you don't mind, I would enjoy hearing a few answers to my own questions. How did you infect *me*, Scratch?"

Scratch frowned. "Come again?"

"If I could, rest assured I would."

"Huh?"

Loki rolled his eyes and turned to face Scratch, pelvis front. Pelvis with attachments showing a definite interest in something. Apparently, himself. "I am not gay," he said angrily.

"That looks kind of gay to me." Scratch reached out to finger Loki's swollen cock. "Hey, little guy. You want to play?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Okay, medium guy."

"Scratch!" Loki snarled. "Intriguing as certain parts of my anatomy find your inappropriate sense of humor, as well as your offer, I must point out something you seem to have overlooked."

"It's obviously not a cure for impotence."

"The door, you horn-brain!" Loki shouted. "The door to your antechamber! Look! It's gone, Scratch. Gone without a trace. Melted into the walls."

Scratch sat up straight, staring. "I'll be damned all over again," he said after a moment. The door *had* vanished. "Got a bad feeling about this, guys."

"Your insight astounds me."

Scratch stood up and waded toward where the entrance used to be. He ran his hands over the area, finding nothing but peeling paint and smooth rock. "Things just got a lot more interesting," he said absently.

A quiet *ding!* sounded from behind him. A sound Scratch knew by heart. One he usually liked to hear. The sweet sound of a web page finished loading. Yet for some

reason, he knew -- just knew -- maybe because of the way his day had been going so far -- when he turned around to look, he wasn't going to like what he saw.

He took a peek.

"Sucks to be right," he said, almost resigned, as he watched the PMS meters of "good match" versus "mismatch" reversing in size and success rate. The negatives went down like a popped balloon while the successes went up like a cock at the sight of Mr. February.

"And somehow I'm not surprised to see this," he said. "Neither one of you had anything to do with wacky website shenanigans? Before you even try to start, don't lie to me, okay? I know you now, and I can tell if you lie."

The angel and Loki shook their heads in tandem. Scratch took in a deep breath and rubbed his hand across his face. "To summarize, then: we're stuck, we're alone, and my mis-match-making system just went tits up in a big way."

"So it would appear."

The angel nodded.

"I could get mad. You think it'd help? Nah, don't answer the question. I already know." Scratch held up a hand, then turned it palm up, reaching out. "We'll figure something sooner or later. Beat your sword into a jackhammer if we've got to. In the meantime..."

He glanced over his shoulder. "You two want to try that one for the road thing and see if a road opens up?"

The angel glanced at Loki. Loki glanced at Scratch. Scratch glanced at the angel. In defiance of physics, they glanced at each other simultaneously.

The angel grinned, nodding.

Loki shrugged. "I'm in."

"Works for me." Scratch turned around, his smile maniacal and his cock going up like a flag on a pole. "I thought I'd never ask. Spread 'em, boys. The Devil's goin' down to George's."

Chapter Seven

There's just a certain something men bring to sex. Sex with women? Not to be taken lightly. Females of the species invested all kinds of... feelings... in five minutes' worth of making slippery noises.

For one thing, they'd rather it lasted longer than your basic five minutes. But not *too* long now, and hey, don't lean on her hair, get beard burn on her boobs, or, Heaven forefend, leave any hickeys, bite marks, scratches, or any kind of sign a man had been there. Her orgasm came first, last, and most important of all.

A guy intent on pleasing his woman -- hurray for him, sure -- but face it, after he got done being Mr. Enlightened, Sensitive Gentleman, his own climax was more or less an afterthought. A sad, lonely spurt of semen safely confined within a condom. Ladies didn't want to get messier than their preference or ruin the sheets, and usually weren't looking to get pregnant.

So women were great, no doubt about it. Hats off to the double X. Still, they had the ability to turn a guy's basic need to get in, get off and get out into a serious exercise in concentration and control. Kind of like being faced with a chalkboard full of calculus equations when you'd been hoping for some dirty graffiti.

Depending on how well a guy controlled himself when horniness replaced other higher brain functions, he could either have a good time or end up banished to an inevitably uncomfortable couch.

Overall and after a few-odd million years, the so-called "gentler" gender tended to give Scratch a migraine. He respected their inherent evil, but there were things even the Devil didn't tangle with.

Hence his current tussle with the angel and Loki, of all people -- beings -- entities -- whatever. Loki said he wasn't gay, sure, fine, but Scratch had plucked a few stories

off the grapevine before, and it didn't look like the old god's cock minded the idea of a good, dirty mano-a-mano session. Scratch figured underneath the bluster, Loki was like himself: tri-sexual. Try anything once, repeating as needed if he had a good time.

As for the angel, his flaming sword probably had all layers of phallic meaning.

Not that Scratch cared. It looked like he was about to get off in a big way, which meant time to stop thinking and start grappling. From the looks on his soon-to-be partners' faces, they agreed. And faster would be better, yeah?

Scratch grinned at the two male-shaped beings one last time -- and pounced.

Vive la games!

* * *

When he had been given his unusual attributes and a tacitly implied lack-of-being-forbidden to go forth and make use of them, the angel had not quite known what to do. He supposed the ability to achieve an erection and come to human-type climax was a sort of Heavenly paycheck for the work he did.

There were certainly worse means of compensation. However, he had quickly learned sex with women, his first experiments, were not terribly to his taste. Women were lovely, smelled sweet, and had deliciously soft curves, rounded breasts, plus dips and swells fit to drive a male mad.

He had very much enjoyed his first few encounters.

Then time passed, as was its habit, and the angel found himself completely bewildered by the gender's rapid transmutation. Women no longer looked like women. They lost all their softness in a never-ending quest to streamline themselves into a size 2. Breasts shrank from generous pillows to tiny bumps in the road often re-augmented by horribly distasteful, hard silicone fillings.

The angel shuddered. The feel of a man-made breast made the flesh of his fingers crawl. What had happened to make females so unhappy with their natural shapes? Why force and squeeze themselves into fleeting ideals of fashion's fancy? It made no sense to him.

Therefore, being a logical sort, he had turned to men to see how he fared with his

own chosen gender.

Much, much better. Some problems remained, of course, but the angel generally did not need to worry about hurting them, and if anything had been surgically altered, it certainly didn't come up during bed sport.

Scratch wondered why he didn't speak. He had learned the wisdom of silence after answering, honestly, the question, "Do these pants make my ass look fat?"

After the bruises healed, he had decided keeping his mouth shut to be the wiser part of valor. Also homosexuality. Men might be oversensitive about the size of the swords they packed, but they would never hurl a high-heel at your head with devastating accuracy if you dared to be honest.

Well, most men. Drag queens were a different story.

But why was he wasting time on thought? Scratch, that most unlikely of bed partners, and Loki, perhaps more unlikely still, were very clearly ready to "get it on."

Far be it from him to object.

The angel did what he did best: got down to work.

* * *

I must say, it's been some good years since I have found myself in this particular situation.

Surprisingly, I find I've missed it.

Loki squirmed a bit, both from the pressure in his loins and the knowing glitter in Scratch's eyes. Gay? Certainly not. He merely considered himself the open-minded sort. A being of his nature, more often than otherwise free to walk all the worlds as he so chose, had taken advantage of many sexual offers in his day. Some male, some female, some which could only be classified as "other" or "none of the above." He'd found a new set of kinks for each gender on every landmass and in each dimension he'd explored. Anything from tentacles to hanging upside down during fellatio rituals had caught his fancy in the past.

Orgies were nothing new. It had merely been... a while. Longer still since the chance of clashing with beings easily his equal in power and might, not to mention

libido. The thought crossed and re-crossed Loki's mind that he should be careful before diving into this particular pool.

But only for a moment.

There was simply too much fun in the offing to turn back. He suspected he might walk away with permanent damage, possibly on favored parts of his anatomy, but he also felt more than certain almost anything would be worth it.

Time to dance.

* * *

The pause that refreshed came to an abrupt end as the three men pounced upon one another.

Truly a sight to behold, if one had the nerve. Sinewy arms twining about those bulging with muscle. Legs tangling together in a three-way pretzel fit to give Escher nightmares. Deep, wet, dirty kisses that were more clashing of mouth against mouth against mouth than expressions of affection. But then, affection was not so much the order of the day or hour.

Three cocks, ranging from long and elegant to shorter and thicker to alarmingly yet enticingly massive bashed against hips and bellies, leaving behind sticky trails that smeared from one to another until they mixed in a seriously blasphemous cocktail. No pun intended.

And in reference to tails, hands wasted no time on gentle, preliminary petting. They went straight for the gold mine, diving between ass cheeks to probe at tight rings of muscle. Testing to see how well they stretched. How far up and at what angle a man needed to crook his finger to hit another's happy spot and be rewarded with yelps of pleasure.

They lost track, quickly, of who was who was who. Did it matter? In their opinion, no. All three were more than happy to be caught up in a maelstrom of wandering hands, eager cocks, and strength that matched and challenged their own. When their legs gave out beneath them, they collapsed to the floor with hoots of laughter and picked up right where they'd left off.

The earth above took notice of what was going on in its guts and shook for fear. Milk soured, hailstorms rained down on California beachfronts, and mockingbirds began to chirp an uncannily accurate rendition of "Jailhouse Rock."

Monks prayed. Nuns wept. Priests headed for their church's stashes of communion wine.

Scratch, the angel, and Loki continued to fuck with merry abandon. Hard-swollen cocks thrust into eager asses, hips pumping in a ragged rhythm no one bothered to finesse. Nails scored along backs and teeth sank deeply into skin and muscle. There was pain and there was pleasure, rising to such great heights they could no longer tell who was who or doing what.

It didn't matter. This? This was the best that sex ever got. Ever.

For immortals, it meant considerably more than it might to mayfly humankind. Had a considerably further-flung effect as well.

This particular orgy made the earth move.

When they climaxed, the sun eclipsed ever so briefly. Someone, or something, tolerated the shenanigans, possibly even approved of them, but for all that had to wink away from the sight of three male faces twisting in orgasm.

Some things simply aren't pretty even in pornography. It doesn't mean they aren't the best times of your life, no matter how many years that might span. Be that as it may, though, there was nothing creepier than the expression a man made while shooting his load. Or funnier. Again, it all depended on your point of view.

* * *

"Whoa," Scratch said from where he'd sprawled out, all but boneless, on the floor. He'd pillowed his head on an overstuffed, well-aged binder. Possibly a user's guide from the early 1980's. "Not bad, my friends. Not bad at all."

The angel sighed, a definitely happy sound, tucking his arms behind his head.

Loki mumbled something incoherent, but well-pleased.

"You want to go again?" Scratch asked.

Loki raised his head wearily, peering out through tangles of sweat-soaked hair.

"You cannot be serious."

"Criminy, calm down. I didn't mean right now." Scratch petted his satiated cock like a puppy. "Good boy. Sometime later. You know, after you guys find a way out. I'm just saying I wouldn't mind you finding your way back down here from time to time."

Loki raised one eyebrow. "I have no soul to barter for what you offer."

"Did I ask for it? Sheesh. You take one guy up on a mountain, try to make a deal, and suddenly you're the creepy dude who walks around in a dirty raincoat asking people if they want a piece of candy." Scratch shook his head in disgust. "I get plenty of souls who end up here no assistance needed, thanks. Nah. Best I'm hoping for -- and it's a whole lot better than a soul -- is another mind-blowing party like this."

The angel sighed again. Almost purred.

"I think he might be agreeable," Loki commented.

"For him? It was as good as a speech. Kind of wrapped up *thanks, I had a great time, sure, we'll do this again soon* all in one, don't you think?"

"Peculiarly enough, I do."

"Them's the words I likes to hear. Even if they aren't, you know, actual words. On his part." Scratch chuckled to himself. He gazed at the ceiling then, his expression slowly falling into somber lines. "Does always seem to be the way, though, huh?"

"What would that be?" Loki's hand, which could be amazingly creative when he put in decent time and effort, crept over to lay itself atop Scratch's arm. He rubbed the pad of his thumb against sweat-dampened skin. "You sound displeased."

"Who, me? Nah. Trust me, I am beyond satisfied."

"What happens to be the problem, then?"

"Nag, nag, nag."

"Indulge me."

"Meh... it's my mind coming back together after you two blew it to smithereens." Scratch bit his lip. "I just meant, this is life for me. I find something good? It isn't something that can stay, or wants to stay for long. Soon as we crack open a hole in the wall, you two are gonna be on your way, and me? Stuck here until the universe

turns the lights out and hangs up its Closed For Business sign."

"Would you like a handkerchief to mop up your tears of woe?"

"Stick a cork in it, Loki."

"Rather stick a cock in it," the angel murmured.

"Stop *doing* that!" Loki and Scratch both shouted. They shared twin looks of annoyance and *what-can-you-do?* as the angel laughed.

Loki paused in thought. "Do you suppose we could really beat his sword into a jackhammer?"

"If you've got a decent toolkit, you can upgrade a turtle to a rabbit."

"Kindly refrain from violating metaphors quite so horribly in future." Loki frowned. "If that's what you just did. I'm trying to parse the sentence, and it's already begun to make my head ache."

"Yep. Still number one with a bullet." Scratch allowed himself a moment's pleasure, soaking up the last drops of afterglow, then raised up with a sigh. "Okay. No sense putting off the inevitable. You two need to be on your way and I have to figure out just what the Heaven went wrong with my PMS." He raised a finger. "Do *not* crack wise the way I can *feel* you wanting to. Okay?"

"Who, me?"

Scratch shot Loki a look that tried to be a glare, but didn't quite succeed. "Shut up, would you? If it's even physically possible."

Loki twinkled at him, smug and annoying. Back to his usual self.

Scratch grinned, shook his head, idly scratched his stomach, and padded, still naked, over to his main terminal. He dropped into the chair with his usual thud -- paused until the main reason naked computing had never caught on eased into a dull ache -- then gritted his teeth and reached for the mouse.

"This doesn't look so bad," he muttered after a few moments' navigation. "I think I see what whoever did."

"Can you fix it?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Scratch clicked busily away. "Old god, I

invented computers. Developed HTML in the back of meaty mortal minds. Inspired pop-up advertising. Embedded subliminal cocaine in instant message systems. There's nothing I can't do with one of these infernal machines, pun fully intended."

"Mmm."

"Want to translate that for me?" Scratch asked absently, scanning line after line of source code.

He heard Loki roll up to balance himself on one forearm. "I simply wonder if you haven't bitten off more than you can chew. Adaptation and mutation are notoriously difficult to combat."

"So?"

"So -- do you think yourself man enough to do battle with anyone able to hew into one of *your* systems?"

"Hack, moron. The word is 'hack.' And trust me when I say there's no hacker out there I can't whip into a crying momma's boy."

He paused. Winced. "Crap."

"I do suspect you shouldn't have spoken those words aloud," Loki agreed.

Scratch attempted a nervous laugh. "Hey take it easy. What could go wrong? I..."

The lights overhead fizzled and spat out sudden showers of sparks. Each and every one of Scratch's monitors filled with animated rodents doing the Hamster dance to a teeth-grating MIDI set on a five-second loop. The room filled with the scent of bitter almonds and burning roses.

A peal of laughter, soft at first, rose until it choked the air. Light, sweet, scarier than -- well, Hell -- and worst of all? Female. Definitely female.

Someone, somewhere, began to clap daintily.

"That's not good," the angel muttered.

"No," Loki said, voice tight. "I do believe I know who's behind this now."

Scratch whirled on him, shouting above the laughter. "You say what?"

Loki ignored the Devil. He stood and shook his fist at the air. "Sigyn! Sigyn,

explain yourself at once!"

The dancing hamsters vanished. A hundred images of a small, plain woman with sparkling eyes blipped up in their place.

Looking at her smile, Scratch wondered why anyone ever thought his grin was creepy. "Loki, is that who I think..."

"I'll be damned," the angel muttered.

"It's a little late for that," the woman said. She folded her hands smugly as a Siamese crossing its forepaws. "Greetings, Lucifer Morningstar, and you, Wanderer of the World. Oh, and yes, I mustn't forget you, Loki. It's been quite a long time since we met. Still, I have thought about you from time to time."

The woman's glance turned sly. More than sly. More like pure, candy-coated evil fit to make any man's testicles try to crawl up and hide inside his belly.

"Loki," she crooned, trailing the name over her tongue. "How have you been, husband?"

Chapter Eight

Scratch decided this would be a good time to take stock of his options.

Running? No door plus eternal damnation equaled the impossibility of escape.

Hiding? A better idea. If he angled himself just right, he could stand behind the hulking mass of the angel -- "Wanderer of the World," was it? Figured. Why couldn't angels actually be named Clarence, Joe, or Fred? Always had to be something elegiac with the intention of making people go "ooh" and "ahh." Nepethar, Taramasalata, or Bending Branches of Eternal Beatitude. Some such crap.

And people sometimes asked him why he'd ditched "Lucifer Morningstar" for "Scratch." Please. It was possible to be too pretentious for the Devil.

Crap, rambling again. Back to the plan in progress. Run -- no. Hide -- maybe. Gotta do something. Because, frankly? Looking at the pure white, candy-coated poison of Sigyn's smile, Scratch remembered once more and all too clearly why he'd given up on the females of most species.

Deadlier than the male? Oh, you betcha.

And Hell had no fury like...

"Sigyn." Loki took three measured paces forward, arms folded across his chest. Scratch glanced at him in curiosity. His gait and expression were thunderous as Thor, but the arms told Scratch that Loki had much fear of this lissome lady. Lady? Minor goddess? Not so minor? He forgot what Sigyn had once been -- goddess or woman? -- but it looked like she'd had some upgrades since then.

Scary ones.

Yeah... hiding sounded good. Real good. Ever so casually, Scratch began to kick-scoot his computer chair behind Mt. Holy.

Sigyn arched an eyebrow. The wheels on Scratch's chair froze, locking into place.

When he gave a desperate nudge, they screeched in protest. A screw snapped off and went *ping!* against a far wall.

"Lucifer, you wouldn't be trying to hide from me, would you?" Sigyn dipped her head charmingly and gave him a supermodel smile that sent goose bumps chasing each other up and down his spine. "I really do need to talk to all three of you. Be a good boy and sit right there for a while, why don't you?"

She pointed one French-manicured nail at Scratch. A wave of paralysis slammed into him with tidal force, locking his physical form into a bizarre mannequin rictus with one hand raised and mouth half-parted.

The angel snickered.

"Now, whatever could be so funny, Wanderer?" Sigyn leaned forward. "You wouldn't be laughing at me, would you?"

The angel hesitated. He glanced back and forth between Sigyn and Scratch, took a peek at Loki, and gave his head a decisive shake.

"What was that, Wanderer?" Sigyn waved a playful finger at him. Terrifying.

"No, ma'am," the angel said, running the words together in his rush to get them out: *nome*.

"That's the spirit. While I do sometimes enjoy a strong, silent type, I think I'd like to hear you answer me out loud when I question you. I'm sure you don't mind, do you?"

"Nome."

"See, Loki?" Sigyn gave her ex-husband an arch look. "Things are so much easier when men know their place. Which is to say, right where we women want you to be." She laughed, tinkling silver bells of terror. Like being delicately stabbed with a hundred needles. "A few centuries in a cavern holding a venom bowl does give a lady time to think. To reach certain conclusions she might not have otherwise. To --"

"Go barking insane?" Loki asked.

Sigyn rolled her eyes and made a dismissive gesture. Loki's legs folded beneath him. The *whap!* with which his posterior connected to the floor made both devil and

angel wince. Loki turned a whiter shade of pale, but score one for Team XY, as he managed not to yelp or whimper. Score two when he dredged his glare back up after the first moment's surprise.

Minus three points when he opened his mouth and nothing came out but the sounds of a mongrel dog with a broken larynx trying to growl. "Mmm. Not terribly attractive, but it'll do." Sigyn turned to the angel. "Two down. Will you behave yourself?"

"Yessim."

Scratch took a long mental step back, decided it was insane for three grown men, let alone the immortal variety, to be so very afraid of one small woman, and briefly pondered trying to stage a rebellion.

His gonads contracted. Eyes crossing, Scratch decided staying put sounded better and better.

Sigyn smiled. "And they say men can't learn. Actually, I say as much myself. Often." She buffed her nails against her bodice, peered at them, and nodded in satisfaction. "All it takes, though, is a little threat aimed at their favorite toys, and they fall in line like lambs. Delightful."

The three men froze. To an icier degree.

Sigyn laughed. "Now, now, don't you fret. I'm a reasonable woman. A thoroughly modern Millie. I don't believe in violence unless I'm pushed. You won't push me, now, will you?"

Scratch, Loki, and the angel answered immediately: "Nome!"

"Good, good boys." Sigyn dropped the charm -- at last -- and sat up straight, all business. Scratch had a brief, uncomfortable split vision of her needing only half-glasses on a chain to be the librarian of everyone's worst nightmares, Chairwoman of the Only Board That Mattered. "Let's speak plainly. I expect you are wondering why I've brought you all here."

You brought us here? Scratch boggled. You? Did you -- the angel -- the door -- my website! My PMS website! I'll be damned a fifth time!

Sigyn tapped her temple with one elegant nail. "Well done, Lucifer. It isn't so hard to think with your big head if you just try." She folded her hands, not demurely. More like she was preparing a ninjitsu move and planned to hit them all where it really, really hurt.

Scratch couldn't decide which frightened him more: the thought of another physical assault or more of her smug yammering.

"I'll be quick, boys, no need to fret. Once I've said what I came to say, I'll let you go." She drew a symbol across one breast. "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick red-hot needles through all your eyes."

The men shuddered.

"Bullet points: yes, Scratch, I am the one who's hacked into your PMS website. Honestly. Do you think I could let a nasty, petty joke like this go unchecked? So many innocent men, women, and other types out there, hungry for love, and you were getting your jollies by causing them pain? I do understand that's more or less your job description, but there is a line you just can't cross before you cross me." Her eyes sparkled. "A tip? I wouldn't use titles of books from the Old Testament for passwords. It was a snap to break through your firewalls." She frowned. "Yes? You have something to say?"

Scratch's lips flapped loose. "How? I mean -- who told you? What -- where --"

Sigyn sighed. "I knew I'd regret permitting you speech. Lucifer, it doesn't matter how I found out. As it happens, one of my new acolytes spilled the burned beans, but what does that signify? I would have found out sooner or later. Before you ask, I also hired the Wanderer of the World to come and put you temporarily out of commission. You can't be killed, of course, but in your preferred guise of a male, with your proclivities and those of the Wanderer's? Sex does nicely to keep you distracted."

"You set me up!" the angel blurted.

"And you fell for it, both of you, like little dominoes." Sigyn flicked the air with finger and thumb. "That had Scratch taken care of. Loki, though... I must say, husband..."

"Ex!" Loki managed to bark.

"Ex-husband, yes. You haven't lost your knack for playing the wild card. Always popping up where you're least expected and where I don't want you. I could have sent you scampering along, but really... I did owe you a bit of payback for those centuries in the cavern." Her eyes twinkled with frightening good humor. "You never did research your spell-work. Freyja's runes, when cast, affect everyone in the viewing area. *Everyone.*"

"But... after," Scratch said. "Why?"

Sigyn giggled. "Don't look at me. You took it from there all on your own, boys. And my, did you ever take it. It was quite a show. Not exactly technical perfection, besides being a bit rough and tumble for my taste, but there's just something so very... *warming*... about seeing two or more men have at the oldest game." She fanned herself. "In fact, I liked the performance so much I'll give the players a gift."

Somehow, Scratch doubted he would enjoy whatever Sigyn had in mind. Still, no choice, huh? Women!

"Now, now, Lucifer, be nice."

"*Nice* isn't my thing, Sigyn."

She made a moue with her lips. "I know. Pity. You can catch so many more flies with honey than vinegar. But, enough. I don't have the time it would take to hammer a bit of respect out of you."

"Healthy respect here, ma'am," the angel piped up.

"Pussy-whipped," Loki grumbled.

Scratch stared at them both, slowly shaking his head.

Sigyn, for her part, arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. "I'm sure. Scratch, the Paranormal Mates Society matchmaking service is no longer yours to command. I've taken over, and I'll see it goes into the hands of someone who'll handle the concept *efficiently*.

"Wanderer, you are free to go.

"Loki?" Sigyn tapped her chin. "By rights, I should leave you where you stand,

unable to transform or leave this particular Hell for a few odd millennia. I would, if a far better punishment hadn't occurred to me. I'll give you the *choice* to stay or go."

"Bitch!"

"Yes, I am." Sigyn glowed with pride. "Everything I know, I learned from you, darling." She paused, then burst into laughter. "No, sorry, I can't say that with a straight face."

Her image began to fade. "Neither can I stay and chat all day, boys. So much to do!"

"Wait!" Scratch surprised himself by blurting. "What are you? I mean -- I'm the Devil, I punish the damned. Quid pro quo. Who do you --"

Sigyn's glow took on a painful edge. "Me? I've made myself the goddess of women's wildest dreams, silly. I bring fantasy to life. And I do an excellent job of it, if I do say so myself." She winked. "Bye, now -- have fun!"

Her laughter echoed through Scratch's antechamber long after the visual faded, eerie chimes tinkling on loop.

The angel shook his head, reached out with one massive arm, and hit "play" on Scratch's MP3 player. Eighties metal blasted out.

All three men sighed in relief. Tension melted from their bones, and testicles carefully peeked out to see if it was safe again. Shuddering, each male in the room surreptitiously checked to see if their packages were intact.

"Men," Scratch said after a long moment, "never underestimate the power of a seriously pissed-off woman."

The angel nodded emphatically. Loki sneered. About what Scratch had expected, really.

He reached for a paper carton of three-day-old lo mein noodles, sniffed them, and shrugged. Picking up a pair of chopsticks from the mess on the table, he dug in. "So," he said, mouth full. "What now?"

Loki shook his head. "I must confess I've no idea. Sigyn is... she... er. Well. Would you mind, terribly, if I did remain down here for a while? Perhaps a century or

so?"

"Hiding out?" Scratch shrugged. "Fine by me. Just no pranks that involve crossing wires or pushing buttons to see what they do, and you're more or less welcome to stick around. I'll even teach you how to whip up a computer virus. Update your pranks to the day and age."

"Virus?"

"Trust me, you'll love it. Practical jokes get no better than strategic placement of embarrassing pop-up ads." Scratch ate another bite of lo mein. "What about you, flyboy? Wanderer?"

The angel looked at Scratch, at Loki, then back at Scratch. He lifted his hands helplessly.

"Yeah. I hear you." Scratch took aim with one chopstick and sent it whizzing past the angel's ear. "Thanks for telling us about the whole Sigyn set-up so we'd have time to mount a defense. Really nice of you."

The angel's cheeks reddened. He looked down, shuffling one huge foot through some wads of paper. After a moment, he shrugged again.

Oddly enough, that really did say everything that needed to be said. It'd take a stronger man, god, or portion of the Host to stand up to a woman who'd just discovered her inner Albright.

Scratch finished his leftovers, dropped the box carelessly toward a trashcan, missed, and yawned, stretching his arms high above his head. "So," he said, semi-casually.

"So," Loki echoed, examining Scratch with a sideways curiosity.

The angel peeked up at both of them.

"You guys want to have that one for the road after all?" Scratch asked.

The angel sighed. Loki groaned. "I thought you'd never ask," they said together, and launched themselves at him. Scratch went down beneath the double-teamed assault, half-smothered but happy.

His last thought before he traipsed off to happy orgasm land was, *Good luck with*

the PMS, Sigyn. Really good luck. Ten to one you come crying back to me the first time a customer yells at you.

But hey, in the meantime? I have better things to do. Two of them.

And I think I'll get started taking care of my new business right now...

Willa Okati

Willa Okati has far too many ideas for her own good, but is having the time of her life writing them all down. She has a very patient husband who puts up with seeing his wife pounding on the keyboard at 5 a.m., a hard-used coffee pot that she calls her best friend, and cats who think she's quite insane, but as long as she feeds them, will put up with anything. She adores anything that goes bump in the night, especially if it lands in the bed.

Willa loves to hear from readers. You can reach her at willshenillshe@gmail.com or visit her website for more information, excerpts, and links to other books at www.willsheornillshe.com