

The Threshing Floor

by

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illustrated by Joanne Renaud

There is a goddess in my bathtub. She eyes me as I heave into the toilet bowl, but makes no move to help me. While I retch, she just stares at me in all her splendorous glory, soaking in a bath filled with floating dates and flower petals. She's holding a sheaf of wheat in one hand, and she smiles like some benevolent mother, which makes me angry. I've heard that drunks hallucinate mice and pink elephants—not fertility goddesses. But I'm not drunk.

I'm pregnant.

Rising silently from the tub in a cloak of Tyrian purple, her face half in shadow, hair gleaming like moonlight, the goddess drapes a garland around my neck. Maybe she has confused me with one of her kind. I used to feel like a goddess—I sure fucked him like one. I still remember the worshipful way his fingers met the lace band of my thigh-high stockings. It always made him groan. Then I'd whisper sexy things in his ear to make him twitch. Once, I tied his arms to the headboard and rode him until he called out my name like a prayer...

Then he dumped me for the virgin in his philosophy class. She's his goddess now.

And this stranger in the bathroom is mine.

"Do you see her?" I ask, as the goddess floats through our kitchenette, leaving fruit on the countertop. Pomegranates, apples, figs...

"Who?" My roommate eyes me warily. She picks up one of the apples, and bites into it. "You mean Annie? I see her in church, sure, but that doesn't mean that we're friends. Frankly, I don't know what he sees in her."

But I'm not talking about Annie. I'm talking about my divine apparition and her sheaf of wheat. But my roommate said, "You need to get over him. He's not worth it. Besides, once you go off to Oxford, you'll never see him again."



I'm not going to Oxford, and I'm not going to get over him. I'm pregnant and now everything has changed for me. But my roommate doesn't know that. Only the goddess knows, and I don't even know her name.

I have confessions to make, facts to weigh, plans to reconsider, and decisions to reach, but curled up on the futon with my laptop on my knees, I am researching fertility goddesses. Native American Mother Corn. The Aztec Xochiquetzal. Celtic

Epona. Greek Demeter. Roman Ops. Phrygian Cybele. Egyptian Isis. Indian Shiva. The list is endless. Some fat, some thin, some fierce, some kind, but all revered. And each one seems to hold some mystery behind her smile. So which one is mine?

I ask him to meet me on the library's fifth floor, in the stacks. He knows the place. It's where it all happened the first time. Late-night studying for a class project amidst the musty scent of archaic books lent a sacredness to what had been only a flirtation. I decide that if he is really in love with Annie, he won't come. He'll tell me to say whatever I have to say on the phone. But he shows up at the appointed time, his body humming with sexual tension.

I can tell that he wants me the moment he sees me, and yet he says, "This is a bad idea..." That doesn't mean he won't do it. It just means that he's convinced himself it's a sin. And I'm the temptation. The one with the apple, luring him away from God's grace. When we first kissed here in this room, he said that I wasn't like any other girl he'd ever known, and when his lips found mine it felt like some kind of salvation. Today though, he looks like one of the damned.

He comes close to me. I smell his cologne, see his pulse beat just below the open collar of his shirt where the little cross he wears swings back and forth like a pendulum at his throat. He thinks I've asked him here for an illicit encounter. Something dark and furtive that he can feel guilty about until the next time. He'd always insisted that he hadn't meant to cheat on her. As if I was the interloper. The siren seductress. As if I had somehow come between two innocent people in love, when the truth was, he'd belonged to me first. He'd loved me first. I'm his mistress of the night, and he's waiting for me to seduce him. Instead, I tell him that I'm pregnant. He is silent. He walks away. Slams his hand into a row of books that avalanche onto the floor. "How the fuck?"

We used protection. It didn't happen in the back of a car, and it wasn't some spur-of-the-moment hook-up in my dorm room. He'd taken the time to rent a motel room and put on a condom. Somehow, I'm knocked up anyway. Like it's fated. Like his body made all the promises to me that he couldn't bring himself to speak aloud. Like it was some part of the

design of the universe that there should always be a connection between his skin and mine. Or maybe I'm just that fucking fertile, like my secret goddess and her fucking sheaf of wheat. Maybe she thought I called upon her to bless me with a child, like all those women in ancient days.

But I hadn't ever uttered that prayer, had I?

He's pacing now. "This is bullshit. Why can't you accept that I'm with Annie now? Do I have to tell you that I don't love you anymore? Is that what it's going to take?"

It's bracing, like ice water to the face. I don't want to cry. When I cry, he shuts down. Like the time he confessed everything we'd ever done together to his priest, like it was a sin. I need him to talk to me like he used to, when I used to listen to him practice the guitar and saw talent there when no one else did. When I helped him with his homework and laughed at his stupid animated television shows as if they weren't infantile crap. "I'm pregnant. I don't know what else to say."

"I don't believe you."

I think he means that he is shocked. But then I realize he means it. He doesn't believe me. And then I am the one who is shocked.

He's been *inside* of me. He's put his hands where no one has ever touched me before or since. He's heard me scream, the rawness of my orgasms leaving me vulnerable in his arms. He knows me. He's learned my secrets in hushed whispers against the pillows and tasted my tears. How is it possible that he doesn't believe me?

When he storms out, I start putting the books back on the shelf. The biggest one has a red, leather-bound cover with gold lettering, and it has fallen open to an engraved drawing of the goddess. I recognize her immediately. The crescent moon, the sheaves of wheat, the fruit and cornucopias. Her face is somehow placid, grief-stricken, and triumphant all at once. She is named Tanit, and I only wonder why, of all the ancient goddesses in these books, the mistress of the Carthaginians should come to me.

Some say her name means *She Who Weeps*. Others say it is the name of a monstrous sea serpent. The

scholars debate her nature. How can a benevolent mother goddess demand human sacrifice?

I slam the book shut when I see the little urns of ash at her feet.

I am curled up under a blanket given to me by the grandmother who married the man who made her pregnant. He also beat her. But it will be different for me. This life inside me is a thread that connects all the confusing facts of my life and makes sense of them. I think about pale pink cheeks and milk-soft skin, soft blankets and little arms that will always reach for me...I'm only 20 and this pregnancy will make a ruin of everything I have wanted for myself, but it will be some part of me, and some part of him, that no one can ever take away. I'll be the mother of his child, and it will make me sacred again.

Tanit is in the kitchenette now, baking bread, and the whole place smells wonderful, but I am cautious because she has two faces. She is the mother goddess who opens her arms in compassion and offers a fruitful life. But she is also the night avenger, the fierce mistress of fate who demands terrible sacrifices in her name. To make the loaf, she says, the scythe must first sacrifice the wheat. To make love, one must sacrifice the self.

I can do that for him.

He is at the door, and for one brief moment, everything seems as if it will work out. Then he shoves a paper bag into my hand. There's a test inside. He wants me to take it now. This is what he needs to see to believe. He won't believe my words, he won't believe my body. He will only believe the piss on a stick and the little magical symbol that will emerge like some prophesy from the dark.

I slam into the bathroom, tearing at the package with my teeth. I pull my skirt up around my hips, squat over the toilet, and let out a slow stream. And this time I'm not surprised to see Tanit standing there. The bathroom is an altar. It's where we are most naked. Where the excretions of our bodies are washed and carried away. Where we are cleansed and ritually prepared for each new day. I had prepared myself for him in this bathroom, painting my face and smearing my body with the oils of flower petals

like any temple whore. And so it feels like blasphemy when he throws the door open.

I have been naked before him a thousand times, but this time, as he catches me with my panties around my knees, I fly into a humiliated rage. Hot tears scald my cheeks and I throw the test at him. It falls to the floor between us. He looks like he might hit me. He raises his arm. I stand there, waiting for it. Expecting it. But it doesn't come. I think, for a moment, that he sees Tanit there, but then he snatches up the stick and takes a step back. I scream at him to *get out, get out, get out!*

Then I splash my face with water. It is already wet with tears and red and ugly. I have never been very pretty, even though he said that I was. I thought that if I loved him completely, reverently, and unconditionally, it would make up for everything else. But those are just women's prayers—the kind that God never seems to hear.

But Tanit hears them.

He is staring at the stick like an old fashioned augur, as if he can read his whole future in a plus sign. I want to feel sorry for him, but he's broken everything between us. I've felt him tremble. I thought I knew him, but now I know that skin can lie. "What are you going to do?" he asks.

The world has turned and now I have all the power. The whole shape of his life is now in my hands. With his child inside me I cannot tell where I stop and he begins. The baby and I are one stalk of wheat, grain and chaff. My hand fans over my belly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't—" he runs his fingers through his hair, a gesture I had once found charming, but now annoys me. "I don't want to be a father. I don't want Annie to find out about this, or my parents, or my priest...*fuck!*"

I listen to him curse. The apartment is stifling hot. Tanit has turned on the oven and whatever she's baking now must have burned to ash. He doesn't see her. Men like him never do. "I guess we have to get married," he finally says, and in his eyes I see that he hates me. That maybe he has always hated me...

There will be no holy matrimony. He has desecrated the temple and smashed the altar and nothing between us will ever be holy again. Perhaps it never was.

When he leaves, Tanit lays down her wheat sheaves before me, and I see the whole road in front of me in every seed of grain. The good is all spoiled, mixed together with weevils and husks and straw. I'm going to be like my grandmother. He may not hit me, but every day of my life I will be battered and bruised, beaten down. I will never be a goddess to this man again, or anyone else. I am sweating now, sure that the oven is so hot that Tanit is going to set off the fire alarm. But I know what she is doing, and I'm furious. She's building a furnace to consume it all.

Other women have walked into that fire...To make the loaf, she says, the scythe must first sacrifice the wheat. To make love, one must sacrifice the self. And to make the self, sometimes one must sacrifice love. There is a reason it was Tanit who came to me...Tanit, and all those little urns at her feet.

At the clinic, they tell me the fetus is the size of one of Tanit's pomegranate seeds. My baby is not yet a boy or a girl. It doesn't have bones or a brain or arms or legs yet, but it has a heart that is beating twice as fast as mine. And if I do this thing, it will never have a face. Like all those children burned away to ashes and placed in urns as sacrifices to the Carthaginian Tanit, this one will never live to know laughter or pain. But I will know both.

He'll blame me for this like he blamed me for everything else, but I don't care. I am not that same girl he knew.

The physician's instruments cut me down like wheat. I am stabbed with a winnowing fork upon the threshing floor to separate me into wheat and chaff. I am ground against the stone of grief, and when I rise from the table I am seared into existence like a new-baked loaf of bread.

I turn the bathroom into a shrine. I light candles. Put flowers in the sink beneath the mirror and see Tanit, beautiful Tanit, in my own reflection. I burn incense. Fill the tub with hot water. Watch the blood make it pink. Slip beneath the depths until the breath is trapped in my chest and the world becomes silver moonlight. When I come up again, it is to gasp

for breath. Lungs filled with the smoky scented air and the life still ahead of me.

He thinks I have had a miscarriage. And when I leave for Oxford on scholarship, I will never see him again. But I think I will see Tanit again. *No*, I am sure of it. For the scholars may wonder why such a benevolent mother goddess should demand human sacrifice, but I don't. Not anymore.

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She's fascinated by all things ancient and has—to the consternation of her devoted husband—collected a house full of cats and Egyptian artifacts. She's been writing professionally for ten years, and her most recent work includes an editing stint at a speculative fiction magazine, several fantasy shorts, and two forthcoming paranormal romance novels with Harlequin's Silhouette Nocturne line under the pen name, Stephanie Draven. Learn more at www.stephaniedray.com.

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