

GoddeSS



Maggie Finson

A "New Woman" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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GODDESS

By Maggie Finson

Chris Jannsen sighed while shaking his head in half mocking despair as his longtime friend and roommate continued trying to drive home a point that he had actually won several minutes ago. It was just that Chris enjoyed drawing Steve's often-impassioned pleas out to the fullest extent he possibly could without making it seem as if he was making fun of the guy.

Still, he really didn't like the idea that his friend had latched onto like a long-lost relative who had money to burn and thought that discouraging this particular wild goose chase would be more than a wonderful idea for both of them.

Stretching his slender, slight form to its fullest height, five foot seven if the yardstick was charitable, he turned his hazel eyes slightly up to better see his companion's wide open blue ones.

"Steve." He interrupted the other's histrionics with a wave. "Earth to Steve."

"What?"

The other stopped his nervous pacing long enough for his lanky, five-foot eleven frame to actually remain stationary long enough for Chris to get a fix on where he was without constantly moving his head from one side to the other.

“Has it just maybe occurred to you that the locals here,” [Chris gestured out the window at the mountainous terrain outside their shabby tavern room, and at several people born in this part of Kentucky and naturally a bit hostile to “rich college boys” from up north.] “might be having a little fun at your expense. You know, to see if the gullible Yankees will kite off into the woods on their equivalent of a snipe hunt?”

Steve’s oddly delicate face, mostly hidden under a bushy beard and mustache appeared to consider that for about twenty seconds before shaking with the rest of his head in denial...

“No way, my friend. This one is for real, and the locals fear it.”

“So doesn’t it stand to reason that possibly we ought to be a little cautious about this, too?” Chris pressed. “I mean get real here. An all-female goddess cult that uses magic to transform any males foolish enough to trespass onto their sacred grounds into any number of things a good storyteller might come up with to scare the kiddies and keep them from wandering in the bad old forest?”

“This will make my thesis,” Steve stubbornly maintained, adding as something of a bribe, “and it should provide more material than you could ever manage to squeeze into yours in ten years.”

Steve and Chris were working on their Master’s degrees in anthropology, Steve’s thesis outline on goddess worship in the New World, and Chris’ on tracing such cults from their Old World beginnings to the areas where they survived, or were resurfacing in North America. Both had been passionately interested in ancient religions and cultures since they had met in high school; and, had pursued that interest once they had entered university.

Chris, short for Christen, a name he had always hated because he had been accused of having a girl’s name and gotten into a number of fights early in life defending his masculinity, grimaced. “So we’ll just merrily trot off into the wild green yonder and promptly get ourselves so lost nobody will find either of us for about a hundred years, right?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Chris,” Steve scoffed in disgust. “Give me a decent compass and an up-to-date topographical map and I could get us there and back without breaking a sweat. Why are you so worried?”

“Because,” Chris stated flatly, “These people here don’t like us, in spite of our overtures to them. They resent our presence in their territory and our money. It would seem like great fun to them if they could ‘help’ us get lost so completely we’d be begging for help within hours. Then they’ll tell us that there ‘ain’t no such thang’ and laugh us right out of the state.”

“So?” Steve raised his eyebrows. “You like it so well here that you maybe plan on moving here or something? It won’t hurt to have a look, then we can get ourselves back to civilization in time to get ready for our next round of classes, and we might have all the material either one of us needs for a thesis.”

“And I suppose you know exactly where this place is and how we can get there?” Chris laconically questioned.

“Sure do,” his friend smugly agreed. “It’s fifty miles north— east from us and there happens to be a marked campsite with facilities not more than three or four miles from the worship site.”

“Figures,” Chris grumped. “Well, let’s get things packed up so you can drag me on another wild goose chase and get this over with, okay?”

“You got it.” Steve grinned happily. “And you’ll see, the cult and their altar, complete with stone idol will be there.”

“Yeah,” Chris nodded with worry showing in his face. “Let’s just hope that if they are, the tall tales the locals have been feeding you aren’t true, or the women aren’t home when we get there to poke around in their sacred grounds.”

“Aha!” Steve crowed. “You do believe something is out there.”

“Something had to get all those stories started,” Chris admitted. “But I don’t really believe in magic using witches in any century, let alone this one.”

“Well, let’s quit jawing about it,” Steve pushed, beginning to pack his meager belongings into a backpack, “and get going so we can find out for sure.”

“All right, all ready,” Chris muttered. “I’m packing up now.”

Several local people watched the pair leave without acknowledging their farewells, or even bothering to act as if they noticed the only paying customers their tavern had hosted in years were leaving. Nor did any of them tell the Yankee brats that the campground they

were heading for had been closed by the state park service over two years ago because too many campers had simply vanished without a trace while staying there. The area did have a poor reputation, and rumors had existed of something very unusual and hostile in that part of the forest for as long as people recalled being told by even older residents of the locale. A string of tales stretched all the way back to when the area was first settled by Europeans.

The campsite was deserted, and in a very poor state of repair. Signs prominently posted warned that the area was closed to tourists and they should seek another campsite in a safer area. The warnings all finished that anyone staying did so at their own risk and the State of Kentucky would bear no responsibility for whatever occurred while anyone disregarded the posted notices.

Chris and Steve both took a slow survey of the run-down buildings and picnic area, then looked at each other with wide grins.

“Wow, this is perfect,” Steve enthused. “Nobody else to pry into what we’re doing or get in our way at all.”

“Right,” Chris sourly pointed at a decaying cabin. “Nobody except the wild creatures of the forest and who knows how many ghosts waiting for their chance to scare the shit out of a couple of fool Yankees idiotic enough to stay in this horror movie set overnight.”

“Don’t be so positive,” Steve admonished playfully. “You might give quiet spooks ideas we don’t want them to have.”

Chris only glared at the tumble-down campsite then at the surrounding forest, then sighed in resignation.

“Might as well get our stuff set up so we can have a meal before getting ourselves lost forever.”

“That’s why I like being around you.” Steve clapped him on the shoulder. “You always look at the bright side of things no matter how nasty they really are.”

“This place gives me the heebie jeebies,” Chris responded. “Let’s just get our looking done and get out of here, is that agreeable?”

“Why not?” Steve shrugged. “We’ve got about eight hours of daylight left at worst. Might as well head off and see the sights.”

Steve didn't want to admit it to his friend after being so adamant about coming, but the ruined campsite made him more uneasy than anywhere he'd ever been in his life.

Putting a confident expression on his face, he reached for the equipment they would need, camera, recorder, measuring tape, and several of the remaining cold beers they had purchased at the combination gas station general store in the hamlet they had just departed.

"So why waste sunshine? Let's get moving here."

Chris reluctantly joined his companion on a trail so overgrown it was barely discernible as anything other than a narrow stretch of ground with only a few less weeds and brush than the surrounding forest had.

The trail was still visible enough to follow, but didn't make traveling along it either easy, or comfortable. After several miserable, sweltering hours of fighting their way through brush that seemed intelligently determined to impede, or even reverse their progress, the pair at last stood on the edge of a clearing that contained a number of things they could only stare at in near dumfounded amazement.

"I don't believe it," Chris breathed while moving his eyes over the neat, tiny cabins, carefully cleared out meadow, and most especially, a carved stone altar laid out in front of a magnificently carved effigy of a large breasted and hipped woman who was quite obviously pregnant with coming life.

The statue's face was anything but grotesque, hauntingly lovely, actually, with it's serene features lovingly shaped out of the pink granite and polished by years of weather and carefully administered care.

Its eyes appeared to follow who ever entered the clearing no matter where they were in relation to the carved goddess, who held a firm vantage over the entire clearing with her straight back against the sheltering trees on the northern edge.

"It's really here," Steve nearly crowed in his triumph. "I told you those stories had to have some truth in them, and there stands the proof."

He gestured at the idol with a strangely shy grin.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," Chris agreed without taking his eyes off the stone beauty. "I wonder how long she's been here?"

“Long, long time.” Steve pointed to the statue’s base, which stood a good two feet below the level of the surrounding ground. “And cared for every day of that time, it looks like. Wonder if she’d object to having her picture taken?”

Reaching for the camera slung around his shoulder, Steve moved onto the clearing itself to get a better angle for the shot.

Chris followed without any real thought beyond getting comparative measurements of the altar and statue, then having a rapid perusal of what at least one of the cabins contained.

Both felt something akin to an electrical shock as they stepped into the clearing, and an unreasoning urge to turn and run from the face of the goddess as quickly as their legs would take them. Fighting that urge was the matter of only a few moments, but each of them was poised to run before they managed to quell it.

Neither wanted to admit to the other that they had felt anything, but both felt as if they were being watched closely by someone who was both annoyed at their presence and mildly amused, like a mother indulging errant children who thought they were getting away with a great adventure when they were actually no farther from home than the back yard.

The longer they remained in the clearing, the more pronounced this feeling became, soon filling them with something akin to dread, though they had no idea what inspired such an emotion in them other than the strange surroundings.

When Chris began measuring the altar as Steve prepared to snap the photographic evidence for their material, the sense of whatever it was being amused ceased abruptly to be replaced with a projected denial that stopped both of them in their tracks and drew their eyes to the statue.

Both gasped in terror at what they beheld.

The formerly opaque, stone eyes were blazing with azure light and the pink stone of the face had become flushed in a lifelike approximation of genuine rage.

Rooted to the spots they had occupied when first seeing that phenomenon, each more than halfway expected the idol to step off the platform she occupied so regally and smash them to the ground. The wash of emotion, mainly rage, but also returning amusement

nearly knocked them over without use of physical force at all.

“You have angered The Mother of Us All.” A conversational voice broke their mental thrall to the idol.

Terrified, Chris and Steve were certain at first that the statue itself had found a voice to chastise them for threatening to defile her with such mundane acts as taking photographs and measurements.

Instead of the goddess, though, a tall, slim figure stepped into the clearing from behind the statue, favoring them with a chill expression and the barest hint of a smile both men found very unsettling. The woman stepped up to get a better look at them, then shook her head in mock despair.

“More tourists wanting to belittle Her with their silly images.”

Walking around both of them several times, she nodded, as if in response to an unheard stream of instructions.

“The Mother is very, very upset with you two.” She smiled wickedly. “The last time a man entered this clearing, he left as a very confused cow, who, incidentally, is still bearing strong calves to this day and that was twenty years ago.”

Looking each over carefully, she nodded in agreement to some voice only she seemed to hear. “Would you two like being contented cows, chewing your cud and waiting for the local bull to breed you? Again and again, and again?”

Seeing the absolute terror, mixed with a measure of disbelief in their eyes, she chuckled. It was a rich, melodic sound, full of life and love of the things in it.

“You see, The Mother does not kill, as that would be contrary to what She stands for, and always has since the dawn of time.

“However, She has decided that neither of you will need to learn how to moo softly. You should rejoice in Her Mercy, that She will let both of you go, provided you leave behind those articles which both offend, and could expose her to the debasement of becoming a curiosity for the mob.

“You will, however, have to pay a price for that leniency,” The woman continued wryly. “One that each of you may find even more unpleasant than being livestock.

“The Mother, in Her wisdom, has decreed that you shall have something of value to you taken away, but will receive something of even greater value in Her eyes. You will be found quite comely by the opposite sex, and have no lack for bed partners, or companions who wish to hold you. Both of you will be very, very productive in bringing children into the world to honor The Mother, and will do so quite regularly for a good many years to come.”

Pausing, she smiled widely at both of them.

“But don’t think you will continue with your former virile male pursuits of the females around you, as you have made a habit of in the past.”

Wearing the smile, and widening it even more, she shook long silvery hair out of her face, then stroked each young man with it in a ritualistic fashion.

“I think you will find that bearing the babies you bring into the world will not be nearly so much fun as getting them on someone else, but that is what The Mother has decreed for you two.”

With a wave in front of them, as a dismissal, she spoke a short, musical word in a language neither understood and they nearly fell to the ground as the invisible restraints vanished.

As both worked the circulation back into numb extremities, she gestured to the path they had taken to find the clearing.

“You will tell no one of this place, or what you have seen and heard this day. Go now, and be most fruitful in honoring your Infinite Mother who will be keeping a close watch on both of you.”

Neither one of them wasted a second obeying her command to go. Dropping the camera and measuring tapes, they charged into the now inviting forest without concern for the recalcitrant brush that had so impeded their progress getting there.

This time, the same path seemed willing to help them along their way, actually appearing to move out of the path to give them clear footing while giving each the occasional, playful slap of a branch across the rump or face.

They traversed the distance it had taken hours to cover in a matter of minutes, it seemed, and checking the position of the sun and their watches confirmed that impression.

Badly shaken, they could barely stand for a few minutes while catching their breath in huge, heaving gulps. Once their lungs no longer clamored for oxygen, their throats and mouths roared into the forefront.

The remaining six beers in their cooler lasted almost that many minutes as the young men drained them for the cool fluid, then rushed to a nearby stream to further quench thirsts that were far deeper than either had experienced in their past.

Following that, Steve gave Chris a shaky grin, wiping sweat from his eyes in an unsteady sweep of a hand that threatened to take out one of the eyes he was clearing.

“Did you go through the same thing I think I did?”

“Depends.” Chris gasped, still unwilling to relive that terrifying few minutes in the clearing. “If you mean did I feel as if something had reached inside me and twisted everything in to a shape it liked better, then gave me the equivalent of a kiss while laughing at me, and maybe with me, yeah. I guess I did.”

“Pretty well covers what I felt,” Steve agreed. “Oh, man, no one is ever going to believe this one.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to tell anyone.” Chris frowned, then carefully examined himself from fingertips to toes.

“What do you expect to find?” Steve demanded. “Tits or something? And do you actually believe all that mumbo jumbo? The crazy bitch obviously hypnotized us, with some kind of drug, then wanted to scare us good, is all.”

“She managed to do that real well,” Chris agreed. “And I sure do hope that you’re right.”

Grimacing at himself, then peering at Steve in turn, he finished quietly, “but, I have a real bad feeling about all this, my friend. A real bad feeling.”

“Aw, you just think so.” Steve dismissed that with a stronger grin. “You’re the one who doesn’t believe in witches, goddesses, and magic, remember? You also didn’t want to come, but what a story we’ll have to tell when we get home! I just wish we hadn’t lost the camera back there.”

“Do you want to go back for it?”

“You gotta be kidding,” Steve retorted. “I’m all for heading home right now. Spending the night in a real

hotel or even a Motel Six if we can find one, consuming very large quantities of alcoholic beverages, then sleeping this nightmare off once and for all.”

“I’m all for that.” Chris fervently agreed. “And the sooner, the better.”

The shaken pair did exactly that, going on an all-night binge that carried over into the next day, then spending another sleeping the worst of their excesses off in a comfortably modern and clean motel. Bleary eyed with the residue of their efforts to forget what had happened, or at least ignore it through the judicious application of contents from numerous bottles of distilled sour mash, they finally made their way home, empty handed. But then it had been a vacation even if they had mixed a bit of work in with the pleasure.

Both were more than happy to get back to the familiar, comforting confines of their apartment, and the equally friendly surroundings of the university town they had called home for the past five years.

Neither bothered to unpack their journey soiled clothing, but did retrieve the shaving kits and toilet articles before showering and falling into their beds on arrival.

They even neglected to check their answering machine for messages. All in all, both were too exhausted to deal with anything but clean, familiar beds, and another eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The next day, they went about their business as if nothing unusual had ever happened to them, and even managed to get through the day without thinking about the strangely alive stone idol and its unnamed priestess who had given them such a scare.

When anyone asked about their trip, they would tell the questioner that it had been a good one, and they were wonderfully relaxed and ready for the next semester to get started.

Their first real hint of any trouble came on the second day, when they met in the local hangout they frequented. Andy’s, a combination bar/restaurant, was reasonably busy, with its usual ratio of girls to guys, which was generally very good considering.

Chris met his current girlfriend for an early dinner, with plans for going on to other places for an evening

of getting reacquainted with one another after the break between semesters.

Jennifer was, as usual, one of the better looking girls in the place, and appeared genuinely glad to see him.

“Hi, honey.”

She leaned forward to kiss him hello, then drew back with an odd expression. “Are you wearing a different kind of cologne or something, Chris?”

Taken by surprise at her unexpected reaction, he shook his head.

“No I ran out of the stuff completely, so what you’re smelling is the freshly showered and deodorized me. Why, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure.”

Jennifer shook her blonde mane away from her face, then carefully moved its length aside so she wouldn’t sit on it while smoothly taking her seat beside Chris.

“Something just doesn’t smell or feel right.”

Chris gave her a sharp look. She was the same gorgeous babe he had left only a few weeks ago, but somehow, she felt different to him too. He couldn’t quite put his mental finger on the problem, but something definitely did not feel quite right to him either.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, Chris.”

Jennifer’s big blue eyes blinked, causing her eyelashes to flutter fetchingly in a way that had never failed to get him hot in the past. This time, though, it had no effect on him at all, nor did her physical closeness.

Staring at him, she shrugged while flashing him a warm smile.

“There’s just something that doesn’t fit the way it should here. Either something’s missing or something’s been added. And I can still feel it now without touching you at all.”

“Well,” he offered. “I am pretty tired out from the trip and everything. Getting my TA and class schedule squared away was an iron clad bitch today. Maybe it’s that.”

“No,” Jennifer responded with certainty. “That never bothered you before, and you feel like I’m sitting beside...”

Trailing off in confusion, she glanced around as if to make sure no one was within earshot, then leaned forward to whisper.

“Like I’m sitting beside another girl, or something.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He leaned away from her, surreptitiously checking to make sure no one had heard that admission from his supposed girlfriend.

“I don’t think your joke is all that funny, Jen. Not funny at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

The blonde gave him a contrite look. “It wasn’t meant to be funny, but maybe I’m wrong. Let’s have something to eat and then go to your place and prove to each other just how wrong I was, hmmm?”

There was a lack of conviction, or anticipation in her tone of voice and actions that alarmed Chris, but he reluctantly admitted to himself that she didn’t move him the way she had before he had gone on that trip. In fact, no woman he had seen since his return had. Not at all.

He grinned, trying to be his old self and coming close, but falling short in a disturbing way. His reply sounded as hollow as her suggestion had. “You bet we can, sweet cheeks. I promise you the greatest ride of your short, beautiful life tonight.”

The couple ordered their meals, and enjoyed each other’s company, laughing and joking like the intimate friends they were. Only the sexual tension that had formerly livened up any conversation they had participated in together was missing, and both of them knew it. That didn’t stop them from attempting to recapture it or having fun with each other.

The weirdest part of the evening with Chris was the fact that Jen was acutely aware of the men that passed their table at the bar. As a beautiful woman she was aware, when a man stared at her. There was that certain feeling. But, when she sensed a man nearby, she had an eerie chill, because she could sense that the man as if he were looking with curious interest at Chris!

As a psychology major she was aware of subtle sexual perfume pheromones that each sex emitted. Could that be what was affecting her, and the men? Was Chris giving off a strange female scent?

When the time came to leave the bar, unfortunately, neither one of them really wanted to go to bed with the other.

That was an absolute disaster.

Chris actually got sick when he tried to make love to his shapely companion. Which did very little to ease her, or his mind regarding their relationship.

Once Chris had returned from the bathroom where he had washed his face and rinsed his mouth after being violently ill in the toilet, Jennifer was already dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Chris, what happened on your trip?”

What do you mean?” He sounded defensive and hated it. “Nothing happened.”

“Did you and Steve,” Jennifer swallowed at saying the next thing. “You know, experiment with each other, or something?”

“No!” Chris was horrified at the implication that he was gay and had been carrying on a love affair with his roommate. “Why on earth would you think an awful thing like that about me and Steve?”

“I don’t know,” the girl moaned. “And I’m sorry, but you just don’t feel like a man to me anymore, and I obviously don’t do for you what I should or did. You can tell me, Chris. We’ll still be friends, cause I like you a lot.”

“Yeah, friends.” Chris drew in a long, shuddering breath. Not from the ages old rejection, but from relief he didn’t want to admit was there. “If you mean that, I think I’m going to need a few over the next little while.”

“Then are you gay?” Jen gave him a level, unjudgmental look. “Is that what it is?”

“I can’t tell you,” he honestly told her. “Except to tell you that I am not a homosexual. I really have no idea at all about what’s happened to me or is happening to me with anything right now.”

“But you’re right,” he went on hesitantly. “About being with me is like being with another girl.”

He gave her a very confused smile, then took a breath before finishing. “I mean, I never have been

one, or wanted to be one, so I wouldn't know what that would be like. Except that I did have a really good time with you tonight, without expecting anything other than conversation when we got here. That's really all I wanted, the company of someone I liked and who liked me."

"You don't need to use the past tense on that," Jennifer softly told him. "I am a psychology major, after all, and have studied cases like yours"

"Like my what?" Chris nearly screamed. "I don't have any idea what my case is, or even how to describe what I'm feeling or thinking about it right now."

"Ever hear of transsexuals?" Jen gave him a direct look when asking that question.

"Sure," he responded morosely. "Who hasn't these days? But I never wanted to be a girl or was even tempted to dress up like one at all. I just don't know what I am, or even who I am right now. Everything's all jumbled up and I can't seem to find up, down, sideways, or whatever."

"I can stay and talk."

Jen patted his shoulder, then gave him a quick hug, sisterlier than anything else, and once it was clear that was the intent, Chris stopped trying to pull away and accepted it hungrily.

"About what?" he restated. "I don't know what to talk about or where to start on anything. This is the first time anything like this has ever happened to me, and I don't like it very much right now. Not at all, in fact."

"That's okay." Jennifer kept stroking his shoulder to calm him, as a mother would to a frightened child.

"Maybe you should give being a girl a try. Just on a trial basis, nothing permanent," she hastily added upon seeing the outrage on his face.

Undaunted by that, she carried on. "I'd be happy to help, if you want to try for a night out, or something."

"Oh, sure," he bitterly answered, pulling out of her grasp and fiddling with a strand of his hair. "Have one bad night, and find that you prefer your girlfriend as just a friend, and she wants you to try being a girl. It isn't that bad, you know. I'm sure it'll pass soon."

"Maybe so," Jen agreed hopefully. "But if it doesn't, keep what I've told you in mind. It couldn't hurt anything."

“Not until some other guy beats the hell out of me for going out in public in a dress,” was the dry response.

“Let’s worry about that when and if it ever happens,” Jen soothed. “I’d make sure you could pass muster before taking you out anywhere like that.”

“Could we talk about something else now?” Chris pleaded. “Next thing I know, you’ll start calling me Chrissy, or something equally ridiculous. And I know I couldn’t take that right now.”

“Sure.”

Jen smiled at him, thinking that Chrissy would suit him just fine all things considered, and that she was going to make very sure that little Chrissy not only got out in public, but was a real hot, sexy thing when she did. Shaking herself, she wondered why she had thought such a thing at all, or even suggested it in such a point blank manner when there was no evidence at all that Chris was having anything more than a hangover from his trip.

They passed the next few hours deep in conversation involving upcoming classes, Chris’ TA position, or teaching assistantship as it was properly known, and what each planned to do once they got their degrees.

Jen left shortly after two in the morning, troubled by her feelings, and the way she had subtly tried to get Chris to act the girl all through the evening and night without really knowing why she did. Those kinds of things had a tendency to turn her off rather than make her want to do it to someone as confused as Chris had been about things that night.

Chris went to bed wondering why the idea Jen had broached was so attractive to him. Maybe he would give that a try if things didn’t settle back into a normal track for him within a few days. The shock to his system and sensibilities might even bring him back to his normal self. Well, that was a very misty maybe at best, the part about dressing as a girl and seeing how it went and felt.

He was exhausted again and fell almost immediately into a deep, dream haunted sleep.

Chris awakened without recalling any of those dreams, but with the vague impression that they hadn’t been very pleasant. Bathed in sweat, with his covers twisted around him or thrown to the floor, he

blearily pulled himself out of the tangle then stumbled to the shower. A steady stream of hot water with its attendant clouds of steam did a lot to restore him and he stepped out with the beginnings of a good mood circling his consciousness.

That fled as he toweled off his dripping body.

Chris had never possessed much in the way of body hair, with his American Indian ancestry being nearly a quarter of his family bloodline that had been something he simply lived with.

But this?

What hair had been on his legs, arms, and underarms, even the fine, downy stuff on his hands and feet, had sluiced off in the shower as if he'd used one of Jen's depilatories.

The skin, now perfectly hairless, also had the smooth, silky sheen of pampered female flesh.

Moaning, he pinched himself savagely to make sure he wasn't dreaming. When the pain subsided and nothing had changed, he swore for a minute or so, then got out his shaving gear, which turned out to be unnecessary as well. His face was as smooth and stubble free as the rest of his body.

All the body hair he seemed to have left was his scalp, eyebrows, lashes, and a neatly inverted triangle of dark, curly hair at his crotch.

Even the hair he had remaining had altered enough for him to really notice the differences. His eyebrows were thinner, arched delicately over his eyes in a very feminine shape, while the lashes surrounding those appeared to be thicker and longer, with something of a curl to them. The hair of his scalp looked thicker and had gone from his usual dark blonde to a darker shade, that simply being wet had nothing to do with. Even wet, it hung differently, and felt heavier than he was accustomed to.

All those changes taken together gave his face a quite feminine cast, much more than before, and the hairlessness of his other body parts added to the general impression. Hurriedly examining himself in a slightly fogged full-length mirror, Chris was relieved to discover that his familiar body contours had remained unchanged.

Or had they? Was his waist a bit higher and narrower, while his hips and bottom were just a tiny smidgen larger and rounder?

Getting dressed was something of a relief, as everything fit without trouble or discomfort beyond the odd feeling his newly smooth, soft skin gave as the rough material of his jeans and shirt rubbed against it.

Fortunately, it was a Saturday, so he wouldn't need to go anywhere at all if he didn't want to, and right then, he didn't wish to face anything or anyone.

Steve had spent the night with his current girlfriend, Gina, and would probably be gone most of the day and into the evening as well, giving Chris some badly needed privacy to consider the conversation, and feelings he had experienced with Jen the previous evening, and his mildly altered appearance. As his hair dried, he was convinced that it was thicker, softer in texture, and getting darker.

He was sitting there nursing a cup of coffee and wondering if Jen had sneaked back in last night and shaved him or something while he slept so heavily when the apartment door slammed open and Steve stormed into the place followed by a puzzled, but slightly amused Gina.

"Hello," Chris needlessly greeted the retreating back of his roommate as the other slammed into his room with a string of curses that sounded more frantic than angry.

Gina, a raven-haired girl with a good figure and lovely, delicate features gave him a tired smile of greeting then shrugged all of her five foot three inch frame along with her slim shoulders. Sitting cross legged on the couch across from Chris, she prepared to wait for Steve, no matter how long the guy spent in his room doing whatever he was making so much noise at. With her characteristic calm, the young woman gave Chris a long, careful looking over, then sighed in disbelief as she sat back.

"You too, I see."

"Me too?" Chris stared at the closed bedroom door as if he could see his friend through it.

"Notice anything odd about Steve when he came in?" she queried.

"Now that you mention it, I thought you had finally talked him into shaving his beard and mustache off," Chris cautiously responded. "He actually tore through here too fast for me to make out much more, if that isn't enough"

“That’s pretty much it,” she confirmed, bobbing her shoulder length hair with her nod. “Only he didn’t shave, and accused me of doing it to him in his sleep this morning.”

“Along with his legs, arms, and just about anywhere else he had body hair?” Chris finished, with a question that really wasn’t one.

“That about covers it.” Gina worriedly watched the still closed door while answering. “I finally convinced him that I hadn’t done anything and he quit yelling, just stared at himself and muttered something under his breath that sounded like ‘*the goddess*’. That mean anything to you, Chris?”

It did, but he wasn’t able to tell her, just as he hadn’t been able to say anything to Jen the previous night.

“It might.”

“Seeing you, even thought the results are a bit less dramatic,” Gina mused, “I think it does, and that the two of you did something, or ran into something on that trip that caused these problems. Unless both of you decided all at once to discover what it feels like to have no hair at all on your bodies, perfectly smooth faces that don’t look like they’ve ever felt a razor, and have sworn off women in some weird pact that neither of you is telling anyone about.”

Gina stared at Chris with a crooked grin.

“I can’t tell you anything.”

Chris seriously tried, but just couldn’t get it past his tongue at first, then didn’t want to at all. He was inexplicably shy about telling the story of that stone image and its priestess in the Kentucky mountains.

“Jen told me enough.” Gina again watched the doorway with anxious eyes. “You don’t suppose he’s hurt himself or anything stupid like that, do you?”

That question was answered as a distraught Steve re—entered the room to sit heavily on the couch next to Gina with a heaving sigh.

“I went through everything I brought back. And there’s nothing out of the ordinary, not even any souvenirs that might have caused this.”

Chris thought his friend looked strangely vulnerable and young without the thick beard. Another oddity, the newly bared skin of his face wasn’t any lighter

than the rest of his face, which it should have been with all the sun the guy had been getting lately.

Any further conversation was interrupted by the doorbell chiming and the front door opening to admit Jennifer, who stopped to openly stare at Steve in something close to shock.

"I always wondered what you'd look like without the beard," she murmured, then greeted the others.

"Hi Gina, Chris."

Chris made room for the new addition to their greatly puzzled group, and she carefully sat herself on the arm of the chair without making her usual contact with him.

Steve and Gina were also staying painfully separate, though only by a few inches. The way they normally leaned against and clung to each other, the distance looked like miles, and looked to be farther than that emotionally.

"I take it you've been talking to Gina?" Chris asked his girlfriend without preamble.

"She called me last night after I got home," Jen confirmed. "She was very upset about the same problems you and I ran into last night." Jen shook her hair away from her face, then gave both guys a long, penetrating examination. "I think both of you need to tell us what's going on here, don't you?"

Up to then the unwillingness to tell anyone had been so powerful it may as well have been engraved in Chris' mind with a laser. Now, he found the story of their encounter with the forest goddess and its priestess coming out in, at first, hesitant little trickles, then a flood as Steve added his own observations and reactions to the story.

Finished, after about an hour, both guys felt worn out, as if they had just made the frantic, unthinking run from the clearing to the campsite all over again.

"That is one weird story." Gina, who was an English major shook her head. "Are you sure this isn't just some elaborate practical joke you two cooked up on a boring trip?"

"Why would we bother?" Chris wearily ran a hand through hair that was definitely thicker and softer than his had been the night before. "Neither one of us would do something like this for the fun of it, and though we read the stuff, wouldn't even dream of

making up a fantasy story like the one we just told you. It's too stupid to be made up, isn't it?"

"Got a point there," Jen thoughtfully touched Chris' hair with an exploratory fingertip, then ran her whole hand through his shining mass with a sigh. "And there is the way Gina and I felt towards each of you last night to throw in to the pot too."

"Yes." Gina mused.

"It was really a strange feeling, like I was trying to kiss another girl last night. And Steve was nowhere near as insistent that we go to bed and play as he normally is. Or was."

"Which leaves us with the very uncomfortable possibility that what we went through was real, and that we're turning into girls," Chris finished without enthusiasm.

Steve glowered, then shook his head with a growl of denial.

Gina reached over to take his hand, giving it a squeeze.

"Oh, don't be so worried. This is probably only some oddball physical reaction to something that hit you both pretty hard mentally."

"And if it's not?" Chris questioned no one in particular.

"Over half the population of this country gets along just fine as females," Jen stated. "In the crude way some people have of saying things any more, if it is true, 'Welcome to the Breeder's Club'. And at least you both have someone willing to see this through with you."

"Which is better than being alone with it," Gina added as both guys winced at the phrasing Jen had used.

"And from the looks of things," she added, running her hand through Steve's thickening hair while looking at Chris' then carefully examining both young men's faces. "The two of you might as well get used to the idea of being very popular members of 'The Breeder's Club' because you're already potentially very pretty women."

"Let's not jump into any half baked plans, without something else happening to keep convincing us," Steve urged. The thought of being pretty enough to at-

tract other men as a woman made his face take on a greenish cast.

Chris felt his own stomach rumble in sympathy. Or was it? He'd been sick last night, and so had Steve according to the stories both he and Gina had told. Suddenly Chris had to reach the bathroom again, and emptied the small contents of his stomach into the toilet for the second time in less than twelve hours. He was surprised that there was that much left to throw up once he finished and had wiped his face and mouth, then brushed his teeth before returning to the group in the living room.

"Are you okay?" an anxious Jennifer demanded to know as he returned wearing a sheepish, embarrassed expression.

"I feel fine now," Chris replied, then sat down with a thump that vibrated through his entire body. "Just a little worn—out, like the flu does to you."

Looking a lot greener, Steve suddenly slapped a hand over his mouth and lunged off the couch to reach the bathroom barely in time to repeat what Chris had just done. The sounds of retching and gagging nearly made them all sick. Chris gripped his abused stomach tightly rocking back and forth slightly with a muffled groan.

"Both of you seem to be having a lively case of it, whatever it is," agreed Gina, reaching over to feel Chris' forehead with the back of her hand. "But you don't feel like you have a fever, and neither does Steve."

"It sure hurts, though," Chris told the girls. "All the way to my toes and up to the top of my head along with every thing in between those two places joining in."

"Well, both of you seem to be changing physically." Jen looked at him carefully, from head to toe. "Maybe this is part of that."

"Or it could be morning sickness," Gina helpfully put in.

"Please don't even think that," Chris begged. "It would be right in line with what that woman in the forest told us, but I think she meant we'd end up getting that way in the usual fashion, you know?"

"Well," Gina teased. "If the two of you start getting fat in the middles, we'll know for sure, won't we?"

"What are you three talking about now?" a recovered Steve asked as he returned.