A centuries-old agreement between two families forces a young man to choose between the gender of his birth, and the dutiful daughter his mother wants him to be; between the freedom to choose his life, and servitude as the wife of a man able to call upon dark powers from another world.
Dedication

To those who wait...

… In the shadows,
for the coming of a better world.
A world of justice.
A world of respect.
A world of everything Trump isn’t.

As the saying goes,
it is always darkest
just before the dawn.

Even now, a better world
(to turn a phrase on its ear),
its hour soon to come,
strides towards Bethlehem
demanding to be born.

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THE PACT
by Amanda Hawkins

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“Archer? Mister Harmes is here.” My mother’s voice drifted up two steep flights of stairs to my attic bedroom. If my door wasn’t open I never would have heard her, but of course she knew I would. Our guest was expected.

I clumped downstairs with all the enthusiasm of a heifer approaching the slaughterhouse. If half of what my buddy had told me, only days before, was true then this meeting was likely to get ugly. Breaking bad news is tough enough, but telling the scion of Arkhade’s oldest, richest and weirdest family that ‘the deal is off’ has got to be beyond the pale. Heck, the guy has probably never heard the word ‘no’ before. People with that kind of cash, and breeding, are used to getting their way. Not this time, though. Not when it’s physically impossible.

“Archer. What on earth took you so long? Mister Harmes, this is my son.” Mom hustled me across the room like I was the star attraction at a debutante ball.

Edgar Harmes flowed to his feet as I approached. We shook hands. “Charmed,” he murmured, a coy smile on his lips. The man was shorter than I expected, not to mention thin as a rake and pale. Probably didn’t get out much. Yet his face was almost plump, like a baby’s, and his unruly sweep of dark hair may never have seen the business end of a brush. All in all, he was just as Jerry had described.

“I’ve just been explaining to Mister Harmes that you and I are all that’s left of the Anders family, dear. I mean, in terms of a direct bloodline from your Great-Great-Grandpa Aloysius. Third or fourth cousins by marriage don’t count—do they?” She threw a helpless glance toward Mister Harmes.

The man shook his head. “Most unfortunate. But a problem, as some have said, is no more than a solution in disguise. I am very good at this sort of thing,” he said, tapping the side of his head. “Finding answers where others see issues.”

*Say what?* I know professors can be a bit dotty—as in off their fuzzy little rockers, as Jerry would say—but Harmes seemed a bit more than just eccentric. Edgar Harmes was my best buddy’s prof for his second-year course in the history of New England, with a practical emphasis on Arkhade itself and the role our little town once played in the great events that shaped our nation.

Mom looked nervous. “Well, I don’t really see how—”
“Perhaps I should inform him as to the nature of the Pact that binds our two families,” Harmes said, steepling his fingers with elbows planted on the arms of his easy chair. “The boy deserves to know.”

“I’m not a boy,” I said quickly. Twenty years old is pretty much full-grown in my books. Old enough to vote, and drink in most states, is old enough to be treated like an adult. Besides, Harmes didn’t look to be all that old himself. Late twenties, I figured. Maybe thirty-something if he was one of those guys who never seems to age. Yeah… he was probably one of those guys.

“Well, I have mentioned it…” Mom began.

Harmes ignored her. “In Aloysius’s time,” he said, “the Anders family was quite large, though not quite so large as mine—and certainly, truth be told, lacking the kind of power and prestige the Harmes have always wielded in these parts.” His gaze wandered out the window and flew off in the direction of the clock tower that his ancestors built more than two hundred years ago. Big deal, I thought. The damn thing wasn’t even synchronized with the atomic clock in Boulder, Colorado, although it did manage to keep pretty decent time in spite of that.

“I know about the Pact,” I said. “My great-great-whatever got too big for his boots and someone in your family took him down a few sizes. They fixed it so that our family had to provide one of your guys with a bride—of a certain age, of course. Nice way of screwing us over, if you ask me.”

Harmes smiled. “Yes… ‘someone’ did that. And even so, one might say that the rest of the Anders family got off rather easily. They have been allowed to live in peace for nearly two hundred years. Others have not been so fortunate.”

“Well—Aunt Minerva is dead, Mom’s too old and I’m a dude, so I guess you’re outta luck, Mister Harmes.”

“So it would seem.” He rose fluidly to his feet. “But there may yet be a solution skulking about these woods, in the guise of a rather impudent young man. I’ll be off now, Greta,” he told my mother, “but I shall be in touch.”

When he was gone, Mom looked down at me sprawled on the couch. “You really shouldn’t talk to the man like that. These people have power.” Her voice nearly broke when she said it.

“C’mon. He’s just a stuffy old history prof. What’s he gonna do? Fail Jerry?”

“I don’t know, dear. But he will do something.”

*
I caught up with Jeremiah at lunch the next day, and related my encounter with ‘ye olde’ Mister Harmes. The guy wasn’t literally over the hill, but he sure as hell acted like he was. In spite of that baby face of his, the dude gave off a seriously ‘aged’ vibe. The way he moved, the way he talked…

Jerry shivered at the mere mention of Harmes’ name. “Don’t remind me, man. I got him for my next class.” Jeremiah Jones had been my best friend since first grade. We were the kids who sat at the back of every class, not because we were dumb or anything—far from it—but because we didn’t want anyone sneaking up behind us. Keep the enemy in plain sight so they can’t stab you in the back—that was the rule. It didn’t rule out a frontal attack, but at least you get to see what’s coming at you. That was important, for some reason, which I guess made us the two most paranoid kids in first grade.

“You think you got it bad? The guy was in my own house,” I said, “and from the sound of it he doesn’t seem like the sort who takes ‘no’ for an answer.”

“No kidding. Someone in class asked about his qualifications—you know, to teach the class. He doesn’t have a PhD, according to the college website. I thought he was gonna kill the guy.” Jerry stared at the sandwich in front of him, which seemed on the verge of toppling over. It was always the same: two kinds of meat—one of which had to be bacon—mustard, relish, tomato, sprouts, spinach and of course cheese, which could be anything from normal stuff like swiss or cheddar, to an import like wensleydale, which he liked because of Wallace and Gromit. His voracious appetite was one reason Jeremiah was known as ‘Jughead’ in our little group, although not usually to his face. He looked a bit like the cartoon character too; thin as a rake, his dark hair forever uncombed, and he even owned a crown beanie, although he never wore it outside of his basement.

From behind, a pair of slim hands caressed my shoulders. A sultry voice said, “Hello, boys.” I was blinded, albeit briefly, by a wave of dark hair, thick with the scent of jasmine. Vanessa, aka ‘Ronnie’, planted a quick kiss on the top of my head and slid into the seat next to mine. Slim, gorgeous and with a trust fund that could choke a horse, she was the dream girl of every guy in town. Yet for reasons I had yet to fathom she often dated me. Go figure.

A moment later she was joined by her best friend and sometime rival, Bethany, aka ‘Betty’, who took the seat opposite hers. As a pretty blonde, she could’ve had any guy in town as well, but for reasons she had yet to share she also often dated me. She frowned at Jerry. “My God, Juggie, you aren’t actually going to eat that awful thing, are you?”

As usual, Jerry ignored both girls and ate the sandwich. It was said by many that he preferred the company of food to women, but I knew better.
I told the girls about Edgar Harmes and his visit the night before. Bethany pulled a face. “Why would your mom have anything to do with a man like that?”

“The Harmes have been around longer than Ronnie’s family,” Jerry said. “And the Pact is a real thing. I hear the museum has a copy in their archives.”

I told them about the agreement that had ensnared the Anders family for the past eight or nine generations. Vanessa waved it off. “Big deal. Done and dusted. You said so yourself. Unless this Harmes guy is into gay marriage.”

Bethany smothered a laugh. “That must be it. The guy wants to marry Arch. Why else would he call around? He must’ve known you’re a dude.”

“Not gonna happen,” I muttered. But to tell the truth, I’d been thinking the same thing. Harmes’ father was married to my great-aunt, and only a few months back my mother had attended her Aunt Minerva’s memorial service in their gothic mansion on the outskirts of town. How could he not know that the current and sole heir of the Anders family was a twenty-year-old male?

Jerry agreed. “The guy wears a suit to class. Velvet jacket, vest, striped pants—all that’s missing is the straw boater. He’s so traditional, I bet he still votes the Whig Party ticket. He wouldn’t touch gay marriage with a ten-foot chamber pot.”

“Thank goodness.” Vanessa slipped her arm through mine. “Although I could see our pretty little Archer gliding down the aisle in a Sophia Tolli wedding gown… with Juggie’s Dad on his arm to give him away.”

Bethany flashed an evil smile. “Too modern. It has to be a vintage gown—a nice off-the-shoulder number with a built-in corset and lots of petticoats.”

“Dream on,” I said. “That’s the only place it’ll ever happen.”

“I’ll take that bet. But if not marriage, then what’s the deal with Harmes? He must be hanging around for some reason.”

“He’s after Mrs. Anders,” Vanessa said. “She looks pretty sweet for her age.”

“Excuse me? Do I talk about your mother like that?”

“Well, maybe you do. How should I know what you and Juggie talk about when we girls aren’t around?”

“We don’t talk about mothers,” Jerry growled. “And don’t call me ‘Juggie’.”

“Mom’s too old,” I said. “People were pretty strict back then, about the right age for a girl to get married. From what I know, the Pact is specific. Heck, in a year or two I’d probably be too old.”

“Then you better get moving,” Bethany said, “unless you wanna be an old maid.”
Mom was in the kitchen when I got home, putting the finishing touches on a mac-and-cheese casserole fresh from the oven. “Give it a half-hour to cool,” she said, so I went upstairs and fired up my laptop. A Google search led me to a genealogy website and the Harmes family tree. Turns out my ‘suitor’ was the sixth in a long line of Edgar Harmes, all descended from the family patriarch who had arrived in America from the old country—Romania of the Ottoman era—around the time Paul Revere was riding around town bad-mouthing the Brits. The Harmes manse outside town was built not long after he got here.

The website had nothing to say about the Pact, of course, and precious little about my own family. The Anders, it seemed, had been slowly dwindling in size and prestige for the last two centuries. Like we were cursed or something.

Dinner was on the table when I came down. Macaroni with three kinds of cheese, my all-time fav, and a chef’s salad for the lady of the house. “Aren’t you having any?” I asked, as I tucked in. She usually did.

“I’m watching my weight.” She picked at her salad. “I made it just for you, dear. I know how unsettling last night’s visit was, so… uhm… well, there’s enough for another few days, if you can pace yourself better than Jeremiah would.”

Harmes again. I couldn’t get away from the guy. “Why are you even giving him the time of day, Ma? This Pact thing is old news.”

She chewed thoughtfully. “Well… Our families are related. By marriage, at least. It wouldn’t be nice to—”

“Arranged marriage,” I said, with my mouth full. “Aunt Minerva never had any kids. In fact, according to their family tree, none of them did. The women they got from us, I mean.”

“Mister Harmes exists, Archer. So they must have, don’t you think?”

“Maybe his ancestors had more than one wife. Maybe they were fooling around.” I laughed through my macaroni. “The guy looks like a bastard to me.”

Mom went pale. “Please don’t talk about him like that.”

Yeah, like the dude could hear us. I shook my head and cleaned my plate.

* *

That night, I dreamed that Ronnie was having me fitted for a Sophia Tolli wedding gown. We were browsing the racks in a high-end bridal shop, while a severe-looking woman with a tight bun and granny glasses wrapped a tape
measure around my chest. “I will need her cup size,” she said, shifting the tape to my waist and clucking her disapproval. Ronnie told her to make it a D-cup.

“I’m not a girl,” I told them, only to be ignored.

The gown they chose was strapless, with a sweetheart neckline and an asymmetric dropped waist, hand-beaded lace appliques—whatever that might be—layers of organza ruffles, and a chapel-length train to sweep the aisle. “Guaranteed to make for a grand entrance,” granny-glasses said.

“I am not a bride,” I said, as they zipped me into the dress.

“Oh, hush.” Ronnie stuffed the bodice with a pair of falsies. “I’m sure there’s a way. All you have to do is—just click your heels and believe.”

I awoke with sunlight streaming past curtains that must have opened while I slept. It didn’t take long to figure out something had changed. The sheets felt different; more slippery, as if they’d been transmuted into silk during the night.

They hadn’t, of course. I rubbed the fabric with my fingers; 800-thread Egyptian cotton, same as always. What had changed was me. I no longer had any body hair. It was no big mystery where it had gone; the sheets were littered with tiny hairs. Very embarrassing, to say the least. Worse than wetting the bed.

Mom had already left for her Tuesday morning fitness class, so I hauled the Dyson stick-vac upstairs, carefully hoovered up every last hair and remade the bed. If I stuck to long pants and long sleeves, and no workouts in the gym, then maybe no one would notice until it had time to grow back.

What followed was the best shower of my life. Without hair to get in the way bare skin is endlessly sensitive. Is this, I wondered, the secret that all competitive swimmers know but have been keeping from the rest of us? If so, where do I sign up for the Olympics? Even my dick had new life. I took my time.

Afterward, as I bent over to dry my legs with a soft towel, a new thought crossed my mind. What would my legs look like encased in a pair of nylons? From this angle they seemed long enough, and shapely enough, to rival anything Vanessa or Bethany had to offer. No reason not to find out.

Clad in a short robe, I went into Mom’s bedroom and opened her dresser. The top drawer was all bras and panties. Below that was shapewear, and tucked in beside the half-girdles and body shapers were several plastic bags stuffed with a variety of nylon stockings and, yes, pantyhose. The pair I chose were sheer and beige, and they fit like a glove. They were mine now. Mom had so many, she’d never miss one pair of gently used Silk Reflections by Hanes.

I returned to my bedroom, revelling in the feel on nylon on bare flesh.
I couldn’t take them off. It was nothing mysterious; they weren’t magically attached to my body or anything. I just didn’t want to. Taking them off would be the sensible thing to do, because I had classes to attend and what if my jeans slipped and someone were to notice the waistband? Too embarrassing.

A pair of tighty-whities solved that problem, so I wore the pantyhose to school. It felt rather naughty, in a delicious sort of way, knowing that I was wearing an item of forbidden lingerie under my regular clothes. Forbidden for men, that is. Girls can wear anything they damn well please, which seems unfair.

Jerry texted me and we met up in the library. “Arch, I had a look at the Pact—”

“Jeez, you’re not still on about that, are you? Old news, like Ronnie said.”

“Yeah. Two hundred years old, to be exact. But there’s no expiry date, so it’s still in effect. As long as the conditions hold.”

I took a seat and crossed my legs. At the knee. “I’ll bite. What conditions?”

“For starters, that the two families still exist. Neither has died out.”

I sighed. “The Anders are nearly there. Anything else?”

“As you said, there’s wordage about the girl and what age she should be, and that she be ‘of comely appearance’. Something like that.” He consulted his notes. “As for timing, the treaty comes into play when the Harmes’ heir decides that he’s ready to take a wife. In other words, whenever he feels like it.”

I swung my leg gently, feeling nylon slip back and forth across the wide side of my calf. “What’s this have to do with me?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe nothing. But you know what’s weird? It’s the way the text is written. I don’t mean the language, which is the usual archaic English in use back then. It’s the choice of words and the way sentences are put together. Lemme read you some.” He cleared his throat. “He who knowth of this Pact, and is ennobled thereof, shall hence bid the party of the undersigned, the familial source of bridal chattel, to produce a young woman of comely bearing and virtuous temper, to enter the bonds of marriage, from whence there can be no return and no release—to become the wife of He who knows not of death.”

I stifled a yawn. “You should run that by a lawyer.”

“Well, it’s pretty clear… The point is, it sounds an awful lot like another book I’ve been reading lately—excerpts from it, that is, which is all I could find. You ever hear of the Necronomicon?”

“Sure. Best horror flick ever. I had to sleep with the light on and still had nightmares. Stephen King wrote the novel back in the Eighties, right?”
“Uh, no. It’s an ancient compendium of dark magic and forbidden knowledge. A lot of people don’t think it’s even real, because Lovecraft used it in his fiction, but it is—real. I just haven’t been able to lay my hands on a copy.”

“Too bad.” I uncrossed my legs and then crossed them the other way round, again at the knee, and swooned as the fabric of my pantyhose shifted. It really was the most marvelous feeling. I resolved to wear nylons as often as I could.

“You’re not listening,” Jerry said. “What I’m getting at is that the Pact is written in the same style as the *Necronomicon*. You know what that means?”

“They waaas—written by the same person?”

“No! The *Necronomicon* was written by the ‘Mad Arab’ Abdul Alhazred over a thousand years ago, maybe in the seventh century. It’s been translated a few times since then, of course. The Pact must’ve been created by someone familiar with the ‘olde English’ version of the book.”

I was thinking about my legs. “You lost me. Why does this matter?”

“It means that the guy who wrote it, probably Edgar Harmes the First, was heavy into black magic. So—maybe his namesake in the here and now is too!”

“C’mon, Jug. Black magic? You don’t really believe in that crap.”

Jerry scowled. “The book is real. Maybe the magic is too. Some of it. I don’t buy all the stuff Lovecraft wrote about—Cthulhu and the ‘nameless ones’ who shall someday return and crush the human race like bugs. That’s crap. But black magic? That could be real. And don’t call me ‘Jug’. You know I hate it.”

“Oh, pish. It’s a term of endearment.” A text from Vanessa arrived, so I left Jerry to his arcane research and met the brunette on the quad.

It didn’t take her long to scope out what was up. As I sat down she said, “O-M-G! Arch-er, are you wearing stockings?”

I glanced around and lowered my voice. “Pantyhose. How’d you know?”

“I saw you walking over. Something about the way you were moving… a sort of ‘strut’. Like you’re wearing heels, even though you aren’t.” She looped her arm through mine. “Dish, girlfriend. What’s with the luscious legwear?”

I didn’t tell her about the loss of my body hair. Who’d believe a story like that? “My Mom left her leg razor in the bathtub this morning, plus a tube of that ‘cream shave’ stuff, so I just figured… why not? See how the other half lives.”

“Really? Just like that? You haven’t been thinking about it for awhile?”

I glanced at her. “Uh, no. Should I have?”
“A lot of guys do. There’s nothing wrong with it.” She nudged me. “This could work out. It might even be fun. For both of us.” Her head was close to mine and I was hyper-aware of her hair; the scent of it, and the fact that an awful lot of it was draped over my shoulder, dangling onto my chest like it belonged there. Was she trying to tell me something? Such as, having a head of hair like hers was every bit as much fun as wearing nylons? It was an intriguing thought.

“Well… I’m thinking about it now,” I said, very quietly.

“Good. So—are these your Mom’s?” She rubbed my leg. I nodded. “You can try some of mine if you like. We’re about the same height.” It was true; I was on the short side, as guys go, and she was tall for a girl, so we met in the middle at about five-nine. I’d spent most of my life regretting that, but now… there might be an upside. “I’ll stop by tonight,” she said. “Be there.”

In a swirl of brunette hair, she was gone. What had I gotten myself into?

* 

Mom worked late on Tuesdays, as Vanessa undoubtedly knew. I chowed down on a healthy portion of my three-cheese casserole, then managed to study for an hour before she arrived. She was carrying a Victoria’s Secret tote bag and grinning like a very pretty maniac. She locked the front door and said, “Your bedroom. Now.” She didn’t have to tell me twice.

Vanessa emptied the bag onto my bed. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much nylon in one pile before. “Pantyhose,” she said, pulling one item out. “You said yours were beige, right? So I brought black. Black is sexy. These are sheer—” She laid out the first pair and rooted around for another. “These are opaque. There are different degrees of opaque; this one’s not very thick.” She stared at me. “Why are your pants still on?”

No reason I could think of. I took them off.

“Oooh, nice legs.” She ran her fingers lightly down one thigh. “Nice job on the shaving too. I figured a rookie would miss a few spots, but this is flawless. Sure you haven’t done this before?”

“Nope. Took my time, that’s all.”

“Well, kudos. I brought stockings as well.” She returned to the pile. “These are stay-ups, in three different colors: nude, beige and black.” She stretched them out next to the pantyhose. “The top is silicone lace. See?” She tugged on the cuffs. “It’s elastic. It grips your leg and won’t slip. You can try those on some other time. I’ll leave them all here.”
“Are you sure? I, uh—do appreciate this. But keep some for yourself.”

She gave me the standard look that means ‘you’re an idiot’. “Seriously? You don’t think I’ve got bags of these things in my closet? This is all stuff I’ve worn before. Hope you don’t mind, by the way. I’m happy to clear it out.”

“I don’t mind. Thanks.” To be honest, it was more of a selling point.

“And these,” she said with a hint of triumph in her voice, “are stockings that do not have elastic cuffs. They don’t stay up on their own, which means you’ll be needing this.” She held up a skimp belt with dangling things. “It’s a garter belt,” she added. “I bet you’ve heard of ’em. Probably never saw one though.”

I shrugged. “Maybe in a movie.”

“Say hello to the real thing. You’ll need to lose those undies.”

“You want me to try these on now? I mean—here?”

“No time like the present. If you’re feeling modest, I can close my eyes. Oh, and you’ll need these as well.” She plucked a pair of pink briefs from the pile.

I accepted the satiny garment. “Panties? Really?”

“Sure, why not? We’ve dated often enough. You’ve been in my panties before.” She held up her hand. “I know—not literally in them. But it’s less intimate than stuff we’ve already done.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Vanessa pulled a chair over to the window, pulled the curtains and relaxed. “We haven’t got all night,” she said.

I swallowed hard. My shorts dropped to the floor. I sat, pulled on the satin panties and worked them over my hips. They fit surprisingly well. I tucked my junk back between my legs and wrapped the garter belt around my waist. It was a snug fit, but at least that meant it wouldn’t slip off by accident.

Vanessa expressed her approval and returned to the pile on my bed. “I brought three types,” she said. “Nude, beige and black, but they’re all patterned. Might be a bit fancy for everyday wear—but way sexier, of course. Sit.” I sat on the bed and she slid the black stockings into place, one leg at a time, and showed me how to fasten the garters. “A bit of practice, that’s all it takes.”

She stood back and whistled. “There go some gorgeous gams. But it seems like a bit of a waste, doesn’t it?” I had no idea what she was talking about. “It’s just that you can’t properly appreciate legs like this without the proper accessories.” She smiled encouragingly. “Know what I mean?” I did not, but clued in fast when she showed me the remaining items from her tote bag: a short black skirt and a pair of black leather high-heel shoes.
I backed away. “Hang on. That’s too much. I just wanted to… you know, see how the nylon felt. Sure, these feel nice and all, but… This is way too much.”

Vanessa shook her head slowly and advanced on me. What was to come was as inevitable as the rising tide. “C’mon Arch,” she purred. “It’s only a skirt. It’s only a pair of shoes. It’s only here in your bedroom. Where’s the harm?”

I gulped. “Where’s the harm? If anyone sees me, I’ll permanently lose my locker privileges at the Y. I’ll be drummed out of the fraternity of men.”

She frowned. “Really. Who was it who shaved his legs this morning, on a whim? Who was it who wore a pair of his mother’s pantyhose to school? Why stop now? Besides, these legs—” Again her fingers trailed down my thigh. “—look damn near as good as mine. Don’t you want to see how good?”

Ever so slightly, and in spite of myself, I nodded.

She smiled. “Good. Now—with most skirts, you’d need a half-slip to wear under it. But this little number has a silk lining. Go ahead. Put it on.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and slid the skirt over my legs. It had an elastic waist, but the hem was fairly tight. I stood, took a deep breath, and pulled it up over my hips. It felt snug, but not too tight. The hem didn’t quite reach my knees.

“It’s a pencil skirt. Pretty basic, but you don’t want to take too much attention away from those legs. That pattern means they’re the feature. Now the shoes.”

I sat down again and slipped my feet into the pumps. “Whaddya know, they fit.” The heels were narrow, but stopped short of being spikes.

“They’re my mother’s. I wanted a mid-size heel and none of mine looked the part. It’s a fairly basic shoe—covered heel, rounded toe—so it won’t draw attention away from your legs. Stand up.”

I did so, waverling only a little on the narrow heel. I took a few steps, stumbled and caught myself, then managed to pace the length of the room. I turned and strolled back, faster this time.

“You’re a natural, Arch. And those legs… wow.”

“Thanks, I guess. Maybe I can use some of this at Halloween, huh?”

“Sooner than that, I hope. Legs like that should not go to waste.”

“Yeah, well… no point getting carried away.”

Vanessa picked up her tote bag. “It’s getting late. I should go.”

“What, and leave me like this?”
“You can undress yourself. Uh—isn’t that your mom’s car?”

It was. Fear surged through me. She wasn’t likely to come all the way up here, at least not right away, but still... why take the chance?

Vanessa gripped my arm. “Calm down. I’ll go down and chat with her on my way out. That’ll give you time to change, and stash the stuff in your closet.”

I agreed. “Seems like you’ve done this before, huh?”

“Common sense, Arch. Maybe you should get some.”

She left, and by the time Mom called upstairs I was back in civvies and the gear was safely stowed in my suitcase. I yelled back and slung the luggage into my closet. I was sweating buckets. How the hell, I thought, do cross-dressers manage this sort of thing all the time without getting caught?

*

That night, I dreamed I was a cross-dresser. Every time Mom would leave the house, even for a few minutes, I was into that suitcase and sliding my legs into one pair or another of Vanessa’s second-hand hosiery. Then I’d strut around the room and down to the second floor, until a car in the street would send me fleeing back up the stairs to remove the stockings with hands that never stopped shaking.

And when I awoke, there were more changes. They weren’t overly large, and I knew they’d be easy to conceal under two layers of clothing, but there was no denying what they were. The B-cup breasts of Archer Anders. ●
If the book is real, then maybe the magic is too. That was all I could think of. With a compression bandage wrapped around my chest and wearing two shirts and a jacket, I tried with little success to concentrate on what my profs were trying to teach. Fat chance of that, considering how these stay-up stockings felt.

I couldn’t handle talking to anyone, so I blew off lunch with my crew. Instead, I grabbed a sandwich and wandered around campus. But every girl I saw reminded me of what lay hidden under my shirt, and what gripped my legs, and the long hair I could so easily imagine flowing over my own shoulders and curling into the cleavage I had seen that morning upon lifting the sheets. So, naturally, I skipped calculus and followed Jerry to his next class.

HIST 235: New England, Colony to American Revolution

Jerry stopped me at the door. “What are you doin’ here?”

“I’m gonna sit in.” I peered at the stage. The room sloped downward from back to front. Edgar Harmes was seated at a table next to the podium; facing us, but focused on the contents of an open binder. “Go sit where you usually sit,” I told Jerry. “I’ll hang back here where it’s dark.”

Jerry shrugged and headed down to the front, as other students trickled in. It was a large class, considering the subject matter. It usually got ten or fifteen students, but enrollment shot up to nearly three dozen after it was announced that Harmes would be teaching. The course had to be moved to a bigger classroom.

At exactly one o’clock, Edgar Harmes stood up. He placed the binder atop the podium, turned the pages back, then looked up. He was silent for a moment, but I could have sworn our eyes met—even though I was as far away as I could get, in a seat poorly served by overhead lights aimed at the front of the room. I couldn’t have taken notes if I wanted to. But I was only here to listen.

“Massachusetts in the year 1692,” Harmes said abruptly. “The town of Arkhade was founded. Who can tell me what was going on elsewhere in the state?” Several hands rose, all of them near the front. Harmes pointed. “Mister Jones.”

Jerry lowered his arm. “The Salem witch trials, sir. Twenty people were accused of witchcraft and executed, most of them women. They were hung.”
“Yes, indeed. America’s most famous, and enduring, case of mass hysteria. But only fourteen of the accused were women, Mister Jones. That is more than half, but certainly not ‘most’. And one man was not, in fact, hung, but rather died by the *peine forte et dure*. Stones were piled on the man’s chest until he could no longer draw a breath. Rather archaic, I think, even for the time.” Harmes stepped away from the podium. “What was the link between these two events? The witch trials in Salem, and the founding of Arkhade. Anyone?”

Silence. No arms rose. I began to wonder if this was part of the curriculum.

“The answer,” Harmes said, in an ominous tone, “is that Arkhade was founded by people who had cause to remove themselves from Salem. To ‘get out of Dodge’, as it were. This, I should add, is a fact very few people know.” He chuckled. “You may write it down if you like, but it won’t be on the test.”

A murmur swept the room. This was unexpected.

“However… Let us now suppose that our founding fathers were, in fact, guilty of witchcraft—even though, as we all know, there is ‘no such thing’.” He made air quotes and paused for the laughter. “But even to be accused of witchcraft was a serious matter in those days, and quite a few townsfolk had the foresight to realize that they would be among those accused. So one might say, the smart witches left town while the foolish ones stayed behind to be executed.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling the pull of nylon on the bare skin of my legs. First my body hair and now breasts, albeit small ones. What next? Would I awaken in the morning with a female body? Would it bother me if I did?

“Here’s something else no one knows about Salem. Two of those fourteen women were *not* in fact female. They were men—men who had affected female guise, for reasons known only to themselves. In modern parlance, they were cross-dressers. Perhaps even those we now call transsexuals. Whatever the case was, these unfortunates paid for their affliction with their lives.”

Now I was praying that the man had *not*, in fact, seen me. Although given the way the lecture was going, that seemed increasingly unlikely. One student near the front—not Jerry—stuck up his hand and asked, “Mister Harmes? If this is stuff no one else knows, then how do you know about it?”

Harmes grinned. “Oh, you know. The grapevine. The walls have ears.”

The kid persisted. “So it’s all just rumors?”

“Oh no, it’s true. I have it on good authority. Not quite straight from the horse’s mouth; I wouldn’t say that. But not as far off as you might think. Stories like this never get written down. Which is why this too will not appear on the test.”
Jerry raised his hand. “If we assume that not all cross-dressers are as dumb as the ones who stayed behind—doesn’t it follow that some of the people who founded Arkhade were cross-dressers? Or transgender?”

“Very good, Mister Jones. That is indeed true. If you were to delve deeply into the history of our town, you would find numerous examples of smart, capable women who were in fact—reading betwixt the lines—male.”

The other kid waved his hand. “Will that be on the test?” Harmes scowled at him. I took my chance and darted for the door at the back of the room. The entire class must have heard it slam shut behind me, but I wasn’t worrying about stealth at that point. Escape came first.

Jerry found me holed up in an alcove of the tunnel that linked the lecture hall to the main library. The tunnels were heavily trodden during the winter months, but a mild afternoon in September left it empty. “That was subtle,” he said, dropping into the seat next to mine.

“He was freakin’ me out,” I muttered.

“What was freaky was all that stuff about cross-dressing. Where the hell did that come from?” He threw me a suspicious glance. “Harmes knew you were there.”

The phlegm stuck in my throat. “He said that?”

“Not as such. After you slammed the door he said, ‘It seems that our guest has left. So I suggest we now turn our attention to material that will be on the test.’ That was it. Verbatim.”

I hugged my knees to my chest. “I could really dislike that guy.”

“Join the club. What I don’t get is, why would he want to tell you that a bunch of our town founders were cross-dressers? What’s that got to do with anything?”

I shrugged and changed the subject. “I checked out Harmes’ family tree the other night. It was around the end of the seventeenth century, wasn’t it? When the family came over from the old country.”

“You’re a hundred years off. The Pact was signed in the early eighteen-hundreds, by Edgar Harmes the First.”

“Near enough. But, uhm… they were from Romania, right? And isn’t that where Transylvania is? Like, Vlad the Impaler and that whole Dracula legend?”

“That was way earlier. Romania didn’t even exist when ‘Vlad Dracula’ was alive and impaling his way across the Carpathians.” He turned to face me. “Lemme get this straight. Are you seriously thinking that Arkhade was founded by a bunch of witches, and later became an immigration magnet for vampires?”
I paused. *Was* I thinking that? Because if I was, then wow—that’s a serious dose of crazy right there. On the other hand, I now had breasts.

“If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking,” Jerry said, “you should know that I’ve seen Harmes walking around in full daylight. He’s *not* a vampire.”

“Yeah, I get that. It’s just—” I fell silent. The guy was my best friend, but really—how much did I want to tell him? I already lied to Vanessa about shaving my legs; otherwise all she knew was that I’d developed an interest in wearing nylons, and I wasn’t planning on spreading *that* news around. No one knew about the sort-of-impossible stuff. I drew a deep breath. “The guy weirds me out, that’s all.”

“Don’t let him get to you. He can’t enforce the Pact when there’s no girl in your family. I hope you realize,” he added, “the girls were just kidding about all that gay marriage stuff.”

“Yeah, sure…” I couldn’t help it; I was imagining myself gliding down the aisle in a designer wedding gown, held up by my very own ample bosom, and under it all wearing patterned stockings. Waiting for me at the altar—Harmes? I shook my head. No way. Not a chance. Never gonna happen.

A text arrived from Bethany, asking where I was. I left Jerry to study on his own and met up with the blonde in front of the library. She slid her arm through mine and we strolled toward the arboretum. “So,” she purred, “I hear you’ve developed an interest in feminine legwear. Is this something I should know about?”

“Ronnie never could keep a secret.”

“C’mon, Arch. This is me. The girl and I are besties, at least when we’re not ripping each other a new one over who gets to date you.” She laughed. “And she managed to get you into a skirt and heels! I *so* have to see that.”

“Sorry. Guess I forgot to invite the gang over to witness my ritual humiliation.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t *that* bad. It’s not like she had to twist your arm. Who was it who shaved his legs and wore mommy’s pantyhose to class?”

Who was it? I wasn’t sure anymore. At first, you think maybe your body hair just fell out all by itself, so why not add pantyhose? They kept my legs warm that day, didn’t they? That could’ve been all me. But when you grow a couple of B-cups during the night… that wasn’t my doing. My mouth went dry.

Bethany cozied up. “You know, after Ronnie told me, I got to thinking… it might be fun to try adding a blouse to that skirt. You’re not much bigger than me, up top. I’m sure I could find something nice in my closet. So whaddya say? Care to come over to my place tonight? For a little fashion show? My folks are out for a late dinner, so it’ll just be the two us. If that’s okay.”
I couldn’t breathe. Mute, all I could do was nod.

* 

Dinnertime, and Mom watched while I ate. She didn’t bother with a salad this time, sitting across from me with a worried expression etched into her face while twisting a tea towel between her hands. Macaroni and cheese again, of course. The casserole was only half-finished. And it was all for me.

All for me. I stopped eating, although I was nearly done. “You’re, uh… not having any?” My voice quivered. Mom just shook her head. Oh god, I thought. No way. Not my own mother. She wouldn’t do that. “Why not?”

“It’s… just for you,” she said. “I made it for you.”

“But—why?” How do you accuse your mother of feeding you the stuff that turns you into a girl? Are there words for something like that?

She stared at the towel in her lap. “I want you to be happy.”

Hard to argue with that. I looked at my plate. There wasn’t much left anyway; maybe three spoonfuls. How much damage could it do? Another quarter-inch to the bustline? Not a big deal. Then I could leave the rest to rot in the fridge. Slowly, I brought the spoon to my lips, while Mom looked on. I ate, but three kinds of cheese felt like ashes in my mouth. The taste of betrayal.

“I’m going out,” I said, pushing the empty plate away.

Mom took the plate to the sink. “Where will you be?”

I stood up. My stockings readjusted themselves. “Bethany’s.”

“I like her. She—she’s the kind of girl any mother would want for a daughter.”

Weird thing to say. “I’ll tell her you send your regards.”

Upstairs, I hauled my suitcase out of the closet and stood in the stairwell looking down. Mom was still in the kitchen, washing up. Piece o’ cake to walk straight out the front door, without her seeing the suitcase. Not that it mattered.

But—why was I doing this at all? Bethany wanted to dress me up in her clothes, but that was the last thing I wanted—wasn’t it? I was only humoring Ronnie the night before, agreeing to wear her skirt. And her shoes. All that stuff was in the suitcase. If I brought it with me, I’d wind up wearing it again.

I took a step down. Wasn’t that the whole idea? Why shave your legs and put on pantyhose, if not to wear a skirt as well? And why put on a skirt if not to add high heels and a pretty blouse? It’s all part of the package.
I paused at the second-floor landing. It wasn’t me who shaved my legs. Strange to forget something like that. It was black magic. Or just a big fat coincidence. Either way, it wasn’t my choice. Which meant I could still choose to do this—or not.

Two steps down. I peered over the banister, toward the kitchen. Dishes clattered in the sink. Mom was humming to herself. I was out the door in seconds.

It felt a bit weird to be carrying a suitcase around town, especially given what was inside. It was a cool evening, with the sun drifting toward the horizon, but there was still lots of light. Maybe folks would think I was running away from home.

Bethany lived three blocks away. I stopped at the foot of her driveway. It was an ordinary house, no different than the rest of the neighborhood. But in none of those homes was I about to be dressed head to toe as a girl. My stomach flipped over. Head to toe? Just neck to toe. She only mentioned a blouse.

Bizarrely, I felt disappointed. That was scarier than anything else.

Bethany escorted me straight up to her room, explaining that she wasn’t allowed to have boys over so I’d have to stay out of sight. Which was odd, considering that I’d been in her bedroom before. We’d even done it there once. That wouldn’t be an option this time around.

“Pants down, mister. I wanna see what you’re wearing.” I followed orders, hoping I wouldn’t get too excited. “Pantyhose, huh? Are those Ronnie’s?”

I nodded. They were the sheer blacks.

“Nice legs, Arch. Seriously. Who’d have thunk it? What else did ya bring?” She pawed through the contents of my suitcase. “Skirt, heels…” She held up the garter belt. “Intriguing. We’ll save that for another time, but for sure you’ve gotta wear these.” She handed me the skirt and shoes.

“Figured you’d say that.” I turned my back, pulled off my socks and dropped the boxers, then stepped into the pencil skirt and the narrow-heel pumps.

“Hmm. All black is fairly dressy, so what’s say we glam it up a bit? I’ve got a gold top that would really set off that skirt. How’s that sound?”

I shrugged. Not like we were going anywhere.

She rifled through her closet. “Lose the shirt, mister.”

Here’s where it got dicey. I had breasts. They weren’t the sort of thing to show up on an Internet porn site, but there was no way to explain them. For one thing, she had seen me bare-chested on more than one occasion. Swimming, for instance. Still, there was no avoiding the inevitable. Reluctantly, I removed my sweatshirt and the T-shirt underneath, leaving only the compression bandage.
Bethany returned holding a sleeveless blouse. Her eyes went round. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“Not exactly.” I unwound the bandage.

“These are new,” she said, placing a finger on my bare nipple.

“Keep it under your hat, okay? I’d rather everyone didn’t know.”

“That might be difficult. I don’t wear a hat.” Then she saw my face. “Okay, okay. Girl Scout’s honor.” She held up two fingers. “But—why? And how?”

The answer came to me in an instant. “It’s my Mom. I think she’s been spiking my food… you know, with hormones. These grew over the last month or so.”

“But your mom’s so nice. Why would she do that?”

I didn’t have to fake looking miserable. “I figure she wants a daughter.” Hell, the way Harmes was getting on her case, she probably needed a daughter.

“Oh Archer… I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I thought the pantyhose and everything was just you experimenting with cross-dressing. Lots of guys think about it, you know, but most of them chicken out.”

I saw an opportunity to strengthen the story. “Well, maybe I am. Maybe that’s why she figured she could get away with this. She must’ve known what I was doing. Women know how they leave their clothes, right?”

“Oh, for sure. So you’ve been dressing up for years, huh?”

“I guess so. Not that much. A skirt here, a dress there, that sort of thing.”

She nodded in sympathy. “But the urge is getting stronger, right? Is that why you shaved your legs? And, uhm—your chest, your arms, your pits…”

I forced a lopsided grin. “Once you get going, it’s hard to stop.”

“I hear that. So are you okay with what we’re doing?”

She was offering me a way out. And I did think about it, for about three seconds. “Sure,” I said, swallowing hard. “When in Rome.”

She caressed my back. “You’ll have fun, I promise. Now, you’re gonna need a bra and I’ve got just the one—from when I was less developed than I am now. It’s an underwire, and it’s padded, so the inserts won’t show up as lines on your bust.” A guilty look flashed across her face. “I know what you’re thinking. Little pure-at-heart Betty? Breast enhancement pads? Well, nobody’s perfect, Mister Anders. Ronnie developed way faster than I did. ‘Nuff said, okay?”

“I wasn’t thinking anything! Anyway, I kinda figured that all girl—”
“Oh, I see. All of us girls are so sensitive about our figures, is that it?” She tugged on the hem of my skirt, straightening it. “Not all of us are quite that shallow. But you’ll find out soon enough, won’t you, Miss Anders? Now that you’re one of us, even if it’s only part-time.” She lay the brassiere on her bed, applied surgical tape to a pair of silicone inserts and settled them into the cups. “That’s so they don’t move around.”

I slipped the straps over my arms and Bethany fastened the clasp behind my back. She adjusted the length of each strap, then the fit of the band across my chest. She took a step back. “Damn, that looks real,” she muttered. “You’ve got a heck of a figure, Arch. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were… you know, female.”

I hung my head. “Great…”

“What, you no like?”

“It’s a bit worrying, that’s all.”

She sat. “You wanna talk?”

I shook my head. What good would it do?

“Well, I’m here, okay? In the meantime, try on the top. No point sitting around half-naked. C’mon, it won’t hurt.” She handed me the gold lamé tunic, which had a scoop neckline and short draped sleeves. I slid it over my head and let it fall into place. “It’s a bit looser on me,” Bethany said, “but that’s okay. It suits you.”

I stared at the floor. “Man… this is all happening so fast.”

“Fast? But you’ve been going through your mom’s stuff for years, right?”

“Uh, yeah. But… the shaving thing was just yesterday. Then I wore pantyhose to school, and Ronnie came over with the skirt and the nylons and these shoes…” I crossed my legs at the ankle. “And now this. It’s just fast.”

“I’m sorry, Arch. I didn’t mean to push you.”

“You didn’t. I know you’re only trying to help. I appreciate that.”

“It’s okay. You think maybe your mom is only trying to help too?”

I plucked at my skirt. “By doping my food with her ‘magic potion’?”

She laughed. “It’s called estrogen. Nothing magical about it. Girls got tons of the stuff.” She snapped her fingers. “Yours just comes from a different source.”

I took a quick breath. “I hope that’s all it is.”

“What else could it be? Listen, if you want to go back to guy stuff now, that’s okay with me. I’m not pushing, one way or the other. You’re in charge.”
Change back? So soon? I pulled my legs closer to the bed, straightened my skirt and tilted them to one side, then ran my fingers along my waist. The tunic was smooth to the touch. “We could just… hang out for awhile, I guess.”

“Sure. We got the whole house to ourselves, so we don’t have to hide out here. It’s just—” She glanced at her vanity. “Seems a shame to come this far and just stop, doesn’t it?”

I followed her gaze. I knew what she had in mind. Probably a bad idea; it’s not like we had all the time in the world. Just watch TV, then change and call it a night; that’d be the smart thing to do. Instead, I nodded.

Bethany set a pair of stools in front of the vanity table. I sat facing her. “Nothing elaborate,” she said, spreading a light coat of foundation on my face. “All I want to do is bring out your cheekbones.” She applied blusher and deftly wielded a small sponge to blend and contour. “…and your brown eyes…” She added a dash of bronzy-gold eye shadow, blended; used a black kohl pencil to define the outer ‘V’ of each eye, smudging it with a tiny wand for a diffuse look; and brushed a rich brown mascara through my lashes. “…and your pretty mouth.” She subtly lined my lips with a rosy pencil, then applied ruby-red M.A.C. lipstick.

I closed my eyes, not daring to look.

“Hold that thought. We need to accessorize!” I heard her searching though her drawers. “I’ve got some dangly clip-ons here someplace… here they are.” I felt her fumbling with my ear lobes, then the pull of something weighty. “Okay, what else… Oh!” She slipped a long necklace over my head and let it dangle down my chest, then added a set of jingling bracelets to each wrist. “Don’t move,” she said. “My sister has just the purse to go with all that.”

She was back in two minutes. I heard the clink of keys, then she pressed a small clutch into my hands. “I put your wallet and phone and stuff in there, just to give it some weight. Don’t open your eyes yet!”

“Not sure I want to,” I said, caught between terror and the thrill of a lifetime. “I probably look like a joke entry in a womanless beauty contest.”

“Not really. Tilt your head back.”

I did, and felt the cool swish of long hair against the back of my neck. Ohmygod, it was a wig! Bethany pulled the rim around my head and settled it on my hairline, then went around tucking in stray hairs. “It’s my sister’s,” she said, “from when she had that campfire accident. Her color isn’t far off yours.” She ran her fingers through the thick hair, then took a brush to it. “It’s capless,” she added, “so it looks pretty real. I opened the inside tabs so it would fit your head.”
She stepped back. “All done. You can look now.”

I was confused, at first, because I couldn’t find myself. In the mirror, I could see there were two girls in the room. One of them was blonde Bethany, standing with a brush in her hand. The other was a dark-haired stranger, seated, wearing a gold lamé tunic with draped sleeves. She had a pretty face. One hand rose to touch her face, then her hair—oh yeah. She was me. Her lips parted. “Oooh… wow.”

“Didn’t know ya could this good, huh?”

I shook my head. Disturbingly, my newfound mane of dark hair flowed back and forth across my shoulders.

“You can get up now.” Bethany took my hand and helped me to my feet.

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Well… you’re a girl now, so you could say, ‘Oh, Betty, I just adore it—thank you ever so much!’”

I glanced at the mirror. “It looks amazing. Thanks. I mean that. Your sister won’t mind, will she?”

“Nah. She hasn’t worn it in years. Didn’t need it, once her hair grew back. She left it here when she moved out.”

Bethany led me downstairs. With my purse clutched firmly in one hand, I checked every window we passed to make sure no one was peering inside. We ended up in the kitchen. She plucked a bottle from the counter. “How about a glass of Chateau Routas rosé? I bet you could use a drink.”

“You kid me not.” It was a pink wine that smelled like flowers and ripe peaches, but tasted more like strawberry with metallic undertones. Nice.

We moved into the living room and Bethany turned on the TV. “Let’s see… what would a couple of hot babes watch when there’s no guys around… Oh, yeah, a rerun of The Bachelorette. Is that perfect or what?”

I sipped the rosé, gave my head a quick shake and tried to get into the right frame of mind. What would someone wearing a skirt and high heels, and with a kick-ass head of hair pouring over her shoulders, say about a fluffball of a show like this? Got it. I licked my lips, pointed at the screen and said, “He’s hot.”
“Who? The tall guy or the one with specs?”

“The tall guy. I’d do him.” I drained my glass and asked for a refill.

“You’d do him? Or let him do you? There’s a difference.”

I sipped and thought about it. “He’d be on top. I guess he’s doing me.”

Bethany nodded. “An on-her-back girl, just like me. But you know what? I hear Ronnie likes it up top.” She tapped the side of her nose.

I swirled the wine glass. “Makes for a change of pace. Riding a guy like a horse… could be fun, as long as he’s got the saddle to make it worth my time.”

“Oh, my. Two drinks and she’s juiced to give it up to the first guy with a nine-inch saddle. I think you’ve had enough, girlfriend.” I made a stab for the bottle, but she moved it to the end table.

I would’ve made a fuss, but a car in the driveway brought the discussion to an abrupt end. “Oh shit—it’s my parents.” Bethany peeked out a window. “They’re home early.”

“Of course they are,” I muttered, shooting to my feet. The ‘luck of the Anders’ never missed an opportunity to screw me over. “I better get upstairs.”

“There’s no time! If they find a boy in my bedroom, putting his clothes on, you know what they’ll think. You have to go.”

I headed for the stairs. “Like this? Not a chance!”

The front door popped open and Bethany’s mother stepped inside. “Beth? I see you have company. And you’ve been drinking my wine.”

Her father closed the door behind him. “My girl, what have we told you about drinking at home? Only when we’re here, and only in moderation.”

“We only had one glass. Well, I did. She had two.” I received a dirty look.

“Where are your manners, dear? Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh, yeah. Uhm, this is Ar—Arlene. From the college. She was just leaving.”

There was a quick flurry of hellos and good-nights. Then Bethany shoved me out the front door. “What am I supposed to do?” I whispered.

“Go home,” she hissed. “It’s not far. It isn’t dark yet. You’ll live.”

“But I’m dressed like a girl.”

“No one will know. You pass, okay? Just avoid making eye contact.”

The door closed, gently but firmly, and I was on my own.
I walked as quickly as I could, without breaking into a race-walk. Even so, it was the longest twelve minutes of my life. Wind sifted through the towering elms that lined the street, sending dead and dying leaves into free-fall, and giving lift to the long hair sweeping past my ears—a reminder of what I had become.

Then, none too soon—but far too soon, in a way—I was home.

I stood at the foot of our driveway, wondering where Mom might be. Probably not the kitchen; that window was dark, as was the rest of the downstairs. The second floor windows were lit up. If she was getting ready for bed I might be able to slip up to my bedroom unseen. Then again, what did it matter? If she was trying to turn me into a girl, why would she object to my being dressed like one?

Of course, that could be the wine talking. Or the wind.

I went inside, closing the door like it was primed to explode. But I didn’t get far. Mom was in the living room, watching television; she barely had to turn her head to see me. I won’t say she didn’t bat an eyelash, because she did—lots of them. But all she said was, “You’re home early.”

“Her parents came back. I had to leave in a hurry.”

Silence. We just stared at each other. For me, that pretty much confirmed what I already suspected. There was nothing else to say. I continued up the stairs, with my narrow heels echoing off the hardwood like gunshots.

In my room, I set my purse on the dresser and lay on the bed; skirt, heels and all. The spill of dark hair across my pillow was yet another reminder of my changed circumstances; as if the taste of the lipstick, the warmth of the pantyhose, and the tight grip of the brassiere wasn’t enough.

Cross-dresser. There was no denying it. That’s what I was.

I doused the bedside lamp and stared up at the glow-stars painted on my ceiling. Slowly, my eyes fluttered shut. I could feel every gram of the rich brown mascara weighing them down. That this could happen to someone who had never given the ladies wear department a second glance… terrifying. What was happening to me? How far would it go? How far would I go?

There was no bogeyman in the closet and no monster under the bed. The threat was inside me; it was changing my body, it was inside my head. And yet, I could not deny that walking the streets of my home town as a woman had been a thrill like no other. I couldn’t wait to do it again.
I caught up with Jerry between classes. “We need to talk,” I said, dragging him away from the stream of students moving between buildings. I was back in boy-mode, having stowed the ladies wear and restricted myself to a beige pair of pantyhose under my jeans.

“Easy on the arm, Arch. What’s goin’ on?”

I waited until no one else was in earshot. There had been no further changes that morning. My hair might have been a bit longer, but that can be hard to judge when you’ve just taken off a long wig. My waist might’ve lost an inch or three, my hips might’ve been a touch wider, but how would I know? I wasn’t in the habit of measuring myself on a daily basis.

I lowered my voice. “Remember what Harmes was talking about in class? That business about the town founders being cross-dressers?”

“I don’t think he meant they all were. What about it?”

“Maybe they’re still around.” I saw his eyes widen. “Not the exact same people. I just mean maybe there have been more cross-dressers around than we know of. Like, from when Arkhade was founded through to now, for all we know.”

“Dunno about you, but I don’t know of any cross-dressers.”

I waved my hand. “Whatever. Here’s what I’m getting at. You read the Pact, right? The wives supplied by the Anders family—you think it’s possible they were really cross-dressers? I mean, does the Pact say anything about that?”

Jerry looked baffled. “The Pact doesn’t mention cross-dressers at all. That word didn’t even exist back then. Even ‘transvestite’ is only a hundred or so years old. ‘Travesti’ is quite a bit older, but still…” He gazed up at the sky, lost in thought. “I get what you’re saying, though. The Pact doesn’t specify that the bride has to be female—why would it? It did mention something about being ‘of child-bearing age’, which could imply female. But strictly speaking, it just means she has to be around the age that women generally bear children; not that she actually has to be able to give birth. Does that help?”

I nodded. “According to his family tree, none of them had children.”
“Lemme get this straight. You think all the Anders wives—the ones that married into Harmes’ family—were actually male?”

“That’s what I’m thinkin’.”

Jerry stifled a laugh. “So your family was, what, putting one over on the Harmes clan all these years—passing off whatever extra son happened to be lying around as a daughter? And they never twigged? They never figured it out, so they just kept marrying transvestites—for two hundred years?”

“Oh, I’m sure they knew. Maybe that was the whole idea.”

“Right. So the Harmes men are all perverts.” He made a face. “You know, I might actually buy that part.”

I suppressed a shudder. That would explain why Harmes didn’t seem to care that the only remaining Anders heir was male. It’s what he wants! The only problem being that I’m not—or at least wasn’t—a cross-dresser. Pressure from the family might have been enough to force a young man of an earlier era into a skirt and even an arranged marriage, but times have changed. This is the twenty-first century. Nothing my mother could say would have convinced me to turn myself into a girl and marry a man. Harmes had to force me into the role.

“Why this sudden interest in cross-dressers?” Jerry asked. “What’s it got to do with you?”

Again, I pondered how much to tell him. “You heard Mister Harmes, the other day in class. Like you said, he knew I was there. I’m just trying to figure out how it all fits together.”

“Right… So we’ve got witches, cross-dressers, a two-hundred-year-old contract between your family and his, and a weird dude who wants to marry an Anders girl—or some guy who looks like a girl. Yeah, it’s a puzzle all right.”

He didn’t know the half of it. I spent the rest of the day in a daze, listening to what my profs had to say but absorbing none of it. I could think of nothing but the clothing that was waiting for me at home.

A text from Bethany brought me to her car, which was parked in the underground lot beneath the student services building. “You forgot your stuff.” She popped her trunk and handed over my suitcase.

I flashed her a quick glare. “Yeah, whose fault was that?”

Her gaze fell. “Sorry about that. I panicked.” She scuffed at the ground with the toe of her Mary Janes. “Did you get home okay?”

“I did. Got caught too. Mom spotted me the second I stepped inside.”
“Ouch. How’d that go? Did she admit what she did to you?”
What she did to me… I had to think about that. The lies were piling up. What had I told her? That Mom had been dosing me with female hormones. Not quite the truth, but it was in the same ballpark. “Neither of us had much to say.”

“Ouch again. Listen, if you need a place to crash…”
I waved her off. “Thanks, but she didn’t kick me out.”
She smiled. “I was gonna say that the Lodgepoles have a big house, and I’m sure Ronnie wouldn’t mind.” Her smile faded. “I hope I didn’t put you off dressing. You really did look nice. With a bit of work you could be… pretty.”
I wasn’t sure how to take that, but I muttered my thanks.

“If you need help with it sometime, I’m certainly willing. So is Ronnie. Or both of us, for that matter. We could have a girl’s night—”

“Another time, okay?”
When I got home, Mom wasn’t there. It was her book club night. Oddly enough they were scheduled to discuss *The Witches of Eastwick*. I wondered if Eastwick was anywhere near Arkhade.

I wandered into the kitchen. She’d left dinner in the microwave; all I had to do was warm it up. Trouble was, it was mac-and-cheese with that little something extra that made it special; the magic potion that was either turning me into a girl or a reasonable facsimile thereof. I leaned on the sink, staring into the back yard. A squirrel was nosing around under the bird feeder for seeds that the chickadees had managed to lose. I thought about Harmes. The bastard figured he had the right to push people around and turn them into whatever he wanted them to be. It wouldn’t be far off to say that I hated the man, and I sure as hell couldn’t imagine marrying a creep like that. Whatever his potion was doing to me, it didn’t make me like him any better.

I thought about the previous night. Being outside, with the wind rippling through the trees, the whole world alive with movement, feeling the pull of Bethany’s skirt on my knees, Vanessa’s heels on my feet, wonderfully long hair dancing across my shoulders… these are the moments you live for.

I needed more. I wanted to fly higher, go farther—to become more of a woman than I was then. It might not be a desire I was born with, or one that I’d chosen on my own, but it was mine now and that’s what mattered. The potion would help me get there. What else did I need to know?
So I ate the portion in the microwave, then went back for more.
There are times when you actually think about what to do; ponder your options, talk it over with someone, make a reasoned choice. Then there are times when you just act; like a robot helpless to go against its programming.

This was one of those times. What I did next I just did, without so much as a first thought, much less a second. I was a robot programmed to ‘cross-dress’, although I do admit to revelling in the act in a way that a mere automaton could not.

I packed the suitcase with the clothing Bethany and Vanessa had given me and hauled it down to my mother’s bedroom. Why the hell not? Everything was out in the open now. I could do whatever I wanted—or whatever it was Mom and Mister Harmes wanted me to do, assuming anyone could tell the difference.

I chose Ronnie’s panties, a pair of her fancy patterned stockings, in beige, and the garter belt. And her narrow-heel black pumps, which fit so nicely. And Betty’s padded brassiere. As for what came next… I needed something different.

A full-length slip; mother hung hers on a nail in her closet. Black silk should do the trick. I slipped it on. The hem didn’t quite reach my knees, which was okay; it just meant I needed an off-the-knee dress. I browsed through her closet and picked out a little black cocktail dress with a draped neckline, three-quarter sleeves and a zipper up the back. I recalled her wearing it last winter, for a date with a man she met through work. And it must have done its job, because she didn’t come home until the following morning. The walk of shame—perfect.

I zipped myself into the dress, wondering whether or not it made me look like her. Did that matter? It wasn’t like I was planning to look the guy up; he didn’t even live in Arkhade anymore.

I gently combed out the brunette wig that belonged to Bethany’s sister, careful to release any snags without pulling on the base of the weft. I found a nylon wig cap in my suitcase, which I was fairly sure had not been there before, and used that to secure my hair. Then I tilted my head back and coaxed the wig into place. A quick shake and it was done. Arlene was back.

I sat down at the vanity and did my best to recreate the look Bethany had given me not twenty-four hours before. The foundation was simple enough, but blending was decidedly not. It took quite awhile before my cheekbones appeared passably real. Mother didn’t have the same eye makeup, so I opted for more dramatic colors. A darker eye shadow; more eye liner, feathered and diffused; thicker mascara. A darker lip liner and bolder lipstick. Mother would’ve been so proud.

According to the mirror, I really did look like her. Only younger. And prettier.
For accessories I settled on a long, doubled-over string of pearls, a pair of clip-on earrings that seemed to match, Bethany’s wrist bangles, and a small diamond ring that had been in our family for two or three generations. I slipped it onto the ring finger of my right hand.

Finally, I added a generous splash of the *Vanitas* eau de parfum, by Versace. It was a Christmas present from me, one she had never used. Her loss; it was mine now. The seductive scent of cedar wood, tonka bean and various flowers seemed to emphasize my newfound female attributes.

Rosy lips smiled back at me as I stood, clicked the suitcase shut and returned it to the closet upstairs. I turned off the light in Mother’s room and closed the door, leaving it just as I’d found it—minus what I was wearing, of course.

The outside world was calling.

Downstairs. I packed one of her spare purses with my keys, my phone and my wallet, plus kleenex and other items women often carried. Outerwear came from the hall closet: a woollen camel-coat that covered my knees, with a self-tie belt. *My my,* I thought, inspecting the result. What *ever* could I say, should I be stopped by the police? Whatever. The truth should be good enough: a cross-dresser out for a stroll. This is the twenty-first century. Men can do this sort of thing.

I doused the lights, closed the door behind me, and locked it. Mother might see the darkened house and assume that I’d gone to bed, although my absent car might tell her otherwise. Not that it mattered. I was a grown-up woman and I could go wherever I wanted.

It was barely dusk. The evening was only half over. There was certainly enough light for the neighbors to see me. Let them, I decided. Let them think I’d loaned my car to a female cousin from out of town, so she could pick up her fiancé from his place of business and the two of them could bog off to some fancy restaurant. Or maybe they’ll know it’s me. But who cares? I’m a twenty-first century cross-dresser. We’re loud, we’re proud, and we’re people just like everyone else.

So I got in my little sky-blue Corolla and went.

That’s about where my autopilot shut off. I was on my own again, with no place in particular to go, and nothing to do but over-think my options. I could look up one of the girls; either of them would be thrilled to see me out-and-about in girl mode. But no… that would be too easy, and I wasn’t in the mood for easy.

I could swing by Jerry’s place. But would he be at home or the library? Or pulling a shift at the counter of his father’s general store, as he did two or three times a week. Not a good idea. I still wasn’t sure what to tell him.
I could pretend to be a campus co-ed and stroll across the quad, and maybe hit the pub for a wine spritzer. My courage failed me on that one.

I just drove. My route was anything but direct, but at last I found myself in the upscale neighborhood of Arkton Heights. It was on the western edge of town, at the foot of the ridge that represented the first step into the Berkshires. It was also where Mister Harmes made his home. I’d been there two or three times as a child, when Aunt Minerva was still well enough to entertain.

The area seemed to be deserted. I passed few vehicles and no pedestrians. The over-sized homes were set well back from the road, and they were mostly unlit. Needless to say, the Harmes manse was located at the distant end of a dead-end street, beyond which loomed the shadow of Arkton Ridge. Along the way houses gave way to vacant lots that had never been cleared, which wasn’t too surprising. Who would want Edgar Harmes as neighbor?

Oddly enough, there was a city park next to the Harmes property. It wasn’t large; no more than a single lot on the zoning map of the area, assuming there was one. But it had a tiny parking lot and that’s where I stopped the car.

As to why I’d come, I couldn’t say. This should be the last place on Earth I’d ever want to visit, and I still hated the man, but I felt drawn to the area. I felt oddly comfortable here, although I couldn’t imagine why.

I got out, purse in hand. The street was fully sidewalked, in spite of this being the only house within half a mile—and it was enclosed by what must have been a ten-foot wall topped with spikes. So why bother with a sidewalk?

I strolled along until I reached the gate, which was closed. There was a call button for the intercom, but I didn’t touch it. Instead, I peered through the bars. I couldn’t see much through the trees, and the house itself was dark—with the sole exception of one window on the third floor. Harmes’ bedroom?

I backed away, feeling faint. If Harmes got what he was after, that could turn into the site of my marital deflowering. I paced back the way I’d come, heels tapping on the pavement. Interesting. I could hear but a single click for each step I took, which meant that toe and heel were striking the ground at the same instant. It was only a three-inch heel, but still… that’s exactly what you’d expect—for a woman accustomed to walking in high heels.

Magic? What else could it be? I had a woman’s gait, in spite of this being only my third evening in heels. The skirt that gripped my knees felt like an old friend and I couldn’t imagine not wearing nylons. The weight on my chest felt like part of me, and removing the wig the night before was an experience kin to shaving my head. There could be only one explanation: I was turning into a woman.
I stopped short of my car, hesitated, then returned the key to my purse. I turned toward the ridge. Someone—or something—didn’t want me to leave.

An overgrown creek ran through the park, before descending into a culvert. There was a paved trail next to the noisy little river, spilling over with rain from the highlands, and this was the path I took. To my right, through a thin stand of trees and brush, I could see the wall that surrounded Harmes’ estate.

I shook back my hair and shouldered the strap of my purse. Ordinarily, this wasn’t the sort of place a girl would choose for a stroll; alone, after dark, in a park full of deep shadows. But I wasn’t afraid. The bad men—the murderers, the rapists, the muggers—were all far away; I could sense it. They feared this place and for them there were safer parks in which to ply their shameful trade.

A cold breeze followed the water down the mountainside, combing through my hair with skeletal fingers. My eyelashes fluttered, feeling the weight of mascara; the tang of icy air and lipstick permeated my mouth. To the outside world, I was no more than a young woman flitting through the night on an errand of the heart—a woman, perhaps, who had left her attentive but mild-mannered husband at home and now sought out her lover; a young fisherman who spent most of his time at sea and whose strong hands could make her body sing. And her heart soared as he came into view, and the solid warmth of his smile was enough to call to life her girlish dreams of love…

I stopped. Where did that come from? Archer Anders never had a ‘girlish dream of love’ in his life. But for Arlene Anders? Part of me knew all about a little girl who dreamed of being a princess, and the handsome prince on a white steed who swept her into arms of limitless passion. Sexist as hell, of course, but little girls don’t know any better. They only know what society and their mothers program into them.

All of a sudden, little girls and me had a lot in common.

A narrow track led away from the creek, toward the wall. A set of rocky steps ended in a small clearing, in the center of which was a cairn of rounded creekstones, cemented into a memorial. To the memory of three young men, I recalled, who had met their fate on this very spot some seventy years ago; a crime that had never been solved.

Through a gap in the trees I could see over the wall. A pool of light spilled from the porch into the backyard. My heart nearly stopped. He was there.

It seemed like too much of a coincidence, both of us here at the same time. A chill flooded through me. I crossed my arms and held tight, as though to keep myself from—what? Running to him? But I still hated the man. Passionately.
Harmes descended a wide flight of stairs and strolled toward the ridge. There must be a path there, although I couldn’t see it. What was he doing? I pulled my coat closer and shifted sideways, trying to see, with one hand firmly on my purse—as women are given to do when they feel threatened.

Harmes vanished into the shadows at the base of the ridge. I moved to the edge of the clearing, as far as my heels could go. Harmes reappeared, higher up. I could see the light jacket he wore and the deathly-pale skin of his face, but little else. He seemed to be ascending a twisting staircase carved into the ridge.

“For Chrissake,” I muttered, “why am I doing this?” Why would anyone give a flying fig what this lunatic did in the privacy of his own garden? For about five seconds I seriously considered leaving. But I didn’t.

Harmes vanished around the far side of a rock promontory that stuck out from the top of the ridge, then reappeared a minute later on top of it. Heck of a view from up there; probably higher than the top floor of his mansion. And that’s what he seemed to be doing: taking in the view.

I waited, and watched, as he stood for a time. Then his arms slowly lifted and the wind picked up steam. That had to be a coincidence. How could it be anything but? Was Harmes the high priest of a cult that worshipped a great god of the sky? The notion was laughable. If he had that kind of power, I was as good as wedded.

I was musing about what sort of wedding gown I might like when a new sound sought my attention. It seemed to rise from the wind itself, but a moment later my perceptions changed. What I had taken for the mere movement of air was not that at all. It was the voice of an invisible giant.

Imagine some vast starship hanging over a city—like a scene from Independence Day—and turn it into a creature with limbs the length of an aircraft carrier. Like a shadow thrown against a starless sky, I could sense the thing without actually seeing it. It was there for some period of time, then gone.

And Harmes looked down—straight at me.

It was a warning. That’s all I knew, as my womanly feet took me tappity-tap back to my little car and I fled, heedless of my safety or anyone else’s, through the deserted streets of Arkhade. A terrible warning of things to come.

Edgar Harmes had shown me what I was up against. To defy his will made as much sense as shouting down a storm, or standing against the rising tide. He was telling me that one day, soon, I would belong to him.
All the way home, I thought about leaving town. Just keep driving, I told myself. Or if you must, stop at the house and change, pack a bag and leave a note for your mother. Then it’s off into the wild blue yonder, that being anyplace on the planet Edgar Harmes isn’t.

I didn’t do any of that. I just went home. But really, I didn’t have much choice in the matter. Something back there on the ridge wasn’t done with me.

Mom had gone to bed, but she kept wet wipes in the second-floor washroom so I was able to clean up. I left her dress and slip hanging on the bathroom door. Everything else went back into my suitcase, except for the wig. Curiously, there was a long-neck styrofoam head waiting for me atop my dresser, so my hair—once I could bear to part with it—found a new home there.

A disturbing dream followed. I was a blushing bride, gliding down the aisle on the arm of old Mister Jones, Jerry’s father, who was giving me away. Waiting at the altar was Edgar Harmes, smirking as he explained to Jerry—serving as the best man—that there was no way I could have avoided this. Events set in motion two hundred years before were guiding our actions. The pastor was an invisible giant who spoke to the congregation in words of wind. My veil blew off. I didn’t speak ‘wind’, so just said ‘I do’ to everything. Harmes seemed pleased, and kissed me with obscene passion. Then I was carried off to his manse on the edge of town, hauled up to the master bedroom, and ravaged in a manner that made it obvious I was now female—and that I belonged to him.

I awoke with pounding heart and sheets soaked with sweat. But it was only in the shower that I noticed what had happened during the night: my hair had descended to my shoulders. It was fuller and thicker, with soft waves that emerged as it dried. I tied it back into a fairly feminine ponytail.

I spent the morning sitting in the back of my classes, hoping no one would notice the change. Fortunately, guys with ponytails don’t get a second glance these days and I didn’t run into anyone I knew—until, wouldn’t you know it…

“Hey, Arch! Long time, huh? What’s it been, a week?” Royce Montel, sometimes known as ‘Reggie’. He flagged me down as I was leaving the science lecture hall.
I cringed as he slapped me on the back. How could I possibly explain any of this
to a guy like him? Totally self-absorbed would be giving him too much credit. He
played point guard for the college team but rarely made it off the bench. Did that
stop him from playing the ‘big man on campus’ card? Not a chance.

“Did ya see the game? We really took it to ‘em, huh? They pulled away a bit at the
end, sure, but it was close. What’s ten or twenty points? I just got back last night.
So what’s up with you? Anything happen while I was gone? How’re the girls?”

“They’re fine, Reg.”

“Good, good… Whaddya know—never saw this before.” He gave my tail a quick
tug. “Must’a been growin’ quite awhile, huh? I never noticed. Probably just got it
styled, right? Looks pretty sweet. Funny how people see what they expect to see.
Anyhow, catch ya later!” He headed off toward the gym.

I heaved a sigh and went to find Jerry. He took one look at me and his mouth fell
open. “What the—where’d that come from? It’s gotta be fake, right?”

I shook my head. “It’s Harmes. You said it yourself—black magic.” I told him
what was happening to my body—chest, body hair and overall figure—but not
what had caused it. No point pointing the finger at my own mother, even though
she was guilty as hell. It was more Harmes’ fault than hers.

Jerry ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t get it. Why would he worry about trivial
stuff like your hair? If he can do mag—”

I stopped him. “I think he’s trying to turn me into a cross-dresser.”

“Oh… I see. That’s why you were going on about the Anders wives being cross-
dressers.” He sank onto a bench and dropped his backpack. “Is it working? This
plan of his to make you his wife?”

I tugged on my pony. “I’ve got tits and a tail, dude. It’s working.”

“Yeah, but you have to ‘dress up’ to be a cross-dresser, don’t you?”

“I’m wearing pantyhose,” I said, pulling up my pant leg.

“Uh-huh. Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t there more to it than just one item?”

Deep breath. “I’ve dressed up all the way, a couple of times. Mom’s stuff. When
she’s out of the house.” I didn’t mention the girls.

“Jesus. And that’s just this week. You were never into it before?”

“Never. We swears.” I drew an ‘X’ over my heart.

“So the magic is affecting your mind. That’s bad.” Jerry bit his lip. “How do I say
this? Has it changed the way you think about him?”
I pulled a face. “God, no. I hate the guy. More than ever.”

“Then how does he expect you to marry him? This ain’t the eighteen-hundreds. You’re not gonna do it just ‘cause your momma tells you to.”

“He’s got a trick or two up his sleeve.” I told him about my trip out to Harmes’ mansion, omitting the part about being dressed as a woman at the time.

His eyes went wide. “Oh, man. This is serious. You’re telling me he’s actually in touch with one of the ‘great old ones’? That’s what Lovecraft called them: magical beings with great power and very little regard for human life. They’re fictional, of course,” he muttered.

“Not this one. I saw—well, I sensed it. Sort of an after-image in my mind—like when you look at something bright, then close your eyes.”

“I’ll hit the library,” he said. “The archives too. Check out the really old stuff no one ever bothered to digitize. Oh—but I’ve got Harmes’ class after lunch. Guess I should go to that, huh? God knows what he’ll say.”

God had nothing to do with it, but I wanted to know too. I took a seat in the back, in a different corner from last time, before Harmes entered the room. The class was full by then, which meant maybe he wouldn’t notice me.

Fat chance. If he could see me in the dark, from way up on the ridge, then spotting me in a crowded classroom would be child’s play. And play he did.

“Central Mass.” He swept his hand toward the map of Massachusetts hanging on the wall next to the stage. “We live in an area rich in history, as I hope this class has shown. Armies have marched across this soil. Men have lived and died. Souls have been lost. One might even say that we live in a nexus of power, in the purest sense of the word.”

Someone stuck his hand up. “Is this gonna be on the test?”

“For you, yes. Now do be quiet. In point of fact, the history of this region goes back much further than the nominal scope of this class. Small minds… could not hope to comprehend…” He paused, as if struggling to find the right words—or suppress them. Then he smiled. “Suffice to say, you’re not likely to get that story from any textbook. Certainly not any text the state would sanction. Perhaps I’ll propose a course in the pre-history of New England, from the ‘time of the old ones’ to colony. It would have to be graduate-level, of course,” he mused. “Only a few select students. A certain… dedication would be required.”

Jerry spoke up. “Sir, is it true that the town of Ark-ham really exists? It would be somewhere around about—there.” He pointed to a location on the map near the Atlantic coast, using the laser pointer he often carried.
Harmes leapt back. “By the gods—watch what you’re doing, boy! You can take a man’s eye out with that thing.” He blotted his forehead with a neatly folded handkerchief. “What an extraordinary question.” He pointed at Jerry. “Perhaps what you really mean is: does Innsmouth exist? Does the river Miskatonic exist? Does Dunwich exist and was it really that horrifying?”

He paced across the stage. “Look at the map, my young friend. Do you see such places? Of course not—because in this world, they are the stuff of fiction. Very strange, irresponsible fiction. Because words have power, do they not? And do we not live in a nexus of power? Are there not places in the backcountry where honest folk dare not venture? Of course there are. Everyone knows that.” He waved at the map. “Find me another chart, Mister Jones, and I’ll show you another world. And in that world you will find accursed Innsmouth; you will find Arkham in its shade, next to the placid waters of the Miskatonic and their hidden depths. There you will find the truth you seek. Oh yes, you can count on that.”

Again he wiped his brow, then pointed toward me. “You there, at the back. Mister Anders, is it not? You’ve been here before, yet you are not one of my students. Perhaps you would care to enroll? It’s not too late,” he added coyly. “Considering the history between our two families, I believe I could find the time to instruct you in the material you’ve missed. Perhaps you could come to—”

I didn’t stick around to hear him out. His laughter followed me right out the door. But the whole thing struck me as odd. What would his students think, when the professor starts raving about other worlds and a bunch of stuff straight out of the pages of an old pulp magazine?

“Everyone knows he’s stark raving you-know-what,” Jerry said, when he caught up with me after class. “Why do you think enrollment went up? It’s entertaining! Plus, rumor has it everyone’s guaranteed a passing grade.” He shrugged. “Either that, or he’ll fail the whole class, in which case the college would have to step in and we’d all get a pass anyhow. Either way, it’s all good.”

“Sure, unless you happen to be the guy he’s firing at.”

“That did kinda set him off, didn’t it? Figured I’d try to shake him up a bit.”

“That’s easy for you. What am I gonna do now?”

Jerry just shrugged. I was on my own.

* 

Mom was still at work when I got home. The rest of the casserole was waiting for me in the fridge. I stared at the thing, like it was rigged to explode.
“You want me to do this, don’t you?” My eyes were on the baking dish but I was talking to Harmes. Not that he could hear me; one would hope. “So what if I did? Whatever happens to my body, I still hate your goddamn guts.”

The back of my neck felt the tickle of my ponytail. I ran my fingers through the curly ends. Having long hair was… nice. So was the feel of sheer pantyhose on bare legs, and the warm flesh of my chest. More of all that would be a good thing.

*What the hell.* I ate the rest of the macaroni and three kinds of cheese, along with whatever magic potion Harmes had given my mother. Whatever it did, I reserved the right to choose my own husband—*wife*, that’s what I meant. Either way.

A knock came at the back door as I was washing out the dish. It seemed like the right thing to do for tableware that had come into contact with magic; get rid of the stuff before it hardened onto the ceramic, if that made any sense.

Vanessa strolled into the room, with Bethany right behind. They made straight for the ponytail, as if they’d never seen one before. “Reggie told us,” Ronnie said. “We said, like, no way—but here it is!” She ran her fingers through the tips.

“He figured you’ve been growing it all summer,” Betty said, rolling her eyes. “We didn’t tell him any different.”

“Thanks for that.” I dried the casserole dish and put it away.

Vanessa said, “You didn’t really shave your legs. Did you.” It wasn’t a question.

Bethany said, “Your mom didn’t really spike your food with hormones.”

Busted. “Yeah, it was Harmes. I’ve got some kind of weird hex on my head. Every day it gets worse.” I told them about dressing up the night before and about my drive around town, although I omitted the part about seeing Harmes on the ridge. No point freaking the girls out.

Vanessa touched my arm. “What’s going on, Arch? Are you turning into a girl?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But probably just a cross-dresser. From what I’ve heard and read about, I figure some of Anders women that married into Harmes’ family were actually cross-dressers.”

“Wouldn’t that include your mom’s aunt? She must have known all along.”

“Huh. Never thought of that.” I mulled it over. “Maybe Mom really *has* been slipping me hormones all these years. It would explain why I never grew much past five-nine, or weighed nearly as much as the other guys.”

“That works in your favor,” Bethany said, “if you do decide to change teams. We came here to offer Arlene a girl’s night out,” she added. “But it’s up to you.”
My tummy did a flip-flop. How could I say no? Harmes’ potion had done its job well: I was a cross-dresser. “I’m your girl,” I said, feigning reluctance, “as long as you don’t try to size me up for a wedding dress.”

“No worries. Bridal shops are officially off-limits.”

We headed upstairs. I retrieved my suitcase while the girls argued about the wig. “Her hair’s long enough,” Vanessa said. “We can just style it.”

“Sure, but ‘certain people’ have seen it. The wig gives her a different look.”

“Ooh, I know. We can pull her hair through the mesh. See this? There’s hardly any solid cap. It would blend right in with the wig.”

“Nice. The color’s pretty close, so no prob there. Oh, Arch-er.”

They sat me on the edge of the bed, tilted my head back and slipped the wig into place. Then they set to work, seated cross-legged behind me, using combs and hair clips from my mother’s dresser to draw my own hair through the open mesh of the wig. They finished by sticking bits of surgical tape around my hairline, just under the edge of the wig. The clips inside the wig slid under the tape, pinning the hairpiece in place. They brushed out the resulting thick tresses, fully integrating grown hair with the artificial.

Bethany said, “It won’t be easy to take this off. But that doesn’t matter anymore. It’s not like you have anything to hide from your mom.”

Vanessa rooted through my suitcase. “Leave it on for tonight. We’ll help her take it off tomorrow, before school. Gotta be patterned stockings, right?”

“Totally. Go with the nude pair. The pattern is more subtle, but those legs are a feature. People are gonna want to see ‘em.”

“Moulin Rouge it is.” She handed me the stockings, garter belt and panties. The girls turned around while I dressed. Then they strapped me into Betty’s padded brassiere, followed by Ronnie’s black skirt and heels, and Betty’s gold lamé tunic. I felt like the little sister, wearing their hand-me-downs.

They insisted that I do my own makeup, then proceeded to micro-manage the process from beginning to end. Foundation was followed by finishing powder, blusher, and more blending than seemed necessary. They chose a dark eye shadow and opted for more liner, with subtle feathering, and a thick mascara for a more made-up look. My lips stood out with crimson lipstick.

Vanessa took the lipstick. “I think I’m jealous. She’s a looker.”

They let me pick my own accessories. I chose Bethany’s necklace from the other night, and her wrist bangles because they went with the top; plus a pair of my
mother’s gold earrings that slipped over and inside my ears, for a pierced-ear look. Over my left breast I pinned a silver broach that once belonged to my maternal grandmother. I spritzed my throat with Vanitas, as well as my wrists. Then I rubbed them together, because that’s what girls do.

Bethany looked me over. “For someone who’s only been doing this for a week, you really know your stuff. Kinda makes a girl wonder.”

Vanessa handed me the clutch purse I’d brought home two night before. Inside I found my keys, wallet and phone, along with a compact and some of the makeup I’d just used on my face. I thanked her and led the way downstairs. Mother’s faux-fur coat completed my outfit. I felt almost dizzy. Intoxicated. I yanked the front door open. “Is this a girl’s night out or what?”

Vanessa stopped me on the porch. “By the by, we thought it wise to have an escort for the evening. It’s Reggie.” She nodded toward the street, where a car’s engine roared to life and its lights flashed.

Oh God. It was Royce’s ‘71 black Dodge Challenger. “Of all the guys you could pick,” I hissed, “why him? He’ll never let me live this down!”

“Chill out, babykins. Your cousin Arlene, from Boston, is here for a visit and we’re taking her out on the town—okay? So don’t blow your cover!”

Bethany leaned in. “You know, hearing Arlene talk—her voice sounds different, don’t you think? Kinda like Archer did when he was twelve.”

My mouth went dry. “You mean, my voice just broke—the opposite way?”

Vanessa prodded me down the path. “Must be that ole black magic. Let’s go, girl. No point looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

Royce hopped out to open the passenger door. I got in, trying to look on the bright side. Reggie wasn’t all bad; far from it. He did knew how to treat a lady—at least when he figured there was a nonzero chance he might score.

I shared the back seat with Bethany; Vanessa rode shotgun. Royce gunned the engine. “Where to, ladies? Sky’s the limit, just like always. With me.”

“Playland,” Ronnie said. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled.

* 

We were bound for an amusement park in Central Mass, positioned to draw patrons from all the nearby towns. It was a thirty-minute drive from Arkhade, at the speed Royce traveled when he was trying to impress a girl, or in this case three girls. It was a miracle we survived the trip.
I exited the vehicle on wobbly legs. Bethany took my arm, while Royce led the way to the gate. Vanessa took his arm. “The boy pays,” she informed him.

He scowled. “What, for all of you? Isn’t that a bit—”

“You’ve got three hotties in tow and you’re worried about a few dollars? Close your eyes and think of your reputation. If coach is here, you might even make the starting five. Besides,” she added, “I’ll buy a big sheet of ride tickets for all of us.”

He perked up. “Sounds like a plan.”

I leaned on Bethany. “Can you believe that? She’s all over him.”

“Uh, why would you care? You’re a girl, remember?”

“Well, sure. But—” I took a deep breath, feeling the friendly grip of my brassiere. So true. Why should I care? If Ronnie wants to sell herself for a freebie, let her. It’s no skin off my pretty little nose. I shook my hair back, feeling it dance across my shoulders. “I remember,” I whispered back. “I’m one of you now.”

“Oh… good.” She looked surprised.

Playland was packed to the rafters on Friday nights. The crowd skewed young and it quickly became obvious why the girls decided to bring Royce. Any girl without a pair of tight trousers in tow was constantly spammed by lone males, the alpha predator in this particular ecosystem. We three stuck near our guy and made him the focus of our attention, which seemed to ward off the rest of the pack. Poor Reggie puffed up and strutted around like a peacock, never realizing he was being used. Or if he did, he didn’t care. To some, image is all that matters.

At first, I was hyper-aware of what I was wearing: girl clothes, for God’s sake! A gold top with a neckline that showed cleavage. A black skirt and heels. Nude stockings that gave my legs a scalloped sheen. My hair was long and thick, and it framed a pretty face with long lashes and a full mouth. A week ago I’d have been slavering after a girl like that, dragging my tongue on the ground.

But after awhile I forgot about all that. My hair was my hair, my face was just me, and my voice took on a feminine lilt that blended with Betty’s, soaring higher than Ronnie’s throaty purr—and when we all laughed you could hardly tell us apart. I was one of the girls. Why would I want to be anything else?

“Funhouse time,” Vanessa said, as we joined a line of about fifty people.

“I was in there once,” Royce said. “Gotta warn you girls, it’s pretty scary.”

“Then we’ll just have to hang on to you, won’t we?” Each of the girls took one of his arms. Reggie puffed up and grew an inch or two.
Not to be left out, I flung my arms around his neck, from behind. “How scared were you?” I whispered into his ear, forgetting for the moment that I’d grown up with the guy. He was a man and I was a woman; that’s all that mattered.

“Who, me? Nah, I wasn’t scared. But the girl I was with—she was scared. Hung on to me the whole way through. Not that I’m complaining.”

Surprising even myself, I giggled. “Maybe we could hold hands.”

“Sure thing, babe. I only got two hands, but hey—if you can think of something else to hold on to, I’m all for it.” We laughed. When you could get past his ego, Reggie was one heck of a funny guy. Or not. I guess you had to be there.

Eventually, they sat us down in a four-person car, with myself and Bethany up front, Vanessa and Royce in the back. We passed through a giant clown mouth, through a set of tattered black curtains, and on into the dark. Then it was a long series of scary clown faces, distorted mirrors, big hairy spiders, fuzzy lights and that might been ghosts, plus one guy in a hockey mask carrying a chainsaw—and all the while the refurbished mine car juddered from side to side and jets of compressed air fired into our faces. I suppose that sort of thing might be scary if you were in the right frame of mind. But I wasn’t. I’d seen worse. Quite recently, in fact.

I glanced back once to find Reg and Ronnie in full lip-lock. Oddly, I found the sight annoying. It wasn’t like she was cheating on me—or on Archer, for that matter. Our relationship was an off-and-on sort of thing and at the moment it was definitely off. I knew she dated Royce from time to time, among others. I wasn’t jealous of him. It was worse than that. The guy was here with all three of us girls, so why should she get all the action? And that thought was every bit as confusing as the evil clown that was yodelling into my left ear.
At the end I said, “It wasn’t all that scary.”

Royce helped me out of the car. “Some chicks are made of sterner stuff.”

I smiled. “How about we try something really scary—like the ferris wheel?” Reg made a face, but he took us to the right lineup, which—surprise, surprise—wasn’t nearly as long as the others. He even volunteered to stay on the ground, when we discovered the seats could only fit three people. We got in, with me sandwiched in the middle, and waved at Royce as the ferris wheel lurched heavenward one pod at a time to let new people on.

Vanessa put her hand on mine. “Havin’ fun yet, Arlene?”

“I am. But you know… This is a group thing, right? Not just a date. So could you and Reggie maybe come up for air now and then? Just so the rest of us don’t get the wrong idea.” Vanessa just laughed.

Bethany patted my other hand. “Girl’s night out,” she said. “The rule is, any guy is fair game. I know you’re shy and all, but have you checked yourself out lately? For a hottie like you, any one of those fanboys prowling around down there would give his left nut just to hold hands. Park yourself in his lap and suck face, and he’d probably blow the other nut right through his pants.”

_Really?_ For a moment that sounded vaguely intriguing. It wasn’t that any of the guys I’d seen were attractive—they were just _guys_. But on the other hand, being treated as a woman seemed like the logical end result of what I’d been doing all week. Not just logical: _desirable_. Maybe even… inevitable.

We rose above the forest and stopped at the top of the wheel. The occupants of the last pod were being swapped out at ground level. We were facing west, toward the Berkshires. The foothills in this area didn’t share the same escarpment as the ridge above Arkhade but like the necklace around my neck they were part of the same chain. An icy wind skittered through the treetops toward us—and it _screamed_. My hair jumped and billowed, slapping at my shoulders.

That’s when I saw the creature.

No one else did. The ferris wheel jolted into motion and we plummeted toward the ground, past the ride operator with Royce standing arms-folded next to him, and back up into the air. The creature was no more than a pit of darkness, but it cast a giant shadow against the sky. I could _sense_ its presence.

I felt it point at me. The wind shrieked. We plummeted toward the ground.

“Did you see it?” I said it first to Bethany, then Vanessa. Their faces were blank. I knew what they must be thinking: the poor cross-dresser is out of his little mind. “It’s the thing from the ridge!” I yelled. “The one Harmes summoned.”
“What are you talking about?” Vanessa yelled back, as we swung up into the full force of the wind. It occurred to me that I hadn’t actually told them about what I’d seen on the ridge, only that I had spent the evening cross-dressed.

“It’s a demon of the ancient world,” I yelled. “Harmes summoned it to turn me into a woman. Or a cross-dresser,” I added.

“That’s a Balrog, silly.” Bethany took my arm. “You know—the monster Gandalf cast into the underworld when he saved Frodo on that bridge. It isn’t real.”

“This thing is real,” I told her. “I saw it myself. Not with my eyes, but in my mind. It’s right there, up in the hills! It—it wants me to be his bride. Harmes, I mean—”

The wind ripped the words from my mouth. We plunged past Royce and back into the sky. I sank into the seat as the girls leaned over me, protecting me with their bodies. The wind gripped the ferris wheel. It shook violently, grinding its gears and finally shuddered to a stop in a shower of sparks.

We were stuck, halfway up. I could hear the operator swearing loudly, as he and Royce bent over the drive mechanism.

“You look different,” Vanessa said. She was staring at me.

Bethany pointed at my head. “It’s her hair. See that? It’s a mess, sure—but it’s got more of a natural waviness to it. And the tips have gone all curly.”

Vanessa’s fingers probed my scalp. “Ohmygod, this isn’t a wig—it’s real!”

“Impossible.” Bethany’s fingers joined in. “The cap has to be in here somewhere. Wigs don’t just turn into real hair!”
“I told you, it’s Harmes. Did you think I was kidding? I’ve got boobs!”

Both girls stared at me. Bethany said, “We call them ‘breasts’.”

Vanessa pointed at my lap. “Are you, er… still male?”

Damn good question. Delicately, I probed my crotch. “Uhm, yeah. I am—for now. He’s doing it one piece at a time, for some reason.” Whether that was by choice or some limitation of the magic itself, who could tell?

Royce called up: “It’s gonna be awhile, okay? They have to get a fire truck in here. They need the ladder to get everyone down.”

We waved back. In any event, the wind had died down. We were in no immediate danger. I took the time to tell the girls about what Harmes was doing and about the Pact itself, including the information Jerry and I had found.

“But—you still hate the dude, right?” Vanessa eyed me suspiciously. “You’re not starting to think of him as husband material?” I assured her that the very thought of being the man’s wife was enough to induce vomiting. She rolled her shoulders. “Well then—I don’t get it. What’s the point of making all these changes if none of them brings you closer to the altar?”

“The point is,” Bethany said, “it’s not over.” She put her arm around me. “Don’t give up, Arlene. Archer. Whoever. We’re your friends and we’ll be right there with you, come what may.”

That wasn’t quite as comforting as she intended. The bride’s best friends always stand with her in the church. But which one would get to be my maid of honor? And who in their right mind would want to catch the bouquet from a ceremony presided over by an evil god from another world? ●
Was I a man or a woman? That’s what I asked myself upon awakening from a dreamless sleep. Sunshine flooded through the dormer window of my bedroom; again someone had drawn the curtains while I slept. My mother, no doubt. Which meant she must have seen my new hairstyle, which lay sprawled across the pillow in soft waves that a shampoo model would envy. There could be no more hiding this from the outside world. It was time to dress the part.

I bundled my hair into a powder-blue shower cap before flooding my increasingly curvy body with warm water. During the night, insofar as I could tell, my bust had expanded slightly, my hips widened, my waist slimmed. I’d have no trouble fitting into your average wedding dress, if I ever decided to go that way.

Afterward, I headed straight for my mother’s bedroom. Why settle for the stuff in my suitcase when there was a whole closet available? I slipped into fresh panties, a push-up bra and a pair of knee-high nude stockings, wondering if I’d end up looking like my mother—although her hair wasn’t nearly as long. I ran my fingers through the thick tresses, then brushed them. I’d have to get my hair done, of course. It was a mess. I added pale blue capri pants, a white blouse with three-quarter sleeves, and yellow kitten heels. Meow.

Mother was in the kitchen, slicing a mango into cubes. She had nothing to say about my outfit. “Girls have to watch their figures,” she said, passing me a plate of fruit with a half-croissant on the side. She took the same for herself.

We sat down opposite one another. “You don’t seem surprised,” I said. She avoided my gaze. “No reason to be.”

“My hair, my figure—that’s all part of the plan, isn’t it?”

She stabbed a slice of pineapple. “I noticed you finished the casserole.”

“Sure I did. Why not? If you’re so determined to make me dress like this, I might as well look nice while I’m doing it.”

“According to Mister Harmes, the additive was addictive. So that wasn’t really a surprise either.” She smiled. “And you do look nice, dear. Pretty enough to make a mother proud. Keep the outfit, by the way. It suits you.”
I picked at my food. “I’m not gonna marry that guy, Ma. He’s a creep.”

“Well then, just go ahead and marry whoever you want. That’s fair, isn’t it? What about that nice Jeremiah boy? He comes from a good, hard-working family, and he’s such a smart young man I’m sure he’ll be a good provider. If not him, there’s always Royce. He’s good-looking, I’ll grant him that.”

“Mo-ther! I am not going to marry one of my buddies. If it’s anyone around here, it would be one of the girls. I’m still a guy, you know. Where it counts.”

Her eyes glittered. “Now that is a surprise.”

Oooh, she could be so maddening. No wonder mothers and daughters are always getting on each other’s nerves. To calm down, I changed the subject. “What’s the name of that salon you go to? I need a blowout.” I rubbed the back of my neck and tousled hair tumbled over my shoulder.

“So I see. It’s Daphne’s, down on Broadway.” She picked up her phone. “Would this afternoon be soon enough? Daphne owes me a favor.”

* 

Jerry arrived as I was getting into my car. He did a cartoon double-take when he saw me. “Arch? Holy crap. You’re really taking this cross-dressing shit seriously, aren’t you?” He opened the passenger door. “Mind if I ride along?”

“Mind your language, Juggie. There’s a lady present.” I adjusted the seat. “Hop in. I’m going to a salon, if that matters.”

“I heard what happened last night. This is getting pretty serious.”

I shrugged. “If you consider being stalked by an evil god-monster ‘serious’.”

“Uh-huh. And you don’t?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course it’s serious. But I have other things to worry about.”

“Yeah? Like what?” He pulled a notepad from his jacket pocket.

“For your information, I simply must get my hair done. If that’s okay with you.”

“Your hair?” I felt his eyes on me. “Can I ask why?”

I plucked at my tresses. “Just look at me! Why does any girl have her hair done? Seriously, don’t men ever think before opening their mouths?”

Jerry pointed at my lap. “Are you, um… still a guy? Down there?”

I threw him a glare. “Of course I am… Jughead.”
He raised his hands. “Okay, okay. It isn’t obvious, that’s all. But listen—I’ve been looking into what you told me yesterday, about the thing you saw on the ridge. Can we talk about that?”

“Sure. My appointment’s not for an hour. If we need more time you can hang out in the waiting room. Or we can talk while I’m under the dryer.”

“Uh, yeah… Sounds like a plan.” He glanced at his notepad. “You said something about a creature that spoke through the wind, right? That’s a pretty good clue. There aren’t many ‘Great Old Ones’ that mention wind. So there’s Rhagorthua, who’s known as the ‘Father of All Winds’. He’s described as a ‘fiery entity’, able to absorb nuclear radiation. That ring any bells?”

I shook my head. “Didn’t see fire. It was more like a dark shadow.”

“Just as well, I guess. He’s supposedly imprisoned somewhere in New Mexico; in the subsoil, if that makes any sense.” He flipped the page. “Then there’s Rh’Thulla, who is ‘of the Wind’, whatever that means. The thing is, he’s listed as the brother of M’Nagalah—aka ‘the Devourer’—who’s supposed to be a ‘mass of entrails and eyes’. In other words, a huge blobby thing. His brother’s probably more of the same. That doesn’t fit either, does it?”

“The shadow wasn’t a blob. If anything, it was more man-shaped.”

“Funny you should say that. The other possibility is Ithaqua, also known as the ‘Wind Walker’, and he’s a ‘gigantic, corpse-like human’ with webbed feet and glowing red eyes. Did ya see glowing red eyes?”

“Not as such. I wasn’t close enough to vouch for webbed feet either.”

“Probably our best bet, though. It says Ithaqua can ‘walk through the sky as easily as it walks on earth’. That sounds sorta like what you were saying. The thing is, he’s supposed to live way up north in the Arctic, where he controls ice, snow and how cold it is. What would he doing down here?”

“Harmes summoned the thing. Maybe it didn’t have any choice.”

“I guess. But his MO is to hunt down unwary travelers and slay them gruesomely. So why would he want to mess around with stuff like femming up your hair? And giving you, uhm… boobs.”

“Christ, how would I know? When you get summoned, I suppose you do what you’re told. And they’re called ‘breasts’, doofus.”

Jerry returned to his notes. “One more thing. This appeared in a story that wasn’t one of Lovecraft’s, so who knows if it’s true or not, but… Ithaqua might just have the nasty habit of mating with human females.”
I nearly drove straight into a mailbox. “Jug, are you serious?”

“Don’t call me ‘Jug’. Unfortunately, I am. At least Ithaqua is. He might be hoping to create offspring that ‘surpass his own limitations’—whatever that means—so they can help him free the rest of the Great Old Ones. If you ask me, that sounds a lot like the Legion of Super-Villains stuck in the Phantom Zone.”

“That’s comic book stuff. What I saw was real.”

“I know! It was only—never mind. I’m just trying to figure out what we’re up against, that’s all.”

“No worries. So you did all that research—how do we get rid of the thing?”

“We don’t, as far as I can see. He’s got like… serious power. He does seem to be bitterly lonely, by the way, which is pretty much his only flaw. But I’m not sure how we can use that against him.”

“You’re a big help, Juggie. I’m leaving you at your Dad’s place.” Honestly, the boy could be such a bore. Someone like that totally belongs in a hardware store.

“I’m begging you, dude—don’t call me ‘Juggie’.”

*D*

Daphne was a bird-like woman with a plume of dark hair that had to be the result of a recent perm. Not the sort of thing that would suit me, but whatev. To each her own. “Archer? Good heavens, is that you? Your mama said you were très deep into this cross-dressing business, but—my goodness—la fille jolie!”

I lowered my lashes and thanked her, which is what I thought a pretty girl should do. “This isn’t something you do halfway,” I added.

“If one has the physique for it, then yes, I have to agree. Mother Nature has been generous.” She led me to a chair in the back, past a row of other ladies in various stages of styling. “We’ll do a wash to start. By the way,” she said, lowering her voice, “you must have a female name, n’est-ce pas?”

“Arlene.” I swung my hair back and let it settle into the sink.

“Yes, of course. Très belle.” She rinsed my hair with warm water, added shampoo and worked it through. “Is this for a special occasion?”

“Not really. I just felt like doing something nice for myself.”

“Then something nice you shall have.” She rinsed and repeated the process with conditioner. “I believe a blowout was mentioned? Which is to say, the hairstyle of a certain English princess? Très populaire.”
“I’ve heard good things.” I wasn’t thinking about Ithaqua or Edgar Harmes or the fate that awaited me in his bedchambers, although a little voice in the back of my mind kept reminding me I should. But I was busy trying to remember the details of the dresses I’d seen in my mother’s closet; the gowns she didn’t often wear. Had there been something with a long black skirt? That would be ideal.

Daphne wrapped my head in a towel and moved me to another chair. “This is just perfect for styling,” she said, in the midst of a quick blow-dry. “Good body, nice length. No split ends. No need for a cut. However—” She pointed to a poster on the wall, of a woman with luminous hair swirling about an exquisitely lovely face. “For that sort of look, you’ll need a multi-tonal effect. A few subtle lowlights, just enough to provide movement and depth. How’s that sound?”

The poster was mesmerizing. I needed that hair and I said so.

“You won’t be sorry.” She applied the dye, followed by a cold-water rinse and time for the color to set. Then a root lift spray for my scalp, blow-dry oil from mid-tress on down, and styling mousse for the tips.

“I’m curious,” Daphne said as powered up a dryer. “How does one come to be a cross-dresser? I have a cousin who often dressed up as a woman, but I haven’t seen him—or her—in years. She had a rough go of it with some members of the family. Not me, of course.” She flooded my scalp with lukewarm air and her slim fingers moved from tress to tress adding lift at the base.

“I’m not your typical case.” Now there was an understatement!

She sectioned my hair and used a round brush to add yet more root-lift. “I have read that most cross-dressers have been dressing since they were young boys, sneaking into mama’s closet. Was it not this way for you?”

“Not really. My first time was this week.”

“Hmm. Not sure I believe that. You must be a quick study.”

I’d said too much. “Well, there’s wearing a few bits and pieces, and then there’s dressing all the way. I’ve only been out of the house a couple of times.”

“Impressive. By this time next month you’ll probably be a super-model.”

Daphne pinned a section between brush and blow-dryer, pulling on the hair to add volume and curl. She wrapped the tips around the brush and hit them with hot air, followed by a touch of cooling to set the curl.

It occurred to me that even a ponytail with all these waves would look blindingly feminine. Was that what I wanted? After this, how could I ever go back to being plain old Archer Anders? Did I even have that choice?
Daphne continued the blowout, oblivious to my confusion; drying each section in turn, curling the tips, wrapping each tress around a Velcro roller and pinning it to my scalp. That done, she topped my head with a dryer hood and wandered off to check on someone else. I had nothing to do but stare at myself in the mirror, wondering what I was turning into. Then I heard the name “Ithaqua”.

I scanned the reflected image of the room as best I could without turning my head. There was no sign of the ‘Wind Walker’; assuming that he could actually be seen in a mirror. Who had spoken? There was another stylist nearby, but her voice bore a striking resemblance to Minnie Mouse. That left the other customers.

The middle-aged lady to my left cast a sly glance in my direction. She caught my eye and winked. To the next lady along she said, “She’s a pretty one, you wait and see. Edgar is a lucky man.” The other woman mumbled a reply and both laughed. More sidelong looks came my way.

Ice water trickled through my lower abdomen. The Harmes family was powerful; they had their fingers in every pie in town. What did these women know that I didn’t?

Daphne returned and removed the curlers. I bent over as she ran her fingers through my hair to separate the curls. “Say hello to Arlene,” she said. I straightened up. She took a paddle brush to my swirling mane to separate the layers. “Is this what you wanted?”

I nodded mutely. Long thick curls were popping out everywhere. My whole head felt refreshingly light and bouncy. If this was what being a woman was destined to feel like, going forward, then where do I sign? Whatever Harmes had in store for me, it couldn’t possibly be wicked enough to justify giving this up.

Arlene, it seemed, was here to stay. As if there was any doubt.

*
It was past six by the time I got home. Mother had a garden salad waiting. She had nothing to say about my new hairdo, which I found annoying. A girl has a right to expect certain things to be noticed!

She ignored her own plate. “Have you picked out what you’re going to wear?”

“Yes. I was thinking about a long gown, like the one you wore to the company Christmas party a few years back. The one with the black skirt?”

“If it fits, be my guest. But you best get moving. The car comes at nine o’clock.”

“Pu-lenty of time, Mother.” If it fits indeed…

After dinner I raced upstairs, brushed my teeth and slipped into a silk dressing gown. Then I set to work on my face. The girls arrived just as the last of my eye makeup fell into place. “Whatchya think, ladies? Two shades of eye shadow—pale under the brow, dark over the eyelid. Really makes ‘em pop, don’t ya think? And check out this subtle eyeliner feathering. Took me *ages* to get it just right. And don’t you just love this mascara?”

Vanessa leaned over me. “It’s choice. So’s your hair. But what I wanna know is *why*. Women don’t go to this much trouble for nothing.”

Bethany added, “Your mom said you’re going out? But it’s not with us, so…?”

“All dressed up and nowhere to go,” I said, pursing my lips. The moisturizer had sunk in so I set to work with a pencil, highlighting my lip line.

“You’re scaring me, Arch. What’s going on?”

“Ar—Arlene.” I rifled through Mother’s limited selection of lipsticks and chose Scarlet Empress; pure and creamy for a bold color. My lips deserved nothing less.

Vanessa eyed me in the mirror. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a date.”

“Nope. Just some fancy after-dinner party. A few drinks, dancing with some dude in a tux. Home early, off to bed. No big deal.” I puckered up and colored my lips with glossy scarlet, then rolled them together. *Sweet.* I found a tissue and blotted.

“Dinner party, huh? Where is it? Who invited you?”

I rolled my shoulders. Who keeps track of such trivia? I dug through the dresser and emerged with a pair of sheer control-top pantyhose, a firm control high-waist brief and a strapless brassiere, all in black.

Bethany picked up the robe I tossed aside. “Listen, Ar—Arlene. If you’re a cross-dresser, I’m cool with that. We’re here to help. If you want to turn yourself into a shemale and do this full-time, that’s okay too. If you decide to get the operation and become a woman, we’re with you all the way. But *please*, talk to us!”
“Kinda busy at the mo.” I sat on the bed and swapped lingerie, deftly shoving my boy parts between my legs. When I was done you couldn’t tell anything was there, which pleased me greatly. The more I looked like the real deal, the better. I might be new to the field, but isn’t that what cross-dressing is all about?

The two girls put their heads together, but I could still hear them. “This is crazy,” Vanessa said. “He acts like he’s already a woman, at least in his mind.”

Bethany sounded worried. “The magic’s getting stronger. Unless he snaps out of it pretty soon, we’re gonna lose him.”

“Lose ‘him’, but gain ‘her’.” Vanessa nodded toward me. “It’s not like that would be the end of the world.” Bethany’s eyes went wide, but the rich girl had a sly look. “Think about it. Then it would be three girls and two guys in our little group. We’d have the balance of power.”

“Not if she marries that creep Harmes—then we’d lose her for good!”

“True.” Vanessa pursed her lips. “We’ll have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

I stood up, feeling the bounce in my chest and no small amount of pride. Even without inserts I was fairly well endowed. “Girls, you have got to see my gown!”

From the far end of Mother’s closet I extracted ‘the dress’, trailing its velvety black skirt over one arm. The bodice was a sparkly gold lamé, with a transition zone from waist to hip where the two colors intermingled. Without a doubt, the most gorgeous dress I’d ever seen. I looked from one bestie to the other, seeking their approval. “Isn’t it pretty?”

Neither said a word. Of course. That wasn’t the right way to show them. “I’ll put it on—then you’ll see.” I chose a full slip with spaghetti straps that can be worn on or off the shoulder, which is important because the gown itself can be arranged either way. I didn’t know which way would look better. I’d have to try both.

I wiggled into the dark fabric. The hem dropped a few inches below my knees. But as I freed the gown from its hanger, two pairs of slender hands stopped me.

“Sorry, Arch,” Vanessa said. “We can’t let you do this.”

“Take your hands off my daughter.” Mother stepped into the bedroom and yanked open the drawer of the antique side table next to the door, which is where she kept her emergency-use-only derringer. She leveled the small pistol at the girls.

Bethany gasped. Their arms shot into the air.

“Put your hands down. I know you’re not armed.” She waved the pistol. “Step away, please. To the far side of the bed. Arlene, get dressed.”

They stepped. “You can’t do this,” Vanessa said. “He’s your son.”
Mother smiled wickedly. “I have no son.”

I could see her point. One glance in the mirror reminded me that I was no longer qualified for the role. *Easy go.* I climbed into the gown, wriggled it over my hips, slid the shirred cap sleeves over my shoulders and worked the zipper up my back. *On* the shoulder for the time being, I decided. The diamond neckline plunged in front and dipped in the back, leaving my hair in full contact with my skin; like a fountain of feminine energy pouring through my mind. I felt *complete.*

Bethany pleaded, “Please, Mrs. Anders. Don’t let her do this. It isn’t fair.”

“This isn’t the Middle Ages,” Vanessa added. “A woman should be able to choose her own husband.”

“Normally, I’d agree.” Mother moved to the vanity and opened the bottom drawer of her jewelry box. “But there is still such a thing as familial responsibility. Two hundred years ago my family made a pact with the devil, and we’ve abided by the rules ever since. We’re not going to stop now. Arlene, the gold necklace.”

I removed it from the drawer. “Really? Isn’t this, like, really expensive?” She only shrugged, so I trailed the ends under my hair and fastened the clasp behind my neck. I added the gold earrings from the night before—the ones that made my ears look pierced—and spritzed myself with *Vanitas.*

“Take this too.” She handed me the engagement ring from her own finger. It was still warm. “Your father gave it to me two years before you were born. It’s your turn to wear it now, sweetheart. On your left hand.”

I was lost for words. It fit my ring finger perfectly.

“Look in the shoe tree,” she said. “Take the D’Orsay stilettos.”

They were beyond gorgeous. Pointed-toe black leather with slim four-inch heels and ankle straps with tiny jeweled buckles. I’d never seen her wear them, but like everything else she owned, they fit me. I pulled the straps tight and stood.

A horn tooted out front. “It’s time to go. Don’t forget your purse. Take my black cape from the hall closet. It’ll be cold up there; Minerva said so. It’s your big night and you don’t want to catch a chill.”

I packed a clutch with a few bit and bobs—lipstick, compact, kleenex and so on—waved at the girls and headed for the stairs. I heard Mother say, “Just stay where you are. We’ll wait here ‘til she’s gone. Then you can go.”

Carefully down the stairs. I didn’t want to break my neck over a pair of stilettos. I found mother’s black faux-fur cape, arranged it over my shoulders and closed the rhinestone clasp across the bodice. Such *class.*
A cold breeze whipped around my legs as I stepped outside, but it failed to raise a single goosebump. In fact, I’d never felt more alive. From inside the house and upstairs came a scuffling sound followed by a hollow pop, like a balloon bursting. Probably just a flesh wound, I mused, heels a’clicking down the cobblestone path. A little gun like that? It couldn’t hurt a flea.

There was a black limousine idling at the curb. A big man wearing a dark suit and a chauffeur’s cap opened the back door. He made me feel like a little girl. I paused with one foot inside, gazing up at his craggy face. “Don’t I know you?”

“Yes, Miss. Your last visit to the house. You were but a young lad at the time. I am in service to the family Harmes for many years.”

That was it. Aunt Minerva’s butler or footman; or for all I knew ‘Igor’ to Harmes’ Doctor Frankenstein, although that might be overstating the case. I slid into the seat and tidied my skirt over my legs. The door slammed shut.

I noticed Jerry standing on the sidewalk, halfway up the block, his mouth agape. Probably just jealous. I mean, who could possibly not want to be a girl as pretty as I was now? Our eyes met as the limo passed, in spite of the tinted windows. His phone was tight to his ear and his lips were moving. Not the best-looking guy in the world, for sure. I wondered if there was a girl locked inside him as well.

Arkton Heights was deserted, as it always seemed to be. Was every family in the neighborhood camped out on some beach in the Caribbean? Did they rush home from work every day and hide out in their oversized houses, pretending like no one was home? This couldn’t all be down to Harmes’ living out here, could it? If his neighbors were so darn unhappy, why not move somewhere else?

The limo stopped at the iron gate to Harmes’ estate. The driver used a wireless fob to get us through. A little voice inside me was crying out—run, fly away while you still can!—but I was trapped by a flood of sensations. The sensual grip on my body of lingerie, high heels and a tight dress; the weight of Mother’s jewelry, and the insistent tickle of soft curls on the skin of my neck and back. This—this was what being a woman was all about. How could I turn away now?

As we moved toward the house I glanced back at the road. In the midst of that dead-end street and all those vacant lots sat a single vehicle, its lights blazing. In the instant before trees got in the way I recognized it—a black Dodge Challenger. And that could mean only one thing. Reggie had followed me here. ●
Edgar Harmes opened the front door. He was winning this existential struggle and seemed to be enjoying the moment. “Well, well… the lovely Miss Anders. From the back of the class to teacher’s pet. I’m pleased you changed your mind.”

Changed my mind? About him? Not a chance. I loathed the man. His touch on my arm made my flesh crawl. But I couldn’t tell him that. Something inside my mind had me on a tight leash. Instead, I gave him a coy smile. Women often do that and it can mean damn near anything.

Harmes took me on a tour of the mansion: foyer to music room to library to dining hall to games room to kitchen, describing each room and each painting we passed, from malign landscapes of the old country to brooding portraits of his ancestors, accompanied by the staccato click of my heels on hardwood flooring. The kitchen, he said, would be my domain, free from interference, although most of the work would involve overseeing the activities of a daytime staff of cooks and cleaners. A sweeping staircase led to living quarters on the upper floors—but, he added, there would be plenty of time later for activities of a carnal nature.

We ended up back in his library, where he uncorked a dusty bottle of some dark liquid. “I see you’re wearing an engagement ring, my dear. Good news deserves to be shared, don’t you agree? Come Monday I shall notify the local newspaper. A headline article on the society page should suffice.”

“Mother gave it to me.” I stared at the ring on my left hand, feeling dazed. A stray tress slid into my line of sight. Without a thought I tucked it back into place.

“Precisely as I told her to do.” He handed me a half-full chalice. The spicy scent of the liqueur shot up my nose like a bottle rocket. Harmes touched the rim of his goblet to mine. “For a wedding ring, you shall have what once belonged to dear Minerva. It was her dying wish that it be passed on to her successor.”

Maybe it was that first dash of alcohol touching my brain, via the sinus cavity, but something had altered the balance of power up there. “Why me?” My voice was soft. “There must be lots of women in town, or in the state, who’d give their left nut for a chance to live like this.” I gestured at the floor-to-ceiling shelves chock-full of leather-bound books that must be worth a fortune all by themselves.
Harmes looked amused. “An odd choice of idiom, but I see your point.” He turned to pace across the room. “Ladies lining up to marry into the Harmes family. One would think so, but no. This has never been the case. Women can be such fickle creatures, can they not? No offense, my dear.”

Fickle? Or because he’s such an effing creep? I didn’t say that out loud. There was definitely a limit to what I could say and do. For instance, getting the hell out of Dodge as fast as four-inch stilettos could take me was simply not possible. I could think about doing it, but my feet refused to act on the idea.


Harmes smiled. “Certainly not. Why would you think that?”

“But—all that talk in class, about witches and cross-dressers. They helped found Arkhade. And none of the wives had kids. I checked the family tree.”

“Oh, that. Yes, of course there have been ‘travesti’ among the women in our town throughout its history. You’d be surprised; they tend to blend in. But the Anders wives—no, they have been quite fertile, I assure you. An exact science genealogy is not. Many births go unannounced.”

And why might that be? Would the birth of a child in another world be recorded in this one? My mind shied away from the implications. I studied the room, taking in the portrait above the fireplace, the stormy seascape hanging over the desk, the book titles in Cyrillic script. I moved toward the fire, feeling its warmth through the thin fabric of my dress. “That man up there—he looks like you.”

“My predecessor,” Harmes said. “When my own portrait is complete, I shall have this one moved into the hallway with the others. Although,” he added, “it amazes me how difficult it is, in today’s world, to locate a painter willing to do this sort of work. And the expense! Fifty years ago I could have bought a whole gallery of paintings for what this one commission will cost.”

Curious. Of all the paintings I’d seen, not one included a woman. Just another example of the Anders wives being used up and forgotten. And there was one more disturbing fact. “They all look like you,” I said, remembering the portraits in the hallway. “All your ancestors. Even the first one.”

Harmes laughed. “You’re a bright thing, aren’t you? None of my other wives noticed the resemblance until—well, most of them never did. Or if they did, they wisely chose to keep quiet about it.”

“Your other wives?” Was the man a polygamist on top of everything else?
Harmes drained his goblet and wiped his mouth. “Well, Miss Anders. I was going to mention this later, perhaps after the honeymoon—a lovely hotel in Romania, by the way, on the shores of the Black Sea—but you might as well know now. There is no Edgar Harmes the Ninth. Or the Eighth, or the Seventh, and so on. In fact, there is and only ever was me. Edgar Harmes, the one and only.”

“That’s impossible.” In spite of the fire, a chill sank through the core of my being. Logically it couldn’t possibly be true… yet in my heart I knew it was.

“To a mere mortal? Yes, quite.” Harmes strolled back toward the seascape. “But to one conversant in the Dark Arts? Many things are possible.”

“But you look so young…” My voice trailed off. The men in the portraits were all older than Harmes, by a decade or more.

“Lucky you, eh? But yes, sometimes I do wonder how old I am. Two hundred years, if it’s a day. I didn’t start using numbers—second, third, and so forth—until I came to this country. Government functionaries get terribly upset when you get to an age where they think you should be dead. But how much older is hard to say. Perhaps another century or so.”

“But—how?” My lips were numb, and not from the liquor.

He chuckled. “It won’t help you, my love. We are destined to grow old together, whereupon you will die and I will not.” He waved at the seascape. “The answer lies far away, in the mountains overlooking the Black Sea. There you will find an ancient hostelry, built next to a hot spring driven by the heat of a volcano that has lain dormant for more than nine thousand years. In the heart of that mountain is a gateway to another world.” He moved to refill his chalice. “Not a better world, mind you. Not one you or your little friends would want to live in. But a world with power. Power that a man like me can put to good use.”

I could see where this was headed. “You—you rejuvenate yourself?”

“Yes! By God, you are a bright spark. Breaking you to the matrimonial wheel will be a singular pleasure.” He tossed back a slug of dark liquid. “When the hour is right I enter the mountain to bathe in its sacred waters—although ‘sacred’ may not be the right word. Let us say ‘ungodly’. There I perform certain incantations to summon a representative of the Great Old Ones—I’m not quite sure which one—and the Old One grants me the favor of becoming young again. If he’s in a good mood. So far I’ve been fortunate. Although it does help to get the hour and the incantation exactly correct. Old Ones are picky about that sort of thing.”

“Then—you’re immortal.” My shoulders sagged. I stared at the floor as my hair slipped into view. I ignored it. What chance did I have against such power?
“Not quite. As I said, we will age together. I have simply found a way to ‘reset the clock,’ as it were.” As if on command, a grandfather clock in the hallway struck the hour: eleven bells. “Time grows short,” Harmes said. “We must proceed to the ridge. For what we must do, midnight is the correct hour.” He took my chalice and placed it with his on the sideboard.

“Why do we have to go there?” I rubbed my arms. I was already cold.

“We’re meeting an old friend.” He rummaged through the drawers in his desk, one after another. “Now where did I put that incantation?”

My throat went dry, remembering what Jerry said on the way to the salon. “You—you don’t mean… Ithaqua?”

“That’s right, you two have met. Ah, here it is.” He tucked a stiff tube of paper into his jacket. “And you’ve done your homework—or someone has. Oh yes, that annoying friend of yours in my class. ‘Jughead’, isn’t that what you and the others call him? How very appropriate.”

There was a discrete cough from the doorway; the butler or chauffeur or whatever he was. The ‘Igor’. “Excuse the interruption, master. Two people are attempting to break through the front gate. I await your instructions.”

Harmes laughed. “The enemy is at the gates, eh? Your friends, Miss Anders—here to witness your nuptials!” He waved at the servant. “Repel them, you fool! Do what you must. My betrothed and I have business elsewhere.” The man nodded and hurried away.

Again my shoulders drooped. “You want us to get married right now?”

“You have something better to do?” He took my arm. “Do not despair, dear one. In a few days we will indeed have a public joining. The Orthodox church downtown is a lovely venue and I know the pastor. Your family and friends can be there—any that are still alive, that is—and we will register our union and your name change with the state.” Yeah, that’s what I was worried about.

We left the library and hurried to the rear of the mansion, the clatter of my heels ringing off the walls like gunshots. “Tonight is a different sort of ceremony,” he said. “It will join us, you and I, in an eldritch bond that can be broken only by death itself. Your death, to be exact. Fifty or sixty years from now—touch wood.” He rapped on the oak panelling.

Light from the back porch splashed into a circle on the lawn, beyond which lay a swamp of darkness. I wasn’t keen on going any further but Harmes insisted. The fog that shrouded my mind gave me little choice. I drew mother’s cape tight to my shoulders, gripped my purse harder, and stepped onto the path to the ridge.
In the distance came gunshots. The enemy at the gate—was it Royce? The car I’d seen could’ve been his, but the guy had never touched a gun in his life. If it didn’t bounce and it wasn’t a girl, he had no use for it. Who else had access to firearms? Whose father owned a hardware store? Jerry? My mind balked at the thought of those two idiots storming the Bastille, guns a’blazing.

Then again, maybe ‘Igor’ was doing all the shooting and my buddies were tin-can ducks in his shooting gallery. That I could imagine. But still I kept moving toward the ridge, primly keeping pace with my captor.

As a wife should. Oh God. I never wanted to be a cross-dresser in the first place, much less a woman—much less the wife of a man the whole town was terrified of. Not because he was big and strong—someone like that would at least be manly, maybe even attractive to the woman I would soon become. But no; the townsfolk feared Edgar Harmes because of the loathsome company he kept, or was rumored to keep—and which I now knew for sure he did keep.

I did try to stop myself. “I can’t marry you,” I said, gasping at the effort involved. “I—I’m a man. I don’t look like one, I know that. But you know I’m not, Mister Harmes. Not really—not where it counts.”

My steps did not falter as we approached the stairs. Harmes paused with his foot on the first step. “You think that matters?”

“It has to. You’re not gay. I saw the way you looked at my mother.”

Harmes smiled. I was close enough to see his teeth gleaming in the dim light from the porch. “Strange, isn’t it, how the words change through time. That particular adjective once meant happy, cheerful, carefree—festive.” He uttered the words with distaste. “No, I am not ‘gay’, Miss Anders. In any sense of the word.”

“I don’t understand.” I began my ascent of the staircase chiseled into the rock face. “I can’t give you what you want. A happy home, the love of a good woman. Children, for God’s sake!”

He followed me upward. “No need to worry. Trust in Ithaqua.”

We ascended the path, which curved from side to side following the contours of the cliff. A final gunshot echoed down the valley. In all likelihood, the friends of my youth now lay dead outside the gate. Never had I felt so alone.

My heels struck the rock sharply, like a jeweler seeking the best way to pierce a gemstone. Higher and higher we went, until the lights of Arkhade peeked over the roof of the mansion, and then higher still. Frodo and Gollum had a tougher go of it, climbing the secret staircase into Mordor, but then again they weren’t wearing stiletto heels.
At last we topped the ridge. The wind sent hair streaming across my face. Harmes pushed me onto the rock promontory that jutted out from the ridge. Was it only two nights ago I had watched him up here? More like a lifetime.

His lips brushed my ear. “The hour is upon us,” he whispered. “Stand ready to receive the gift of womanhood. I promise you, it will be over quickly.” He stepped to the edge of the precipice, unrolling the scroll from his pocket. Strange, eldritch words fell from his lips—and the wind rose.

Light from the town grew dim, as though receding into the distance; the vault of stars grew stronger, arcing from one horizon to the other. Then came a misshapen shadow, slowly filling half the sky. Somewhere, not far away, a doorway to the other world had opened. Ithaqua had answered the call.

The wind howled. *Who summons me?* I don’t know if the creature said precisely *that*. If there was a reply to Harmes’ incantation, it was encoded in the way the air tore at my dress and raked its bony fingers through my hair.

*Enough,* I thought. *If a woman I must be, then do it already!*

“Great Old One!” Harmes cried. “I have chosen one who is to be my wife. Bind her to me as you did the others. Give her the form of a woman born!”

The wind lifted my skirt and Harmes spoke dread words from the scroll. “Y’ai ‘ng’ngah, Ithaqua. Uaaah wgah’na—”

Gunshots, from the yard below. Bullets ricocheted off the face of the cliff.

Had one of my friends survived? It was hard to picture Jerry or Royce as an action hero, but stranger things had happened—*were* happening, in fact.
Bony talons of frigid air crept up my legs, plucking at the nylon and probing the skin. Wind whipped through my hair. I clutched at my skirt, but no force on Earth could keep it from rising and billowing. Harmes laughed. He must know, as did I, how unlikely it was that a bullet could find its mark from such a distance. He must have known, or sensed, that none of my friends could shoot worth a damn.

There was no time left for them to charge up the stairs. By the time they arrived I would be as female and fertile as my own mother—and worse, bound to Edgar Harmes as a woman is bound to the man she adores. The bile rose in my throat. To love such a man was a fate I could not imagine, much less endure. I fought the compulsion that kept me immobile, but still my feet would not act.

Invisible fingers probed my panties, found what lay within—and recoiled. Angry air screamed in my face. I could only imagine what it meant. Sacrilege!

And then—a green flicker of light from the direction of the house. Then another, over to the left. Flashlights? No, the bursts were too sharp, too focused. A laser? My spirit rose. Jerry never left home without his, and two meant that both of them had survived. The flickering intensified. Harmes dropped the scroll. More bursts rang out from the opposite side, from where I stood on my earlier trip to Arkton Heights. All of my friends were here, trying to save me.

I struggled to free myself. The least I could do was fight as hard as they were.

Harmes screamed. “Damn you—my eyes!” He fell to his knees. The hex that had bound me vanished. Two quick steps forward and my heel found the middle of his back; a mistake I would come to regret. The skin broke, as befits the impact of a stiletto. Harmes howled in pain, toppled over—and fell. Shouts rose from below.

The Wind Walker came at me like a savage dog. This is what I saw: a great shadow, only vaguely humanoid, its legs planted at the base of the ridge, bending toward me with limbs outstretched. Its great maw opened. Wind poured out.

My legs felt like pillars of stone. Another curse had seized me. A torrent of raw hatred poured through my mind, like water through a bed of crushed ice. Alone! Abandoned! A loneliness so vast no human could endure.

The creature was mad, in every sense of the word. Its anger seemed poised to tear me apart. But instead, the tip of one fearsome claw found its way between my legs—and into my body. I gasped, but the feeling was less than pain and more of a spreading numbness. Perversely, but with terrible precision, the Old One took its revenge by granting Harmes’ final wish. The gift of a woman’s body.

*
Mother awoke in hospital late the next morning, following surgery the previous night. The bullet had entered her thigh and pricked an artery. She had lost a lot of blood but the paramedics did their job. She survived.

Seated at her bedside, I had mixed feelings. She adulterated my food, pulled a gun on my friends and tried to marry me off to a man who dabbled in the Dark Arts. On the other hand, she was still my mother. And we were the same size, so her closet was my closet. You can’t put a price on that.

“Sorry we shot your mom,” Bethany had said, looking contrite, after I came down from the ridge. But she really hadn’t. The girls were only trying to get past her, so they could come after me. It wasn’t their fault her own gun popped her one during the struggle. Plus they were the ones who tied off her leg to stop the bleeding and called 911. Yep, my friends were action heroes, all four of ’em.

Mother’s eyes wandered around the room before settling on me. “You’ll be fine,” I said. The bullet was out, the danger passed.

“You… my daughter?” She gripped my hand with surprising strength.

“I am your daughter.” I was wearing a long-sleeved peasant blouse—hospitals can be chilly—in Venetian red over a sky-blue skirt and light makeup, with my hair pulled into a thick ponytail. I was a woman now, I explained. Blessed and cursed in equal measure—fated to walk in beauty all the days of my life.

She looked pleased—and asked about my once and future husband. Had the man proposed? When would the ceremony take place?

“No, Mother. There isn’t going to be a wedding. Mister Harmes is dead. The Pact is over.” There too, my feelings were mixed. I had become a woman in mind as well as body, and would gladly have married the dark seer of Arkton Heights, happily shared his bedchamber and borne his children—in whatever world he thought best. I would have refused him nothing.

Even though he’s dead and gone, my heart belongs to Edgar Harmes.
Indeed, the call of Cthulhu, like the call to worship any deity, is couched in the language of ambiguity. Those called must look deep into their hearts and discern the truth for themselves; a truth that may apply to no one else. Thus does the believer create his new reality — in this case, a reality where Jimmy turns himself into the spitting image of his late mother and ultimately takes her place as head of the local Cotillion Committee and organizer of their yearly gala. For some weird reason, Cthulhu is pleased. ■