

Divine by Choice

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P.C. CAST



Book Two of the
GODDESS OF PARTHOLON
series



PART ONE



Like ink running down a sheet of black paper, the darkness at the edge of my vision wavered, sending a chill of foreboding shivering across my skin. What the hell? I peered into the shadows. Nothing. Just an empty, starless night that had turned cold and windy.

Clearly I was losing my friggin mind.

The Fomorian War had been over for months. No winged demons lurked about waiting to pounce on me. I mean, please, I was in the middle of my own temple, which, despite its beauty, had been built as a fortress. Even had some kind of freaky monster been loose upon the world (and in this world, one never knew), I was more than perfectly safe. Seriously, I was in more danger of being pampered and adored to death than I was being monster-grabbed. Yet I still had the awful “someone just walked over my grave” feeling. And tonight wasn’t the first time I’d felt as if something was wrong.

As I followed the marble path that led to the monument I thought about the weird sense of foreboding I seemed to be carrying around with me. Had it been weeks? Damn! Now that I really thought about it I realized that it had been at least two or three weeks that I’d been feeling off. I’d definitely been

off my food, which was bizarre in its own right because I seriously love food. But a lingering stomach virus and/or stress could account for that. What was most odd was the way I'd been jumping at shadows. And the shadows seemed dark and thick and filled with something definitely malevolent.

Okay, yes, I'd just been through a truly awful war in which the good guys (naturally, the ones on my side) had to battle horrid demonic creatures and save the world from enslavement and annihilation. Literally. And yes, that could make a girl slightly jumpy. Especially if the girl was really a high school English teacher from Oklahoma who had accidentally been exchanged for the Beloved Incarnate of a Goddess in a world that more closely resembled a weird mixture of ancient Scotland and mythological Greece than Broken Arrow, Oklahoma (a lovely suburb of Tulsa). All true. But the war was over. The demons extinguished, and (supposedly) all was right with the world. So why did I feel like the damn booger monster was out there in the darkness waiting to leap on me?

Jeesh, I had another headache.

When I got to the MacCallan's memorial I tried to still my roiling thoughts by breathing deeply and savoring the peace and serenity that always blanketed me when I visited it. Tall, graceful columns ringed a three-stepped marble dais, whereon an ornately carved pedestal stood as the resting place for a weighty urn that was kept perpetually filled with sweet-scented, forever-burning oil.

Tonight the silver-gray smoke curled lazily up through the circular hole in the domed roof. I walked slowly toward the urn, enjoying the way the brilliant yellow flame contrasted with the backdrop of the starless night's sky. I had specified that the monument be built with no walls, just columns, a dome and this ever-burning flame. I believe the man memorialized here would have liked the freedom it symbolized.

A breeze stirred my hair and I shivered. The cool air was almost moist. I was glad I'd let Alanna bully me into wearing my ermine-lined cloak, even though the memorial was only a short walk from my chambers.

"Lady Rhiannon!" A young maiden rushed between the columns on the far side of the edifice. She paused long enough to drop almost to the floor in a fluid curtsy. "May I bring you some warmed wine? The night has become chilly."

"No." Distracted, I barely glanced at her, quickly searching my memory for her name, "Maura. I don't need anything. You may go back to bed."

She smiled at me shyly. "Yes, my Lady." Then she blurted, "But you will call if there is anything you require?"

I returned her smile with a tired one of my own. "Yes, I will call."

She bounded away.

I looked sardonically at the urn and rolled my eyes. "The annoying exuberance of youth," I muttered at the smoking flame. "But I'm probably preaching to the choir here. Heck, you'd probably consider *me* filled with youthful exuberance." Getting no audible answer, and, of course, expecting none, I climbed to the top level of the dais and sat down with a sigh, tucking the thick folds of my cloak around my knees before I rested my chin in my hand. "But then I don't *really* know what you would think. I never actually knew you." I sighed again, plucking irritably at the escaping curl that was tickling my cheek.

I had hoped visiting the monument would lift my spirits as it usually did, but tonight I couldn't shake the depression that threatened to engulf me. I rubbed my right temple where the needle prick of a headache throbbed with each beat of my heart.

Another wisp of breeze ruffled my cloak. Again, the hair

on the back of my neck lifted eerily. I turned my head to check the leather tie that knotted my thick tresses back from my face, and my eyes caught the movement of something liquid and dark as it skittered just outside the line of my sight. Forgetting the escaping hair, I sat up straighter, ready to chastise whoever was encroaching upon my privacy.

“Who is it?” I demanded imperiously.

Silence.

I studied my surroundings. The low-hanging clouds curtailed the night sky. The only illumination came from the flame burning steadily before me. I could see nothing out of the ordinary—except that the darkness of the night mirrored my mood. Nothing sinister stirred or skulked or crept in the dim non-shadows.

Jeesh, Shannon. Get a grip, girl!

It was probably just the wind in the nearby trees, mixed with a healthy dose of my always-active imagination. That was probably it. Nothing was *really* wrong...

...Then another movement caught at the edges of my vision. I turned my head quickly, but all I could see was darkness on darkness—more ink running across a page of black paper. I shivered again and my memory stirred. What was it Alanna had told me not long after I’d come to Partholon? Something about dark gods who were better left unnamed. My stomach clenched in an unexplained spasm of fear. What was wrong with me? I definitely didn’t traffic with dark gods. Hell, I didn’t even know anything about them. Why should just the thought of such beings cause me to be afraid?

Something was definitely not right.

As it had been for weeks, a feeling too deep to call sadness and too thick to call loneliness nagged at the edges of my mind. I put my face in my hands, stifling a sob.

"I wish you were alive, Dad. I need to talk to you about what the hell is going on inside of me."

He's not really your father. My errant thoughts taunted me. And this is not really your world. Interloper. Usurper. Fraud.

"It's my world now!" I yelled before I spiraled down into an endless wash of tears. My voice split the night with its strength. The sound echoed eerily off the columns like a tolling bell, which made me start in response. My unexpected reaction caused me to laugh out loud at my own foolishness.

"What the hell am I doing sitting here yelling at myself and imagining the booger man in night shadows?" The humor in my voice helped to ease my morose mood. As I wiped the tears from my eyes and took a deep breath, I watched the almost full moon suddenly break through the misty sky and appear over the trees. I smiled in pleasure at the ethereal beauty of the timeless orb.

"I don't care if I wasn't born into this world. I love it here. This is where I want to be, and it's where I belong." I said resolutely.

And, of course, it was true. Rhiannon, the original Incarnate and Beloved of the ancient Celtic horse goddess Epona, had jerked me out of twenty-first century America—Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, to be specific—where I had been content to be Shannon Parker, an incredibly attractive, witty and broke high school English teacher. Rhiannon had succeeded in casting a spell that caused us to exchange places. Almost six months ago I had awakened from what I'd thought was a horrible car accident to find myself in Partholon, a parallel world where mythology and magic lived. To add to my initial confusion, some of the people of Partholon mirror those of my old world. In other words, people looked familiar, they even sounded and maybe acted familiar, but in actuality they weren't. Which is where the monument to the MacCallan (my dad/non-dad) came in.

For a moment I felt a wave of sadness, not just because my beloved father was a world away, but because his mirror image in this world, Rhiannon's father the MacCallan, had been brutally killed not long after I had arrived here. The power of my Goddess had allowed me to witness Rhiannon's father's death so that I could warn this world of an encroaching evil. My mind told me that the man whose death I had witnessed, Lord MacCallan, Chieftain of his Clan, was not actually my father, but my heart whispered something else. The MacCallan had been a leader and a warrior. My father, too, was a leader of men—mostly young men. His chosen field of battle was the football field. I couldn't help feeling unalterably bonded to the dead man who so closely resembled my father.

"It's damn confusing sometimes," I said as I rose and gave the side of the urn a pat. MacCallan's body wasn't entombed here. He lay with his men within the charred ruins of MacCallan Castle. I had felt the need to erect this monument to him, to show him the respect I would want accorded to the memory of Richard Parker.

There were a lot of things I had learned about Rhiannon that mortified and embarrassed me, but her love for her father was not one of them. Now I enjoyed having the status of Lady Rhiannon, High Priestess of Partholon, Beloved of Epona and Goddess Incarnate in her place. And I supposed that she "enjoyed" being an underpaid Oklahoma public-school teacher.

The thought made me laugh as I walked toward the path that would lead me back to Epona's Temple.

"Yeah," I whispered sarcastically. "It was obvious how much she had been *enjoying* her change of status when she attempted to re-exchange places with me a few months ago."

The memory of that failed attempt sobered me. Even though I hadn't been born to this world I had become bound

to it. Partholon was my home now; these people my people—Epona my Goddess. I closed my eyes and sent a quick prayer to her. *Epona, please help me to stay.*

My stomach lurched and I swallowed hard. Maybe that was what was wrong with me. Maybe Rhiannon was up to her old tricks and was trying to pull me away from Partholon and back to Oklahoma so that she could return here, and this creepy, bullshit sick feeling was Epona sending me a premonition of trouble so that I'd keep my eyes open. Ugh. Just thinking about losing Partholon—and the husband and people I'd come to love here—was enough to cause another wave of sickness to wash over me. Damn it! I was completely tired of feeling like this! I shivered again as a breath of chilled wind caressed my cheeks and slipped within my cloak. I thought of the weird, running darkness I kept imagining around me. Now it seemed I had started hallucinating.

Great—my husband was gone for one month to make sure the land was recovering from battle and I go totally nuts.

Squaring my shoulders, I told myself to knock it off. Rhiannon was in Oklahoma. I was here in Partholon, which was how things were going to stay. I'd just be on my guard against unusual weirdness (easier said than done, but still). And about the sick feeling in my stomach...well...I had probably just caught a nasty flu bug, which was adding to a bad case of the I'm-a-newlywed-and-my-husband-went-on-a-trip blues. Anyway, he was due home any day. Things would get back to normal then.

At least that's what I told myself as I ignored the crawling night shadows. The lights of the temple beckoned and I picked up my pace, whistling the theme to *The Andy Griffith Show*. Loudly.

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