Divine by Blood

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P.C. CAST

Book Three of the
GODDESS OF PARTHOLON
series

Oklahoma

"A storm comes." John Peace Eagle squinted into the southwest sky.

His grandson barely glanced up from his portable Playstation. "Grandpa, if you'd get cable out here you wouldn't have to do all that sky watching. You could check out the Weather Channel instead, or watch it on the news like everyone else."

"This storm could not be predicted by mundane means." The old Choctaw Wisdom Keeper spoke without turning from his study of the sky. "Go now. Take the truck and return to your mother's house."

This did make the teenager look. "Really? I can take your truck?"

Peace Eagle nodded. "I'll get a ride into town sometime this week and pick it up."

"Cool!" The boy grabbed his backpack and gave his grandpa a quick hug. "See ya, Grandpa."

It was only after Peace Eagle heard the engine roar and then

fade as the boy drove down the dirt road that led to the two-lane highway to town that he began to prepare.

Rhythmically the Wisdom Keeper beat the drum. It did not take long. Soon shapes began stirring between the trees. They entered the clearing beside the cabin as if they had been carried there by the growing violence of the wind. In the fading daylight they looked like ancient ghosts. John Peace Eagle knew better. He knew the difference between spirit and flesh. When all six of them had joined him he spoke.

"It is good you have answered my call. The storm that comes tonight is not only of this world."

"Has the Chosen of the Goddess returned?" one of the Elders asked.

"No. This is a dark storm. An evil one stirs."

"What is it you would have us do?"

"We must go to the sacred grove and contain what is struggling to be free," Peace Eagle said.

"But we defeated evil there not long ago," said the youngest of the tribal Elders.

Peace Eagle's smile was grim. "Evil can never be truly defeated. As long as the gods give world dwellers freedom of choice, there will be those who choose evil."

"The Great Balance," the youngest Elder said thoughtfully.

Peace Eagle nodded. "The Great Balance. Without light there would not be dark. Without evil, good would have no balance."

The Elders grunted wordless agreement.

"Now let us work on the side of good."

Rhiannon welcomed the pain. It meant that it was time for her to live again. Time for her to return to Partholon and take back what was hers by right. She used the pain to focus. She thought of it as purification. Ascending to Epona's service had

not been a painless ritual. She expected no less from what Pryderi must have planned for her.

The labor was long and difficult. For a body she'd been detached from for so long, it was a shock to suddenly be aware of muscles and nerves and the cascade of cramping pain that radiated like drowning waves from her core.

Rhiannon tried not to dwell on thoughts of how this birth should have been. She should have been surrounded by her handmaidens and servants. She should have been bathed and cosseted and pampered—given ancient herbal infusions that would dull her pain and fear. Her women would never have left her alone to face the birth by herself. And her daughter's entry into Partholon would have been met by joyous celebrations, as well as a sign from Epona that the Goddess was pleased by the birth of her Chosen's daughter.

No, she couldn't dwell on those thoughts, even though she secretly hoped that when this child was finally born Epona would return to her and show her some sign—any sign, even though she wasn't in Partholon and this child wasn't her first. Somewhere in the blackness between the seemingly endless surges of pain Rhiannon had time to think about that other child. The infant she had aborted. Did she regret what she had done? What good did regret ever do? It had been a choice she had made in her youth. A choice she could not undo.

She must focus on the daughter she was giving birth to now, not mistakes in her past.

When the next spasm of contractions seized her she opened her mouth to scream, even though she knew that entombed as she was, her pain and aloneness would be given no voice.

You are wrong, Precious One. You are not alone. Behold the power of your new god!

With a deafening crack, her living tomb was suddenly split open, and in a rush of fluid, Rhiannon was expelled from the

womb of the ancient tree. She lay gasping and shivering on the carpet of grass. Wrenching coughs shook her. She blinked her eyes wildly, trying to clear her blurry vision. Her first thought was of the man whose sacrifice had entombed her. With a shudder, she looked over her shoulder at the gaping hole in the tree, expecting to see Clint's body. She braced herself for the horror of it, but all she saw was a faint sapphire glow that faded slowly, like it was being absorbed into the bowels of the wounded tree.

Yes, her memory was intact, as was her mind. She knew where she was—the sacred grove, in the modern state of Oklahoma. And, as expected, she had been expelled from her prison inside one of the twin oaks. The other stood, unchanged, beside the shallow stream that ran between the trees. It was twilight. The wind whined fretfully around her. The bruised sky rumbled dangerously with thunder, and was answered by shards of lightning.

Lightning…that must have been what freed her.

I am what freed you.

The voice was no longer in her head, but it still had a disembodied, otherworldly tone. It was coming from under the twin tree to her oak, where the shadows were the deepest.

"Pryderi?" Rhiannon's voice sounded too raspy and weak to be her own.

Of course, Precious One, whom did you expect? The Goddess who betrayed you? His laughter brushed against her skin, and Rhiannon wondered how anything that sounded so beautiful could also feel so cruel.

"I—I cannot see you," she gasped as another contraction engulfed her.

The god waited until the pain receded again, and then the shadows under the tree stirred. A form moved slightly, so that it could be more easily seen in the fading daylight.

Rhiannon felt her breath catch at his beauty. Though his body was not fully materialized in this world and had the transparent look of a spirit, letting her see through it to the shadows beyond, the sight of him made her forget that she was swollen with impending birth. Tall and strongly built, he was imposing even in spirit form. His mane of dark hair framed a face that should have inspired poets and artists, and not the terrible stories whispered about him in Partholon. His eyes smiled at her and his face was suffused with love and warmth.

I greet you, my priestess, my Precious One. Can you see me now?

"Yes," she whispered in awe. "Yes, I see you, but only as a spirit." Rhiannon felt dizzied by such an obvious show of the god's favor. He was absolutely magnificent—everything a god should be. And suddenly she could not believe she had wasted all her life worshipping Epona, when she should have been kneeling in supplication at this wondrous god's feet.

It is difficult for me to hold corporeal form. In order for me to truly exist in the flesh, I must be worshipped. There must be sacrifices made in my name. I must be loved and obeyed. That is what you and your daughter will do for me—you will lead the people to find me again, and then I will return you to your rightful place in Partholon.

"I understand," she said, ashamed that her voice was so weak between her panting breaths. "I will—"

But before she could finish her words, two things happened simultaneously, both effectively silencing her. The night was suddenly filled with the sonorous sound of drumbeats. Rhythmically, like a heart pulsing blood through a body, the glade was wrapped in a deep, vibrating pulse. At the same moment Rhiannon was gripped by the overwhelming need to push.

Her back bowed and her legs automatically came up. She gripped the gnarled roots, trying to find something, anything that would anchor her straining body. Her wild eyes searched

the shadows where Pryderi had materialized. Faintly, she could see his spectral form.

"Help me," she moaned.

The beating drums were getting louder. Within the resonant sound, she could now hear chanting, though she could not make out the words. Pryderi's form flickered and, with a horror that mirrored the pain that threatened to tear apart her body, she watched his beautiful face ripple and re-form. His sensuous mouth was seared shut. His nose became a grotesque hole. His eyes were no longer smiling and kind. They glowed with an inhuman yellow light. Then, before she could take another sobbing breath, the apparition changed again. The eyes became dark, empty caverns and the mouth ripped open to show bloody fangs and a slavering maw.

Rhiannon screamed in fear and rage and pain.

The drumbeat and chanting got louder and closer.

Pryderi's image shifted and he was, once more, the inhumanly beautiful god, only this time he was barely visible.

I cannot always be beautiful, even for you, Precious One.

"Are you leaving me?" she cried as the terrible pushing urge abated for a moment. Though his changing visage terrified her, she was even more afraid to face birth alone.

Those who approach are forcing me to leave. I cannot battle them tonight. I do not have the strength in this world. Then his eyes blazed into hers and his body almost solidified. *Rhiannon MacCallan, I have sought you for decades. I have watched your unhappiness multiply as you were shackled to Epona. You must make your choice now, Rhiannon! You have seen all of my forms. Will you renounce the Goddess and give yourself to me as my priestess, my Chosen and Incarnate?*

Rhiannon felt light-headed with pain and fear. Her eyes flicked wildly around the grove, searching for some sign of Epona, but she saw nothing of her divine light. She had been

abandoned to the darkness—a darkness that had been pursuing her for years. What choice did she have? She could not imagine existing were she not the Chosen of a deity. How would she live if she did not have the power such status afforded her? But even as she made her decision, Rhiannon could not bring herself to openly renounce Epona. She would accept Pryderi. That would have to be enough for the god.

"Yes. I will still give myself to you," she said faintly.

And your daughter? Do you pledge your daughter to me, as well?

Rhiannon rejected the warning that whispered through her soul.

"I give—"

Her words were broken off by the high-pitched battle cry of seven tribal Elders as the men entered the grove, tightening a circle around the two oaks. With a roar that made Rhiannon's heart tremble, Pryderi's spirit dissolved into the shadows.

Pain bowed her body again and all Rhiannon knew was that she must push. Then strong hands were supporting her. She gasped and opened her eyes. The man was ancient. His face was deeply furrowed and his long hair was white. There was an eagle feather tied within its length. His eyes…Rhiannon focused on the kindness in his brown eyes.

"Help me," she whispered.

"We are here. The darkness is gone. It is safe for your child to enter the world now."

Rhiannon gripped the stranger's hands. She pushed with everything within her pain-racked body. Then to the beat of the ancient drums her daughter slid from her womb.

And as she was born, it was Epona and not Pryderi to whom Rhiannon cried.

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