

PURE SACRIFICE

A MYTHOS LEGACY
NOVEL

JAMI GOLD



BLUE
PHOENIX
PRESS

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Chapter One



THE STRANGER'S EYES STARED BACK AT CELIA FROM THE sketchpad. Finally. Apparently, the hundred-and-fifty-seventh time was the charm.

She leaned against the bus seat and flicked eraser bits off the paper. That was a damn good likeness if she said so herself.

Her gaze stole across the bus aisle to check out her subject. As usual, dark sunglasses hid his pools-of-warm-honey eyes. No matter. Months ago, an unsteady passenger had knocked off those shades, and she'd gotten enough of a glimpse to cement the image into her memory. Eyes like that would make puppies jealous.

In contrast, the rest of him oozed guy-you-didn't-bring-home-to-Momma. His Conan the Barbarian build added to the Captain Jack Sparrow beaded dreadlocks and leather clothes to rank him high on the *not safe* meter.

But those eyes... They fascinated her. Maybe he wore sunglasses to hide their secret.

What secret his eyes might reveal if they were exposed she had no idea. Yet she couldn't help spending an unhealthy amount of time thinking about the intimidating—and sexy—stranger.

Heat crept up her cheeks. Not that he'd turned in her direction, or even twitched. Regardless, her face burned as though behind his shades, he'd focused on her.

Impossible. No one ever noticed her.

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Even now, when the bus held only one lily-white ass—hers—everyone ignored her. As usual.

The familiar taste of bitterness rose in her throat, and she buried the sensation with a swallow. The ability to live in the ninety-five-percent black neighborhood of West End without drawing attention meant she could afford another year at Washington University in St. Louis. Her scholarship was great but didn't cover housing costs.

And the world had made it perfectly clear she didn't deserve more.

The bus rounded the corner onto Hamilton Avenue, and she packed up her sketchbook and colored pencils. The stranger across the aisle stood as well.

Somehow, no matter what her class and lab schedule was each day, he always ended up on her bus. Any other person would suspect him of being a stalker. Right. He'd have to be aware of her existence first.

Her weight shifted as the bus groaned to a halt, and she let Mr. Scary-Hotpants pass by in the aisle before following him to the door. A grumble from her stomach sent heat to her face again. Hopefully she could grab some supper from her landlady, "Auntie" Harriet.

Crap! The prescription she'd promised to pick up.

Just in time, Celia yanked her foot back from stepping off the bus. Another passenger behind her on the stairs barreled forward as if she were invisible. She flattened herself against the stair railing and let the woman pass. The bus started again, and Celia scooted into a seat.

Movement outside the window caught her eye. The leather-clad stranger strode alongside the bus, his head turned toward her far enough that a blue-beaded dreadlock slid over his shoulder and swung freely. Furrows formed above the sharply angled brows peeking above his sunglasses.

Chill bumps rose on her arms despite her jacket.

The bus sped up, leaving his figure to fade in the distance. Once she lost sight of him, she twisted forward in the bench and rubbed her arms. She'd imagined that, right? He wasn't *really* a stalker and upset she hadn't gotten off the bus with him. Was he?

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Well, if he was a stalker, he was a piss-poor one. They'd been riding the same bus for a year and a half—ever since her required freshman-year stint in the dorms—and other than a few times when he *might* have looked at her from behind those sunglasses, he'd fallen firmly into the you-don't-deserve-my-attention camp. And he'd never followed her home, even though she rented a room from an elderly woman more defenseless than herself.

No, the stalker thing didn't make sense. It must have just been a coincidence that his head had swiveled in her direction.

Several stops later, she used her fast stride, honed from scurrying to reach classes on time, to make it to the pharmacy while she still had some daylight. People might ignore her, but she wasn't so stupid as to rely on that fact for safety.

Not in this neighborhood.

The address from Auntie Harriet matched a little hole-in-the-wall liquor market stuck between a rundown building and a darkened community center. An electronic door chime buzzed at her arrival, and the stench of smoke and body odor inside choked her throat. The man behind the counter thumped his cigarette pack repeatedly.

Predictably, he didn't look up at her approach. Unless she spoke, she might as well not exist to the world. And sometimes not even then.

"Excuse me, I'm Celia Hawkins, here to pick up a prescription for Harriet Williams."

She'd have grumbled—not actually out loud, of course, as that never ended well for her—about Auntie Harriet sending her prescriptions to a pharmacy in this neighborhood, but conveniences like supermarkets and chain restaurants were rare in the north section of St. Louis proper. The only other pharmacies in the area were even farther away.

In a way, the lack of shopping options reminded her of the small-town life at home. As if the local violent crime was simply the big city version of cow-tipping.

After the cashier rang up the purchase, Celia stuffed the prescription bag into her backpack and slung the strap over her left shoulder. "Thanks."

The guy thumped his cigarette carton, signaling he'd already

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

forgotten she existed. Just as bad as her professors, her classmates...

And her family.

Damn people were all the same. Someday she might just snap and decide the consequences of demanding more from the world weren't as horrible as living like this.

She snorted. Right. And someday she'd have a boyfriend too.

During the few minutes she'd been inside the store, dusk had fallen, and she zipped her jacket against the chill. Crap, she'd miss the next southbound bus for home if she didn't hustle the half mile to the bus stop.

A few blocks down, busted-out streetlights loomed overhead, and two tall, boarded-up buildings hulked over the sidewalk, darkening the area even more. She quickened her already hurried steps.

Something skimmed her hand, and she jumped, interrupting her stride. At her elbow, a bush growing through the broken pavement between the abandoned structures reached over the sidewalk.

A weak laugh burst from her. "Just a branch, Celia."

An arm shot out from beside the bush and yanked her into the darkness. A hand covered her mouth from behind, and the thumb blocked her nose. Adrenaline clawed through her body so fast she broke out in a cold sweat under her jacket.

She struggled against the strong grasp, thrashing her head and trying to pry the fingers away. But the hand stuck to her face like duct tape, and she couldn't get in a breath to do anything, much less scream. Her heartbeat filled the space of her empty lungs, pounding through her chest.

Visions of her maybe-stalker flickered in her mind. She'd have no chance at besting a goliath like him, but she swung her elbows anyway, fighting for air.

Her attacker pulled her tight to his ribs, pinning her arms. He was about her height and scraggly in build.

Not her stranger from the bus.

Her relief didn't last as this unknown stranger dragged her away from the road.

"Who's your pimp?" The scent of alcohol and sweat tainted the tiny amount of air creeping around his thumb. "Why he bringing

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

white pussy to this 'hood?"

She twisted in his hold.

A sharp point jabbed under her jaw. "Uh-uh, no fighting, ho."

She scanned the area for anything to use as a weapon. How could she escape?

He heaved her into a narrow alley behind the buildings. Thick trees and crumbling homes, dark and vacant, framed them in from the other side. The truth settled heavily in her gut.

There was no one around to help her.

No one.

The blade pressed on her neck, and grimy fingers shoved oily fabric into her mouth, gagging her. "You cross into my territory, I get a freebie. Them's the rules."

Icy tendrils trailed the adrenaline in her limbs. God, why had she spoken and announced her presence? Of all the times to *not* let herself be overlooked. Stupid.

Think, dammit. Panic bubbled up in her chest, and her throat tightened against the too-deep-to-spit-out gag. This was definitely *not* how she'd wanted to lose her virginity.

The knife's pressure let up for a second, and she jammed her elbow back into his ribs. She hopped, moving in the only direction she could, and threw her left shoulder up. Her off-kilter backpack caught his chin. She stooped and lunged under the now-outstretched blade.

One step away. Two steps away.

Her backpack heaved in his grasp and jerked her sideways. Solid knuckles crashed into the side of her face. Fire burst through her jaw, and she stumbled.

"Bitch!" He tossed her to the blacktop.

She hit the ground hard, jarring her wrists. Glass fragments cut into her palms and stabbed through her jeans at her knees. Stings burned at every point. He straddled her from behind, grabbed a fistful of hair, and slammed the side of her head into the pavement.

Crack.

Light blasted in her eyes. Pinpricks of heat erupted across her cheek from the remnants of broken bottles slicing her skin.

"I warned you not to fight me, ho. Your pimp oughta thank me for teaching you your place." He smashed her skull into the

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

ground again.

Warm, wet liquid met her face. Pressure built at her temple, and the horizon tilted. A metallic scent filled her nose with each sucked-in breath. She pushed up on her arms, but they didn't want to move. Red flashes speckled her vision.

He yanked her wrists behind her back and shoved her right hand through the other strap of her backpack. He twisted the pack, and the straps cut across her biceps, effectively tying her arms behind her.

Her arms, her shoulders, her muscles—everything screamed. Wrenched out of place and too weak to help. The weight of her bag added to his mass and pinned her to the ground.

She tried to lift her head and work the gag forward to spit the fabric out. Instead, the red spots in front of her eyes turned black, and the alley swirled around her. Oh God, she was going to die.

Here.

Now.

Her attacker sawed through her jeans with his blade. "That's right... Good little whore... Or I'll fuck you with my knife..."

The pounding in her skull drowned out most of the words. Or was she passing out?

Cool air drifted over her bare bottom, and pain broke through her haze. He carved into the skin of her butt cheek and chuckled like a madman. "I. Was. Here."

A scream ground its way up her throat only to be muffled by the gag. He was going to torture her until she died.

Please, no. Please, no. Please, no.

The hammering in her head deepened into a rhythmic thunder echoing her plea. In sync with the rumble, vibrations shook the asphalt under her cheek.

The thunder rolled down the alley past her. The weight of her attacker disappeared, and a shriek reverberated off the surrounding brick walls.

What...? Pressure in her temples spread into blackness. She blinked. Dark—so dark. White flashing. Moving.

A—a horse? White and glistening like freshly fallen snow. Snow. She was cold. So cold.

Dark liquid streaked down from something on the horse's

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

forehead as it galloped away.

Come here, horsey. But the horse wouldn't come. She didn't have any sugar cubes.

Only darkness.

Chapter Two



M ARKOS DIDN'T DARE TOUCH THE VIRGIN.

By the Maker, that had been too close. He crouched down in front of her. Blood crawled across the pavement from under her head, and mottled splotches spread over her face. The sight of his near-failure turned his stomach.

What the *skoro* had she been thinking? His magic could do only so much. Keeping her pure—and alive—in a place like this made his job a thousand times harder.

“Wake up.”

She didn't move.

The gag. Maybe she couldn't breathe. He took off his sunglasses and poked at the rag with its plastic arm. The tip slipped behind the fabric, and he pried the gag from her mouth.

He slapped the ground so hard the gust of air blew her blonde hair. “Wake up!”

Still nothing.

Mule's piss. He couldn't leave her here. He had to get her home and off the street. And that meant he'd have to touch her.

He stuck his sunglasses in a pocket, tugged his leather jacket over his hands to minimize contact, and slid his arms under her body. As he stood, holding her away from his chest, her head lolled to the side and revealed her injuries.

Blood poured from an open wound at her temple, cuts covered

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

her face, and her narrow jaw hung loosely, probably broken. She was so fragile. Too fragile.

The Virgin would die if he left her at home bleeding and unconscious.

Ass, ass, and more ass. He needed to heal her, but not here. Not in public.

New to-do list. Get her home—quickly. But how?

Her bedroom at the old woman's house was too far away for a direct transport, his magic unable to connect two distant Earthen points. No, the only way to get her home was to take her through the Mythos plane.

Piss. By the time the Council of Elders was done with him for all these transgressions, he wouldn't be worth a gelding's balls.

He mentally reached through the veil between planes and held the image of his quarters in his mind. With a swirl of his fingers, a vaporous doorway to the spartan white room formed in front of him, and he stepped into the mist. No one else was around. Thank the Maker he didn't have any unscheduled visitors asking questions he hadn't come up with answers for yet.

He half-expected her to wake as her body recognized its destiny in the Mythos plane. She didn't.

Not a good sign.

If he couldn't heal her, they were all headed straight to Hades's crows.

Mist swirled in front of him as he brought to mind her attic bedroom at the old woman's house. The vapor coalesced as his magic slipped through vents and cracked-open windows to enter the room. He carried her back into the Earthen plane and laid her on her side on the bed.

Twilight filled the room with shadows, hiding her injuries, and he switched on the table lamp beside the bed. Her backpack still bound her arms, and he slid the straps down, releasing her.

He was about to turn her onto her back when her bare rounded behind caught his eye. Heat galloped through him. He sucked in a breath through his teeth and shot back, bumping his head on the sloping ceiling. The opposite corner wasn't far enough in the small room.

This was wrong. All wrong.

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

He wasn't supposed to touch her. He wasn't supposed to see her like this. He wasn't even supposed to get this close to her until he'd prepared for the ritual. He couldn't do this.

Couldn't? If he didn't heal her, there wouldn't *be* a ritual.

Suck it up, jackass.

He set his jaw and returned to her side. Letter-shaped gashes bled onto her bedsheet. Too bad the son of a mule who'd attacked her couldn't die a second time. He'd gladly kill the man several times over.

The only way to heal her was to touch her, skin-to-skin. The Maker must have a sick sense of humor.

He swallowed and placed his hand over the deep graffiti cuts. His hand covered her behind, his fingers following the curves. The urge to stroke the yielding flesh twitched along his arm. He shook his head, banishing the enticing image.

He was the last of the Guardians. He would resist. He would remain pure—pure in thought and pure in action.

Warmth passed from his palm into her skin. Her body would knit itself together, and by morning, only a slight reddish mark would give evidence of the injuries. He closed his eyes and let his magic go to work. He *could* do this.

He relaxed, lulled by the softness under his fingertips. How could anything be so supple? His thumb absently circled.

Mugarok! He yanked his hand back. Caressing her? He should be the last one to make that mistake. The danger of getting too close to the Virgin hadn't been exaggerated.

His vow came out in a low rumble. "I will not be tempted."

He rolled her onto her back and tugged the bedsheet up to her neck, covering her allure. Her battered head desperately needed attention, so he forced himself to touch her again, but he dug his fingernails into the palm of his other hand. He wouldn't let impure thoughts take hold within him again.

One by one, the cuts on her face sealed shut, and shattered bones re-formed. After the last injury healed, the Virgin opened her eyes.

He froze. *Skoro* and ass. Maybe she'd be incoherent.

She reached up and stroked his dreadlocks. "I always knew you were a good guy."

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Her eyelids closed again. Sleep tugged her fingers through his hair, and her arm flopped down the side of the bed. A soft *tap* sounded as her hand fell to the wood flooring.

Curse the Maker. Hopefully that “good guy” nonsense meant she *was* incoherent. He scanned her room. If she wasn’t delirious, would she remember that he’d been here?

He sat back on his heels. Maybe cloaking magic would make her forget. The stories implied that type of magic wouldn’t work on the Virgin, but what choice did he have? Hopefully, the stories were wrong, and it would affect her the same way it affected other humans.

Blood glistened on her dangling palm. He stood, ignoring the minor injury. Those cuts would heal on their own, and there was no pissing way he’d risk touching her again.

He drew a pattern in the air above her, calling on the threads tying the two planes together. A woven square of mist took shape from the intricate motions of his fingers, born of his intention to hide the past hour from her awareness.

He released his creation with a flick of his fingertips. “Forget.”

The shroud of vapor fluttered over her head and sank into her skin. With luck, she’d think she’d overestimated her injuries and stumbled home on her own.

He switched off her light and stepped into the Mythos plane.

Time to face the Council of Elders.

Chapter Three



THE SUMMONS WAS WAITING FOR MARKOS WHEN HE ARRIVED at his quarters. Other than removing the leather jacket that had been exposed to the Virgin, he didn't bother changing before heading out. Nothing could remove the contamination inside him.

The white-marbled columns and buildings of his homeland glowed in the moonlight. The soft illumination turned the paths to Council Hall into silvery rivers winding through the trees. Burbles and sloshes from the nearby brook accompanied the smells of an eternal springtime. Green, growing, pure.

The serene evening didn't calm him. His muscles ached, still shuddering with tension from the slip with his thumb—and his thoughts.

Hoof falls shadowed him, quiet on the grass along the path.

He stopped. "Show yourself. I'm in no mood for games tonight."

Hipdemos approached and tossed his head, bouncing his white mane across his neck. Light glinted off his golden horn as he emerged from the shadows. "I hope you're not planning on entering the council chamber looking like that."

Markos surveyed his appearance. Boots, worn leather pants, Henley shirt, leather vest, wide leather wrist cuffs, and buckles everywhere. With as many mistakes as he'd made tonight, he couldn't care about breaking such an insignificant rule. He

continued along the path.

Hipdemnos trotted beside him and snorted. "Markos. You know as well as I do that if you appear before the priestesses in human form, they'll think you're challenging them."

For a moment, the darkness swallowed everything but the *clomps* of their feet.

Hipdemnos arched his long neck closer. "Are you?"

"I've never approved of the way Alkipsia rules with an iron hoof. That's no secret. But no, I'm not challenging them."

Broad white withers blocked the path. "Then she'll find a way to punish you."

Markos pulled up short and peered toward the horizon. "I don't know if I care."

"What happened to you?"

He couldn't explain his dark mood to himself, much less to anyone else.

He shoved against Hipdemnos's flank. "Move."

Hipdemnos bowed his head and shuffled back. "Yes, my prince."

Markos took two steps and then stopped. By the Maker, he couldn't deal with this tonight. "I wasn't giving an order."

"It sounded like one." Hipdemnos's ears pivoted forward. "Maybe you should try it more often."

"Hipdemnos." He didn't restrain the warning in his tone.

"You're the last of the royal line and—"

"*And* I'm not female. I cannot rule the tribe."

Not to mention that he'd proved his unworthiness too many times over the centuries with every Virgin he'd failed to save during the ritual. And his impure thoughts tonight had been his worst mistake yet. He was going to get his whole tribe killed.

"Plenty would follow you."

"That's not the point." He started toward Council Hall again. "A tribe divided is no tribe at all."

Markos left Hipdemnos at the edge of the trees and lifted his head toward the next confrontation. Council Hall stood above him on the hill at the center of his homeland.

Unlike the rest of their land, which showed signs of his tribe's fading magic, the massive columned building had been continuously maintained during the four-and-a-half centuries of Alkipsia's

reign—another indication of her conceit. Familiar bitterness burned through his chest, and he tamped down the feeling.

His mother was no longer alive to rule as queen and high priestess, so thoughts like that were a dead end. Especially under Alkipsia's rule.

Faceted lanterns lit the way from the front entrance to the drapes marking the doorway to the council chamber at the end of the hall. An attendant trotted out, his ears pulled back and his lips parted, baring his teeth.

"I'm not changing." Markos kept his tone calm, almost bored. He had a feeling he should have recognized this male, but with his failures to heal their land over the centuries, he didn't deserve connections with his kind anymore.

The attendant's tail swished, and he flared his nostrils.

Maybe Hipdemos was partially right about giving more orders. He met the male's eye. "Open the curtain. Now."

Swish. Swish. Swish. Pity that flies didn't exist on the Mythos plane to give that tail something real to do.

The attendant finally lowered his head and clacked his teeth. "As you wish, my prince." He poked his golden horn through the overlap of the hanging fabric and pushed the drapes aside.

Markos entered the council chamber and faced the three priestesses huddled behind the half-wall separating the council thrones from commoners. Of course *they* were in their human form. *They* were allowed.

"I have come." He didn't acknowledge their summons, but he did perform an elaborate human bow, complete with several flourishes of his hand for added irony.

Silence fell over the group of females. Their gaze roved his appearance, and as one, their jaws dropped. Recovering first, Alkipsia gathered her gauzy dress and swept to the center throne of the high priestess, elevated above the commoners' floor even more than the other two thrones. The lower priestesses followed suit and took their seats on either side of her.

Alkipsia gave him a tight smile under her wild halo of spiraling black hair. "The council recognizes Markos Ambrostead, who has come in answer to our summons." She raised one brow. "We have rules for a reason, Markos. Requiring those who wish an audience

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

with us to appear in their natural form ensures that no one is scorned, even those who have lost the ability to shift. We want all who appear before us to be equal.”

“With you being more equal than others, of course.”

Her hand waved away the obvious. “Of course.”

May the Maker grant him patience. He sighed. Forget it. Lost cause.

“Remind me to bring you a book from the Earthen plane. Called *Animal Farm*.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward. “I do hope you are not comparing me to an animal, Markos.”

He tilted his chin, feigning innocence. “Would I do that?”

She slapped the arms of her throne and stood. “Our kind are not *animals*. We are not simply *horses* with a horn.” Her light brown skin flushed with a grimace at the epithet—*horses*.

He stomped closer to her perch. “I know that. We are proud, mighty, and magnificent, not merely servants of one who mistakenly believes herself more powerful...”

He closed his mouth before the words “you stupid donkey tit” emerged.

Forget about dying during the next few months. His mood was well on its way to getting him gored through the heart. Tonight.

He hadn’t intended on challenging Alkipsia’s rule when he’d walked into the council chamber, but somehow his frustration had gotten the better of him.

No, not *somehow*. He knew exactly where this anger was coming from. Anger at himself. Anger at his mistakes. Anger at endangering all their lives. His tribe deserved better than his failures.

Silence replaced the echoes of his words, and her stare turned cold. Finally, she retook her seat and spent a moment arranging the nearly see-through gray dress around her form. Although she was the eldest female, she didn’t look a day older than a human in her twenties, and she had the vanity to go with that fact.

When she looked up again, her voice dripped with compassion. “Markos, you have served our kind well for 440 years, and we are grateful. We summoned you here to explain how we were able to smell the Virgin in our land, as we wish to understand your dilemma.”

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

He struggled to keep his face blank. Since when did she show him respect? Even though she was undoubtedly insincere, he couldn't help wanting sympathy.

"I'm going to fail again."

His stomach lurched, and the admission that he might get them all killed even before the ceremony on the Spring Equinox stalled in his chest.

"Despite the fact that I'm the sole Guardian of our kind, the last one able to take on human form in the Earthen plane and shield the chosen Virgin of each generation, and the only one with the inborn magic to salvage even the failed rituals, I've never been qualified for this job. Worse, the Earthen plane is changing, making the task impossible for anyone."

His gaze fell, and he visually traced the maze of inlaid gold lines in the marble floor, as if they could show him where things had gone so wrong.

"This generation's Virgin is not content to stay home and await some man to pay attention to her. She has gone out into the world, and she is..." He struggled to find the right word.

Alluring. Enticing. Tempting...

"Assertive."

"Assertive? Your magic is supposed to prevent that." Alkipsia's tone dropped into a sneer, implying additional failures on his part. *That* was the Alkipsia he knew.

"No, my magic is intended only to make it easier for the Virgins to choose to join us during the ceremony. The spell creates an emotional distance by making humans, especially men, uninterested in her—unless she makes herself known in some way. As a side effect, the weaker bonds typically cause the Virgins to be shy and withdrawn, but this generation's Virgin is chafing at her situation more than usual." He glanced away. "And she is aware of my presence."

A soft gasp resounded from all three females.

Charisia, one of the lower priestesses, touched Alkipsia's forearm. "Maybe this is a sign. Maybe this Virgin will accept Markos at the ritual and heal our magic."

His twenty failures had destroyed any hope those words might have engendered.

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Alkipsia froze, and deep creases formed above her stony gaze. “Tell me more.”

“As she is active in the world, I have had to keep a closer watch on her than usual. She places herself in countless dangerous predicaments every day. She spends hours in assemblies with men who might become aware of her every time she speaks. She travels in a conveyance surrounded by men who are intoxicated enough to lessen the effect of my magic. I have had to follow her everywhere to ensure the preservation of her purity.” He indicated his attire. “This style of clothing is intimidating to human females. Yet she goes out of her way to notice me.”

“Perhaps she is merely being watchful of you as a possible threat.”

“Perhaps.”

He didn’t bring up that she’d called him a “good guy.” He stifled a snort. Delirious.

“Regardless, she is very much aware of my existence.” He crossed his arms. “Tonight, a chemically altered man attacked her with the intention to defile or murder her. I killed him before he had the chance.”

“Naturally.”

“But she was severely wounded. To prevent her death, I had to bring her through the Mythos plane so I could return her home and begin the healing process. That is why you smelled her scent here.”

Alkipsia fell back against her throne, her jaw slack. “You—you touched her?”

The answer burned his gut, and he spit out the word. “Yes.”

“This disturbed you. That’s why you believe you will fail again.”

He didn’t deny her insight. Especially as it meant he didn’t have to reveal just how much weakness he’d shown in the Virgin’s room. How deep his impure thoughts had led him into temptation.

“She will survive, however?” Alkipsia quietly tapped her nails on the arm of her throne. “Purity intact?”

“Yes.”

She glanced at the other priestesses and then faced him again. “Wait outside until we call you. We have much to discuss.”

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

He bowed his head and retreated from the room. They might not see eye to eye on how to rule the tribe, but Alkipsia was the only one with enough insight into the Maker's commandments to help him avoid another failure. Another needless Virgin death.

The attendant met him in the hall and neighed. "You're still alive. Glad to see it."

Markos patted his withers as he passed by. Good to know the male's earlier behavior was driven by protectiveness rather than kowtowing to the council.

He stood at the Council Hall entrance and let the cool night air wash over him. The stars overhead danced, like fireflies flickering in rhythm to a secret song. A glowing stellar disc swathed the land in a brilliant ribbon despite the moon's glow. Humans had never seen a night sky that could compare, even in the most remote corners of the planet.

He reattached a loose buckle on his vest. Although truth be told, he spent so much time on the Earthen plane these clothes felt like part of him now. Yet another reason his kind kept their distance from him.

The attendant returned sooner than expected. "The council is ready for you."

The three females sat in their thrones, and Alkipsia inclined her head to him. "You have performed a great service for our kind tonight, and I wish we could protect you from the trials yet to come. However, the Virgin must be protected, no matter the risk, and tonight's events have shown us the potential threats are greater than we imagined. Therefore, we have decided you must reside full-time on the Earthen plane—"

"What?"

"—where you will keep constant watch over the Virgin."

"I can't *do* that."

"You must remain strong and pure if we are to survive."

"But you're telling me to get *closer* to her."

"We regret the situation. Perhaps this Virgin will be the one, and you will finally be rewarded for your efforts." Alkipsia's grimace and flat tone didn't offer hope for that possibility.

The priestesses stood as one and left him alone in the council chamber. His limbs grew heavy and thick, the finality of their

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

departure upsetting his balance.

He remained there—how long he didn't know—and tried to grasp the enormity of their decree. Rather than finding a solution so he wouldn't fail again, the council had dismissed the danger the Virgin posed to him. To all of them.

Physically resisting her would be difficult enough, but he'd already proven he couldn't keep his thoughts pure. He'd have to remove part of his brain to manage that feat. Yet the Maker's commandment demanded nothing less than purity, in actions *and* in thoughts.

Impossible. He might very well go insane before the Spring Equinox freed him.

Chapter Four



SOMEHOW, HE MADE IT BACK TO HIS QUARTERS DESPITE HIS stunned daze. The council's attendant, now in human form, waited for him. The male's appearance shook him from his stupor. Parimenos.

No wonder the attendant had seemed familiar. Centuries ago, Parimenos's sister was intended to be Markos's mate. His mother had arranged the pairing back when she was still alive—and matings were legal.

Parimenos's family had suffered greatly for their defense of the royal line during the Civil War—including the loss of his sister. In a show of respect for what could have been, Markos gave the male a deep bow.

"Forgive me for not recognizing you earlier. I spend far too much time away from home."

His stomach hollowed. It was only going to be worse for the near future.

"Think nothing of it, my prince." Parimenos indicated a two-foot-square stack of gold kilobars in the corner. "The council anticipated that you might need additional funds to set up a permanent domicile for you and the Virgin. These have been purified and minted to your specifications. Will this be adequate for your needs?"

Living under the same roof as the Virgin? Markos shuddered

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

and dismissed the idea by picking up a bar from the top of the pile. This much gold would be worth over twenty million dollars once he placed it on the market through the private Unicore Mint he'd set up on the Earthen plane.

"Yes, that will be plenty."

He had no intention of speaking with the Virgin, much less sharing a house. But he *did* need a location close enough to use for direct transport. His magic could create an Earth-bound portal only within a mile or so radius, so his lakeside castle in Ireland was unquestionably too far away. Thank the Maker the council had no way to check up on *how* he fulfilled their edicts.

Parimenos started for the door, but Markos stopped him. "I'll be importing several hundred kilos of iron bars to offset this export. Make sure the council informs the faeries. I don't want to come home to a war."

Parimenos grinned and dipped his head. "I'll ensure everyone is notified."

After the male left, Markos transported the gold bars to Unicore Mint's vault in London and wrote instructions for his executor to handle the gold and iron exchanges. The Mythos plane had plenty of gold, but non-living matter had to equalize between the planes or throw both worlds off-balance. Iron was the perfect replacement, as it wasn't naturally occurring in Mythos due to the fae, and its import allowed his tribe to craft with steel.

While at the London office, he fumbled through a computer search for real estate near the old woman's house. Once he'd printed the listings for several possibilities, he headed home. Whether the council would agree with his decision or not, he needed one last night in his quarters.

The last night in his own bed. The last night he'd get a respite from the Virgin's temptations. The last night to gather strength for his resistance.



CELIA WOKE AND SHOT UP IN BED, ADRENALINE SURGING THROUGH her veins. Everything felt off. As she stretched for the switch of her bedside table lamp, her shoulder burned and her palm stung.

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Hell, her whole body ached.

The clock on the nightstand displayed nearly eight-thirty a.m. Was she running late for anything?

Her brows pulled low. What day was it?

She glanced at the small desk in the corner. Her backpack with her cell phone wasn't there. She swung one leg off the bed to get up. Wait, she was still in her jeans?

Pinpricks of red at her knee drew her eye. Something...

She examined her palm. Dozens of bloody scratches covered her skin. On her other hand too.

And her backpack sat beside the bed.

Her body became numb as her blood abandoned her. A remembered nightmare tickled her thoughts, and she slowly stood. Part of her jeans and underwear flopped down, and her ass hung out in the breeze.

It hadn't been a bad dream. It had been real.

The buzz of adrenaline strengthened, as if her attacker might still be within reach. Oh God, she'd been violated. How seriously? Her muscles tensed, torn between wanting to strike out at someone, something, anything, and wanting to run away before the situation got worse, before her head was bashed in again, before she died.

Her head... She touched her face, expecting pain. Nothing.

She twisted and checked her bottom. Despite the blood all over her jeans—and oh crap, her bed—no gashes marred her skin.

What. The. Hell.

She unzipped her backpack. The prescription bag for Auntie Harriet still lay on top.

Her legs gave out, and she plopped onto her bed. Okay, there had to be an explanation for this. The steps of the scientific method scrolled through her mind.

She'd been attacked. That much was clear, and that much she remembered. But then what had happened?

She'd gotten away. How? And how did every wound match her memory, yet several injuries were missing?

Ugh. All she had was questions and not enough information to come up with a hypothesis.

"Celia, honey, you here?" Auntie Harriet's voice carried up the

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

stairs. "I'm cooking up some flapjacks if you want 'em."

Food. Her stomach rumbled. Last night's planned raid of her landlady's dinner spread had never happened.

"I'll be down in a minute, Auntie. Thanks."

She stripped off her bloodied clothes and threw on a robe. Maybe she'd think clearer when she wasn't starving and gross anymore. She grabbed the prescription bag and started down to the bathroom to wash up.

The vanilla smell of pancakes wafted up the stairs, and Auntie Harriet waited at the bottom. So much for cleaning up before the woman saw her.

"A robe, child? What time did you get in last night?"

"Uh..." Not a clue. She held out the bag. "Your prescription."

A true southern black woman, Auntie Harriet embodied the spirit of her home. Despite being on the "wrong" side of the Delmar Boulevard north-south dividing line, this block of well-maintained houses from the early 1900s boasted cozy details like wood flooring and arched doorways. Likewise, Auntie never left her bedroom without being perfectly put together, and she seemed to have a hat to match every Sunday church outfit.

This morning, her bright flower-print shirt clashed with the frown pulling across her face. She took the package. "Thank you, honey, I forgot all about that."

Was Auntie having another memory episode? Celia dropped her mission to stop at the bathroom first and followed the woman into the kitchen.

Auntie nodded to the small old-style TV on the counter. "I'm glad I didn't remember you were heading up to that neighborhood. The news is all a-chatter about a big murder on MLK Drive last night."

Something tugged at her memory. Something white.

"A murder? Why is that big news?"

"Because the guy"—she slipped a spatula under the edge of a pancake and peeked—"some low-life type from the looks of him, had a softball-sized hole clean through him. Not a gunshot or nothin'. The cops said it looked like he'd been impaled by a pole. They haven't found a murder weapon, and of course no one up there is talking." She flipped several pancakes onto a plate and

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

held the dish out to Celia. “You didn’t see anything, did you?”

“Not that I can remember.” That was the truth.

She reached for the food, but Auntie gasped and set down the plate. “What happened to your hand, child?”

She grabbed Celia’s wrist and towed her to the sink. Water rinsed away the dried blood creased in her palm print.

“I’m not sure.” Celia put her other hand under the faucet as well. She needed a story that wouldn’t panic the woman. “I think I fell on the sidewalk, but everything’s a bit fuzzy.”

Auntie grasped Celia’s chin and tilted her head from side to side, squinting. “You have *blood* in your hair. You hit your head and don’t remember it?” She *tsked*. “They have a clinic at that school of yours, don’t they? You might have a concussion. Promise me you’ll make an appointment.”

“I promise.”

The woman paid more attention to her than her own mother ever had. It was a pleasant change. Most of the time.

Eating didn’t help Celia feel better. Instead, her confusion increased the more she thought about the news report. Did the murder have something to do with her attack? Her mind turned over the mystery while she washed the dishes and griddle.

The last thing she remembered clearly was the attacker slicing into her skin. After that, things became less distinct. Cold. Tired. A flash of white. A streak of dark liquid. Her stranger from the bus.

What? The plate she was drying nearly slipped from her grasp.

Before the memory floated away, she set down the dish and closed her eyes. An image solidified of the stranger peering down at her, a ceiling above him.

Her bedroom’s sloping ceiling.

That couldn’t be right. Did people with concussions suffer from hallucinations? Or maybe that part was a dream.

Her cheeks heated. She’d dreamed about him? In her bedroom?

She shook her head. Whatever. She should probably go to the police and make a report about her attack in case it was related to the murder.

She hung up the dishtowel and added “visit police station” to her mental list of things to do. Assuming she hadn’t lost a day in her befuddled state, today was Thursday, and she had a break

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

between her morning plant biology class and her ecology lab late in the afternoon.

Auntie Harriet came into the room with one of her fancy hats perched on her head.

“Where are you going all dressed up, Auntie?”

“To Sunday services, of course.” The woman took a mint from a kitchen drawer and stuffed it into her purse.

“Auntie...?” Celia hesitated.

Which of them was wrong? Normally, she’d chalk this up to the woman’s declining mental health, but she wasn’t as sure of herself today.

The day’s paper wasn’t sitting in its usual spot on the table. Celia opened the front door and grabbed the newspaper from the porch. Thursday. A sigh left her muscles relaxed but her stomach tense.

“No, today is Thursday.”

“Certainly not. How hard did you hit your head, child?”

“But look. I just brought this in, and it says today is Thursday.”

The woman’s dark eyes scanned the newspaper, and she checked her medication calendar. “Oh dear. That means I took the wrong pills this morning too.” She sat heavily in a chair at the table and removed her hat. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

Celia sat beside her and patted the woman’s hand until it loosened around the now-crumpled hat brim. “It’s okay. I’m feeling all out of sorts today too. It happens sometimes.”

“I remember the doctor telling me to expect things like that, but...”

“But it doesn’t make it easier. I know.”

“Could you call Roger for me? He’d want to know about the medication mix-up.”

“Of course.” After the woman left to put away her hat, Celia lifted the old rotary phone from its hook and dialed the long-distance number written on the notepad on the wall.

“Williams Dentistry. How may I help you?”

“This is Celia Hawkins. Is Dr. Williams available? It’s about his mother.”

A few minutes later, the man’s deep voice sounded over the phone. “Celia? What’s wrong?”

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

“Hi, Dr. Williams, your mother’s fine, but she had another episode this morning.”

The line remained silent for a moment. “How serious?”

She shared the details and then paused, listening to ensure Auntie was still back in her room. How far should she stick her nose into business that wasn’t her own? “Maybe you could fly out next week for Thanksgiving—?”

“Thank you for the call, Celia, and thank you for being there with her. I’ll touch base with her doctor and see if her medication should be adjusted.”

“But—”

Click.

Her shoulders tensed. She knew all too well what it felt like to be shunted to the side by family. A nobody. Her usual good manners slipped, and she slammed the handset onto the wall.

Fine. Lots of people couldn’t deal with the failing health of their parents. But right *now* was when Dr. Williams should visit his mother, while her Alzheimer’s was still in the early stages. Her episodes were rare, and she still remembered her son, her face beaming with pride that her only child had grown up to be a well-respected dentist in North Carolina.

Sure, his desire to remain hands off was what gave Celia a cheap place to live. By letting her stay here, keeping an eye out for changes, he could delay the argument with his mother about moving her into assisted living. In exchange, Celia paid a paltry ten dollars a week for her rent, which didn’t even cover food expenses for all the times Auntie Harriet treated her like a family member. But she’d gladly give that all up if it meant he wouldn’t blow off his own mother.

“It’s okay, child. I’ll be fine.” Auntie’s voice shook Celia. How much had she overheard?

Celia schooled her expression into a façade of graciousness and faced the woman. “I know you will.”

Auntie waved her hand. “Now go on. If today’s Thursday, you have classes to get to.” When Celia inhaled, ready to protest, the woman added, “Yes, I have your cell number there on the notepad if there are any problems. I remember.”

A smile tugged at Celia’s lips, and she squeezed Auntie’s

shoulder as she passed. “Of course you do.”

One quick shower later, and Celia was feeling better. Still confused, battered, and traumatized, but clean at least. A shocking amount of blood had washed out of her hair. If Auntie Harriet’s eyesight were better, the woman would have marched her off to the hospital at the mess around Celia’s head.

After getting dressed, she grabbed her backpack to repack it for the day’s classes. A quiet rolling noise sounded from the wood floor. She bent down to check what she’d kicked with her toe.

A blue bead.

No... It couldn’t be.

She held her breath and picked up the bead, certain it would vanish before her fingers closed around it. Shimmers like the sparkle of a bright blue Caribbean lagoon leapt over its surface despite the curtained dimness of her room. Her heart couldn’t decide whether it was going to stop or beat a thousand times a second.

Even though the bead’s unusual appearance had drawn her eye hundreds of times, she still wanted—needed—to double check. She fetched her sketchbook from her backpack. Her hands trembled with each turned page.

There. In the drawing she’d completed last week.

The face of the stranger from the bus was penciled in full color, all except his eyes, which the fuzzed paper revealed she’d failed several times to get right. But everything else was there. His eyebrows with the sharp point at the arch. His mustache and goatee. And his beaded dreadlocks—with a blue bead just to the side of his face. This blue bead.

Had that memory of him from last night *not* been a dream? Had he really been here? In her bedroom? She shivered.

The question of *how* she’d made it home suddenly seemed less of a mystery. But what—if anything—did he have to do with her lack of injuries? Or the murder?

Ugh. She shoved the bead into her pocket. She was already running late and didn’t have time for all these unknowns that didn’t get her closer to a hypothesis. Years of being ignored had taught her patience, so she mentally filed the mystery under “to be continued”—at least until she had time to dig deeper.

Her first opportunity to investigate presented itself just a few

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

minutes later, when the stranger climbed onto the bus behind her. As always, he didn't look in her direction. Out of the corner of her eye, she checked.

The blue bead was missing from his dreadlocks.

Chills prickled up her arms. She rubbed warmth into her limbs. What to do, what to say? A thousand scenarios ran through her head during the bus ride.

He still looked as scary and intimidating as ever. But she *knew* he wasn't the one who'd attacked her. She *knew* someone must have rescued her from her attacker because she sure as hell hadn't been in any shape to save herself. And she *knew* he'd been in her bedroom.

Doing what though? Her unbroken bra, the closed safety pin securing her jeans, and the lack of soreness from injuries other than the attack had told her that her virginity was intact. But did he have something to do with her missing wounds? She scoffed. What—like he'd healed her? Not scientifically possible.

The bus approached Brookings Hall at the university. He stood but let her lead the way to the exit stairs. While they waited for the doors to open, she gathered her courage and spun toward him.

She focused on a buckle of his leather vest, avoiding her reflection in his sunglasses. "Thank you for making sure I made it home safely last night."

His jaw loosened, and she hurried down the steps as soon as the *swoosh* announced the door had opened. She hitched her backpack over her shoulder, and a rumble sounded as the bus pulled away. Only then did she glance back.

He'd never descended the stairs to follow her off the bus. That was a good thing, right?

Chapter Five



DEEP MID-AFTERNOON SHADOWS CONCEALED MARKOS FROM the view of the police station entrance. He checked the time on his new phone again. What was the Virgin doing in there? Giving the police a description of him?

Mule's piss. His magic hadn't worked on her, and she remembered too much. The situation was spiraling out of control.

He'd tried hanging out in the building, but even with his ability to cloak his presence, there was no way to loiter in a police station close enough to hear her conversation. Instead, he'd had to lurk here, in the shadow of the building next door, and watch for her exit.

His phone buzzed with a call, and his irritable mood leached into his voice. "What?"

"Mark Ambrose?" The woman's anglicization of his name clued him in to the identity of the caller. "You left a message asking about the listing on Lindell Boulevard?"

After confirming that the listing was accurate about the large lot and dozens of mature trees, he made a generous no-contingency cash offer for the house and all furnishings, with a bonus if the owners closed immediately. Luckily, the owners had already moved out and left the furniture in place for showings. He threw in a raise for the housekeeper-cook and gardener to remain on staff too. Anything to avoid hassle.

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

“Call me when the deal requires my signature.”

He disconnected the call just as the willowy form of the Virgin left the police station, and he pressed against the building’s façade to stay in the dark shade. After she passed on the sidewalk, he trailed behind, slipping from one building’s shadows to the next.

The open gravel field ahead posed a problem, however. He let her reach the far side before he followed in the bright fall sunshine.

As soon as he emerged from the shadows and began crossing the empty lot, she stopped. He silenced his steps on the loose rocks. Her shoulders lifted with a deep inhalation. Dread unfurled in his gut.

She spun around and glared at him, her voice carrying over the distance between them. “You know, it’s rude to stalk someone after they just survived an attack.”

Donkey’s balls. By stopping at the same time she had, his intentions were obvious. He was a *skoro* of the first order.

Tension vibrated through his muscles. “Is that what you told the police? That I’m a stalker?”

Not what he’d planned his first words to the Virgin to be. Then again, he hadn’t planned on talking to her at all.

“I didn’t mention anything about you.” Her shoulders dropped. “Please don’t make me sorry about that.”

Earlier, she’d thanked him, then she chastised him, and now she managed to reassure and threaten him at the same time. How was he supposed to respond to all that?

He approached her in case the police were listening to them yell across the open field. “I’m not a stalker.”

As he stopped outside of touching distance, she stood her ground. “Right. You just follow me around and let yourself into my bedroom. Perfectly normal behavior...” She tightened her grip on the strap of her backpack. “For a stalker.”

She remembered that he was in her room? His fingers curled into a fist.

“You’re imagining things. I wasn’t in your bedroom.” He lifted his chin and looked away, as if he could hardly be bothered with her. However, he couldn’t help grumbling, “And it’s not my fault you get yourself into dangerous situations and need someone to

keep an eye on you.”

She laughed, drawing his gaze. Rosy lips and flushed cheeks colored her face like a blooming rose he wanted to explore with the lightest of caresses. The idea punched him in the stomach.

Her mirth faded into an eye roll. “A... I can’t believe you just spouted that lame ‘I have to stalk you to protect you’ excuse. Stalking isn’t sexy. It’s creepy and something I can and *will* report to the police.” Her hand dropped to her jeans pocket. “And B... Yes, you *were* in my bedroom last night. Don’t bother lying to me.”

His mouth opened, but he had no idea how to reply. She was nothing like the demure Virgins he’d watched from afar in the past. All he could think of was repeating his claim.

“I was *not* in your room.”

“I really wish you hadn’t lied to me again.” She tugged her hand from her pocket and held up something in her fingertips. “Recognize this?”

Mugarok. He swallowed. A blue bead. *His* blue bead. The bead of his family line.

By the Maker, how had he not noticed it was missing? He’d even appeared before the council without it.

If he’d reported to his summons in his natural form, everyone would have noted its absence from his forelock. The council might have even taken that as a sign of him relinquishing his noble birthright. His decision to answer the summons in human form, for which they didn’t know how he displayed the symbol of his family status, was the only thing that had saved him from political suicide.

Trembles weakened his legs, and he stiffened his spine to stay upright. The bead must have slipped off when her fingers had dragged sleepily through his hair last night. Now, the iridescence of the curved surface glittered in the sunlight, looking out of place among this block of warehouses in St. Louis. The tiny sphere, an irreplaceable gift to his ancestors from the Nyx water spirits, was unlike any substance on the Earthen plane.

Unable to help himself, he reached out for the bead.

She snatched her hand back. “Nuh-uh. Are you admitting this is yours?”

His teeth ground together. “Yes.”

Pure Sacrifice ~ Jami Gold

Her brows arched, and she considered the object held firmly in her grasp. “This thing? This thing I found in my *bedroom* this morning—this is yours?” Her faux-innocent sarcasm made her point, slicing through his false claims like a blade.

“Yes.” He didn’t dare move close enough to the Virgin to forcibly take the bead from her. “Now return my property.”

She closed her hand around it. “Oh, but we still have to discuss how this could *possibly* have ended up in my room, since you’ve never been there.”

Son of a mule. She had him by the balls, and she knew it.

To read the rest of
Pure Sacrifice,
[order your copy!](#)



Also By Jami Gold

[Unintended Guardian](#) (A *Mythos Legacy* Short Story)

[Treasured Claim](#) (A *Mythos Legacy* Novel, Book One)

[Ironclad Devotion](#) (A *Mythos Legacy* Novel, Book Three)