

“Now that’s a cleansing.”

Marta smiled and faced the crowd—schooling her features to one of humble benevolence—and waited for the accolades to begin. But they didn’t. She searched their dumbfounded expressions, then frowned at the few women crying. Why weren’t they praising her name, or at least offering tribute to show their gratitude? She snorted. Some people just didn’t know when to be appreciative.

Her mentor, Thaddeus, parted through the sea of people and gasped his obvious surprise at her ingenuity. She waited with anticipation as he paced back and forth in front of her and the total destruction she’d wrought.

“I…” He shook his head and stared behind her.

Excitement filled her. Now she would get what she had coming. Her certainty turned to confusion when he threw his hands in the air and pinned her with a narrowed, disapproving glare.

“This was NOT what you were to do!”

“What?” She turned toward the fire leaping from huts, wagons, and other sundry items—shimmying in pleasure as the heat knocked the chill from her skin. It had been nippy all morning. And while extremely flattering, her leathers offered nothing in the way of protection from the elements.

“When I tasked you with cleansing the village,” he all but growled, coming up beside her, “I meant for you to cleanse it from the pestilence plaguing the people.”

“I know, but the spell was too complicated.” She smiled again at the dancing flames. “So, I went old school.”