

Downhill All the Way

by

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Foreword

A well written book doesn't need an author's foreword to help explain it. Therefore feel free to draw your own conclusions for why this is here. It was my second attempt at writing a novel and the first that was not so episodic that each section could not have stood alone as a short story. The writing is a bit rough, although I think it improved quite a bit as the story progressed.

There are a lot of things about this story that I am not satisfied with. For starters I never liked the title. I originally chose it as a working title, figuring I'd come up with something better. Somehow that never came to pass. The phrase, "downhill all the way" did get used in the text so at least it has some relevance. I also toyed with the title, "Uphill Both Ways," but that applied even less than Downhill. So be it.

On rereading this, I found that I hadn't really thought out the rules of magic in this world as much as I did in other stories. This story takes place on a number of planes of existence and perhaps I tried for too many differences between the real world and this fantasy construct. My original idea for the world came out of notes for an open-ended series I thought up but never actually wrote way back (mid-1970's). What I had in mind in that series was a concept of Time as being three dimensional. Most alternate history stories implicitly deal with Time as being two dimensional; having length (beginning to end) and width (what if some key event went differently?). I pondered how Time could be three dimensional, and if it were, how would that be different than three dimensional? I decided that the "depth" of Time might be a way in which the rules of physics differ. Too far in any direction on this axis, I quickly realized, would lead to worlds uninhabitable to life as we know it, but it would also allow for worlds in which magic in various forms existed. I saw each difference in the laws of physics and/or magic as a plane. As soon as I constructed this three dimensional image of Time it immediately occurred to me that it was obvious that if such a form of Time existed, then no matter what the laws of physics or magic, somewhere on each plane there would be one line in which history had run identically to that on this world. The originally planned series wasn't going to play on that at all, but it seemed like an interesting enough notion for this

story. Some years later I chanced to read Harry Turtledove's "The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump" which handled this concept in what I think was a better manner. If you want to see another better attempt at magic in a world in which history ran nearly the same as ours (or just want to read a good story), I recommend it.

Then I threw in a whole bunch of deities. That was fun. I was part of a writers' group when I wrote this story. I think they liked the story better than I did. Well it does have some merit. They particularly liked how I handled some of the gods and other divine beings. Ratatosk, the squirrel who carries strife up and down the trunk of Yggdrassil was a particular favorite. Where I did have trouble was in trying to explain why the Judeo/Christian God in his omnipotence and omniscience couldn't have just solved the problem before it even started (not that the writers' group had spotted this) consequently I rewrote a little bit of that part of this story before posting it. I also rewrote the ending to something I prefer. If I ever seriously think of publishing it in print I will probably rewrite even more of the story. Anyway, my fellow writers like my deities so much they convinced me to drag them out again in another story, which I plan to post for download later this year.

I also threw in a few in-jokes that don't bear explanation. This was the last time I'm aware of any such in-jokes in my writing. Those who know me well enough will catch them. Those who don't shouldn't notice them at all, I think.

Finally, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford, 467 Hawthorn Street, North Dartmouth, MA 02747 email: <mailto:jfgnb@meganet.net> The Jewish Federation hosts and/or supports a wide variety of services and programs in the Greater New Bedford area and internationally including assistance in resettling families from the Former Soviet Union, their "Wheels in Motion" transportation service for the elderly, college scholarship programs, recruitment for local blood bank drives, a permanent Jewish video lending library, many educational programs and the allocations to other local agencies in the New Bedford, Mass. Area. For more information write or call them at (508) 997-7471. So far they do not have a website, although I've been working with them on this matter.

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One

There are times of extreme peril or anguish in one's life when time seems to stand still for an infinite moment and in that moment, when all else stops, the mind is forced to look back and consider the mistakes one has made and what might have been done differently given another chance.

On my personal list of such occasions, the following is number one so far. I was hanging on for dear life to one of the outer branches of the great World-tree over the abyss of Hell. Meanwhile a hawk and an eagle were executing some of the meanest strafing runs at my face with their talons - specially sharpened for me, no doubt - while four deer and a demented squirrel cheered them on. And that was just the beginning.

What was I doing there? Well, I'll get to that. Let's just say that times have changed. Yggdrasill; it's not just for Vikings anymore.

Bolton University. Archaeology 329; Magic Theory in the Medieval World. That's where my story really begins...

Doctor Morrison was not the most interesting lecturer I had ever been subjected to. Just the opposite, in fact. She also gave the toughest exams, which were based equally on her lectures and the textbook. The book, by the way, was actually marginally less interesting. Where do they find those texts? Does some publisher actually go out of his way to find the most boring and confusing authors to write them? Are there special catalogs that let the professors know which books contain the most convoluted and inaccurate arguments so that no matter how bad their lectures may be, the book will make them seem good by comparison? Or do those publishers figure that if they can't follow the text, then the author must know what he's talking about?

Well, that class was thankfully behind me, and in front of me was another season out in the field where the real work of archaeology takes place. The one thing I really dread is that when I graduate next year, I'll be seeing the end of my fieldwork for a while. My three-month vacations will be replaced by one or two weeklong vacations commencing a year after I start working in the private sector. I'd love to go on to graduate school full time, but I can't afford that and my academic record is not so great that I can get enough financial aid. I'll have to take classes at night and on weekends to work toward my Master of the Arts degree. Maybe I would be able to find some local digs that would let me work as a volunteer during my soon-to-be-shortened vacation time.

So, with a semester behind me and a summer in the field ahead what was left? You got it, a final exam smack dab at my side. Specifically, Dr. Morrison's final exam - my last one of the semester.

It was a standard essay question exam; the type in which each question ought to be answered by a two hundred-page thesis, but instead you have a little blue book with twenty-odd wide-ruled pages. Of course you are free to use as many of these little blue books as you need to complete the answers, but unless I write very large I have a hard time filling even one of them in the three-hour exam period.

Looking back on that morning as I hung over the abyss, I wondered why I ever thought that the exam was a problem. Hindsight and something to compare the experience to has given me a remarkable perspective. Actually the exam wasn't all that bad - aside from the lack of time to properly answer each question - until I reached the last question;

10) Discuss the role of Wild Magic in the decline of the Catholic Church at the end of the Middle Ages.

It was the second worst exam question I have ever encountered. I didn't recall that subject ever coming up in class. It wasn't in the text either. This was a hot subject in academic circles and I had no idea of where Dr. Morrison stood. Oh well, when in doubt go with your own opinion and give lots of examples defending it.

As the Middle Ages came to a close, scholars began to question the physical laws of magic as they had been postulated by the ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. It was discovered through controlled experimentation that many forms of magic once thought of as Wild actually did conform to predictable laws. True Wild Magic conforms to no laws and can not be used safely. A Wild Magic spell will do anything and will rarely produce the same results twice. At one time it was thought that all Wild Magic might one day be predictable, that the laws surrounding it were just so hopelessly complex that we did not yet have the ability to predict it.

However, with the introduction of modern computers, we now know that truly Wild

Magic is so full of indeterminate variables and strange attractors that even the most thorough studies can not produce accurate predictions at any reasonable power level.

The discovery of many new forms of controllable magic led to the belief that all Wild forms were ultimately controllable. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The first Wild Magic disaster of that period occurred at Bosworth Field in 1485. The Plantagenet wizards, in desperation, employed a Wild Magic spell they expected to be explosive. Instead, it caused Richard III's army to lose its morale. A series of Lancastrian charges soon won the day for Henry VII. Years later his son Henry VIII broke with the Church.

The Inquisition was also responsible for many misuses of Wild Magic. At the height of its power, inquisitors openly and publicly tortured their victims with Wild Magic experiments. The practice, considered vile by many, caused the Church to lose the tacit support of the masses, the source of its power, which in turn paved the way for Martin Luther and the Protestant movement.

Wild Magic tends to collect in certain places. It has an affinity for abandoned human habitations, which didn't apply to this question, but it also calls to its own so that it has been noted that in an area in which a lot of Wild Magic has been used, many otherwise safe and controlled spells have a tendency to go Wild if proper precautions are not taken.

I went on that way for as many pages as I could fill before time ran out, trying to somehow weave all these facts together to support my answer.

By the way, the worst exam question I ever encountered was in a survey of history class I had the previous semester. The professor had been an avid supporter of the scientific parallel worlds theory. That theory proposes that there is another universe in which science, not magic, is the basis for technology. His question was "Postulate the conditions under which a scientific universe could produce an identical line of history to our own world." Science is a notion that was abandoned long ago when it was proved that all alleged cases were merely unexplained instances of magic - only a few romantics and the uneducated truly believe in it. Even if there were a universe where science worked, I feel the odds are infinitely against a parallel history. However, since the professor believed such a thing was possible, I gave it my best shot and started postulating all sorts of complex conditions under which an identical line of history could be produced. I found out later that the answer was quite simple; an identical history will be produced if all comparable events starting with the creation are identical. Such a possibility is an infinity of the second or third order, so I had a hard time believing in such a situation. Fortunately it was only for extra credit.

Finals are always draining and I meandered away with all the emotional response of your average zombie. My flight out wasn't for another few hours, maybe I should go back to the dorm and take a nap.

"Hey, Marcus!" I heard a voice call. "Wait up."

Coming up fast behind me was a blond-haired, gray-eyed beauty with a literata's store of knowledge and an ingénue's smile. Rona d'Crecy, my fiancée, and I had been seeing each other for the better part of the last three years. We were also going to be working together this summer.

"Hi, Rona," I said, still feeling the emotional drain. "Killer test, huh?"

"It wasn't that bad," she replied.

"Oh no? What about that last question? She never covered that anywhere."

"Well, that's true," Rona agreed. "But everyone knows she puts that question in the finals every semester. Just answer from the point of view of historical inevitability and that Wild Magic had no real effect on history, that history would have turned out the same regardless and you're home free."

"Oh shit!" I groaned. "I didn't know that. I answered from a causalist perspective."

"Oops," she said dryly. "Don't sweat it, dear. I don't recall hearing that Doctor Morrison has ever flunked someone for disagreeing with her, yet."

"My mother will kill me."

"Hey relax! It was a joke, and if I'm wrong, well by the time your Mom finds out we'll both be in Israel. You all packed?"

"Nearly," I replied. "Still have to pack my toothbrush and a few books, but otherwise I'm ready. You?"

"Oh, I'm all packed. My flight home's in an hour and a half. In fact, I just have time for a cup of coffee before I leave. That's a hint, Marcus."

"Coffee?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

The cafeteria in the Student Union had seen better days. Pale yellow paint was peeling off those parts of the walls and the four tall columns that held up the ceiling that weren't covered with flyers, handbills and posters. Several of the tiles on the floor had broken up and been removed revealing an ancient ballroom floor. The tables were a study in early Formica and don't get me started on the chairs.

By themselves, the coffee that was served there was suitable for cleaning the tables and retiling the floor and the honey-dipped donuts could have been tapped as a new and endless supply of oil. However when they were combined they underwent some form of culinary synergism and actually became palatable.

Rona and I sat fairly near the center of the room talking through the coffee and donuts. Where I was an anthropology major, she was pre-law. Her interest in archaeology developed after she met me. This summer would be her first dig. A lot of people never get past that first dig; it's a love-or-hate sort of job. Very few people walk away at the end of the season with an indifferent attitude. I hoped that she'd come to enjoy archaeology in the field as much as I did. In return I had let her drag me into ballroom dancing. It seemed like a fair exchange.

We spoke of the dig this summer and we spoke of love and of when we'd get married after graduation. We went over our list of things to pack for the expedition and added a few last minute items. Then finally we went back to her dorm room and I helped carry her bags to the bus stop.

"I'm going to miss you, Marcus. It's a good thing I'll be seeing you in a week." We kissed quickly as the bus rolled up and then she grabbed her bags and got on.

"See you at Kennedy!" I told her.

"I love you!" she shouted back through an open window as the bus started moving again.

"I love you too!" I replied. It's questionable whether she heard. I stood there until the bus had been out of sight for several minutes.

Two

"Your name is Marcus Postumus Steele?" a Israeli customs officer asked as a matter of course. I told him I was and in response to other questions I also told him that I was here as an archaeological volunteer, that I would be receiving no compensation other than room and board for my services, that I had nothing to declare, and that the three pointing

trowels in my suitcase were not some strange, new, American gang weapon, even if one of them had been sharpened. That threatened to hold me up but after a half hour of my patient explanations, an older customs officer in the next line said that he'd seen archaeologists bring hundreds of the things into the country every year about this time of year and so I found myself free at last to wander around Lod Airport.

"Marcus!" I heard Rona's voice call out. "Over here!" Well, maybe I wasn't so helpless after all. She actually knew some Hebrew. I was still thumbing through my phrase book just to find that humus is called humus here. Fortunately, she was directly in my line of travel, since I didn't have much choice but to go with the heavy flow of traffic. "It's about time you got through customs," she said when I finally reached her. "What was the big hold-up?"

I thought about the trowels and decided it was too long a story and merely grumbled, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh, come off it. They went through my luggage too. What's the big deal?" I looked about for the exit instead of answering so she continued, "I hope you remembered to bring that trowel you promised for me." Grr! "Oh look! There's our contact just outside."

Through the large plate glass windows I could see a young woman with short black hair holding up a cardboard sign with the initials A. S. O. R. - American Schools of Oriental Research, the sponsor of our expedition - on it. We introduced ourselves when we finally got to where she was.

"Oh good," she said. "You're the last ones in. By the way, I'm Naomi. Naomi Cohen. I'm Dr. Trahan's assistant. My car is this way." She turned to lead us and we were about halfway to the parking lot when our world was suddenly torn apart by the sound of automatic weapons fire and breaking glass in the terminal we had just left. "Down!" Naomi shouted as she turned and pushed us to the pavement before we could react. I was face up to the sky and could see that while most people had likewise hit the ground a few were running around in a panic. Several of them stepped on us on their way past. The screaming seemed to last forever, with the occasional punctuation of gun shots. The shooting stopped finally as I heard a motor vehicle I barely had the time to see speed away. I think it was a jeep or a related sort of vehicle, but my attention was elsewhere; my eyes were locked on the look of pure hate that I saw on the face of one of the terrorists. He had black curly hair, a full mustache and very long sideburns that covered most of his cheeks. I only saw him for a moment or two, then he and his accomplices were gone. My watch informed me that the entire incident lasted just over a minute. The multiple sounds of sirens approached, and the crying and the screams continued.

"Do either of you two have any experience as paramedics?" Naomi asked as she let us up. In shock we both shook our heads. "Me neither."

"I had some first aid training back when I was a Boy Scout," I offered.

"Any real world practice in the last five years?" Naomi asked pointedly. I admitted that I hadn't. "The airport medics are already at work and they have plenty of experience. We'll have to wait for the authorities to question us now. Let's find a place out of the medics' way." The other people around us were getting to their feet too. Many of them were inspecting the damaged plate glass and the more morbid among them were undoubtedly staring at the wounded. I always wonder why anyone would want to do that; my first reaction is to turn away. It was my second reaction to try and help, but I was just as glad that I wouldn't be needed to dredge up my old Boy Scout first aid healing magic.

It took two hours for an officer of the Israeli army to get around to us. I did my best to describe the face I saw, but the end result sounded like a generic Semite. I hadn't really caught the face in my memory, just the expression. Finally we were released and made our way to the parking lot.

Naomi's car turned out to be an aging Land Rover that had been repainted several times over. In its current incarnation it was a dirty sky blue with desert tan seats. Naomi evidently liked her comfort, as the seats were newly upholstered and better padded than I ever remembered finding in an all-terrain vehicle.

The expedition was to start out from the Albright Institute in Jerusalem, A.S.O.R.'s center in Israel. The ride from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was considerably longer than our map suggested it should be, but the roads in Israel are very much dependant on the terrain. Very often the fastest route from one point to another involves driving first to the coastal plain, taking the coastal highway and then cutting back inland. And I thought New England was the land of "You can't get there from here."

"There's been a rash of terrorism over the last couple of weeks," Naomi told us in answer to our repeated questions as we left Lod Airport. "I'm afraid that we're in for the proverbial long hot summer this year. The PLO is upset about the plan to begin construction on the new Temple next year. They've even been hinting that they have a W bomb somewhere." We all shuddered at that thought. The last W bombs that were used in warfare were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We all grew up during the Cold War when each day seemed that we could easily start World War III in which W bombs would be the primary weapon. Nobody in their right mind would want to live to see the effects of a W bomb; lingering deaths, strange mutations, and recurring horrors for years.

"I think I'd better warn you," Naomi continued, seeing that our reaction to Wild Magic was similar to her own, "That our site is out in the Wild. When you use magic there, do it carefully and only when absolutely necessary. The most minor variation of a common household spell can turn Wild on you." She saw we were getting uneasy and went on, "Never been in the Wild before?"

"Never," Rona answered.

"I was once before," I told Naomi. "It was an abandoned village in North Yorkshire. It was more a battle of nerves than anything else, but the Wild areas of the Negev are reputed to be worse."

"Oh it's not too bad," Naomi admitted. "Just use some common sense. If you smoke, try lighting up at a fireplace or stove rather than using an ignition spell. Our supplies are being kept in old-fashioned, non-magic containers. Preservation could be a problem, but it's the dry season now so the biggest problem is that you may have to learn to drink your beer warm. There are a few unproofed spells we have to use on site, but we schedule their use. It works out."

"That's actually fairly common in archaeology," I agreed as much to show my experience as to reassure Rona.

"True enough," Naomi smiled. "Especially at sites in abandoned areas. For some reason Wild Magic has an affinity for former population centers. Perhaps someday we'll understand why, and if we do, maybe we'll learn to control it. Then again, maybe not." She went on to describe what our daily routine would be on site as we drove to Jerusalem.

I have been told that Jerusalem is an only slightly modernized version of a failed ancient Roman attempt at urban renewal. After the Judean rebellion was put down, Rome decided to rebuild Jerusalem along the classic Roman lines. The Romans, being the stubborn sorts that they were, didn't let minor considerations like steep hills and wadi canyons get in their way. On the whole, you sort of have to admire that kind of determination. Anyone else would have bowed to the natural forces of nature that shaped that part of the world, but the Romans thought in terms of straight lines and quartered cities; thus we have Jerusalem, a city revered by three out of five major religions. Go figure.

We didn't really have the time to see any more of the city than we actually drove

through as it was late afternoon by the time we reached the Albright Institute, where we met several other American students who had been waiting for one or two days for us to arrive, had dinner and were given an orientation lecture.

We would be opening a new site at Tell el Ahvram about fifty-five miles south of Jerusalem. Preliminary surveys suggest that we had a good chance of finding an Iron Age city and three or more levels of Bronze Age occupation, and that was just based on surface finds in the area. It was likewise possible that the site might yield far less than expected, or be far larger than we dared hope. That is the exciting part of archaeology. Surface surveys, infrared photography, and divination can only reveal so much. You don't truly know what's there until you find it and no matter how much you know, how much you plan, there are always surprises.

The lecture eventually degenerated into a bull session during which we enjoyed the last magically chilled beer we'd be seeing for a while. Naomi disappeared for a few minutes and then returned with a stack of paperback books.

"I nearly forgot," she said passing them out. "Dr. Trahan insists that every member of the expedition have one of these and keeps it with him at all times."

"Gray's Survival Guide?" a tall, blond student said with a heavy Southern accent. "Isn't that rather unusual?"

"Yes, Greg, it is," Naomi replied. "But that's the way Dr. Trahan wants it. Ten years ago, when he was in your position, a student volunteer, he had a copy of this with him on a dig in Egypt. A sandstorm blew up without warning and he was trapped at the remote site he was working. He claims that this book saved his life. Ever since he has made sure that everyone under him has one. Keep it with you at all times. He will occasionally ask to see it. It won't do you any harm. I've read more boring stuff, and you might even enjoy it. Besides, for those of you who are magic-dependant, it contains a number of certified anti-Wild spells. Absolutely no chance of invoking Wild Magic.

"And now, friends, you can stay up all night if you wish, but it's going to be a long day tomorrow, and I, for one, am going to cop a few zees. Good night."

Rona and I had a long day ourselves and were feeling the effects of jet lag, but when none of the others made a move we felt we ought to stay a little longer and get to know the people we'd be working with.

"Gray's Survival Manual," Greg said with some disgust.

"Oh, come on Greg," Marla, a student from Ohio State, admonished him. "It's not such a bad idea. We will be out in the Wild, you know."

"Oh, I suppose the idea is just fine," he replied, "but I've been on survival trips before and I much prefer Hoffman's to Gray's. It relies on a totally non-magic survival method, which is really much safer, especially since you'd have to be a full Ph.D. wizard to use many of Gray's so called 'anti-wild' spells. Anyone here major in any of the physical magics or are we all social magicians?"

"I'm minoring in general phys. mag," I offered, "but that's only twenty-seven hours out of a hundred twenty."

"That beats me," Greg admitted. "I went for music. Anyone else?" There were a few mutters but we were all majoring in Anthropology or Archaeology and I was the only one with a general minor.

"This seems like a very small expedition," I pointed out. "Are there many others?"

"Oh yes," Greg told me. "We're the third and last load of students to arrive and quite a few are making it down to the site on their own. Sightseeing I guess."

"Rona and I have set aside two weeks at the end of the season for that," I said.

"Me too. I figure by the end of the season I'll want about a solid day in a bath tub and then I'll take the grand tour of Solomonic cities."

"Sounds good." I would have said more but I was interrupted by Rona's snore. I excused myself and gently escorted Rona back to her room. We had planned to sleep together, but I was only slightly more awake than she was. Tonight was definitely not the night.

The next day we all piled into a pair of Land Rovers and headed on out to join the rest of the expedition. We spent the first half of the day driving to within twenty miles of Tell el Ahvram along mostly paved roads. It shouldn't have taken even that long, but we were held up for over an hour at an army roadblock. An Israeli soldier informed us that there was a riot going on in a Palestinian town up ahead. Eventually we were given detour directions and allowed to proceed. The other half of the day was spent proving the worth of a Land Rover.

Many archaeological sites are in the middle of current population centers. I have worked in the middle of a major metropolis with horns, sirens, and various other big city noises going on all around me. At the end of the day I went home by public transportation to the apartment I shared with three other excavators. Other sites are in abandoned towns and cities. They vary in accessibility according to where the modern world has decided to put roads. That village site I worked in North Yorkshire was a mere half-mile off the nearest official road and accessible by car via an abandoned railroad track, although walking on to the site was no great hardship. That, aside from a couple of contract archaeological jobs my advisor brought me on during spring breaks, was the sum total of my field experience.

We arrived on site an hour before sunset and were instructed to find space in the available tents near the base of the tell, a large hill composed of the earth and debris of previous human occupation. Our expedition site headquarters consisted of a motley collection of canvas tents. Most were quite small, having room in them for anywhere from two to five people - Rona and I picked one of the two-person tents - but there was a medium-sized tent that Dr. Trahan, the chief archaeologist and expedition coordinator, used as both an office and living quarters. There was also a much larger tent that served as site headquarters. Inside there were several long tables at one end that were used for sorting artifacts. A similar-sized tent was used as the mess hall and conference area, although when conditions were pleasant we often ate and met outside, especially in the early evening.

After we were settled in, Naomi rounded us up and herded us toward the mess tent. There we met Dr. Trahan and the other supervisors and excavators. Dr. Trahan gave us another orientation lecture that was similar to the one Naomi had given us the night before, but also went on to update us on the last week's activity that Naomi had missed out on.

No actual excavations had started yet, but the people who had been here had built a path to the top of the tell that would make going to and from work twice a day easy. Well, not easy, actually, but at least we wouldn't need pitons to scale the north face anymore - I think he was joking when he said that. Now we had a long switch-back path up the steep slope. Also the individual site supervisors and the volunteers who arrived early had marked off the sections of the area of the tell where we would be digging.

The next morning we were given our initial assignments. Rona, because she had no previous field experience, was put to work in the main trench. I had hoped that we might be able to work together, but because of my seasons in the field and my studies in general magic practice, Dr. Trahan chose me to work directly with him on any number of site-related projects.

Actually that meant that at least half the time I'd be working in the trench or where ever else an extra body was needed, but the rest of the time I'd have a chance to learn some of

the other specialized chores on the site.

The first day he showed me how to cast an infrared photography spell, so my assignment for the first week was to spend the days working with Naomi in the sorting tent and then in the early evening before I had dinner I went out with the Doc to complete an infrared survey of the site. I had done photography before but this infrared spell was fairly tough. It took me a few attempts to get it down right, but being anti-Wild there was no chance of danger if I cast it badly.

"So, how went your first day?" I asked Rona in our tent after dinner.

"Now I know what they mean by 'working in the trenches'," she replied. "My knees are sore, my arms are sore, and I'm starting to stiffen up."

"Want a back rub?"

"Oh, yes. That would be nice. I really need a good massage." She rolled on to her stomach and I started the massage. "About the only good thing all day," she went on, "was my supervisor."

"Who's in charge in the trench?"

"The Israeli grad student, Chayim, Chayim Yosef."

"I don't think I've met him yet."

"He's very nice. Oh, don't stop. That's wonderful. He's the handsome one with the curly black hair, the dark, dark eyes, and the bright smile. I was the only one in the trench who'd never been on a dig before and he took the time to show me how to use my trowel."

"Find anything?"

"Nothing much. We just finished removing the last of the sod. Well, I guess you could call it sod, it was a top layer with some sparse plant-life growing in it. Anyway, we scraped down to the top of the first discernable stratum, which we start on in the morning. There were a few odd finds, mostly either small potsherds or modern artifacts. Gail, the girl next to me, found a bullet, about .45 caliber, Chayim said. Probably shot during one of the wars this century. That was sort of amazing. There that bullet was, just sitting there on top of that whole big hill, and we just happen to find it."

"Just think of all the things we'll miss, because we're digging in the wrong spot or that will get overlooked as you trowel down."

"But we found all those tiny sherds," she protested. "How could we have missed anything?"

"Oh, we miss things all the time," I told her. "Wait a week and then check out the dirt pile where you're putting what you scrape out of the trench. Last year when I was digging in England, one guy found a silver Roman coin that way and I found some medieval pot-sherds that were rendered archaeologically useless because we didn't know where they came from. And if we can find artifacts on the pile, just imagine what must be there that we don't find."

"However, with care we only lose the little, randomly scattered things. The big stuff, like temples and pyramids, are a little harder to miss." I grinned at her and she grinned back.

Plans are usually apt to change on a moment's notice and this expedition was no exception. On the second day of full activity, many of the student volunteers were too stiff and sore to get down on their hands and knees and scrape at the dirt in the trench, so I and many of the students who had been in the sorting tent on the first day were out in the trench on the second. Either it was my massage or she was just a bit tougher than some of the others, but Rona was one of the few back in the trench.

We didn't exactly work together, however. I was on one side and she was nearly forty feet away. Chayim, the site supervisor showed each of us in turn, just how deep to dig on the first layer and gave each of us a collection pan for the random finds in the grid section we were working. I noticed that he spent considerably more time with Rona than with any of the others, draping his arm familiarly across her shoulders and speaking with his face very close to hers. That he should be attracted to her was no surprise to me, although I felt no small amount of anger at the liberties he was taking. What hurt, however, was that fact that Rona, far from objecting to this treatment, was enjoying it and, indeed, encouraging it. I felt hot stabs of jealousy pulse through me and had to force myself not to watch as he continued to work with her. I've never been known for keeping my feelings to myself, but I was very shocked by Rona's delight in the way he handled her. This was not like the girl I'd met a few years ago, and not at all what I would have expected from my fiancée. I really thought I knew her by now.

When he wasn't near Rona, I occasionally looked closely at Chayim. I could have sworn I'd seen him before, but I just couldn't place it. He was classically Semitic in appearance. Maybe that was it - I'd known several people who would answer his general physical description.

I didn't trust myself to speak during the breaks but I did bring it up in our tent that night.

"Really, honey," she tried to reassure me, "it's nothing. It's just his way. Besides he's cute and he's really helping me."

"Nothing? He was practically feeling you up in front of everyone."

"Marcus, you're jealous!"

"Damn right I'm jealous. Darling, we're engaged. We're getting married next summer. He's liable to think you're leading him on."

"Marcus," she said coldly, "we may be engaged, but you do not own me. There is nothing going on between Chayim and me so you have no reason to be jealous. It's just a harmless flirtation, nothing more."

"But," I started.

"No, Marcus," she cut me off. "That's the way it is. If you don't trust me, then you can find some other place to sleep." That shut me up, not because of the threat, but because the whole reaction was so completely unlike any I'd ever observed in Rona before. Who was this person I found myself in bed with? I pondered this in silence for some long minutes, until Rona turned around to face me taking me in her arms to give me a long passionate kiss.

It was as if our conversation of a few minutes earlier never happened, and that was even more confusing than any of the rest. Rona was not the sort to flirt so outrageously, but I had also never seen her moods swing so rapidly. We'd had fights before and had never made up so soon after. As if sensing that my mind wasn't on what we were doing, Rona increased her efforts and my thoughts soon turned to more physical matters, putting aside the problem for the night at least.

The next day I was back in the sorting tent by day and in the field with Doc Trahan in the late afternoon. By the end of the first week, the infrared survey of the greater site paid off by revealing the location of a Bronze Age necropolis. My reward, of course, was to be handed a shovel and to spend alternate days the next week opening graves. On the other days I worked with our expedition cartographer, surveying the entire site.

Rona's odd behavior continued and, if anything, got worse. We fought once more that first week and three times during the second. She was becoming gradually cooler with me, and I noticed that she began following Chayim around with her eyes during dinners and early

evenings. It seemed as though he was her god and that she adored him. That hurt and when I openly questioned her behavior, we would fight.

The final fight came at the end of the second week after I had seen her playing up to Chayim, rubbing up against him like a friendly cat in heat. His reaction seemed to be mere amused tolerance and the more indifferent he seemed to her advances, the harder she tried. She threw her engagement ring back at me as she stormed out of our tent with one of her bags in tow.

I suppose I should have brought her other bag to the tent she moved into, but I kept it there hoping she'd come back. The ring I kept on top of the wooden box I used as a bed stand right next to a small wind-up clock.

Three

The third week at Tell el Ahvram found me continuing to open graves and mapping the site, but of the actual details I can't really say. My working hours passed by in a gray fog. I went through the motions but I couldn't keep my mind off of Rona, her strange behavior, and the hope that we could get back together.

One of the girls on the site tried getting friendly with me when it became clear that I was available, but I politely - at least I think it was politely - shook her off. Rona was the only one I was interested in and she was trying out for the part of sex slave for Chayim, who had started to pay attention to her again. I think I hit the depths of my depression the night he led Rona to his tent. After that I just got angry.

The next day, I was recovering when I opened a cyst grave. Because of the narrow, vertical shaft, it was pretty much a one-man operation to dig out the loose fill down to the stone that sealed the burial chamber or cyst. Sometimes these graves may have a single central chamber from which three or four smaller individual burial chambers were connected, but so far the ones we'd found here were single small chambers that had been cut into the bedrock. This one contained, along with the expected skeleton and assorted grave goods, an excellent example of a Middle Bronze Age duck-billed axe. It was a delicate, finely made piece that still showed its quality even after over twenty-five hundred years of corrosion. I imagined the axe head hafted on an oval shaft being wielded by the warrior whose remains lay before me. I imagined him screaming as he scampered over the debris of a fortification wall and planted the axe firmly in the head of Chayim Yosef. I smiled then for the first time in several days. It was a start anyway.

From that point on I started taking an interest in the world around me again. Rona was still on my mind, but I was able to enjoy my work and to pull my own weight around the site. Dr. Trahan moved me off of cartography and taught me an anti-Wild photography spell. It was similar to the infrared spell, but used the visible spectrum rather than heat to make its images. So for the next week he and I were all over the site making a photographic record of the site just before mid-season.

I looked for Rona when I photographed the main trench and found her somewhere in the middle, but she wouldn't talk to me and even pointedly ignored my presence when I persisted in trying to talk to her. Then I noticed that she had several bruises on her left arm.

"What's this?" I asked. "Bruises? How did you bruise your arm?"

"I fell down," she said defensively.

"I see five bruises on that arm. Did you fall down several times? You would have had to to get bruises like those."

"I fell down," she repeated stubbornly.

"Yeah. Right," I said unconvinced.

Through it all, Chayim was sitting off to the side laughing at me. The next day she was sporting a shiner on her right eye and similarly refused to talk about it.

Over the first three weeks of the dig we had been very much isolated from the rest of the world. The only contacts we had were the weekly trips into town for supplies. On the fourth such trip Naomi and I were sent. It was good to get off the site for a while, to just sit back and watch the countryside go by.

The incidents of terrorism hadn't subsided over the last few weeks by any means. In fact, we had to stop at several military checkpoints on the way into town and back. Late that afternoon, at the last stop before we turned off the road we were held up for over an hour.

"Sorry, folks," the soldier apologized. "Some terrorists up ahead have been shooting at cars. We'll have to hold you here until they're cleared out."

We waited until the sun was hanging just over the horizon.

"All right," an officer told us. "You may go ahead but be careful, some of them got away by running into the desert."

"Terrific," Naomi said disgustedly, "That's where we're headed. I don't suppose you could assign an escort to get us back to Tell el Ahvram safely."

"I'm sorry. We're under orders to keep this road clear, but we will escort you to your turn and we'll call ahead to your boss to let him know when to expect you. I'll even go so far as to come looking for you if you don't call in within an hour of your expected arrival, but that's the best I can do."

"Well, I suppose it will have to be enough," Naomi replied.

I would say that the trip through the desert was uneventful, but that wouldn't be quite accurate. Because of the delay half of the off-the-road route was in the dark. The moon wasn't up yet and the only illumination in the desert for us to travel by was contained within the beams from the Land Rover's headlights and the stars. Such light can be deceptive in the wilderness. We were following a rough trace through the desert that disappeared occasionally. In the daytime we could use visible landmarks to stay on the path. At night we needed to use the high beams and the side-mounted searchlight. A small dip in our path could well look like a deep crevice or a wadi, and if we strayed from the path just the opposite could be true. Several times Naomi stopped and I had to go out on foot to inspect the land. We only strayed from the path once, but then we had also managed to go a good half-mile off the track. Getting back to it was a long and tiring trek. The ground was rough so I spent most of an hour on foot with a light scouting the way for Naomi.

"We're going to arrive at the site later than expected," she said when I got back in the vehicle. "Our army friends will probably come looking for us if that happens."

"Well, they'll be in touch with their base," I replied. "They can always be called back. How much longer will this take, do you think?"

"Assuming we don't get lost again? About an hour, I guess."

"I hope we don't. It's getting pretty cold out here. If I'd thought we were going to be this late I'd have brought a jacket with me."

"Same here," Naomi agreed. "I suppose that when we were delayed so long we should have gone back to town and gotten a room for the night, but I didn't think we'd have so much trouble following the path."

"Naomi, what do you know about Chayim?"

"Who?"

"Chayim Yosef. The trench supervisor."

"Oh, him. Not a lot. I'd never heard of him until the day I brought you on site. The trench supervisor was supposed to be an American, but he had to cancel when he broke his leg just before summer break. Doc found him while I was in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem rounding up you students. He's supposedly a native Israeli, he sure acts like a Sabra, arrogant bastard, but I speak better Hebrew than he does. I haven't learned anything else about him since we got here either. He doesn't speak to anyone if he doesn't have to - not to the volunteers or the other supervisors, not even the Doc. Oh he sits with us, but unless someone asks him a direct question, all he does is listen to us and smirk like he's laughing at some inferior life form. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, he seems to have come between my fiancée and me." There didn't seem to be much else to say and Naomi left it at that too.

When we finally rolled into the expedition's camp only the main tent was illuminated.

"That's odd," Naomi said. "It's not all that late. There ought to be a few more lights on than this. Doc must have decided to give one of his impromptu lecture-seminars. Come on we'll get some help to unload for us and call up the army to let them know we're all right." We walked into the main tent and promptly found ourselves facing a pair of automatic fire-ball throwers.

There is a perverse streak in me that I had not previously suspected but it manifested all over the place as I asked, "New staff members, Doc?" Dr. Trahan was sitting on the floor of the tent against the right-hand wall along with most of the rest of the expedition members. Nobody laughed at my joke. Tough room.

Assuming this wasn't some impromptu game of "Simon Says" the guys in the desert camouflage with the guns just had to be the escaped terrorists whose activity on the road had held us up. There were three of them all told, the two facing us and one who kept his gun on our friends.

One of them shouted something at us in Arabic and gestured with his gun that we should join our colleagues. The other countermanded those orders until he had checked to see if we were carrying any concealed weapons. We weren't and we were thrown roughly to the floor with the others. One of the three told us in halting English to keep our mouths shut, backing up his commands by waving the gun under my nose.

I looked about and noticed that there were several people missing, most noticeably Rona and Chayim. Many of the rest of the expedition looked like they had been roughed up a bit before being put here in the main tent. There didn't seem to be much to do but wait.

"Ah! You're back," I heard Chayim's voice in the doorway. Looking up I saw him standing there apparently untouched. The terrorists nodded at him, then he turned to Naomi and me. The perpetual smile was still there but his eyes gave us a look of pure hatred so strong that it seemed to be a tangible force between us. Now I knew why he looked so familiar; he was the terrorist I saw at Lod. That look in his eyes gave him away. What I didn't know was what he was doing here at the dig. "I was beginning to get worried about you two," he said without a trace of sincerity. "All sorts of nasty things can happen to the unaware in the desert at night."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Here's a good case in point."

"Ha ha," he said flatly. "Very funny. Oh don't worry about your ex. I'll be taking very good care of her." He left the tent doing a fair Snidely Whiplash imitation. I didn't think anyone actually laughed like that, but then this whole situation seemed unreal. I tried to keep my mind off Rona, without too much success. However I did work a few things out in my

mind between thoughts of her.

I don't know what they were waiting for, but I figured that this whole episode was going to degenerate into killing the hostages and I decided that if they hadn't thought of that yet, why should I be the one to go putting the notion into their heads. Of course as hostages we were worth more alive than dead. Perhaps they were going to hold us until the Israelis released some of their cohorts. That thought was comforting until I remembered that the army was probably out looking for us as we sat there, and the transceiver in the corner didn't look like it was likely to ever send or receive a message ever again.

I did a few mental calculations as I tried to figure out when the cavalry was going to come over the hill. It took us four hours to make the trip in daylight when we knew where we were going and it took us five hours at night also knowing where we were going. Now the army only had a vague notion of where we were. Tell el Ahvram, I was sure, figured prominently on their maps, but it wasn't certain that they knew our encampment was just to the north of the tell. I sneaked a quick peek at my watch and saw that we'd been back for three hours, so with luck our rescue was only an hour or two away. It was a shame that I had no way to tell anyone else that.

Most of the archaeologists in the tent had fallen asleep when we started hearing motor sounds outside. I looked over at Naomi to see if her thoughts had paralleled my own. She was still awake - probably for the same reasons of anticipation that kept me up - gave me an almost microscopic nod and her right hand made a small gesture that I took to mean "Stay still, don't give it away."

One of our guards looked out through the tent flaps and I got a clear sight of at least two army jeeps pulling into the camp. They started shooting immediately and one of the jeeps went up in a ball of fire.

"Down!" Naomi shouted. It was unnecessary to tell me as I was already on my way down as the first shot went off. The terrorists might have won the encounter except that the two jeeps were only the first of several more vehicles to arrive including a helicopter. It was far more than I would have expected the army to send out after two missing archaeologists, but they must have also been tracking the terrorists and the officer in command told us later that they had expected a problem when they were unable to contact us by our transceiver.

The terrorists made one other really major error as well; their weapons weren't proofed against Wild Magic. This worked in their favor on their initial attack on the expedition. A fireball gun, while dangerous, is not particularly powerful when compared to other forms of magic. A power plant, for example, which provides enough power to keep whole regions lit at night and supplies the energy for many of our daily household gadgets as well, is several magnitudes above a mere gun. But if you put such a plant out here in the Wild, it's more than likely to explode in a fury of randomly directed power. The lucky ones would be those close enough to die instantly.

A gun, on the other hand, uses far less power per shot. It has to since only a set amount of magic can be stored in the chamber, so the manufacturer must design the piece to balance the number of shots per cartridge against the amount of magic power that can be held. Even in the most powerful of hand-held weapons the charge would not be sufficient to light a common house lamp for more than a few minutes. With less power expended, the effects were less random, less apt to turn on them. On the other hand they also had their automatic weapons set on the single shot setting.

In the presence of Wild Magic the terrorists were lucky once and their guns became slightly more powerful. Against a group of unarmed archaeologists, they probably didn't really need to shoot even once. The fact that they killed two students and left six more for dead in that attack was probably more a matter of desire on the part of the terrorists than need.

However when attacked by the army, they switched their guns to automatic which increased the randomness of the Wild Magic effect. The first burst from one of the terrorists' guns had produced the blast that destroyed the jeep and those who were in it. One of the guns produced a shower of daisies, the third worked normally for the first few bursts and I was beginning to think that it alone was Anti-Wild until the man using it was suddenly enveloped in a smoky red sphere. It must have been an exceedingly hostile environment in there because his screams were deafening. They didn't last long, however, because the sphere rapidly contracted in size until it had disappeared, taking the unfortunate victim along with it. Couldn't think of anyone more deserving save one.

The Israeli army came prepared with Anti-Wild weaponry. They only had to worry about their enemies' weapons, not their own. The fight was fairly brief after the first surprise attack of the terrorists. One of them was simply blown away by an Israeli gun after his own only served to call up a brief but intense storm of rain and the other surrendered when his hands and forearms were transformed into talons by a Wild Magic backlash.

In the cold glow of false dawn we hesitantly left the main tent to search for survivors. We found the bodies and survivors that I already mentioned but there was hardly a trace of Rona and Chayim. They had evidently lit out at the first sign of trouble as the Israeli officer told us that the only shots had come from the tent we were in.

That day there was no archaeological work on the site. The wounded were air-lifted out to the nearest hospital. I don't know who took care of the dead as I was given a direct order by Dr. Trahan to get some rest. It wasn't the sort of order I was likely to ignore. Sleep came easily to me that morning. All I had to do was get vaguely horizontal on my cot and close my eyes.

I woke to find the tent stiflingly hot and stuffy and I rose to open the tent flaps. Noticing that it was just past noon, I decided to get up and join the world again. The camp was quiet and I wandered over to the main tent to see if I could find something that might resemble breakfast. Naomi and Greg were just arriving from their own tents when I got there and in the absence of anyone else in the tent, we fixed ourselves a rough sort of breakfast involving coffee, toast, eggs, and canned spaghetti. The breakfast of champions!

After breakfast I went back to my tent. I remembered noticing that the place looked like it had been ransacked, but when I looked at it on my return I decided that I had just let my housekeeping go south for the duration. Well, the duration was over and I started straightening up. That's when I found Rona's diary.

I'm not normally one to go through someone else's diary, especially not someone I love, like Rona, but with her recent behavior and disappearance, I just had to know what had caused her to behave that way. Her diary, I thought, might contain those reasons that she had never expressed to me.

Her first entry on arrival at Tell el Ahvram was innocent enough. It gave her impressions of the site and the work she'd be expected to do. I was beginning to feel guilty about invading her privacy until the second entry. It mentioned her meeting with Chayim and our fight that evening;

I don't understand why Marcus and I fought last night. He was right, I shouldn't have done anything to encourage Chayim, and I certainly shouldn't have allowed him to get so familiar. Why did I do it?

The next entry was a week later;

What's happening to me?

Today I was even worse. I actually told Chayim he could take me to his tent anytime. I don't even like the arrogant bastard. Why do I play up to him? It's as if I can't control myself when he's within sight.

Finally;

That bastard! He's using some sort of spell on me. When I'm with him it makes me behave like some adolescent's wet dream and when I'm with Marcus, I'm Superbitch. I keep trying to tell Marcus, but the more I try, the colder I act toward him. The only place I can even write this down is right here in this diary. When I found I could write it here I tried writing a letter to Marcus, but I just couldn't get myself to write anything. I can only write it here where I know Marcus would never normally look.

I find myself begging Chayim to let me move in with him. I just hope Marcus comes across this diary and against everything I know about him, he decides to read this.

Read this, Marcus, please!

Help me!

Four

I put the diary down on my cot. Her plea for help was the last entry before she left following our final argument. Against all hope, I had read it, but what could I do now? Both she and Chayim had left quite literally without a trace. If the Israeli officer was right and they had taken off on foot, I had no idea of what direction they might have gone in.

My only recourse was to return to the daily routine of the dig until some clue as to where they might be presented itself. It was the middle of the afternoon when I went back to the main tent looking for something to do. Most of the expedition members were understandably in a state of shock. Dr. Trahan was in a corner of the tent talking to several students while others just milled about not knowing what to do.

The only real source of direction at the moment was Naomi who organized the cleaning and resetting up of the sorting area. The terrorists had made a shambles of the sorting operation by indiscriminately turning tables over in order to make a large enough clear area for their hostages. Naomi had started working on it directly after our breakfast and others seeing someone who seemed to know what she was doing, joined in. They were nearly finished now.

Someone had kept a large urn of coffee going all afternoon, although we normally only had fresh coffee in the morning and evenings. I guess that with our upset schedule breakfast had turned into an all day affair.

I helped myself to a mug of coffee and walked over to where Dr. Trahan was talking.

"It's a bit late to start today," he was saying, "but we'll pick up again tomorrow on our regular schedule. I'll supervise in the trench for a few days until one of the grad students I'm expecting arrives next week. Ah, Marcus, just the man I wanted to see. With all that's happened, I'll need you to complete the mid-season photo survey on your own. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure thing, Doc," I told him. It was good to have something to keep my mind off of

Rona. "If you don't mind I'd like to start right in now on the nearer part of the eastern quadrant. I think we have enough light left to get a fair amount done before dark."

"All right," he agreed. "Be careful by the wadi out there. With last night's storm there'll be water flowing in it today and the edge may not be very stable. Perhaps you should take someone with you. We're going to be short handed until next week, but there isn't much going on at the moment."

"I'll go with him," Naomi said, coming over from the sorting area. "I'm finished here and I could use a walk to clear my mind and get a little exercise."

"Good. But remember this is Marcus's assignment. You're just there for company, okay?"

"No problem, Doc," she said cheerfully. "I'm ready if you are, Marcus. Want some help with the gear?" I could handle both bags, but it made the going easier with help so I handed her one of them and we took off for points east.

Photographic spells had become a comforting routine for me and I quickly fell back into that routine. I had chosen this area to get started again in because there hadn't been any work done in the eastern quadrant yet this season and the pictures here were more a matter of being thorough than the recording of work done so far.

Due to the schedule of the academic year we were out in the Negev during the dry season, a particularly stupid time of year to be there. To make matters worse we really did go out in the mid-day sun. Mad dogs, Englishmen, and archaeologists, don't you know.

I never did learn what the name of our local wadi was, but the seasonal stream was no doubt the water source for the ancient city represented by Tell el Ahvram. Normally at this time of year the streambed would have been dry, but the rain the magic storm dumped had not yet finished evaporating, draining off, and being absorbed. There was a slow trickle of water in the wadi and I decided to complete the day's session with a few shots of it.

"Be careful, Marcus," Naomi reminded me as I neared the steep cliff edge. "You know what Doc said about the edge."

"Good point," I agreed. "I'll be careful." I cautiously approached the edge and, after a few close calls that were closer than I would admit to Naomi, found a stable area to take a few pictures from. "There looks to be an easy way down over there," I told Naomi, pointing. "I'd like to get a close up of the plants down there."

"It seems safe enough," Naomi conceded reluctantly.

We carefully climbed down the slope to the slowly drying stream.

"If it rains again," Naomi warned as I started taking pictures, "we would be caught down here in a flash flood."

"True enough. Hopefully it won't rain." When I was finished with the pictures we were a few hundred yards or so upstream. "You want to climb back up where we came down or continue on and hope we find another way up?"

"We could climb here," she replied. "The slope's not so bad and we have at least an hour before sunset. What the hell, let's explore a bit."

We made our way over wet and occasionally slippery rocks and sand and soon came to a spot where the valley was only a few feet deep, although it was very wide.

"Marcus, look over here," Naomi called. I caught up to her and saw what had attracted her attention. There, very clearly in the moist sand between two rocks was the footprint of a man's hiking boot just below the high water mark. Evidently the wadi had risen and lowered before someone had walked through here.

I looked around but there were no others on this side of the wadi, but the person who left this print was heading due south, deeper into the desert. We crossed the stream, getting our feet wet and searched the abundant sand on the southern side. We were another hundred yards upstream when we found more footprints.

"Hmm, two sets. A man and a woman I would guess," Naomi said confirming my own unspoken conclusion.

"It looks like they climbed up here. Let's see if there are any traces on top." The wadi wall here was about five feet high and an easy climb. Once on top we were able to make out a twenty-foot long path of footsteps that continued to head south. The prints faded out as they reached harder ground.

"Looks like we found a trace of them," I said.

"Probably," agreed Naomi. "It's not likely that anyone else would have walked through here since the rain. We're lucky that it did rain, actually, or we might never have found even these. What are you doing?" I had pulled out my copy of the survival guide that Dr. Trahan required us to carry and was flipping through it rapidly.

"Ah ha!" I exclaimed. "I remember an Anti-Wild tracking spell from when I was a Boy Scout. Here it is."

"Why would a Boy Scout need an Anti-Wild spell?"

"When you're camping out in the woods or a desert, there's always the chance that the area might be prone to Wild Magic, so for safety's sake any spell in the Boy Scout manual is Anti-Wild. I guess the theory is that you can use a tracking spell to assist in hunting should you get lost."

"Makes sense."

The spell was easy to cast. I laid one hand on a footprint and used the other one to make the required gestures while I spoke the incantation. Nothing happened. Realizing that I had chose one of Chayim's prints, I tried again with one of Rona's, hoping that my greater affinity with her might add something to the spell's effectiveness. No such luck, the spell failed again.

"He must be covering their tracks with a damping spell," I told Naomi.

"It's going to be dark soon, Marcus. We'd better head back to camp. We can call in the army, they'll be able to do a better job than we could." I was forced to agree.

The army didn't send anyone out until the mid-morning the next day. Colonel Naton was a middle-aged, clean-cut gentleman with graying hair. His specialty was tracking and he came armed with more tracking devices than I'd previously been aware existed. Instead of the primitive, hand-cast spell I'd used, his devices came fully charged with the most highly powered divinatory spells available to this purpose.

Dr. Trahan had me show him where Naomi and I had discovered the footprints in the wadi and on top of the south cliff. It was on the south edge that he set up his equipment. While he did that, a helicopter was doing aerial reconnaissance, both by eye, the colonel assured me, and with devices similar to his. I was impressed by the competent, business-like manner in which he did his job, setting each device in turn, making a few notations and then going on to the next. However, I was also insulted by his dictatorial manner - I was ordered to stand aside and wait for him to finish so I could help carry the gear back.

By the end of the afternoon all his devices and experience had achieved the same results that my simple survival spell had given me. Zilch.

"The man's a real pro," Colonel Naton conceded later, talking to Doc, "or very lucky. I

suspect that he was either a first rank wizard - although the odds of someone attaining the level of mastery necessary to defeat this equipment without being registered or at least noticed are very low - or he was using a low-level spell that wasn't Anti-Wild and got results far in excess of the power applied." That's the usual result of using an unproofed low-power spell in the Wild, and that is what makes the use of Wild Magic so tempting and dangerous. Just a little more power to make what you want easier, until you try something just over the edge or the odds run out on you and zap! You're a lizard!

"Well, I'm not likely to find anything else out here," the colonel said. "Maybe the aerial readings will find something." Before leaving he agreed to call Doc to let him know the results of the search. Doc, in turn, agreed to tell me as soon as he found out.

There wasn't much else for me to do while waiting so I immersed myself in my work. The next day I concluded the mid-season photographic survey of the site at around two in the afternoon. Normally, I might have taken the rest of the day off, but I soon found myself fidgeting and looking for something else to occupy both mind and hands and finally finished off the day at the sorting tables.

The trench had so far revealed a Roman-period city and what we thought would turn out to be a small town from the Hellenistic era. So far, all we had from those cities were some walls, potsherds and a couple of bronze coins, but Doc was elated saying that even these small finds would guarantee funding for the expedition next year. He was already planning the expanded operation that funding would afford him. A stratigraphy pit had also been dug and the finds from it suggested that a large settlement had existed here in the Middle through Late Bronze Age. That potential combined with the publicity from the incident with the terrorists, as horrible as it was, would produce more revenue than Doc would know what to do with. Even the worst experiences can yield some good.

Colonel Naton called the site that night and left a message. It was brief and to the point, "Sorry, Dr. Trahan, but the trail was insufficiently distinct for our instruments to follow."

One basic principal I had learned at school in all the classes I took was that for every spell, there is, theoretically at least, a counter-spell. Chayim had used a spell that countered all the forms of tracking we had tried, but somewhere there had to be a way to counter his spell too.

A direct counter-spell requires that the caster knows exactly what spell he is countering. If Colonel Naton, who made a specialty of tracking, couldn't find a direct counter, it was quite possible that Chayim had employed an unproofed spell, thereby getting random results in the Wild, which are virtually impossible to unravel.

What was needed was an indirect counter - one that would reveal the path without necessarily undoing the spell Chayim had used. From my studies, I knew several spells that had a chance of working, but none of them were Anti-Wild. Such spells are rarely needed in an academic environment and are not usually dealt with until the senior year or even in grad school and only then in a field in which such knowledge is necessary.

Having no other recourse, I started studying the survival guide. I was starting to doze off when my mind made an intuitive leap from rote magic to the creative variety. The survival guide was a fairly basic manual. It had to be since the average person has little or no training in magic being more dependant on modern day devices in which the spells have been pre-cast. None of the magic contained within was particularly tough, in spite of what Greg's opinion might have been, although some of them were very precise and therefore tricky to get right. However it was that quality that gave me what little faith I actually had in them. The less precise a spell is, the more prone it is to Wild Magic infection.

As I started to fall asleep my mind continued to consider the last spell I had read in the book. It was meant to be a protective ward, warning the user of the approach of hostile magic. I was half dreaming when I realized that hostility can be a relative term. I was wide

awake in an instant. Could Chayim's damping spell be considered hostile to anyone trying to follow him? It was worth a try.

The next day was my weekly day off. Some of the people on site would go into town on their days off or do a little sight seeing. So far, I had just hung around the camp and usually ended up working either in the trench or the sorting tent. This time, however, I filled up a large canteen with water and packed some clothes for night time use and as much food as I could legitimately take for both breakfast and lunch, and while no one was watching, I slipped a little more in along with a few cans of beer. Then I threw my pack over my shoulders, grabbed a walking stick and struck off for the wadi where the footprints had been, and hopefully still were.

The wadi was dry again and I had difficulty finding the prints, but after an hour I found the ones on the south side half filled with wind-blown sand. Climbing up, I could barely make out the prints at the top but I did find them.

The sun was only about midway up in the sky and the temperature was already in the high nineties, with the humidity low enough to be considered at ground level, maybe lower. I was beginning to think I would need a whole tanker truck full of water to get me through the day. I stopped to take a small sip of water while I prepared myself to cast the warding spell.

It worked, sort of. The ward itself was invisible, but wherever Chayim's damping spell worked to keep any tracking spell from detecting a trace of his and Rona's passing, the ground turned ever so slightly gray.

The intelligent thing to do would have been to go back and let the army take care of it. So I'm a little foolish when it comes to Rona. That's just the way it is. By late afternoon I was running low on water and was getting ready to start in on the beer, when I realized that I was approaching another tell.

Tells can be fairly easy to spot. Just look for an incongruous hill in the middle of otherwise level ground. At least that's how I knew that this wasn't just an ordinary hill. If I were in hilly country I might have been fooled.

I estimated that I was at least ten miles away from Tell el Ahvram. I didn't know the name of the tell in front of me, it might not have one anymore and it might never have been excavated, but I put archaeological thoughts aside and went back to following the trail. The trail was difficult to follow. The light gray color wasn't all that different from the desert floor and I had lost and re-found the trail three times so far.

The trail now led me around the tell. I was wrong; strictly speaking this tell had been excavated. On the far side of the mound nearly at ground level the remains of what might have been a stone gateway had been cleared. From what I knew, it seemed a bit small for a city gate and there wasn't enough of it for me to identify the period it was from. Perhaps it was merely the doorway into a house. In any case, there were two stone stumps about six feet apart and a smooth slab of stone on the ground between them formed a stoop. No other excavation was apparent, but this, at least had been cleanly cleared.

My jury-rigged tracking spell caused the entire gateway to go gray, including the air up to about six feet above it. The trail stopped there.

I released my hold on the spell and it faded out as I sat down in front of the gate. I had heard of this, it was some form of magic portal. The trouble is, such portals are not supposed to exist outside of mythology and fairy tales. Well, not quite. Albert Einstein, probably the greatest theoretical wizard of all time, postulated other planes of existence and went further to say that if they did exist, then there was indubitably a way to get to them. However, while he did prove their existence, he never finished work on his Unified Field Theory before he died, which might have given us clues as to how access to another plane might be accomplished.

Now, here was such an access that didn't exist as far as modern magic knew and not only did Chayim know it was here, but he knew how to use it.

For a moment I considered that maybe he had used unproved magic just as his fellow terrorists had and that the portal was an accidental effect, but I soon realized that achieving a random effect that resulted in exactly the escape he needed after a day's walk deeper into the desert when he should have been going the other way was even more improbable than his being an ordinary terrorist.

I spent an hour reading through the survival guide for a safe spell that might open the portal and came up dry. In fact the only magic I knew that might work in this case was a manual toggle spell.

As most people know, modern magic is precast and held until some simple action, like the flipping of a switch activates it. The most common example, of course is a household lamp. Flip the switch up and the light goes on; down and it goes off. You can keep doing that indefinitely as long as your local power plant keeps pumping magic power into your house and until you use up the activation spell that the switch itself activates.

Well, before our ancestors had the new modern technology to build spells into artifacts in mass production, they had to cast such activation spells the old fashioned way, by invocation. The only problem was that the spell isn't Anti-Wild.

The sun was just at the horizon; it would be getting dark and cold soon. Figuring that it was now or never, I swallowed hard and cast the toggle spell.

There was a flash of pinkish-purple light and suddenly the portal, as I had seen it in the tracking spell, now glowed a bright red-violet. From what I saw of my outstretched arms, my skin had gotten a shade of two darker and I felt like I had lost a bit of weight. I fished a small hand mirror out of my pack and saw that my hair had turned from it's normal dark brown to a light brown. After a quick inventory I still had all my accustomed body parts and no new surpluses had appeared. It appeared that I had lucked out this time with an instant tan and diet. The sun-bleached hair didn't look half bad either.

"Well, you've come this far," I thought. "Might as well go all the way." So, I picked up my pack, took one last look around and stepped through the portal.

Five

And stepped through the portal into a world colored in shades of green and brown. It was a far cry from the desert I'd just left. The humidity was up to around seventy percent and I practically felt my body trying to absorb much needed moisture. The temperature was at a temperate level, like a late September day.

To my surprise, I found that I was standing on a very wide tree branch, about three feet wide in fact, with furrowed bark a sort of brownish gray in color. Smaller branches were an almost neutral gray. What I had taken at first glance to be a green sky turned out to be a multitude of pinnate leaves. Looking carefully I could see bits of blue sky behind the leaves, and the sun was clearly at high noon. The branch I was on seemed to go on forever with numerous side branches of various sizes diverging off of it.

I walked outwards for a while along the main branch I had come in on, but felt like I was making no progress at all. After an hour of walking I noticed that the branch was perhaps a few inches thinner and I thought the outer tree might be a little closer. This plant was immense, I realized, but it was not infinite. Far off on another branch I saw a solitary male red deer, a hart, feeding daintily on the buds of the tree. I hadn't realized that this

species could climb trees, but then this was no ordinary tree. The hart looked up and stared at me for a moment, but he must have realized that I was no threat to him and for he soon returned to his browse.

I turned around and started heading for the trunk of the tree, when I realized that I wasn't following a trail. If Chayim and Rona came this way, I hadn't the foggiest notion of which way they had gone. I was about to fire up my makeshift tracking spell when I realized that I was no longer on Earth -trees, even Sequoias, just don't grow this big back home - and if so I might not be in the Wild here. The survival manual had a spell that would detect the background level of Wild Magic.

Well, wherever I was, the place wasn't Wild. As I put the book away it occurred to me that even with my twenty-seven academic hours in general magic, I had cast more manual spells since my arrival at Tell el Ahvram than I had in the last three years previously. Even in lab classes, many of our modern spells have been pre-cast and we had used the talismans that held those spells to do our experiments rather than actually casting the spells ourselves. The reason for that is that manual spells are both hard and dangerous and only graduate students get to employ them on a regular basis.

Once I knew I didn't need to worry about Wild Magic, I started running through my repertoire of tracking spells. When I had tried both of them to no avail, I used the odd-ball one I'd followed Rona with this far. Since it also showed no sign of them, I decided that they must have traveled inward rather than outward on the branch. I walked back inward for a little over an hour and tried again. This time my first and simplest spell was sufficient to pick up the trail.

I thought that Chayim was no longer bothering to cover his trail but after a few minutes the trail suddenly came to an end and nothing I could do would detect which way they went. I continued on for another half hour until I came to a large junction where the branch I was on converged with another, forming a larger branch, heading inward. Well actually the branches were diverging in their outward growth, but as I was headed inward, my perspective was off.

I had been getting very sore and tired, having been walking with as few breaks as possible for the better part of thirteen hours. Now I was almost totally exhausted. I would have stopped sooner but a fear of falling off the tree limb while I slept had kept me going. However the width of the branch at the junction was wider than most beds I had slept in and I decided it was time I got some sleep. My thoughts turned to actions and I was out as soon as I managed to get horizontal.

According to my watch I had been asleep for some fourteen hours. I awoke very stiff and in no small amount of pain. Part of that was, no doubt, due to using a bed of rough tree bark, but I think that most of it was the after effect of the previous day's exercise. Groaning, I sat up and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes.

"It's about time you got up!" I heard a high-pitched voice not unlike one of the Chipmunks say behind me. Turning, I saw the largest squirrel in creation sitting back on its hind legs and looking at me in curiosity. The critter was about the size of a German Shepherd and was gray with dark brown eyes and a reddish tint to its tail. Not seeing any signs of intelligent life I kept looking for whoever had spoken. "Yo, monkey-man! Over here." Wonderful, bloody wonderful! A talking squirrel.

I thought about that and decided that maybe squirrels really are the dominant species in temperate arboreal environments, so I spoke to him like I would any human who had greeted me the way he had, "Who the hell are you and where in Hell am I?"

"Ah! That's more like it. I was beginning to think you'd sleep through the next Ragnarok, or whatever they decide to call it this time. Ratatosk's the name and you're not in Hell, but that could be arranged, trust me. This is Yggdrasill, the great World-tree that supports the universe." Ratatosk paused a moment. "Funny, you don't look like a Viking.

What are you doing on the Norse aspect of this place, anyway?"

"Just following someone else," I replied suspiciously.

"Oh you must be chasing that couple that came through a few days ago. I rather thought someone might be the way the girl was fighting. She sure didn't look too happy to be here, that's for certain."

That at least was good news. Evidently the spell Chayim had cast on Rona had come apart when they changed worlds or planes, or whatever the technical term was. The fact that a spell could not be maintained across two worlds was also potentially useful information. I checked but my instant tan was still there. A shift in worlds doesn't cancel the effects of a spell already completed, just interrupts one that is currently working.

"You know where they went?" I asked. Maybe I shouldn't have shown so much interest, but the news of Rona had taken me by surprise.

"Yeah," the squirrel replied. "I can show you the way. What's in it for me?"

"All the nuts you can eat," I bluffed.

"Right. Look here, bunky. I wasn't born yesterday, you know. Even if that little pack of yours was filled with nuts, it wouldn't be more than a few mouthfuls for me anyway. Besides I am sick to death of nuts. What I wouldn't give for a nice rare steak with a fine wine and maybe a potato or two. Yeah, that's what I want. You got anything like that in your bag of tricks?"

"No. I've got some water, a can or two of beer, and a sandwich."

"Roast beef?" Ratatosk asked hopefully.

"Peanut butter and jelly."

"Hmmp!" The squirrel turned up his nose. "I hate peanut butter and jelly. Let's see what else you have." With that the giant rodent started rummaging through my pack.

"Hey!" I protested. "Get your paws out of there."

"Okay, okay! Sheesh! You don't have anything of value in there anyway. Oh well, I guess I'll get back to work. Have a nice stay, Ape-boy!"

"Wait!"

"Yes?"

"I may not have anything right now, but when I get home I'll buy you the biggest steak you ever saw." Maybe I'd just spring for a side of beef and invite in the neighbors.

"How you gonna get home, hot shot?"

"If there's a way out of my world, there must be a way back in," I guessed. "If I get Rona back, we'll find a way home."

"You humans," the squirrel sighed, shaking his head. "Do you all believe in happy endings? Oh well, maybe it'll be worth helping you for the laughs. Just in case, though, I'll have one of those beers as a down payment. Come on. They went this way." I handed him a can of beer, gathered up my gear and we continued on inward.

It was a longer walk than Ratatosk had implied, but as we went along, his banter became a fascinating travelogue.

"You only came to Yggdrasill in its Norse aspect. We haven't had many visitors here in the last thousand years or so since the Vikings converted to Christianity, but many cultures and religions have an Yggdrasillian analog. Your own Judeo-Christian mythos has the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge." As he said that I found that suddenly we were in a smaller - although it was still very large - tree. "This is the Tree of Knowledge. Your

ancestors ate from this tree before being expelled from the Garden. Sorry, the fruit won't be ripe here for another month and there's nothing worse than sour knowledge. That other tree over there - the one with the flaming sword guarding it - is the Tree of Life. The fruit is always ripe and eating it will confer immortality."

"Any chance of getting over there?" I asked.

"No way, Jose! At least, I'm not allowed to take you there and I might be one of Creation's biggest troublemakers, but even I won't break that law. The quest for the Tree of Life is both dangerous and usually unsuccessful.

"Take the case of King Gilgamesh. He was an Ancient Sumerian monarch who after a whole series of adventures heard about a source of immortality in the form of some herbs that grew at the bottom of the sea. Frankly, I think that old Utnapishtim was pulling Gil's leg, but it was before my time. Maybe the tree was only a bush seven thousand years ago. Certainly by the time the Babylonians came along it was a full fledged tree and stood to one side of the gates of Heaven."

"Did he succeed?"

"Who? Gilgamesh? Nah, and his blood was two-thirds divine, so imagine how much trouble a pure mortal like you would have. Well back to Yggdrasill." Suddenly we were back in the World-tree. "Of course, this is an Ash tree," he continued. "The Scandinavians considered it sacred just as the Celts venerated the Oak, the Germans the Lime tree and in India, the Fig." As he spoke Yggdrasill changed with each reference and finally settled back to the form I had first seen, an Ash. "While you see Yggdrasill as principally an Ash, it is in reality all trees that ever were and ever will be. Here," he reached out to a suddenly appearing branchlet, plucked off a fruit, and tossed it at me, "Have a pomegranate."

"Thanks. Maybe later." I put the fruit in my pack. "Hey, if this is both the Tree of Knowledge and of Life, couldn't this fruit impart both qualities?"

"It could, but it won't. I told you that I can't lead you to the Tree of Life and I certainly can't just toss you one of its fruits. That one is from the Tree of Knowledge only, which you are allowed access to. You didn't think it was that easy, did you?"

"I suppose not. I thought you said this wouldn't be ripe yet."

"No, I said the fruit in that aspect of the Tree wouldn't be ripe yet. There are aspects that exist in every season of the year, so there is always fresh fruit and nuts. Feh! I'd even settle for a Caesar salad. Can't get one of them here either."

"Can you get any other kind of fruit?"

"Yes, any other kind. Help yourself. Just think of what you want."

I did and a branch full of apples appeared to one side of me. I plucked one off and let the rest return to whatever limbo they had come from. Tasting it I discovered that it wasn't the Delicious I had expected but a MacCoun, which I actually prefer. I'd have to keep a rein on my subconscious, however.

"The Christians have also seen this tree," Ratatosk was saying, "as the Cross of Redemption, and Romanesque art adds a labyrinthine aspect to its portrayal. The Jewish tradition portrays the Tree of Life as growing downwards from above, but most cultures used the symbolism of vertical upward growth." He was rambling quite a bit now and I just let him go on in the hopes of getting some eventually useful knowledge. He mostly repeated himself a lot, but every now and then he hit upon some new aspect to talk about.

"And I'm not the only creature living in Yggdrasill," he told me after an hour of discussing how various theologies viewed the great tree. "If you look carefully up there, you'll see the hawk, Vethrfofnir. He usually sits on that branch. When we reach the trunk you'll also be able to see Samuel the Wise, a Bald Eagle."

"Bald Eagle? But if this is the Norse aspect, shouldn't he be a Golden Eagle?"

"Well there used to be a Golden Eagle here but times change and he retired earlier this century and was replaced with an American eagle. Those Americans, they insist on getting a share of everything."

"I saw a deer in one of the outer branches."

"There are four of them, actually. Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr, and Durathror. I sure can't tell them apart - they all look alike to me. Actually, they represent the four winds and aren't truly immortal. I used to think they were, but after serving a while each one is replaced by an identical hart of the same name. I might never have found out, but I caught them stepping out of the office once - a sort of changing of the guard."

"Hey! You with the scales!" Ratatosk suddenly stopped his monologue and started yelling at something way down below in the ground. "You know you're not allowed up here. Get your tail back down to the netherworlds!"

I looked down and instantly regretted it. I'm not particularly bothered by heights but the prospect of falling from those heights leaves me sweating blood. I grabbed on to a nearby branchlet to steady myself. Once I had a good grip and no longer had to worry about falling, I could look down comfortably. There was a large, mottled-brown serpent on the ground that had just crawled up through the surface of this world. It looked up at us and hissed a malicious blast of black fire in our direction. Fortunately we were well out of its range. With a screech the hawk, Vethrfofnir, launched himself from his branch and began to attack the snake below.

"Yeah!" cheered Ratatosk. "Go get him, Vethy! Tear him to shreds. We'll have snake steaks tonight!"

The serpent attempted to fight back but the hawk was too powerful for him and he finally slithered back down into the ground.

"Run! Save your miserable hide, snake." Ratatosk jeered. The snake came back up to hiss at the squirrel but the hawk attacked again and he receded out of sight. "And tell Nithhogg I say his breath stinks!" Ratatosk shouted, getting in one last shot.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"One of Nithhogg's gang. Probably thought he could sneak up here for some of the fruit."

"What's a Nithhogg? Some kind of pig?"

"Only figuratively. Nithhogg is the dragon of Niflheim, a hellish world of cold and fog. He and his gang, some seven in all, feed on the roots of Yggdrasill, at least those that reach Niflheim and the other worlds they can visit. Every once in a while they follow the roots up to the main tree. They prefer the fruit and nuts of the tree to the roots, of course, or maybe they'd like to try some venison, but so far they've never been able to get past the birds. Hawks and eagles kill snakes, you know."

"But they can follow the roots everywhere else?" I asked.

"Well, everywhere the roots go. The Scandinavians believed that there were nine worlds and that Yggdrasill's roots extended to wells in three of them. Niflheim and the well Hvergelmir, where Nithhogg gnaws on the roots, Jotunnheim and the well of Mimir, the source of all knowledge, and Asgard where at the well Urtharbrunn the Norns feed and care for the Tree.

"Actually the situation is far more complex than that. There are many more than nine worlds in the universe and all of them are in some way accessible from the Tree. The Tree, you see is at the precise center of the universe and, in a sense, is the source of all

knowledge, wisdom, and life. It has been said that it germinated on the day that Time itself began and that it will be here at the end of Time as well. And it's not a bad place to catch a few zees. You look exhausted."

"I am. According to my watch, we've been walking with only a few breaks for twenty hours. I didn't think I had it in me to keep going that long. How is it possible?"

"The fruits of Yggdrasill can have certain powers - from healing and extra energy up to eternal life and infinite knowledge. I still don't think that you've reached a stage of development where you can find those last yet."

"But I might, someday?" I said, stopping to rest.

"Anything is possible. Get some sleep. I'll be back later." So I laid down, closed my eyes, and quickly fell asleep.

I don't usually remember my dreams, but I had a particularly vivid one while I slept. I was standing naked in the middle of a great Roman arena armed with nothing but a silver-plated salad fork. Chayim and Rona were sitting in the Imperial seats laughing at me while the members of the Tell el Ahvram expeditions were in the bleachers making bets on whether or not I'd survive. Suddenly a large black dragon erupted from the earthen floor of the arena and spat greasy gout of fire at me.

I woke with a start and found that I had rolled over in my sleep and I was precariously close to the edge of the massive branch. Shaking, I crawled back to the center of my arboreal hardwood bed and fell back to sleep.

I woke sometime later when raindrops started falling on me. Sitting up, I found Ratatosk waiting for me. He tossed me the largest walnut I've ever seen and I was sorely tempted to toss it back at him until I remembered that I had my trowels with me. Using the one I had sharpened for digging through clay, I pried the nut open, getting the dark, staining juices of the outer covering all over my hands. After all the fruit the day before, the nut meat was a welcome change, but I began to sympathize with Ratatosk. A nice rare steak would be good about now. I was not cut out to be a vegetarian. I shared my last beer with him as I put my pack back together.

"What do I do for a drink after this?" I asked as we walked.

"Well you could try a coconut," The squirrel suggested, "or just pick the juicier fruits. If you were going to be here for an extended amount of time, you'd want to put out pans to catch the rain water, but we should have you on your way by tomorrow sometime."

I'd been feeling stiff when I woke but by the time I finished the nut I was feeling much better. I didn't want to throw the empty can on the ground below, but before I could ask Ratatosk what to do with it we heard two sets of screeching birdcalls. Looking down, I saw there were three serpents attempting to get to the Tree.

"That's bloody unusual," Ratatosk muttered. "We don't usually get them on the surface more than once every few years. Something's up down there. This is the fourth intrusion they've made in the past few weeks. I wonder if maybe they're not attacking so much as running away from something. Yeah! Get 'em, Sam! Send those scabies back where they came from." The hawk and the eagle were each occupied with a serpent and Ratatosk grabbed the empty beer can from me and threw it at the third. It grabbed the can in its mouth and swallowed it, but I guess it didn't agree with him. He bellowed and breathed out flames then dove back down into the ground. The birds sent the other two packing soon after that and everything returned to normal for a while.

We continued on to the trunk, which we reached an hour later. The trunk was huge and more than huge. It stood before us like the Wall of China built vertically. The gray bark of the giant ash tree seemed to go up forever.

"It's so big," I said in wonder. "It must be miles thick, How does the Tree support its own weight?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Maybe it stands here as a living testimony to the power of magic. Maybe there are rules to such structures that your people know nothing about. Maybe it just is. How would I know? I'm just a squirrel. Remember?"

"You seem to have been full of answers so far. Why play dumb now?"

Ratatosk looked embarrassed. "Well to tell the truth, I've never really thought about it."

"Oh."

"Well, we go upwards from here," Ratatosk said after a pause. He scampered up the trunk as if he were still walking along the level branch. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Climbing a giant tree trunk isn't as easy for me as it is for you."

"Then don't think of it as a tree. Think of it as a crossroads."

"Say what?"

"Hey, Burford! Wise up. I've already shown you how the Tree can shift its shape and you've been feeding yourself by utilizing that property. What's the problem? Just envision the tree as a great wooden highway."

"A wooden highway?" I asked skeptically.

"Trust me."

I swallowed back my obvious retort and tried his suggestion. As I watched, the tree slowly changed shape. No! Rather the orientation of my viewpoint changed. Instead of standing on a largely horizontal branch springing out from a vertical trunk, I now saw both branch and trunk as horizontal. So with the ground behind me and the sky in front we started on up the tree.

"This is pretty neat. Are you sure that gravity will continue to work sideways like this? I'd hate to find myself suddenly falling down the trunk."

"Not unless you intentionally will it to happen. Yggdrasill is as much a state of mind as anything else."

We walked up the trunk for a couple hours or so until we came up to the level of the third large branch above where we had started. It was still a few miles away, however, and we had to walk around the trunk until we got there. If I thought having the sky directly in front of me was unusually strange that was almost commonplace and unremarkable compared to having the ground to my right and the sky to the left.

"I can't seem to call up any fruit here on the trunk," I complained to the squirrel. "What gives?"

"Fruit grows on the branches, Bucky. You must be a city boy not to know that. Just hang tight, we'll be over on the branch in a few minutes."

Sure enough, once we were back on a branch, I was able to help myself to a couple blood oranges, and a handful of assorted nuts. The nuts were tough to open until I picked up the trick of cracking two nuts in my hand at once. We went on a bit longer until we were intercepted by one of the harts Ratatosk had mentioned.

"Hey, Dainn," the squirrel greeted him, "how's it going?"

"I'm Durathror." the deer replied coldly. "There's trouble down below, Ratatosk."

"No kidding. There's always trouble below. Now tell me something I don't know."

"This is more than the usual situation. Samuel claims that Niflheim has been negotiating with Hell. He feels that these recent attacks by Nithogg's gang have been a

diversion of some sort."

"Hah! Some diversion," Ratatosk laughed derisively. "Who are they trying to divert? So far they haven't sent anything Sam and Vethy couldn't handle two or three times over. And protecting Yggdrasill is their job. You know as well as I do that there are other guards on the Tree's other aspects. If it's a diversion, it's a damned poor one."

"Samuel says that they are trying to step up the pressure on the guardians of the Tree so that they'll have to call on the gods for help. Then when the time is right, they'll move on to their main objective."

"Which is?"

"He doesn't know that, but he's calling a meeting of all the denizens of the Tree in all its aspects tomorrow. Will you have finished guiding this Midgarder by then?"

"I should be."

"Good. If not, Samuel says to bring him with you. We'll be meeting at the Liberty Tree aspect." With that Durathror turned and ran off, probably to continue spreading the word about the upcoming meeting.

"Well, we'll have to keep moving if I'm going to make that damned meeting in time," Ratatosk muttered.

"What's the hurry?" I asked. "We're days behind Chayim and Rona and the trail is cold enough to be coated with dry ice. A day's delay isn't likely to make much difference and this sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"You're wrong there, Marcus," he replied with uncharacteristic compassion. "You have no time to spare. I can't tell you much about this character your chasing but he is most decidedly not human."

"What is he then?"

"Sorry, but I'll keep that to myself for a while longer. Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough, but he's not human and your fiancée's peril increases with every moment she spends with him."

"Why?"

"Look, my job here on Yggdrasill is to carry strife up and down the tree and I'm fighting against my very nature to be even this nice to you. Don't tempt me, huh? Trust me, you don't want to know. But you'll find out before you need to." I could see that he wasn't going to tell me anything no matter how hard I pressed so I just nodded a vague sort of agreement and let it go for now. "Besides," the hyperthyroid squirrel continued, "the only reason Samuel would let you attend that meeting is that it's absolutely vital that I show up. He's not particularly fond of humans, especially Americans. If it weren't for you guys he wouldn't be an endangered species and some of the guardians that will attend make him look positively benevolent. The Guardian of the Tree of Life, for example, might have to be put in restraints if you showed up. Her prime directive is to slay any human approaching the Tree and she might just forget which aspect she's in at the moment."

"If all the guardians are in one aspect at once, what's to stop the serpents from attacking again while you're all away?"

"Good question. Actually, as the Tree is the living symbol of the entire universe, it represents Time as well as Space and we have certain limited abilities to be in two places at once. You didn't think I was taking three days out of my busy schedule just to shepherd you through Yggdrasill, did you?"

"I hadn't actually thought about it."

"Well, while I've been strolling along with you, I've also been scampering up and down the tree. This ability to be in two places allows us to get enough rest while also being constantly at work. The only problem is that I can't be in three places at once so if I'm escorting you through the Tree, I can't be at the meeting."

"You could leave me alone while you attend the meeting."

"I could, yes, but it won't be necessary. I should have you at your destination by mid-morning tomorrow."

"I've been meaning to ask you. The sun never sets here; how do you separate the days?"

"Well, actually the sun does set, but you're here in the middle of the summer. If you were here in the winter, then it would be in the middle of a two-month-long night. In between we have days of varying lengths."

"You mean we're north of the Arctic Circle?"

"You didn't know?"

"It seems nice and warm here."

"Of course it's nice and warm. The sun hasn't set in a month. You want cold? Come on back in six months and you'll get the thrill of your life, Bozo. Even I have to wear two fur coats then. On the other hand, I also spend two weeks in Fort Lauderdale during spring break, so it all evens out."

"Sorry, it's just that I got here from a place considerably south of the Arctic. I just assumed that I arrived at a point coexistent with the one I left."

"Obviously not."

"How much further do we have to go?" I asked the squirrel changing the subject.

"Oh, another two or three hours I suspect. Need a rest?"

"Yeah. It's strange, I seem to be going along just fine and then fatigue just hits me. It's like it holds off for a few hours until it can hit me all at once."

"An interestingly paranoid way of putting it, but that's pretty much the way of it here. It's another part of the healing and energy properties of the fruit. I'll see you in a few hours." Once more he ran off into the other parts of the Tree.

I awoke to the smell of fresh brewed coffee.

"You were out for fifteen hours, bub," Ratatosk greeted me, handing over a large mug of coffee. "You sure you have the stamina to keep going?"

"Thanks. I don't see that I have much choice."

"All right. Drink that coffee down. It'll help restore you. Then we'll have to make tracks. I don't have too much time to spare before that meeting."

"Where'd the coffee come from anyway?"

"I told you that Yggdrasill is all types of trees, in one aspect or another, didn't I? Well, coffee also grows on trees. I had to use a spot of magic to prepare the beverage, but it wasn't all that difficult." I finished off the coffee and we started off.

"By the way," Ratatosk told me after we started walking, "you'll want to stock up on edibles as we walk. You won't be able to eat any of the food where you're going and you will need the energy."

A couple hours later, my pack was full of various fruits and nuts and the squirrel was getting a bit antsy to get me to my destination.

"Okay," he said, pointing at a side branch, "we'll want to take this branch here." As we started down that branch I smelled an acrid odor that I couldn't quite place.

"Ratatosk!" a deep voice said above us. "Aren't you finished yet?"

"Hey, Sam, get off my back!" the squirrel replied. On a branch above us sat the bald eagle, Samuel. Beside him I also saw the hawk, Vethrfofnir and the four deer. "We had a few delays. I'm not late yet anyway and we're almost finished. What's the big rush?"

"You have a bad habit of ignoring these meetings. Let's just say that we don't trust you. Now hurry up!"

We continued down the branch for another five minutes or so. It got increasingly thinner and the acrid smell got more intense. Finally, the branch was too thin for me to walk on comfortably.

"Well, this is where you get off," Ratatosk said, pointing downward.

"What is that smell?" I asked, looking toward where he pointed. Infinitely below us, the ground appeared to be burning. The molten surface churned and spat up gouts of lava in our general direction.

"Oh that. Brimstone. That guy you're chasing took your girlfriend to Hell. Come on jump."

"Jump?" My fear of falling took over then and I froze on the spot. If I jumped here it looked like I would fall forever. My mind kept telling me that I had to go, but my body kept saying, "No way, Jose!"

I must have said that out loud as Ratatosk said, "What do you mean no way? I went to the trouble of getting you here. If you won't jump, I'll push. Come on, we haven't got all day." When I gave no sign of any intention of moving, the squirrel made good on his threat and pushed me off the branch.

Quick reflexes and unreasoning panic allowed me to spin and grab on to the branch with a vise-like grip.

"Hey! Let go!" Ratatosk yelled.

"I'll fall!" I replied.

"Of course," he said dryly. "That is the general idea. You wanted to rescue your fiancée, didn't you? Well that's the way you have to go. Now let go and fall."

"No!"

"Hey, birdies! I think he needs a little help." Samuel and Vethrfofnir flew from their perches and struck at my face with their talons. I desperately tried to fend them off with one hand while hanging on with the other. It worked for the first two passes, but finally, as I felt my grip going I heard Ratatosk shout, "Good luck, Marcus! Remember you owe me a steak dinner!" Then I lost my grip and fell into the abyss.

Six

In spite of the awe-inspiring view I had had from Yggdrasill, I didn't fall very far. In fact, I doubt the actual drop was as much as an inch. However as soon as I let go of the branch, the entirety of Yggdrasill vanished from sight and I was surrounded by what looked like searingly hot flame. While it was, indeed, very warm here, I wasn't actually burning. I've fared hotter, more humid conditions during a Mississippi August.

The scenery, however, bore no relationship to cotton fields hemmed in by kudzu

vines. Instead the vista was more akin to the caldera of an infinitely huge, active volcano. Lava fountains spewed magnificent arches of glowing molten rock overhead and the ground was otherwise strewn with basalt and obsidian boulders. The sky was a deep, smoky red, almost black around the horizon. Instead of the sun, a large black spot dominated the sky that cascaded the landscape with its dark malevolence.

I was standing at the beginning of a long, winding, apparently safe path through this smoking, spewing inferno. Almost directly in front of me to one side of the path was a modest sign which read;

Hell

Service Entrance Only

Customers Must Use Front Entrance

I decided to quickly run through the same spells I'd used when I first found myself perched on the branches of Yggdrasill and just as quickly discovered that I was in the middle of the ultimate source of Wild Magic. When my only anti-Wild tracking spell left a coat of iridescent green polish on my fingernails that wouldn't come off, I decided to cut my losses and just follow the path. So much for proofed spells.

There was evidently some sort of protective magic on the path. As hot as it was, that was nothing compared to the scorching intensity of the temperature my shirt and arm hairs experienced when I wandered too close to the edge of the path. After I patted out the flames, I was careful to stay as close to the center of the path as possible.

I'm not sure why Hell needs a service entrance. Certainly there was no traffic on the path as long as I was on it. Still I preferred that sign to the one reputed to hang over the front entrance as I was not yet prepared to abandon all hope, although if I smelled much more of the ubiquitous brimstone fumes I was fully prepared to abandon the hope of ever getting that pungent aroma out of my nostrils.

An hour later I thought my eyes were adjusting to the pathetically dim light in this place when I noticed that the black hole that passed for a sun here was setting. As it dropped with an oily motion beneath the horizon, the sky glowed in a much brighter shade of red. Night time had come to Hell.

For all my walking however, when I looked back I seemed to have progressed only a few feet from the end of the path. I took two steps back toward where I had come in but was unable to reach the head of the path. In fact, I was unable to make any visible progress in either direction, although it clearly felt like I was walking. I tried running and succeeded only in tripping over a stone in the rough path. I got up and tried again, but I was still unable to proceed.

Pausing to ponder this problem I absent-mindedly took a step backwards and to my surprise I noticed that I had visibly moved away from the head of the path. I took another step back and moved again. A few more steps and I was convinced that walking backwards was the only means of progress through this hazardous environment.

Another discovery I made was that merely walking backwards was not enough. My head had to literally be facing directly away from my intended direction. Every other step I found myself bumping into the intense heat of the area beyond the protected path so that my

clothes were half charred in the first hundred steps or so. After that I started to get the hang of it, although I did manage to collect a few nasty burns along the way. As far as I could tell, however, I hadn't lost more than a strand or two of hair from my head even though I had precious little that hadn't been burned off on my arms. I wasn't counting, but I'm willing to bet that it was on my six hundred and sixty-sixth step that I finally won free of the volcanic wonderland.

Suddenly I was in a well-lit, overly air-conditioned room with the sound of dozens of telephones randomly ringing and being answered. A telethon in Hell? I was facing a dark wooden door set into a beige wall. Turning, I saw an arena-sized room filled with cheap office furniture. There were aisles upon aisles of desks at which hundreds of men and women were seated. No, not a telethon. I had stumbled into the office floor of a very large corporation. Many were speaking on the phone but just as many were writing, typing and standing around the water cooler. It would have looked perfectly normal if the water in the cooler weren't red and didn't emit vicious pink fumes. I didn't dare guess what might be in the coffee pot.

"Yes, sir," a female voice said close by my right side. "May I help you?"

In my effort to take in the whole scene I had missed some of the closer details. Startled, I spun to find myself facing a young woman about my age. Her light blue spandex dress was stretched tightly across her well-developed chest and hips. Her legs, ensconced in navy blue silk, were long and shapely and neatly tucked into a pair of three-inch spike heels. Raising my eyes, I was unable to get above the chasm effect of the deeply cut V-neck of the dress. It was a pleasant view but finally she decided to put an end to it and reached out, putting her hand under my chin, and raised my head until I looked into a pair of dark violet eyes set in a heart-shaped, deeply tanned face framed by waist-length, loosely curled hair of jet black hue. She wore an unfathomable half-smile and for the first time I realized I was no longer smelling brimstone as I breathed in her lilac-scented perfume. For a moment, just a moment mind you, I forgot entirely about Rona, until I realized an eternity later that this woman was waiting for an answer to which I had forgotten the question.

"Excuse me?"

"May I help you, sir?" she repeated. When I continued to stare at her, she went on. "Your business here. Who are you here to see?"

Thinking quickly, I realized that I'd better be able to fake some sort of legitimate business. Ask for the boss? No way! No chance in Hell, so to speak. Now there was one guy I did not want to meet. Finally I said, "Chayim Yosef."

"Your name?"

"Marcus Steele." Belatedly, I realized that I shouldn't have used my own name. If she called ahead, he'd be well prepared for me.

Instead, however she merely said, "This way, Mr. Steele," and escorted me off along one side of the incredibly sized office. When we reached a doorway, she turned and said, "We had better get you cleaned up first, He doesn't think much of those who can't negotiate the entry path."

"Thank you, Miss..."

"You may call me Jael. Normally I supervise in another region, but I'm filling in for a friend today." She walked through the open doorway and kept going. I just stood there dumbly with a stupid smile on my face admiring her walk. "Well, are you coming? Oh, for evil's sake!" She march back to where I stood mesmerized, grabbed my hand, and exasperatedly led me down the corridor.

I eventually came out of my trance and retrieved my hand as we walked down a

series of halls. Finally she brought me to room with an "M" on the door.

"In here," she said briskly.

"What?"

"Go in here and get cleaned up. I'll get you some fresh clothes." She pushed the door open and gently shoved me on through.

Inside was a super-deluxe restroom of monumental proportions, all tile, mirrors, and disinfectant, although it was the first restroom I'd ever encountered with black tiles and a mirror on the ceiling. It contained all the usual receptacles plus a few I didn't recognize. The place was empty and I had to wander about before I found the shower stall, stocked with a convenient set of black towels with gold trim and embroidery - "Hades Hilton" - on a bench just inside the stall.

The shower, itself, was well designed. Rather than a square shaped closet with a glass door or a curtain, it looked as if a rectangular stall had been bent at a forty-five degree angle. An open doorway led to the bench with the towels on the left and the shower head was on the right, facing away from the bench. I could shower without fear of splashing the towels or my clothes, although considering the tatters that my clothing had become, that could hardly hurt. Beneath the shower control was an inset niche in which I found a small bar of soap wrapped in paper.

I was about to disrobe when I remembered the fuming red nitric acid in the water cooler and cautiously turned on the spigot by kicking it with my boot - that was as far away as I could get and still reach the handle. My fears were unfounded and the spray head produced nothing more corrosive than hot water.

I took off my clothing, left it in a heap on the bench, and stepped into the shower. The soap turned out to be black just like the towels, but it seemed to get me as clean as Ivory might have, although I doubt this stuff would have floated - probably would have displaced twice its volume of water instead.

After I felt clean enough, I just stood there enjoying the feel of the hot water flowing over my body. I was finally starting to relax when I heard someone clapping. I spun around and saw Jael applauding with a big grin on her face.

"Hmm. Not bad," she said eyeing me up and down, mostly down. "Not bad at all. Maybe I should join you?"

"No!" I shouted, bolting for a towel and feeling my face warm as it must have sported a monumental blush. Her laughter was not entirely malicious, but I thought I detected a slight amount of satisfaction in achieving revenge for the way I had ogled her.

"Are you sure?" she asked, starting to pull her spandex dress up over her head.

"Yes!" I pulled the hem of her dress back down to where it had been and she made a half-hearted grab at my towel causing me to jump back away from her. The effort, while successful, caused the towel to come loose and fall to the floor.

"Such a shame," she said without much sincerity as I retrieved the towel. "You really don't know what you're missing. Oh, by the way, that's your change of clothing on the bench."

"Hmm, a complete set - underwear and all," I commented. "Rather lacking in variety color-wise, though."

"Like Henry Ford said about the Model T," Jael replied, "You can have it in any color you want as long as it's black. It's a standard service for all visiting dignitaries. You'd be surprised how few come through the caldera without at least one scorch mark."

Along with the underwear, the costume included trousers, a silk shirt, shoes, and a sport coat, all black. Jael refused to leave or even turn around while I got dressed, so I

turned my back to her.

I had to admit that I did look pretty good in the basic black garb, but I might have appreciated it more had there been some splash of color in it somewhere. Of my old clothes, I dumped the lot, except for my hiking boots, which in spite of showing a few scorch marks were still useable. My pack was still full of the fruit and nuts I'd harvested on Yggdrasill along with a spare shirt and jeans and the other supplies and tools I'd toted from Tell el Ahvram, so I strapped the boots to the outside and slung it over my shoulder.

"Well," I asked, "what now?"

"Well," she replied in conscious mimicry, "unless you care to find out what it's like to roast slowly over a brimstone barbecue, you'd better tell me why you're really here. Oh, don't give me those innocent brown eyes. Few humans would want to see Chayim - he's not too popular with his own kind, never mind other species - and I know he wouldn't want to see you, except maybe in his private torture chamber. So fess up, kiddo!"

"Well, I really am looking for Chayim," I started, "but conversation isn't exactly what I have in mind." I went on to tell Jael about how he had bewitched and kidnapped Rona.

"You can forget about taking Chayim on. He's so far out of your league even a five-year-long players' strike wouldn't put you in the majors. Even if you were up to it, you could never take him on his own turf. He's a demon and this is Hell. Maybe it doesn't match the Medieval pit of horrors Dante wrote about - we gave that customer what he wanted - but this is Hell and there are rules here. None of that Wild stuff you humans play with."

"Wait a minute. There is nothing but Wild Magic here, my detection spells..."

"Are surface world spells," she completed for me. "While most spells work equally well both here and on Earth, many spells involving the detection of good versus evil or order versus chaos have reversed results. Why do you think there's such a dichotomy between our two worlds? Good versus Evil? Well, maybe by your standards, this is where you go when you die if you've been bad, but we're not out campaigning for souls the way your evangelists say. In fact most of those evangelists end up here anyway. Believe me, we'd send them back if we could. But we're getting off the subject. Would you settle for just getting your girl friend out of here?"

"Yes."

"All right. I may be able to help you there. I owe Chayim more than a few pokes in the eye. He used to work under me but managed to get promoted against my recommendation. Since then he's played me dirty every chance he gets. I should even be able to cash in on the deal, if I play it right. Come on and remember to act as if you belong here. So far you've seen the tame parts of Hell. We may have to travel through some pretty rough territory - our job is punishment here after all - and if you stop to gawk at the sights the way you did at me, we'll be found out from the start. Watch how some of the other male demons behave and follow their lead." She lead the way out of the rest room.

We walked down seemingly endless corridors for a couple of hours until I complained of fatigue and hunger.

"I can't give you anything to eat, Marcus" Jael told me, "I'm sure you've heard the tales, eating the food of Hell will trap you here."

"That's all right. I brought my own," I said pulling an apple out of my pack.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Yggdrasill. Want some?"

"Hell no!" Jael said showing the first sign of fear I'd seen in her. Somehow the phrase sounded like a fervent prayer when she said it. "That stuff would kill me here and if I ate it

elsewhere I'd be banished. However, we were heading for my rooms - you can sleep there."

A moment later we walked through yet another door and into Death Valley cubed. The perpetual noontime sun hammered down on the anvil of the desert forging the souls there in punishment for their sins on earth. I'm not sure what they were being forged into - probably flattened souls. As in the caldera, there was a safe path on which we could walk avoiding the excessive heat of the desert floor. The major difference here was that the path was straight and well marked.

"The scenery seems to be moving faster than we are walking," I observed.

"Of course," Jael replied. "Hell is infinite, for all intents and purposes. At least we haven't found any limits yet. So, in order to get anywhere before J. Day, the service paths are enchanted for speed. Actually you can move just as quickly without taking a step if you concentrate, but walking makes it seem more natural and without having to think about it."

Out in the real desert beyond our path I could see innumerable people, or their souls I guess, suffering in the intense heat. A few were hardy enough to walk, but most were crawling toward various oases that they could never quite reach. One poor soul relatively nearby was in terrible shape. What was left of his blood seeped through his cracked and sunburned skin. Soon he was no longer able to crawl and with a final plea for mercy, he seemed to expire. A moment later his form shimmered and he was fully restored to apparent health and ready to begin his torture again. There were so many examples of this and worse in the desert that I soon stopped watching the scenery and kept my eyes on the path, but nothing could distract my attention for long from the thousands of anguished moans and screams that assaulted my ears.

"Who do you punish here?" I asked at last, letting my curiosity get the better of me.

"This is a generalized area. Just about everyone gets thrown in here at one point or another. You see, we try to make the punishments fit the sins. Anything else would be senseless and random and while we may be cruel at times, we are not chaotic. However, people are amazingly adaptable and their souls are tough and resilient - immortality is like that. Almost any torture will lose its edge after a century or two, so for variety's sake damned souls will get cycled through the general punishment areas every once in a while. It keeps them from becoming accustomed to a single set of conditions.

"They also get one day a week off."

"I don't understand," I admitted. "I thought damned souls suffered eternally."

"Not at all, and certainly not constantly - same problem, they'd get too used to the treatment. Besides, Saturday's our day of rest. Always has been." My confusion must have shown so she explained, "Look this particular afterlife world is Judeo-Christian, which means it is directly descended from the Jewish concept of Gehenna. The Jews didn't have a clearly defined concept of the afterlife, but they envisioned a place of constant flame based on the town dump of Jerusalem. Anyway, their religious practices prohibited the lighting of fires on the Sabbath so damned souls and demons alike got the day off. As the millennia passed Christianity came into being and the elements of many other religions were incorporated into their eschatology. There are a lot of Greco-Roman elements around here too and we are directly and indirectly connected with the mystical worlds of every Earthly culture that has ever encountered Judaism or Christianity or any religion or culture that has, which is nearly all of them. But I digress.

"When we started converting to accommodate the Christian notions of Hell, they expected constant and eternal punishment. Well we unionized in a hurry, let me tell you. No half-cocked bunch of holy rollers was going to cheat us out of our days off! We managed to get shorter working hours and vacation pay as well. When our contract comes up for renewal we plan to negotiate for a profit-sharing plan. Good thing we live forever or else we'd need a

retirement plan as well. Here's our turn."

There had been several forks in the path over the last thousand miles or so. How she could tell one from another I didn't know. We proceeded no more than a few feet down this side path and the scenery changed again.

We were in the mountains following a trail not completely unlike some stretches of the Appalachian Trail. All around oaks and maples towered above us providing a leafy canopy.

"This is Hell?" I asked. "It seems pretty nice to me."

"Samuel Clemens."

"Excuse me?"

"Wait a few minutes," Jael explained, "It'll change."

She was right. A few minutes later as the trail left the wooded area behind to follow a cliff face for a while the deep cobalt sky began to fill up with ugly black clouds. Soon there was no sign at all that the sky had ever been anything but a greasy charcoal-gray in color.

"Hurry up!" Jael urged me. "You don't want to get caught in the rain."

"Hey, I'm a big boy. I won't melt in a little water."

"Who said anything about water?"

I may be a little slow on the uptake at times but I took the hint. The sky began to grow lighter and less distinct as it will just a minute or less before the start of a torrential downpour. Running, we made it to the bottom of a cliff where the trail finally ended. I skidded to a stop but Jael ran straight through the rocks that were apparently there. I tentatively put my hand up to feel the rocks where she had entered. They sure felt like the real thing. Then her hand reached out of the rock and, grabbing my hand, pulled me in after her.

Inside was a small atrium and an elevator door. I looked back and was afforded a clear view of the mountain scenery just as a blinding flash of lightning illuminated the landscape with nova intensity. The light was quickly followed by a rolling clap of thunder accompanied by a solid wall of rain.

As the rain touched the forest in the valley beneath us clouds of yellow-gray smoke began to rise. Although I couldn't see the souls below, once again I heard the heart-rending screams of their anguish. I turned to Jael and looked questioningly at her.

"Acid rain," she said dryly. "This is a relatively new area. Like the desert it's sometimes used as a general punishment area, but mostly it's for environmental polluters. A few years ago we started using it to also punish fanatic environmental activists."

"What? How is that a sin?"

"In moderation it isn't, but when you start using gunboats to support your cause, that's going way too far. There's also an arctic-like zone where baby harp seals skittle along clubbing hunters to death. They also work on the environmental fanatics that figured that it's okay to club a few seals of their own so they can have horrifying pictures to show. Strange thing, though, the hunters, for the most part understand why they're being punished but the environmentalists just don't get it." At that point the elevator door opened and we stepped in.

A minute later after not seeming to move at all, the doors opened up to reveal a large semi-circular room with a spectacular view of the valley. It - the room, that is - was tastefully decorated in warm shades of brown, with red and orange accents. All in all I would have taken it for any modern, high priced condominium.

"Welcome to the Aerie," Jael announced. "That's what I call this place."

"Not bad."

"I like it. It's one of the perquisites around here. With an infinite amount of space available, we all get whatever sort of personal living space we want. The furnishings, however, come out of our own pockets."

"You have money here?"

"Yes. Credit cards, too."

"I always said those things were an invention of the devil," I muttered. She ignored that remark. Outside, the acid rain had stopped. A quick look revealed an utterly barren landscape. As the sky cleared, oppressively intense sunlight beat down.

"No ozone layer," Jael remarked.

The souls who had been eaten by the acid were rapidly healing and then just as rapidly burning in the increased ultraviolet levels. Over the next several minutes they all succumbed to various maladies brought on by over-exposure to sunlight; skin cancer, sunstroke and the like, or so Jael told me. Finally, the light became less harsh and the forest grew back to the condition it had been in when we first got here.

"Well, that's the show for today," Jael said. "I really hate that part and usually try to avoid it. For the next two hours the environmental extremists and the polluters will probably fight until they've torn each other to shreds. Each group blames the other for all this, you see. It's all very sad. That's why I made sure this place is soundproofed. The rest of the time this area is truly beautiful."

It seemed odd to me that a demon should have aesthetic sensibilities and if she did, why did they seem so human?

"What did you expect?" she responded when I asked. "That we were grotesque, scaly mutants practicing the foulest acts of blasphemy and depravity, who would appreciate only vicious, ugly scenes of destruction and human suffering? Get real! We're just another type of people - no more and no less - and we're just doing our jobs. We just happen to live forever, that's all. With certain obvious exceptions like your friend Chayim, we're not even truly evil. We don't enjoy torturing souls and that isn't the purpose of this place in any case."

"What is the purpose of Hell then, if not to consign wicked souls to eternal agony?"

"We're here to punish, not torture," she repeated. "Only truly obstinate souls are condemned to stay here forever. You look confused. Okay, this is how it works. When a soul arrives in Limbo - a zone directly between Heaven and Hell - he or she must stand trial before a tribunal of judges, generally headed by either King Minos or King Solomon, whoever's on duty that shift. However, special cases often require other qualified jurists - some of the new high-tech sinners have required special trials. Anyway, at this trial all one's sins in life are investigated as to whether they have been repented and, if possible, rectified. Then these sins are prioritized in order of importance relative to the subject. No, I'm not sure how that is done either, but the end result is that the heaviest burdens are punished first. So if, say, the subject was a polluter he must first repent all such sins that relate to pollution. When he has fully repented them, he will then serve penance for the set of sins in the category that has been given the next highest priority. It's all very personal. Generally speaking, however, many people are genuinely repentant by the end of their trials and if not then, by the end of their orientation tour in Hell. The hard cases can stay here for centuries or millennia, but once a subject repents his most important sins, he doesn't take so long on the rest. There are exceptions. You may even meet some of them before we get you and your fiancée out of here."

"Now, I think you ought to stay here and get some sleep while I find out where Rona is being held." A quick and abridged tour of Jael's home brought me to the guest room, where I was soon fast asleep on the large waterbed there.

Seven

It was dark both outside and in when I woke up. I rolled off the waterbed, trying unsuccessfully to land on my feet and promptly fell flat on my face. I hate waterbeds. My little pratfall did not go unnoticed. I looked up as the lights came on to see Jael laughing at me in the doorway.

"I should have warned you," she half apologized. "I have that particular bed enchanted to always trip someone getting out of it. There're a lot of large egos running around this realm - quite a few of them are friends of mine. I find a few harmless tricks like this put some pinholes in those egos and bring them back down to a normal size."

"How many of them remain friends after the practical jokes?"

"Most of them," she replied. "On the other hand, I can turn the spell off and usually do if I don't think the guest can take a joke. If you think the pratfall is something, you ought to see what it does if you have sex on it."

"Oh? What does it do?"

"Why don't we find out, hmm?" She had not been all that far away and now advanced on me, aggressively rubbing up against my body. As she pressed, I backed up until I fell across the bed. Jael, I was learning, was one hell of a tease. Instead of following me on to the bed she just stood there laughing, and her laughter redoubled when I fell on my face all over again. I had to admit that if I got angry at what was, after all, a harmless joke, I probably deserved the humiliation. So I laughed along with her.

That, however, didn't stop me from getting a little revenge. When she helped me up, I continued to hold her hands until I had swung her around, and then deposited her on her own joke bed. She continued to laugh as she realized that I'd turned the tables on her, so at least she could take as much as she dished out.

"It's nice to see that you have a sense of humor, Marcus," she said as I helped her up. "You're going to need it before this is over. Let's go over to the kitchen and I'll tell you what I found as you eat."

She led the way as I lugged my pack over to the kitchen table and selected some mixed nuts and a grapefruit.

"I'm not cut out to be a vegetarian," I complained to Jael. "I see now why Ratatosk would do anything for a steak dinner."

"Sorry, but I can't offer you even so much as a glass of water. Remember the story of Persephone. If you eat the food of Hell, you're stuck here. That was one of those Greco-Roman elements we inherited."

"But she got time off for good behavior," I pointed out.

"More like a suspended sentence, and she got to be the queen here as well. But rank has its privileges and she got special dispensation for being a goddess. You're a nice guy, Marcus, but you're only human. Too bad it's still the middle of summer, though. Maybe you could have pulled an Orpheus and appealed to the queen for Rona's release. But it's too long until she gets back so we'll have to break her out of here."

"This is very confusing. Does Hell have other aspects like Yggdrasill?"

"Does it exist on other levels of reality that all connect into a greater whole? To an extent, yes. But on the Tree you can change aspects by concentrating on where you want to

be, or so I'm told. They don't let Hellspawn on the Tree as a matter of policy. We may not be evil as a group, but there are enough schemers doing field work to get the rest of us a bad reputation. Anyway, you can't just get to the Greek Hades by focusing your attention on it, but it does exist as part of the greater underworld or part of it does. The Elysian Fields are one of the old neighborhoods in Heaven. To get from one section to another though, you have to travel."

"Travel?"

"You know, put one foot in front of the other and repeat until you're there, although we do have faster means of transportation." We were silent for a while as I finally worked myself up to start eating my meal. "Marcus," Jael broke the silence with a very serious tone to her voice, "I found where Rona is being held."

"There's a problem?" I asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure. She's being kept in a low security area. In theory I could have her released with a standard bit of paperwork, but that seems too easy. Chayim isn't stupid and he is ambitious. Two hundred years ago he was just an ordinary working demon, Now he's being considered for the Inner Circle. Consciously bringing a living human here without going through channels is strictly forbidden, but when you get to be part of the 'Good Ole Boy' network, the rules can not only be bent, but twisted, shredded, melted down and recast into any shape you like.

"The only reason that I can figure that Chayim would be leaving her practically out in the open is that this is his way to make sure he wasn't followed and that if he was, to catch anyone who did follow. Your Rona, my human friend, is the bait in a trap.

"The question is how do we spring that trap?"

"I hope you have an answer to that too," I said.

"Maybe. While you were sleeping I looked into the hidden security measure in her confinement. The program should have some results by now. Have you finished eating? Good. Come on into my work room." She continued as we went, "Evidently, he's only planning to hold her temporarily though. He's been importing Earthly food and while we've no proof he's feeding it to her, I don't see any other use he'd have for it." That was good news at least.

The workroom was a small and Spartan affair. The plain white walls and walnut table and chair were accented only by a modern computer terminal with a small vase next to it containing a sprig of cherry blossoms.

"Sure glad this place has kept up with the times," Jael said pointing at the computer. "I do a lot of my work from home, although I still have to report in person at the service center once a week or so."

"Then I'm lucky that I just happened to show up the day you were in."

"I ought to let you keep thinking that, but it isn't so. There're enough political intrigues going on around here, and Chayim has stepped on enough toes, ankles, and knees on his way up that it would have been more surprising if there hadn't been someone on hand to help you out. If anything, I'm the lucky one for having been there to get the opportunity. Okay, here's what we need to know." She pointed at some undecipherable numbers on the computer screen.

"Okay, I'll bite," I shrugged after a moment. "What's it mean?"

"Damned if I know," she replied with a grin. "Then again, strictly speaking, I'm damned anyway. Just let me get this rig to analyze the data." She punched a few keys and the screen went blank.

"Should just take a few seconds," she assured me.

A minute passed.

"Any time now."

Another minute passed.

Then the screen lit up again. At first glance it appeared to be filled with random garbage, but I was sure that Jael would be able to make perfect sense of it all.

"Bless!" she swore in the netherworld's equivalent of a curse. Okay, my first impression was correct, we had a screen full of gobbledegook. "Software crash!"

The screen went dark again and then printed out:

Hello, Jael.

How may I be of assistance?

Jael typed in a series of commands and after a brief pause a screen that may have been the first series of numbers appeared.

"At least I didn't lose the initial results. Okay, I'm putting this on the highest priority I can finagle and activating the trace mode as well." This time the screen blanked out again but a series of data lines began to scroll up the display. None of it meant anything to me, but Jael made occasional noises that indicated that she both understood and was pleased with the progress. "Whoops! There it goes again. Ah hah! You little bugger. Put a virus spell on my program will you? Time for a little inoculation." She made a few mystic passes with her hand and the screen blanked once more and finally it spouted out data in plain language.

"There you go, Marcus. I'll just get a print-out, and we'll have all the security codes we need to get your girl friend out of gaol."

"Gaol?"

"Yeah gaol. You know, the pokey, the hoosegow, the slammer. Jail."

"Oh. How're you going to get a print-out without a printer?"

"It'll be in my mailbox downstairs by the time we get there. Ready to move?"

As promised the data was in a small set-in mail box in the cave wall down stairs. Along with several pages of green and white striped paper, there was also a small dark red booklet which Jael handed to me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Your passport. You may be wearing the standard uniform for around here, but we do have security checkpoints. You'll need ID to get through them. That's why it took us so long to get here yesterday. If you had authorization we could have been here in under fifteen minutes. As it was, we had to take the long way around. I have another passport here for your fiancée when we finally retrieve her."

There was the delightful scent of pine needles drifting up from the forest below. I was a bit puzzled by that - the forest had been mostly oaks with a scattered maple thrown in for good measure before the acid rain.

"That's right," Jael agreed when I mentioned it. "It comes back differently every day. The point is to show the damage done to the entire environment. Sometimes it's a tropical rain forest, sometimes it's the Mojave in spring, it pretty much hits all ecological situations and gives our charges the chance to appreciate them before they're destroyed."

"Is it always acid rain?"

"Usually, but that's not always an appropriate form of destruction. We also use simulated nuclear weapons, wholesale smog, and any other unnatural agent that can damage the environment."

"It seems to be a bit exaggerated, don't you think?"

"Well, yes, but we are trying to do our job here before J. Day."

"J. Day?"

"Judgement Day. The point is to teach the subject the end result of his actions and for him to empathize with his own victims. From there, repentance should be a short step. The hard part is getting him to see the connection between his life and his punishment. If we do this at normal speed, it would take forever. Dig?"

We'd been talking as we walked and soon reached the end of the path where two demons stood in dark blue uniforms that clashed with their bright red skins. These looked more like the sort of demon I would have expected before coming here. They seemed to have an infinite number of fangs in their mouths and a pair of evenly matched, eight-inch long, slightly curved horns on their heads sprouting out just above their temples.

"Hey, Lefty! Dutch!" Jael greeted them. "How's business?"

"Dull," answered the one on the right, "No one's tried to break out in weeks."

"That's good, Lefty," Jael replied. "Maybe it means our little object lessons are starting to work."

"Whatever you say, boss, but a guy needs a little action every now and then."

"Well, I wouldn't worry too much about that. We're rotating in a batch of new souls next week. You'll have more excitement than you know what to do with by then. Oh, this is Mr. Steele. He's getting the grand tour."

"Passport please, Mr. Steele," Lefty requested politely. I handed him the booklet. He flipped through it and handed it back to me. "Enjoy your stay, sir." While I still wasn't used to the idea of polite demons, I could see now that some of them, at least, did enjoy the nastier parts of their jobs, but then Sadists exist on Earth too.

Beyond the checkpoint the scenery suddenly blinked out and we had to continue the trek through the same sterile hallways I had first found when I made it past the caldera zone. We walked down to the third door on the left and went through into another corridor. After several more such turns we were back in the central offices, at least I think we were.

"How do you ever find your way around here?" I asked.

"After the first century or so, it starts to become second nature."

"The first century?" I had taken her for only a few years older than I was. "Just how old are you?"

"Marcus," she admonished me with a smile, "don't you know it's not polite to ask a lady's age?"

"Curiosity and all that," I said apologetically. "Let's just say I'm not polite."

"And I'm no lady," she responded. "Well, if you must know, I celebrated my millennium several months ago."

"A thousand years?"

"Yes, I'm still fairly young. Demons are immortal, you know."

"I keep forgetting where I am, and you seem as human as I am."

"I'll take that as a complement both personally and for my people. I told you, we are just folks doing our jobs. We're just another sort of people, no more and no less and Hell is not that bad a place. We do terrible things to unrepentant souls, true enough, but it's for their own good, and it's all in the scheme of things."

"Personally, I prefer positive reinforcement," I pointed out.

"That works too," Jael agreed, "and we do use it, but it works best when you reward a correct response, and most of our," she paused searching for the word, "clients, if you will, are here because their responses were all wrong in the first place. It takes a very long time to retrain a lifetime worth of conditioning. Here's my office. Good morning, Gwenwyn," she said to the secretary outside the office door. "Anything new?"

"No, Jael," Gwenwyn replied. "Everything seems to be running as smoothly as ever."

"Thank you, we'll be inside if anything comes up."

The office was a slightly larger version of the one in her home, except that it wasn't so Spartan. The desk was a rich, contemporary walnut affair with matching chairs - one behind and two in front. There were a few shelves along one wall - also walnut - that were full of leather-bound books, punctuated by the occasional knickknack. The desk was kept completely clear except for a bud vase filled with a daffodil and a few leaves and a computer terminal identical to the one she had at home.

"I don't really feel the need for such a large office, but it comes with the supervisor's job and one must keep up appearances, especially here." She logged on with her terminal and went to work.

"Why couldn't you have used your terminal at home?" I asked while she worked.

"My home terminal is on an all-purpose line. This one is directly on the mother-line. I'll be able to have Rona released from here without it showing up on Chayim's terminal, or every other one on the mother-line for that matter. The only other place this will show up is on the Master terminals in the computer center and, the Boss's office, of course. Chayim may have a friend in Computing, but the chances are slight and the Boss wouldn't notice a small, routine transfer like this." She leafed through some of her printouts, and made a few notations in red. "All right, now let me work in silence for a couple minutes. I'll need to do this just right." A few minutes passed and then she turned her terminal off. "Done! At this moment a pair of guards are on their way to transfer your Rona from her current holding cell to a waiting area not far from here. From there she will ostensibly be transferred to the Sea of Sins, by another pair of guards - you and me. We'd better get into the right uniform, our orders should be in my secretary's box by now." I followed her out the door.

"A packet just arrived for you," Gwenwyn said, handing a plain brown envelope to Jael as we left the office.

"Very good," Jael replied. "I'll be out on vacation for the next few days. I don't imagine that anything will come up that you can't handle, but I'll have my beeper with me so don't hesitate to have me paged." Gwenwyn nodded with a smile and we continued on.

Our next stop was another deluxe restroom like the one Jael had led me to the day before. There were two neatly pressed, blue uniforms, one with trousers the other with a skirt, carefully hung on two wall-hooks beside a row of lockers waiting for us there.

"What about my pack?" I asked when I had put the trousered uniform on. "Won't it look out of place when we escort Rona?"

"A little, yes. Here, I can fix that." she muttered a few words in a guttural language I'd never encountered and made some complicated gestures with her hands and suddenly the pack had been transformed from its former khaki-colored canvas to a black, heavy, raw silk. "There. Now it's standard issue. No one will give it a second glance. In fact, I'll take mine too,

just in case something comes up and we don't get back here to change again." She picked up an identical black pack from inside a locker where she then stored her other clothes.

"What's in the pack?"

"Oh just a few supplies for me. We're going to be roughing it, and I thought I might want to follow your example and pack a little food and other stuff in case we're a bit far from a restaurant when I get hungry."

The hallways of Hell had a redundant monotony about them as if they had been designed in a single hour by a government-assigned architect who had been given six months to design the project, but would receive an incredible bonus for each day that he finished the plans ahead of the deadline. Another five minutes of untraceable corridors and doorways brought us to an iron-barred gate where there were another two guards sitting at a table playing cards. They looked up as we approached.

"Your papers?" one of the two seated demons growled at us. Jael handed over a paperback-sized sheaf of paper. The demon barely glanced at the cover and handed it back. "Go ahead," he said, tossing a large brass key ring at us. I caught it and unlocked the iron gate and then threw it back to him. He nodded as we closed the gate behind us and went back to his game.

Beyond the gate the nature of the hallway abruptly changed from the paint and wallboard of the administration center to a rough hewn, curving passage through basaltic stone.

"We're almost there," Jael said in a low voice when we were out of sight of the gate. "Now this is very important. Do not show any recognition of Rona when you see her. There is no reason that a random guard should know her. Keep your face neutral and if you must show any emotion keep it to boredom, disdain, or exasperation. This is just a routine job, the sort you have to do several times every day."

"Got it," I acknowledged.

"Good."

We walked on until the rough passage opened up into a large, natural-appearing cavern. It was similar to the natural caverns I had visited at home except that this one seemed to have been formed out of the same basaltic stone that the passage had been. There were solid black stalactites and stalagmites scattered about and the sound of dripping and trickling water was an instant fixture to my auditory senses. As far as I knew, this sort of formation was far more common in limestone caves. In fact, I doubt that this sort of formation could ever come about naturally. Magic had probably been used to construct this cavern.

"We got here first," Jael observed. "This is the Cavern of Tears, Marcus. All that water you hear and see are the tears of Humanity as they are actually being cried on Earth."

"That's an awful lot of tears," I said, awed.

"There're an awful lot of people on your world. There are times when people are on the average happier and the tears down here become a mere drip here and there, and other times, say during a major war, when the brine flows like the Amazon. This is about average."

"Someone's coming," I said hearing the sound of footsteps approaching."

"Shh!" Jael shushed me. A moment later two more blue-suited demons approached with Rona in tow.

Rona's hands were bound and she was blindfolded with a bright red piece of cloth that seemed to have been woven in one continuous loop. I didn't know if she had become resigned to her fate here or if she was waiting for an opening, but she was not struggling

with her guards as they approached. On the other hand, she had been here for several days and by now probably knew better.

The two guards with her were both female, their ample proportions mostly concealed by the loose-fitting uniforms. They both had short jet-black hair which looked right with their dark red skins. Unlike the males I'd seen, their horns were only a couple inches or so long, providing an interesting accent to the shape of their heads, rather than the nasty-looking weapons that the men had. Their faces, while not unpleasant, could hardly be considered pretty, but take away the horns and change their skin tone to one more appropriate to humans and they could have walked down any city street without being noticed.

No, I'm wrong. They would definitely have been noticed. I don't know if it was a natural scent or a hellish version of perfume but they both carried with them, a strong stench of dung. Jael, I noticed, didn't react to it at all, but I had a hard time keeping my disgust in check.

"You our relief?" one of the two husked in a deep contralto voice.

"This is Prisoner # 85910-A21?" Jael countered. The guard nodded and so did Jael.

"Let's see your papers," the guard demanded. Jael handed them over. The guard looked them over with a frown crossing her face. "Hey, what's this? This is Chayim's prisoner. Why did the transfer come from Lucifer via that bitch Jael?"

"Things change," Jael replied after a momentary pause, to check her anger. "Chayim made a deal with his boss who had Jael do up the paperwork."

"If you say so. Sign here and here." She indicated on her copies of the orders.

"Okay, and I'll need your signature here and here," Jael countered.

"Hey what do I have to sign for? That's not usual procedure."

"The Boss," I could hear the capitalization in Jael's voice, "said so. Capeesh?"

"Okay! Okay. Take her already. We have better things to do." The other guard nodded vigorously while the first one signed, and then quickly signed her own name. They turned Rona over to us and then went back in the direction they came from.

"Who are you?" Rona asked. "Where are you taking me?"

"No talking!" Jael snapped harshly.

"Of course, no talking," Rona sighed. "It's always no talking. Doesn't anyone here know any other words?"

"Shut up!" Jael shouted, slapping Rona's face. I started to protest, but a warning glance from Jael stopped me.

"Ow!" Rona complained. Then she dropped her blindfolded head and allowed us to escort her quietly back up the basalt passageway to the iron gate.

Once past the gate guards, we made a few more turns that I couldn't have retraced to save my life and wound up back in the unisex, unispecies restroom where Jael and I had changed into the guard uniforms.

Jael touched the back of Rona's seamless blindfold with a small metal disk and it abruptly disappeared. She did the same thing to Rona's wrist bindings while she tried to adjust to the light in the room.

"Marcus?" Rona said uncertainly as her eyes began to clear.

"Right here, love."

"I'm so glad to see you. Where are we, and how did you find me here?"

"Well, uh," I began intelligently, "We're in a bathroom"

"I can see that, but where?"

"You're in Hell, dearie," Jael said with a smirk.

"Oh," Rona said, turning pale. She looked to me for comfort, support, and perhaps someone to deny our predicament. Whatever it was she was looking for, I could only nod and shrug.

"Here," Jael said handing a blue uniform dress like her own to Rona, "put this on. Marcus, you should put the black suit back on."

"Why?"

"No reason. I just think you look better in it." She earned a glare from Rona for that remark and I hesitated to change because of it. "Seriously," Jael continued, "the black suits are for higher ranking personnel and visitors. I'd better put mine back on too."

"Then why couldn't you get me a black outfit too?" Rona asked.

"I checked Marcus in personally," Jael replied, "and was able to credit him with sufficient status to rate the distinction. You, on the other hand, I had no control over. I had to clothe you as Chayim saw fit to rank you."

"Chayim!" Rona spat. "That pig. He brought me here, didn't he?"

"You don't remember?" I asked.

"The last thing I remember before waking up in a cell here was being in some giant tree. I tried to get away from that bastard but he hit me a few times and then, while I laying there moaning cast another spell of some sort on me. Before that, my last clear memory was working that first day at Tell el Ahvram. Oh, Marcus! What's going to happen to us?"

"We'll get out of here," I assured her. "After that, we'll pick up where we left off." She smiled.

"All right," Rona said with more ease than she'd shown since her blindfold had been removed. "Where can I change?" She looked around for a private area.

"Right here." Jael answered her flatly.

"Right out in the open?"

"We don't really have sufficient time to satisfy your sense of modesty. Besides, haven't you two ever seen each other dressing or undressing? What kind of relationship do you have?"

"But that's different," Rona protested. Jael just looked exasperated.

"Why don't you use the shower stall?" I suggested. Rona rewarded me with one of her hormone-raising smiles and entered the cubical, drawing the curtain shut behind her.

"That's some prize you have there, kid," Jael said disgustedly.

"Not everybody's an exhibitionist," Rona said primly from behind the curtain.

"At least I have something worth exhibiting," Jael snapped. "What do you think, Marcus? Not bad, huh?" Actually I had modestly turned my back to Jael whenever we changed clothes in each other's presence and she knew that, but Rona didn't.

"You shameless tramp!" Rona said, venom dripping in her voice as she tore open the shower curtain and jumped between Jael and me, blocking my view.

"Sexual repression, hmm?," Jael returned with mock sympathy.

"Slut!"

"Prude!"

"Whoa!" I stepped between the two mostly naked women. Now that situation may sound rather nice to you, but only if you aren't trying to keep them from attacking each other with fangs and talons. "We have to work together. Remember?"

"I don't," Jael reminded me. "I could turn the two of you in at any time."

"And we could tell how you'd been helping us," Rona replied.

"My word against yours," Jael said a bit too smugly. "I won't, for now. I'm doing this because I like Marcus, but don't you go pushing it. Now hurry up and get dressed, unless you plan to parade around here in your panties." Rona gave a cute squeak and jumped back behind the curtain. Jael smirked at me and posed for a moment to give me a more provocative view. She really did have a spectacular body. I may be in love, but that doesn't put blinders on me, does it? "Just think what your missing, sport." She whispered as she turned to finish dressing.

There was a noticeable negative temperature gradient between the girls as we emerged from the restroom. However its explosive nature had been somewhat defused, mostly by their own conscious efforts, but it had not, and I doubted that it would ever disappear completely. As we progressed I noted that it continued to manifest in a slightly more subtle manner. Neither of them would speak directly to the other for over an hour. They weren't so blatant as to ask me to say something to the other, but the only one they would actually talk to was me. I will admit that it was not entirely unpleasant to find myself wedged between two such beautiful women, but it would have been much nicer if they were even vaguely civil to each other.

We eventually left the administration center and found ourselves on the muddy banks of a steaming river of blood. Sinister vegetation, strangely misshaped in the light of the sullen blood-red sky stood here and there shining a glossy black with metallic-looking berries the color of red gold tightly clustered on each branch.

"Yew!" Rona grimaced at the stench. "It smells like a slaughter house here."

"It should," Jael said without turning to look at her. "We stand at the head of the delta of the River Styx. Further upstream, the river flows with the purest water imaginable, but as it passes through Hell and joins with its four tributaries - Acheron, Cocytus, Phlegethon, and Lethe - it turns to blood as it absorbs the sins of humanity. Downstream it splits into an infinite number of rivulets as it heads toward the frozen Sea of Futility. We are at the brink of the deepest abyss in all Hell and the threshold of the only way out. It's all, as they say, downhill from here."

Eight

"So, what's next?" I asked. "Do we stand around and wait for Charon to paddle on by and pick us up?"

"No, Marcus," Rona corrected me. "Charon guides the ferry on the Acheron between the Vestibule and Limbo, the first circle. Haven't you ever read Dante? Phlegyas is the ferryman on the Styx."

"Actually you're both right," Jael put in. "Dante had some very specific notions of what this place was like. He wasn't particularly accurate, but the customer's always right. This place tends to adjust to suit the individual - if you two compare notes you'll probably disagree on some of the actual details - but we had to go all out to meet his expectations. Lord but that man had an imagination. We kept a few of his ideas, had to actually. After he wrote those books, too many people were expecting his Inferno when they got here and we

couldn't disappoint them.

"Anyway, we only have one ferry here. Charon works the day shift and Phlegyas is on nights. But we're in the wrong section of the river. The nearest ferry landing is a few hundred miles away. Your guess is as good as mine whether that's upstream or down. We're nigh on equidistant from both.

"Without a landing Charon can't stop for us, we'll have to find a way out into the river where we can rendezvous with him."

"Jael?" I asked. "There must be faster ways to get between the Administration Center and the lower depths. Why are we taking the long way around?"

"I'm only a regional supervisor, Marcus. I can get access to the any area, but not without leaving a record of my having been there and we want to get you two out of here without leaving any more of a trail than necessary."

"You know, according to legend," Rona pointed out, "a bath in the River Styx is supposed to confer invulnerability."

"Not here," Jael told us. "Achilles took his baptism in the head waters of the river before it spills into Hell, before its purity has been sullied by the collected sins of mankind. A bath here would confer almost anything but invulnerability - memory loss, apathy, disease, hate, nothing good certainly. Stay out of the river at all costs."

"Then how do we get out to the ferry?"

"We may have to hoof it, but there have been innumerable attempts to escape from Hell on the parts of the souls here. A popular means is by building a small boat and rowing or floating down the river. Our river security is pretty good and most usually get caught before they go too far. We may find an abandoned boat along the shores."

The Styx didn't run straight down to its delta. In fact, it had more twists and bends in it than a snake with heat rash. Three miles downstream we encountered an oxbow lake - a meander of the river that got cut off some time in the past, but which held on to the now stagnant liquid.

I paused on the banks of that lake to peer into the depths of its rotting blood. The stench was nearly more than I could stand, but my attention was drawn to what I had first taken to be ripples in the blackening liquid until I realized that there was no wind that might have produced those ripples.

As I looked closer, I realized that there were faces in the blood - souls condemned to be drowned in this ghastly medium.

"The sullen?" Rona asked.

"And the depressed," Jael augmented. "Along with the people whose anger is of the slow burning sort that weighs down their souls, we also use these areas to put a little spirit back into the souls who have become depressed about their situation."

"Since when do the demons of Hell want to perk up the people they torture?" Rona asked.

"We really do need a better PR department," Jael sighed, rolling her eyes toward the dusky sky. When her gaze returned to a more horizontal angle she looked at me. "You care to explain it? I try to limit myself to once a week."

"Rona," I began, "it seems that this place isn't for eternal damnation. It's more like the ultimate reform school. Souls only stay here until such time as they reach true repentance for their sins, or enlightenment, or whatever. I would guess that since the Styx is supposed to be the river of hate, the depressed souls are placed in these back waters where they will soak up some hate for their situation - something to give them back some gumption to notice their

surroundings and maybe do something to get themselves out of it. Jael, you said that some try to escape by boating down the Styx. Do any make it?"

"A few," she admitted, "but only those who are ready to move on anyway. There's no way to sneak past the final check point. If you are ready to pass you are allowed to proceed, otherwise you go back for another spell of conditioning. Most who leave, however, go when we escort them to the Great Egress, as P.T. Barnum called it."

"Barnum was here?" I asked.

"For a short while, yes. The Boss has a good sense of humor and old Phineas' designation for our only exit was accepted and has been used ever since."

"Dante's story involved a lot of talking to the damned souls here," Rona said as we walked. "So far we've barely even seen any. What gives?"

"Do you really believe everything you read?" Jael snapped. "Yes, he was here. We gave him the grand tour, such as it was at the time, but when he wanted to talk to the souls we had to have a few of the locals talk to him disguised as damned souls. The rest he just made up when he wrote the books. The experience of damnation is a rather internalized one and most souls are too involved to even notice you. I've also been keeping us off the more commonly used paths so it's less likely that we'll find a soul who will talk. Besides, this isn't a guided tour and we haven't got the time to talk with everyone along the way. We have to get you out of here before Chayim realizes that you're missing. Otherwise you'll be back where he had you, maybe with Marcus and me for company."

After that not so subtle hint we made our way down stream without pausing to take in the gruesome scenery, short of looking for a boat. Along the way, we found tons of flotsam and jetsam, but it took us another hour or so to find a small punt on the banks of the river.

"Shit!" Jael swore when she had examined the craft. "No pole. We'll need something to push us along."

"How about a tree branch?" I suggested.

"That would be fine, but there aren't any trees around here, are there?"

"What about that one?" I pointed at a tall, spreading live oak covered with Spanish moss in the distance.

"Now where in Hell did that come from?" Jael muttered. "There's not supposed to be anything like it in this zone."

"No use looking a gift in the mouth though" I said.

"True enough. Let's check it out."

About halfway there, Jael's beeper went off. She pulled it out of her pocket and turned on its transceiver mode.

"Hey boss," Gwenwyn's voices said sounding a bit tinny through the small speaker in the unit, "you have trouble. Supervisor Chayim was just here looking for you. He wants to know why you sprang his prisoner and is threatening to take it to the Boss."

"Bless! I'd hoped we could get further along before he found out. Thanks, Gwen, forewarned is forearmed and all that."

"Be careful, Jael. I don't want to lose you as a boss. I had to work for too many bastards before I found you," Gwenwyn said with feeling that came through even the tiny speaker.

"Thank you," Jael replied simply. "You're aces in my book too. Keep in touch."

"Right, boss," Gwenwyn signed off.

"We could be in trouble now," Jael told us. "Start looking over your shoulders as we go. Chayim's people will be looking for us with a vengeance."

With that in mind we continued on toward the tree in the distance. We seemed to make better time than we had any right to. It was as if the tree were walking toward us even as we walked toward it. When we were nearly to the tree a long, thin branch came falling down from one of the upper branches.

"Heads up!" I heard a familiar squeaky voice call down. I looked up to see Ratatosk waving at us. I waved back and started to walk up to the trunk. Suddenly the air was full of outraged screeches as Samuel and Vethrfofnir launched themselves from their perches and began to defend the tree, which had transformed itself from the live oak to its more well-known ash form.

At first I thought they were attacking us alone, but they were also attacking two others - demons in blue uniforms who had been following us. Their attacks at us were just enough to discourage us from approaching the tree, but they really tore into the other two.

I picked up the branch and yelled, "Run for it," suiting my actions to the words as I led the way back to the river. A few minutes later we were back at the banks of the Styx near the abandoned punt.

"Were those others Chayim's people?" I asked.

"Yes," Jael replied, "I recognized one of them. They won't be reporting back for a long time if at all. Those two birds were shredding them alive last I looked." She glanced back in the direction we had come from. Yggdrasill was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did it go?" Rona asked.

"Were we where I think we were?" Jael asked simultaneously.

"Depends on where you think we were," I replied, dealing with Jael's question first. "And it didn't go anywhere, Rona. We did."

"Huh?" they both said staring at me.

"Unless it was some form of illusion, and judging by this branch we got, I doubt that, that was Yggdrasill, or one of its avatars."

"But that's impossible," Jael protested. "The only section of the tree that extends to Hell is one of its roots, and that comes down near the center of the frozen sea, lightyears from here."

"One of its branches," I replied, "leads to the service entrance in the caldera. That's how Rona and I arrived."

"Really? I didn't know that. I thought you came in by the usual means - pentagrams, portals, that sort of thing. They all end up in the caldera. I didn't even know there was a way here through the World-tree, and if I don't know that, it must be a closely kept secret. I wonder how many know about that entrance. Could it be a two-way route?"

"I don't think so. Yggdrasill disappeared as soon as I lost contact with it. What I don't understand was why it should appear to us here just when we needed a pole."

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation," Jael said thoughtfully, "but I doubt that it will help us to explore that now. I wonder why the birds didn't attack us with the same vigor that they did Chayim's people"

"Perhaps they knew we weren't approaching with hostile intent, but that Chayim's minions were. I just remembered, when I was on Yggdrasill," I told them, "Ratatosk told me that there were rumors that Hell has been negotiating with Niflheim on some big power deal."

"Really? What would the boss want with that frigid bitch? Are you sure of that?"

"That it was a rumor? Oh yes! I definitely heard a rumor. Was it true? How would I know?"

"Point taken. I wish I'd known of this before we started out, it might have been useful if I knew who was involved."

"I thought you were only a regional supervisor," I said.

"I am, but keeping your eyes open is the way you get ahead around here. We'll need to strip that branch and make a pole out of it. Give it to me, I'll handle it." I handed it to her but she screamed as she took hold of it and quickly dropped it to reveal that she'd severely burned her hand. "I guess you'd better handle it," she admitted. She looked at her hand for a moment and it quickly healed itself.

I picked up the branch, but before I could pull out my pocketknife it transformed itself into a smoothly shaped pole approximately ten feet long.

"How did you do that?" Rona asked.

"It must be an inherent property of the wood. The Tree itself adapts to the subject's needs in providing desired food and directional orientation. I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised if a piece of it should adapt, within limitations, to the needs of the user. Well, all aboard, I guess. It's time we hit the river."

"Have you ever punted before, Marcus?" Jael asked as she stepped into the shallow boat.

"Only on the fourth down," I replied, helping Rona in.

"Be especially careful in pushing us off so you won't fall into the river, and as you pole us along, try not to get too much of it on you."

"I'll be careful." I stepped into the boat, pushed us off from the shore, and got my greatest surprise so far.

As I put the pole into the fluid of the Styx a burst of steam erupted from around it with such force that I lost my balance and was thrown to the deck of the punt. Rona and Jael quickly grabbed and held on to me before I could fall into the river. I was still holding the pole, but now it was completely out of the river. The end that had been in was now burnt.

I sat up to discover that we were now several yards out into the Styx and were drifting slowly downstream in the sluggish sanguine flow.

"An unusual method of locomotion," Jael commented dryly. "We'll need to get out into the center of the river in order to meet the ferry. I suggest that you brace yourself and use the propellant qualities of the pole to get us there."

I did so and we were soon out where we needed to be. The pole, however, was now only two feet long, barely enough for me to hold on to safely and still be able to guide the boat. We decided to hold off using it so we could maneuver as the ferry approached.

While we waited I pulled a few pieces of fruit out of my pack for Rona and me. Jael helped herself to her own supplies and, in all, it was as pleasant a picnic as one could have on a river of blood, which is to say, not at all, but it was a chance to rest at least.

While we were waiting we saw several groups of demons patrolling the shores. Jael thought they were looking for us and she was probably right. Some of them did notice us on the river and pointed us out to others in their group.

Finally we saw a large, barge-like vessel approaching from upstream.

"Okay," Jael said. "Here she comes. Bring us up on her right side."

"Starboard," Both Rona and I corrected her.

"Pardon?"

"Her starboard side, Jael," I informed her. "On a boat of a ship starboard is right, port is left."

"Whatever."

As I started the rendezvous maneuver, Rona noticed two boats moving rapidly toward us from down stream. I had been planning to let the large, approaching ship come to us, but now I decided to meet it part way.

The enormous vessel bearing down on us began to slow and come to a complete halt as we came up on her port beam. The speedboats, only a hundred yards away, veered off to await the outcome of our encounter with Charon.

"Charon outranks Chayim," Jael explained, "and they won't dare interfere if he decides to step in now."

"Ahoy, Jael!" a deep booming voice called down from the ferry's gunwales. "Have you taken up boating now? And why are you out in the middle of the Styx without a paddle?"

"Ahoy, Charon!" she returned. "Allow us to board and I'll tell you all about it."

"All right, girl. This promises to be interesting, and at my age anything to stave off boredom is worth the Devil's own ransom." A moment later a long rope and board ladder was dropped down to us. At the same time the remaining few inches of the pole from Yggdrasill suddenly flew out of my hand and into the Styx, where it erupted in a cloud of steam and smoke.

"What did you do that for?" Jael asked. "We might have needed it later." Rona nodded her agreement. It was the first time she agreed with anything Jael had said.

"I didn't. It just jumped out of my hand."

"Oh well," sighed Jael. "I suppose it served its purpose." She turned and led the way up the ladder.

"Wait! Not those two," Charon objected.

"Charon," Jael said with a hint of steel in her voice, "you must let them aboard. This has been willed where..."

"Oh don't give me that rot!" the ferryman objected. "We both know that you haven't got that sort of authority, so don't you try to bluff an old master."

"It was worth a shot, cousin. Besides they're part of the story."

"All right, girl. All right," Charon boomed with laughter. "Bring 'em with you."

Nine

"Welcome aboard the Ziusudra, mates!" The ferryman greeted us in his booming voice. He stood well over seven feet tall and appeared to have been sculpted from a slab of solid muscle and then overlaid with a veneer of skin. Had Jael told me that I was meeting Atlas, I may well have believed her. His blue-black, curly hair was nearly as long as his matching beard and formed a nearly imperceptible line of division between itself and the skin of his face, which appeared to be sun-darkened to a nearly black shade, although how he found an area where he could get a tan was beyond me. For the final touch, there was a

twisted black cheroot protruding out of the corner of his mouth that produced clouds of black smoke that might have done a cartoon villain proud.

"This is a very big boat," Rona said in awe.

"Ship, child," Charon corrected her quickly. "It's a ship."

"More like an ark," I muttered.

"Exactly!" Charon replied. "I salvaged her myself after she was beached on Mount Ararat. Until this century she was the largest vessel ever built, although I have my agents negotiating for the Q.E. II, I'll always regret passing up my shot at the Titanic"

"Wait a minute," I said in disbelief. "Are you trying to tell me that this is the real Noah's Ark?"

"Where else would I find a ship large enough to get my job done?"

"Where are all the people?" Rona asked while I digested that.

"I'm almost at the end of my run. The remaining souls are below in the aft cargo bay, They'll all be disembarking at Terminus Station."

"Noah's Ark? Really?" I still couldn't believe it.

"Uh huh," Charon nodded. "He was no sailor, though, didn't even think the tub needed a name. So I named it after the old boy using his original name."

"Ziusudra?" Rona asked.

"Yes, child. Ziusudra, Utnapishtim, Atrahasis, Noah, they're all the same person. No matter what the religion, only one ark could have ever been built, otherwise the world-sea would have been filled with the things.

"Anyway, I had to argue with Noah about it for a century, but I eventually got my way."

"What about that structure that people claim to see every so often on Ararat?"

"What? The old monastery? Haw haw! As I said, I salvaged this scow from the lower slopes of Ararat, but later some monks in the Middle Ages went as high up as they could manage and built a monastery, trying to make it look like the ark as it was described in their Bible. They didn't come very close to the real thing, but then the description is rather vague. Three hundred cubits by fifty cubits by thirty cubits with three decks. That leaves a lot to the imagination, hey? Anyway ten years after they completed the monastery it was torn in two during an earthquake that also destroyed what served as a path up the mountain to it. Ever since, a long line of pseudo-archaeologists have been claiming that it's still up there. Wise up, kid! If you put a five thousand year old boat on that mountain it would have rotted away without a trace three times over by now. As it is, I've had to repair it so many times myself that the only original timber left on this hulk is in a helium-filled museum case down below. Now, girl," he said, turning toward Jael, "where's that story you promised me?"

"Why don't we go to your cabin?" she suggested. "I'm sure we'll all be far more comfortable there."

"What cabin?" he asked. "I don't have a cabin. What good is a cabin for someone who never needs to rest?"

"Cousin, we all need to rest every now and then."

"You're not doing anything for my image you know," Charon said with a vitriol waterfall in his voice. "Oh very well, yes I do rest during the night shift, but never on Ziusudra. I'm the only regular pilot on board during the day shift, although I occasionally will give one of the passengers a busman's holiday before he meets his final reward. But there has to be someone at the helm. This worm-eaten wreck doesn't exactly have an autopilot, you know. I've only had in-board engines for the last fifty years. Come on up to the pilot house; we'll talk

as we continue on down the river. You know, there was a fellow about a hundred years ago who told me I ought to have this tub remodeled as a Mississippi river boat..."

The Ziusudra was in essence a very large rectangular box with rounded corners. The design didn't seem very sea-worthy to me, but Charon assured me that it was actually a very stable design especially in the long, rolling waves of the open ocean. The upper deck was flat with only a token gunwale to keep one from falling overboard, and a large rectangular building sat astride the center line of the upper deck. Charon's pilot house was actually the forward section of that center structure.

Charon may have blown his chance at trading in Noah's Ark for the HMS Titanic, but from the bridge I'd have never known. The room was all dark wood and brass fittings with controls that were strictly turn-of-the-century. Much older and I'd have been tempted to sing, "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!" and do a quick hornpipe. So much for Jael's assertion that Hell keeps up with the times.

Charon turned his engines on to half speed ahead and stood at the huge ship's wheel as the ark started once more in its progress downstream. While he guided the craft, Jael told him what we were up to and why.

"Chayim, eh?" he spat and drew deeply on his cheroot when Jael had brought him up to date. "I never did trust that young upstart with an angel's name. Anything that'll earn him a kimchee enema, is worth devoting a millennium or two to. So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, all we need," Jael explained, "is to get to the Egress before Chayim catches on. Anything you can do to speed us on our way would be appreciated."

"Girl, I can only take you as far as my last stop but I can get you there in next to no time." He turned to the speed controls of the ship that once served as the largest floating zoo in creation and switched from the casual half speed to a truly incredible flank speed. Bells and sirens went off as we heard the engines below begin to rev up. "There'll be a slight delay before the engines kick in with their hundred and ten percent," he told us taking another puff on his cigar. "Grab on to something. This will really knock your socks off." He grinned a vicious grin at us just before the Ziusudra made the first attempt at escape velocity by an ocean-going vessel in the history of the universe, certain Japanese anime not withstanding.

I grabbed on to a stout post on one side of the bridge and Rona held on to its mate on the other side, while Jael braced herself against the aft bulkhead. Charon, of course, grasped the wheel with his superhuman strength. As the acceleration began, my feet seemed to leave the floor cartoon-style and I soon felt like my body was nearly parallel to the deck, although visual examination of the situation belied the feeling. The wind noise outside reached a deafening howl and I missed most of the scenery in a dark red blur as it went flashing by us.

Suddenly the acceleration rate slowed and my full weight gradually returned to the floor. All the noise stopped except for a slight ringing in my ears and I feared that I might have gone deaf until Charon said in a normal tone of voice, "Ultimate velocity achieved. We should be arriving at Terminus Station."

"Hey," I said in an almost whisper, "that's some trick."

"If you think that's something, you ought to be around when I kick in the afterburners." Afterburners? On Noah's Ark? Maybe he was kidding.

Instead I said, "I doubt that I'd survive the experience."

A few minutes later I began to feel a subtle pressure pushing me toward the great ship's bow and realized that we were decelerating, although at a somewhat slower rate than we had built up speed. True to his word, Charon had us in sight of the dock at Terminus

Station within five minutes. Because of the size and the mass of the ark it took us another fifteen minutes to dock safely and Charon told us he was rushing the maneuver shamelessly as it was, but while he was capable of docking faster, this was as fast as he could do it without someone noticing his haste. Jael agreed that we didn't want to attract attention, especially since we had already come so far.

"I'll give you three a few minutes to disembark before I start unloading my passengers," Charon told us, relighting his cheroot with a brief burst of flame spat out between his lips. "Good luck and kick that young upstart where it hurts." We waved a farewell and proceeded down the gangplank.

The smell of the river here near its end was almost more than I could bear. Rona frequently looked sick, but Jael told us that since we were still living, we would in time grow used to it, or at least be able to tolerate it better. I hoped we wouldn't be here that long.

There was a large squad of blue-uniformed demons waiting on the dock armed with cruel looking bullwhips and pitchforks. The expressions on their faces conveyed the feeling that they really loved their work and were looking forward to giving us a demonstration of what they did so well. Jael greeted their leader, a demon in a uniformly black suit identical to my own and showed him some papers and they let us pass unmolested.

Aside from the intensified charnel stench erupting from the Styx as it neared the end of its nine circumvolutions around and through the regions of Hell and the distant roar of an immense waterfall, Terminus Station was not much different from any other port town. In fact I found it vaguely reminiscent of New Orleans' French Quarter, with its riverside docks, two or three storied buildings and narrow streets neatly arranged in a tight grid. The soul who had earlier suggested transforming the ark into a Mississippi riverboat may have been right. Certainly it would have fit right in, given the surroundings.

"Out! Out, you corrupted souls!" We heard Charon boom behind us "Get you all hence to the nethermost depths that is your fate!"

"He always was a ham of the first water," Jael said with a touch of pride for her cousin. We began to hear the staccato crack of whips and an occasional scream as a damned soul was either whipped or punctured by the tines of a pitchfork, but these unpleasant sounds faded rapidly as we left the dock area.

"Jael," Rona said questioningly, looking around her, "this town seems very residential."

"It is. This is the last residential area before the deepest pit of the Abyss - the basin that contains the Sea of Futility. Most of the demons who work in the nethermost regions live here. A few of the upper crust from above have condos here as well. It's not a bad place to visit on vacation, but I prefer my forest for a home. I'll probably keep it, at least as a vacation house, even when I move up."

We were walking through an area of small shops, taverns and restaurants that only furthered the illusion that we could be in New Orleans. As we walked past one such shop I saw two demons concluding some sort of deal with what looked like paper currency being exchanged.

"You have paper money here?" I asked.

"Hey, we invented it, you know," Jael said, flashing me a big smile. "It's the root of all evil, or so they tell me."

"I thought that was money in general,"

"That too," she agreed.

"I'm hungry," Rona complained.

"Here," I offered, "Have a banana."

"Marcus, what is this fixation you have on fruit and nuts, lately. I, for one, feel a desperate need for a rare steak."

"All we have is fruit and nuts."

"Can't we stop and eat in one of these restaurants?" Jael shot me a quick look that silently told me that I ought to be the one to explain this.

"Not here," I told Rona. "If you eat any of the food of Hell, you'll be forced to stay here, just like in Greek mythology."

"Oh my!" she gasped, "but I've been eating here all along."

"I checked that before we had you released," Jael put in. "Chayim went to the trouble of importing food from outside for you. I don't know what he's up to, but he didn't want you stuck here permanently, at least not yet."

"But that means I could have been the bait in a trap. How hard was it to spring me?"

"Too easy, but I couldn't find out what the trap was so I decided to take the chance of springing it and you, to see what might happen. So far, it's been going too smoothly. We got out of those two encounters just a bit too easily to satisfy me. Also I may not have mentioned it, but I've spotted several of Chayim's people around this town. We're being watched but as long as we continue to go the way they want us to, they'll just continue to guide us along. They tried to turn us back from Yggdrasill, although the birds did a better job of it than they did and we managed to avoid them by taking a trip on the Ziusudra. There must have been an earlier ambush that we bypassed by that excursion - that's why they tried to cut us off - but now Chayim must have changed his plans and we're back to heading the way he wants. I think the only big problem spot left will be the customs station at the Great Egress. Too bad it's our only way out."

"How far is it to the Egress?" I asked.

"Farther than you could possibly imagine. You see, this place is as much a state of mind as it is a set of spatial coordinates. Distances tend to contract and expand depending on one's need to get somewhere. That's the only way we can get around in an infinite realm. It's not a perfect system, of course. With this system we do need to pass certain points in order to proceed. As you might say, we need to touch all the bases and those bases are where we put our checkpoints. Besides, if we could just will ourselves somewhere our clients would be able to escape before they were truly able to move on and that would create chaos in the universe."

"I would think that Hell would want to bring about chaos in the universe," Rona murmured.

"Just the opposite," Jael contradicted her. "Hell has a very important place in the universe and we can only maintain that position by supporting order. Without order, there would be no Heaven nor Hell; the distinction would be meaningless." We soon came to the edge of a cliff, beside over a valley enshrouded with a perpetual fog, but the top of the clouds that formed that fog were a mile or more beneath us.

"This is one of the few places that actually existed before we gave Dante the grand tour," Jael told us, "although we brought him to another section of the cliff, far away from the waterfall. Too bad, really. I'd have loved to see how he described that. Anyway, as you look off into the distance you will see the Titans that line the edge of the sea. They serve to place some of the damned souls into the ice." As I watched, the nearest one reached out and picked up a handful of souls. Then he threw them out over the ultimate abyss where they fell and disappeared into the mist. "That's how we distribute most of the souls in this area, but a few, more technology minded, we toss out with catapults."

"Technology minded?" I asked.

"Just kidding. We use the catapults to supplement the workload possible by the giants during the busy times, like during wars."

"And is that how we're going to get down?" I asked with trepidation, "or are we going to ask one of the Titans to let us down gently?"

"Neither," she replied. "We're taking the V.I.P. elevator."

Jael led us briskly to a small building set by the edge of the cliff. Like the rest of the town it had a distinctly New Orleans look to the iron gate at the front door and the incongruous palm tree in its front yard. Inside there were another two blue-uniformed demons in a single 10' x 10' room with a sliding door directly across from us as we entered. After checking our papers they allowed us to enter the elevator car through the sliding door.

Suddenly, the elevator slid down through its bronze tube and into the open air revealing that the walls of the car were made of glass - something I hadn't noticed as long as I couldn't see outside.

The view was magnificently breath-taking. We were about a mile from where the Styx emptied over the cliff and into the Sea of Futility frozen beneath us. According to Jael we were only on one edge of the Styx's vast delta region. From our descending vantage point we could see not one but thousands of the Styx's torrents of rotting blood cascading off the edge and into the dark red mist below.

"Truly the greatest fall in the universe," Jael told us. "The delta stretches for a thousand miles along that edge, and all of it drops into the Sea of Futility." Something had been bothering me about that ever since she first described it to me and I decided to bring it up now.

"If the Sea of Futility is completely frozen," I began, "why doesn't this basin eventually fill up?"

"Good question," Jael commended me. "There are hot springs beneath the sea that melt the ice from below. Currents then draw the liquid out through the bottom and into the bedrock of Hell. The bedrock acts like a natural filter and purifies the water again before it eventually finds its way through the water table to the springs at the headwaters of the four rivers. In all, it's a magnificent example of recycling. Even the corrupted substance that is filtered out of the water is refined and reused as the magic that powers the entire realm. Nothing goes to waste here, Marcus. We have too big a job to do without adding waste and pollution control to our daily chores."

"But you have pollution all over the place," I protested. "The acid rain in your forest and the reeking stench of the Styx are just two examples."

"True, but they are only there as object lessons to the souls we are punishing. On Judgment Day, when our work is complete, even those examples will be erased. We do have to live here, after all."

I heard a whimper as Rona grabbed on to my arm suddenly and I remembered that she had an acrophobic tendency that must have finally kicked in several minutes into our descent.

"Don't worry," I tried to say comfortingly in vain, putting my arms around her. "It will be all right. Just don't look." Too late she was already staring in hypnotized horror at the vista, particularly its downward aspects, all the while clutching my arm fiercely.

Finally, the elevator car dipped into the bloody clouds and our view was obscured. Rona's grip on my arm slowly loosened and I felt the prickling tingles as circulation was restored. I looked at her face. It was pale - all the blood had drained out of it - and she slumped suddenly in my arms, passing out now that the strain had relaxed.

I let her down to the floor gently and Jael examined her carefully to make sure she was all right.

"She'll live," Jael said after a few moments. "I didn't realize she was afraid of heights. We could have taken an enclosed elevator down. Just thought you'd appreciate the view."

"I did," I told her, "but I guess Rona just wasn't up to it. You're sure she's all right?"

"Yes. I know that she and I don't get along at all. I've been trying to be civil, but it is tough. As I think about it, I don't get along with many women at all. Men, on the other hand..."

We reached bottom a few minutes later as Rona began to recover. Jael helped me guide her to a couch in the room that the elevator opened into. The room was a near duplicate to the one we passed through to enter the lift, complete to the uniformed demons who demanded to see our papers before allowing us to leave when Rona was ready to go on sometime later.

It was snowing outside, sort of. The mist from the great fall of the Styx was condensed and frozen in the arctic environment that encompassed the Sea of Futility and it precipitated, piling up in dirty pink drifts much farther than the eye could see. Of course, the eye could only see for about thirty yards in the dirty blizzard, but Jael informed us that the perpetual storm reached out for a thousand miles or better. The sea, she explained was as much glacier as it was ocean.

At least here the stink of the polluted Styx was almost gone, frozen into the ice cap of the Sea of Futility.

We found several vehicles outside the elevator house that resembled large, enclosed snowmobiles. After the warmth in the upper regions of Hell, I began to realize how the Jamaican bobsled team at the Winter Olympics must have felt, especially now that I was about to ride in a giant motorized luge.

When we were all aboard, Jael shut the hatch. The motor came to life with villainous basso roar and as Jael slipped us into gear the sled vaulted us off at an alarming acceleration into the dirty pink storm. A few minutes later we were beyond the storm area, which gave credence to Jael's earlier explanation about distances in Hell. We may have been going fast, but to get through a thousand-mile wide storm in minutes under Earthly conditions, we would have burned up from the air friction. The surface we were riding over gradually changed from a dirty pink, snowy surface to one that was a grizzly dark red shading into black and icy.

Jael was obviously following some sort of path, although whether it was a well worn track or an actual road on the ice, I couldn't tell. And I never did find out if Dante's description of the traitors stuck in the ice of the abyss was accurate or not, because our speed was such that all nearby details blurred.

Finally, after an hour or better, we came to the great central tower of Hell. It stretched up to an impossible height of one hundred miles and was some twelve or fifteen miles wide at the base. Such a structure could never have been built by ordinary means, and even the magic used to hold it together and keep it from collapsing under its own weight had to be of a magnitude just under that required to create whole worlds. There were ground, or rather ice, level doors evenly spaced all around the base of the windowless tower and Jael steered our sled part-way around the tower until she came to the door she wanted.

"What is the purpose of this tower?" Rona asked hesitantly. "Is this where Satan lives?"

"Not hardly," Jael replied. "This tower is relatively new, only about fifty-five years old or so. We use it mostly for broadcasting and communications - radio, television, that sort of thing. The tower is tall enough that with an adequate transmitter it can reach most of the

currently settled regions."

"That's all? The whole thing is nothing more than a giant antenna?" I asked.

"Mostly, I said. There are also quarters for semi-resident demons. Nobody really lives here, but it's so remote a location that very few of us when stationed here want to commute home to Terminus Station or even farther, so we have adequate facilities here for comfortable lodgings and supplies are brought in once a week. That way those stationed here, and it is not one of the more prestigious assignments, trust me, can stay here between days off and then go home for their weekends or vacations. The great Egress is also here at the heart of the tower."

"What was here before the tower?" Rona asked.

"Depends on the millennium. Originally there was a mountain, about as tall as this tower. But it was mostly coal, with a large vein of diamonds at its heart. That was until maybe fifteen centuries ago, before we learned about ecology and how to manage our environment properly. The entire mountain was eventually mined down below sea level. This was mostly to get all the coal and diamonds, but it also gave us great access to the Egress, which was approachable only through a vast and unchartable labyrinth of natural caves.

"After that we usually had some form of gatehouse with guards but eventually we found that a giant robotic statue of what most people thought the boss looked like frozen into the ice guarded the Egress better than any guards could have. At least it did for a thousand years until the souls started catching on and tried to escape. The guards, you must realize, are there for the protection of the damned souls, not to keep them in. If they leave too soon, they'll only be sent back to serve their previous sentences over from scratch before being allowed to pick up where they left off.

"After that we built a castle here, which worked nearly perfectly, until we got the idea for the tower which is equally effective."

We entered the tower and found a corridor about the width of a two-lane highway that went straight out of sight until it became a mere point in the distance. On the walls on both sides of the corridor were black signs with bright red lettering that said simply, "This way to the Great Egress" with an arrow pointing down the hall.

"We walk from here," Jael informed us. "I haven't spotted any of Chayim's people, but if we can get to the Egress, we should be home free. The Egress is guarded by Lucifer's Elite. They're extremely loyal and almost totally incorruptible. They won't be working with Chayim's minions and if we're attacked, they'll defend us and ask questions later. Let's go."

It was several miles to the center of the tower where the Great Egress was, but the entire corridor was done up in a bleak array of uniformly speckled gray tiles with a dark gray linoleum floor. Jael was insistent that we keep moving and try not to slow down so Rona and I ate while we walked. It was only the restorative properties of Yggdrasill's fruit that allowed us to keep going for nearly two hours straight at a full speed walk. All I had left by the end of the corridor was the original pomegranate that Ratatosk gave me in the tree. We might have eaten that too, but have you ever tried to eat a pomegranate while walking? It's no easy task.

Predictably there was another guard station at the end of the corridor just before a large iron-reinforced, wooden door. On the door was a bronze plaque that like the signs at the other end of the corridor said, "This way to the Great Egress." The two guards here wore dark red uniforms instead of the more familiar blue and black ones. These were the special uniforms of the Lucifer's Elite Cadre.

Rona and I showed them our passports. They passed me immediately but one of them, a demoness with nearly black skin, blond hair, and red glowing eyes, frowned a bit while inspecting Rona's and comparing it to her computer records. Finally she gave her grudging acceptance of the orders and Jael escorted us to the door to the Egress. She

opened the door for us and told us to proceed down the corridor behind it and that we'd know what to do.

The hallway beyond the door was about one hundred yards long and seemed to stop at a dead end, but we never got to see that end close up. As Rona and I stepped through the door there was a warning buzz from the guards' terminal and the demoness that had given Rona's passport the twice-over shouted for us to stop.

"Run!" Jael hissed, pushing us the rest of the way through the hall. She tried to close the door behind us, but when it would not move fast enough, she gave up and joined us in our flight. The two elite demons picked up their pitchforks and gave chase.

Jael was capable of running faster than either Rona or I were and she soon caught up to us and tried pushing us along. When we about halfway down the corridor several things happened at once.

The corridor started to fade from my vision - I assume this was how Jael and Rona perceived it as well. At the same time the guard-demons, seeing us start to fade out from their vision, threw their pitchforks at us in a last ditch effort to catch us. I felt something hard and very pointed slam into my back but it didn't do more than throw me off balance.

Suddenly, and for one step only, we were running on a branch of Yggdrasill and then the scene changed with our next step and we were in a lush, garden-like environment that seemed to extend in all directions for many miles.

All those abrupt changes of terrain caused me to stumble, losing what little balance I had left, and the three of us fell to the deep but neatly cut grass.

"Well that was hairy," I said, getting up, "but at least we made it. Right, dear?" There was no answer from Rona but I heard a small choking sound come from Jael. Turning, I saw that she was staring in horror at Rona, who was lying face down on the grass with a heavy iron pitchfork sticking in her back.

Ten

As we stared at Rona's body, wisps of smoke began to issue from it where the pitchfork protruded from her back. The sight of that fork offended me beyond words and I reached to remove it, but Jael stopped me.

"No, Marcus. She's dead and if you touch that pitchfork, you'll be dead too and consigned to Hell by your own willing actions." I struggled desperately and unreasoningly to grab the fork. It wasn't that I didn't hear what Jael was saying, but in my shock, I just didn't care. Jael, however, was much stronger than she looked and she kept me from destroying myself in that moment of despair.

I watched helplessly and the smoke darkened to an ugly, greasy black mass of almost tangible consistency, enveloping her lifeless body. Soon she and the pitchfork were lost from my sight in the smoke. After a minute or two, as I continued to struggle against Jael to reach Rona, the black cloud began to dissipate. When it had completely dispersed, both Rona's body and the pitchfork had disappeared leaving only a charred spot on the grass to mark their passing.

Finally, I stopped fighting Jael and sank to my knees sobbing at my helplessness. I don't know how long I knelt there, oblivious to my surroundings but I occasionally picked up Jael's voice nearby muttering incantations. She must have finished with what she was doing

about the same time I came up for air.

"Bless!" I heard her say. "That bastard planned this, and I didn't catch on. Shit!" Her invective snapped me the rest of the way out of my grief-induced stupor and I looked at her to see what was wrong. "Chayim!" she spat, "He fed her Hell-food."

"Didn't you say he imported food from outside?" I asked, feeling a cold stab of anxiety strike me through the heart, by way of my throat.

"He did. That was part of the trap," she replied coldly. "As I told you earlier, Marcus, Hell-food causes the subject to belong in Hell. The result is that even though Rona was not yet dead, and therefore should have been able to escape through the Egress unimpeded, the food created conditions that allowed the pitchfork, or any other means of retrieval, to return her to Hell. I just wish I knew what he was up to. If he wanted her as a dead soul, why did he go about it in such a round-about way? You, on the other hand, truly belonged out of Hell. That's why the pitchfork they threw at you bounced off your back."

"Oh yeah. So that's what it was. It threw me off balance. That's why we fell off the Tree."

"What tree?"

"You didn't see it? Well, maybe I imagined it, but for a moment, just long enough for us to take one step, I thought I was back in the branches of Yggdrasil."

"I missed that. Are you sure it happened? I thought the birds kept Hellspawn off the Tree."

"I'm not sure of anything. It was very fast, but Chayim walked for quite some time dragging Rona through the branches on his way to the service entrance. Maybe they only attack those approaching from below. What's wrong?" Jael was looking puzzled.

"Well, first, a pitchfork was thrown at me but it hit my pack instead of me." She held the torn cloth in front of me. The pack was now half empty. "Second, we should have landed somewhere in either Heaven or Earth. Those are the only two places the Egress leads to. Come to think of it, we should have made it all the way to the end of the corridor. We were only about halfway, weren't we?"

"It looked that way to me."

"Well, maybe we did pass through the Great Tree after all. I wonder. There might be more to the Egress than anyone ever suspected. Well, the next question is, 'Where are we?'"

"Earth maybe," I suggested uncertainly.

"Maybe, but it doesn't feel right."

"Well we won't find out where we are by hanging about here," I noted. "There seems to be a path running off in that direction. Let's follow it."

"Why not?" she shrugged.

The path appeared to be a well planned affair winding through the tremendous garden we found ourselves in. An hour later, we found a strangely dressed woman, sitting on a bench-like stone talking contemplating a nearby brook.

"Hello," Jael greeted them. They returned the greeting and after a brief pause she blurted, "Where on Earth are we?"

"Earth?" laughed the woman. She was divinely beautiful and appeared to be in her mid-twenties. In spite of her diminutive height she somehow seemed statuesque, with straight, medium length, dark brown hair that she kept tied back. She was wearing a long, plain, white linen gown and was adorned only by a single yellow flower in her hair and a plain

ceramic pendant on a chain around her neck. Her strangely round-shaped face also sported a fair sized nose, which somehow accented rather than marred her beauty. Her rich brown eyes sparkled with mirth as she continued, "You think this is Earth? Oh that's funny!"

"Where are we then?" Jael asked a heartbeat ahead of me. "And who are you?"

"This is Dilmun," she answered simply, "and my name is Nin-ti."

"Pleased to meet you, Nin-ti," I said in a polite reply more from upbringing than feeling at the moment. "My name is Marcus and this is Jael. What or where in creation is Dilmun?"

"Dilmun?" Nin-ti laughed, "Why it is the flower of all creation! This is the garden of the gods in which Ninhursag created her most perfect works. This is Paradise. Are you blackheads?"

"Blackheads?" Jael asked.

Nin-ti took closer look at us and said, "Sorry, now that I take a real look at you I can see that the shape of your heads is all wrong, and your hair," she said to me, "is much too light. You'll have to forgive me, it's been such a long time since we had any visitors here."

"Who were the blackheads?"

"Our original worshipers," Nin-ti replied sadly. "Now that I think about it, they disappeared or were conquered, maybe, by another tribe who also worshipped us, but under different names."

"That happens a lot," Jael said knowingly.

"Yes," Nin-ti sighed. "I believe the Blackheads have also been called Sumerians, although I haven't kept up as well as I might - it's been so long since we had anything to do except talk to each other here. Even a god can die of boredom - many of the Anunnaki passed away centuries ago. So what brings you here to our glorious kingdom?"

"We're not sure," Jael responded. "We were on our way to Earth. We got sidetracked and ended up here. How do we find the way out?"

"There isn't a regular way out. Not the way there used to be. We can only leave if we have a direct analog in another realm. For example I have several direct analogs in related religions. My name means, the 'Lady of the Rib.' I was created by Mother Ninhursag to heal the rib of Enki when he was dying from a curse. My direct analogs are the other goddesses who were created in other pantheons to do the same for Enki's analogs. I do have one indirect analog with some of the modern religions, but I haven't been able to contact her. Maybe you've heard of her. Her name is Eve."

"But Eve isn't a goddess," I objected.

"No she isn't that's why she's an indirect analog, but another translation of my name is the 'Lady who makes live.' Eve was created from Adam's rib and her name means 'She who makes live.' It was considered to be a very clever pun in Sumerian, but it got lost in the translation to Hebrew. Oh, you're feeling a great pain," She said sympathetically, staring at me again. "What happened?"

I had trouble getting the words out, so Jael explained to Nin-ti how Rona had died.

"Oh my! I can help a bit, if you will let me. My only power is the ability to heal ribs, but this amulet I wear was fashioned by Queen Innana to fend off depression brought on by loss. She gave one to each of us after the universe began to shrink." She looped the chain that held the amulet around my neck. I immediately felt better. My grief over Rona's loss was still with me, but I no longer felt that it weighed me down. I hadn't realized until then just how low I had been sinking into depression. I paused to look at the amulet. It was a fired ceramic disk with what looked like cuneiform all over it on both sides.

"Thank you," I said gratefully, "but won't you need it? I imagine that you've lost far more than I have."

"Perhaps," She replied, "but I have others. Many of us never wore theirs. They were the first to die and I have a few of those. Also they lose their effectiveness on a user after a while. It will do me good to go without for a while."

"So are we stuck here?" Jael asked, cutting to the heart of the matter, "Marcus is a mortal and I don't have any known analogs."

"I really don't know," Nin-ti confessed, "but you can try asking Enki, he's the god of water and wisdom. If anyone in Dilmun can help you, he can."

"Where can we find this Enki?"

"In his home, probably. I'll take you there." She started walking down a path and beckoned for us to follow.

I had feared that it might take us hours to get anywhere here, considering that I could see the garden stretching out as far for what seemed like miles, but distances in Dilmun were as subjective as in Hell, maybe more so, and we casually walked through this prototype Garden of Eden as if we wore the legendary seven league boots. We strolled through an area where we saw some gods and goddesses lounging about on long wooden benches sipping beer, through long straws from out of a common pot. Nin-ti stopped there to ask if anyone had seen Enki recently, but none of them had. One tall, light-haired god, called Nanna-Sin told her that he thought his father had gone to take a nap about a century ago and was probably still sleeping in his home so once more we followed Nin-ti through Dilmun until we came to a beach.

Nin-ti stopped to look around and then turned south and walked down the beach a few miles. We came at last to a headland jutting out into a fairly heavy surf. Nin-ti told us we would be following an underwater path that went directly into the huge waves crashing down before us and that we should be prepared not to panic. As long as we stayed on the path we would be able to breath normally.

"Who is this Enki?" Jael asked sarcastically. "The Surfer god?"

"Cowabunga, dude!" I said dryly. My sense of humor had been more or less restored by Nin-ti's amulet. "Actually, you're close. According to the classes I've taken Enki is the Sumerian god of waters and wisdom. I believe he is also known as Ea."

"By the Akkadians, yes," agreed Nin-ti. "So you do know of us."

"A bit," I admitted. "I took a class in ancient religions during the second semester of my freshman year. Some of it is coming back to me now. There were a lot of stories about Enki, he was a real character. Oh, now I remember you," I said turning to Nin-ti, "You were one of the eight goddesses created to save Enki's life when Ninhursag cursed him for eating her special plants in Dilmun."

"That's right," she agreed.

"I don't get it," Jael complained. "You were created by Ninhursag to cure Enki of a disease that she afflicted him with?"

"Right," I informed her, accidentally cutting Nin-ti off. Fortunately, she was more amused than annoyed. "Enlil, the king of the gods, promised the fox a great reward if he could convince Ninhursag to remove the curse. What I don't know is how the fox got Ninhursag to relent. That part of the story was on a tablet that was damaged." I looked at Nin-ti questioningly.

"I'll tell you as we walk," she promised, turning to walk directly into the sea, a Venus returning to the foam she came from. Jael shrugged and followed and, after a moment, so

did I.

As Nin-ti promised we were able to breath normally under water and the path was well marked out so there was no chance of accidentally straying from it. Along with breathing normally, we were also able to move normally. We did not float as we should have in water nor did it feel like we were moving through water. For us, we may well have been on land.

The strangest part of all was that fish were able to swim across the path without it affecting them at all, so the spell that maintained it was selective for land breathers, or else it only affected those who entered it the way we did. I tried sticking my arm beyond the edge of the path and it came back wet.

"Coming?" Jael asked. I looked up and saw both Jael and Nin-ti standing a few yards away with amused smiles on their faces. I smiled back at them, slightly embarrassed for holding the party up and we continued on while Nin-ti made good on her promise to relate how the fox sued for Ninhursag's compassion.

Eleven

When Enki fell ill (Nin-ti told us) the other gods tried to cure him, but to no avail. Even Enlil, the god of the Air and our king, was at a loss to do something to help him. Only Ninhursag, who had pronounced the curse in the first place, could remove it, and she had removed herself to some unknown place so that she would not be forced to relent. And so she left this realm for a time and no one saw her leave except the fox, who was out hunting and just happened to be in the right place at that time.

Now the fox had always liked Enki - they had much in common - and, like the gods, was saddened to see the great Enki brought so low. However, even his fondness for the god did not prevent the fox from trying to make a profit while helping his friend.

And so the fox went unto King Enlil, prostrating himself before the god, saying, "Oh great king, who controls the storms and gives us the very air we breath. Oh, 'Great Mountain' Father Enlil the bright eyed, hear this thy most humble of creatures, for he has news and may be of some small assistance to thee."

The gods were quite vain in those days and easily manipulated through outrageous flattery, an art which the fox had mastered in his cradle. And so Enlil looked down upon the fox and smiled upon him.

And he spoke unto the fox, saying "What is this news thou bringest and how might thou, most humble creature, be of assistance to 'Great Mountain' Father Enlil the bright-eyed?"

"Oh, Great Enlil Nunamnir, father of all the gods, and king of all the lands, it is of this most foul curse on Enki, puissant water god, that I bring thee news. Only the hand of Ninhursag the mother, who brought this curse about, can remove it."

"Earth Mother Ninhursag," Enlil replied, "has absented herself from us and there are none who might know where she has gone."

"Ah," said the fox, "but if this worthless one might find her and persuade her to return and heal the ailing Lord of Wisdom, wouldst thou, King Enlil, bestow upon me reward commensurate to the task?"

Enlil, in his fear and grief said, "Very well, humble fox, if thou art able to find Ninhursag and if thou art able to convince her to return and heal Lord Enki, then I shall grant thee any boon that thou might wish."

The fox thanked Enlil for his generosity and left to follow Ninhursag's trail. His sharp hunter's nose, combined with the fact that he knew where to pick up Ninhursag's trail, enabled him to follow her into the distant wilderness to which she had taken herself.

The fox followed her trail up the banks of the Tigris River, until he reached a place where Ninhursag had turned westward and then across the breadth of Mesopotamia to the Euphrates which he followed to its head-waters and then southward into the mountains of the land where lived those tent-dwelling barbarians who still ate uncooked meat and worshiped the god Martu.

Now Martu was at this time still unmarried, having not yet selected the daughter of Numushda, the tutelary deity of the city of Kazallu, as his bride. However, having already decided to marry he was more than happy to act as host to the visiting Ninhursag and to get to know her better. Ninhursag, for her part, was flattered by the foreign god's attention.

And so at last, after many days of following her trail, the fox finally found Ninhursag at Ninab in the tents of Martu, enjoying his hospitality.

"Oh, Great Ninhursag, Mother of All," the fox began, "I beg of thee to return to Dilmun. Water Lord Enki, Lord of Wisdom, lies ignominiously low, dying of a disease none save thou can cure."

"The Lord of Wisdom?" Ninhursag asked scornfully. "Lord of Stupidity! I created those eight plants in the garden land of Dilmun. Their creation required the creativity and industry of three full generations of goddesses merely to make them sprout. Does he think that I brought them into being merely to give him something new to eat? He destroyed for all time the eight most precious plants I ever created - plants that were for the benefit of all creation! He deserves his fate. Let him die."

"Mother Ninhursag!" the fox pleaded, "Without the aid of Enki who provided the water and who order Utu to provide sunlight to Dilmun, thou couldst not have created those plants. They were as much his to dispose of as they were thine."

Ninhursag, hearing the fox's words, grew angry and hardened her heart still further against Enki. "Get thee hence, fox! Lord Enki will soon belong to Erishkigal, to play with as she pleases. Be satisfied that thou dost not share the fate of the Lord of Fools."

"Mother Ninhursag," the fox begged again, "Without Lord Enki there will be no water for rain, no water for the rivers, no water for your children. All the gods, all the men, all the animals will soon die. Please have mercy, Great Mother."

And Ninhursag heard the words of the fox and saw the wisdom within them, but her heart remained hardened. "Mercy thou dost crave," she answered the fox, "but Lord Enki deserves it not."

Again the fox tried, bringing all his cleverness to bear on the problem. "Oh great goddess, Mother of All There Is, Ninmah Ninhursag, is there not one way that I might change thy heart?"

"Nay, fox, there is not!"

"Then perhaps thou might be amenable to a small wager," the fox said slyly.

"What sort of wager?" Ninhursag asked suspiciously.

"You will set a task for me, and I will undertake to accomplish that task before Lord Enki dies. If I succeed thou shalt have whatever task thou choose accomplished and thou shalt lift the curse."

"And if thou shouldst fail?" Ninhursag asked. "What should I have then?"

"Why, thou shalt have the death of Lord Enki that thou dost desire."

"Ah, but that I shall have without taking the bet, now won't I?"

"True," the fox conceded. "Then no matter the outcome, I shall continue to work on the task thou set for the wager until it is completed?"

"Any sort of task?"

"Any," the fox agreed smoothly, "save that it be not impossible to be done by such as me within the time allowed."

"Thou dost set yourself an easy victory, fox."

"Not so, Mother. Just because the task can be accomplished, it does not mean that I will know how to do it."

"I will think upon this anon," Ninhursag replied and went away for some few hours. When she returned she told the fox, "I have considered thine arguments and thou speakest truly. It would not be proper for the Lord of Waters to die in this fashion, regardless of his crime, so I will remove my curse. But to do so, thou must first bring eight stems of the golden tamarisk to me. For I will need their divine nectar to accomplish what I must."

"Mother of All," the fox replied, "Tamarisks are pink. Where would I find one of a golden hue?"

"There is but one such plant and it lies to the east of Dilmun. When thou hast collected these branches, bring them to me in Dilmun." And with that Ninhursag sent the fox on his way and returned her attentions to Martu.

The fox traveled long and hard to the lands east of Dilmun where barbarians who herded sheep and goats lived. Along the way the fox encountered a young man with black hair.

"Young man," the fox asked, "dost thou know where I might find the golden tamarisk?"

"Nay," replied the young man with black hair, "We have tamarisks a plenty in this land but they all be of a pink hue."

And the fox thanked him and moved on. Further east he met an old woman who was weaving a basket of reeds from a nearby river.

"Old woman," the fox began, "I seek the golden tamarisk. Canst thou assist me?"

"Nay," replied the woman, "there be no such plant. Tamarisks are pink."

Once more the fox moved on. When he had gone some distance further east he met a wolf.

To the wolf he said, "Brother of the forest, Mother Ninhursag has sent me forth to find the golden tamarisk. Dost thou know where it might be?"

"Nay, brother," the wolf replied. "The Mother of All hath laid a hard burden upon thee. I know of no such plant."

Again the fox moved on. Finally when he had gone further east than ever he found the largest pink tamarisk tree that he had ever seen.

"Greetings, oh tamarisk!" he said to the plant. "I be on a quest set upon me by Ninhursag to find thy cousin, the golden tamarisk. Dost thou know where grows the golden tamarisk?"

And the tamarisk said, "Yea, friend fox. I know of that which thou dost seek. Thou wilt find the golden tamarisk by the sea not far from here."

The fox followed those directions and soon found the golden tamarisk. The golden tamarisk was larger by far than the pink one. It stood a dozen cubits tall and as many wide.

Its flowers were the color of beaten gold and they shone blindingly bright in the light of the sun, its tiny, scale-like petals so dark green that they almost appeared black.

"Oh, most glorious of plants!" the fox hailed the golden tamarisk, walking forward to collect his reward. But as he approached the tree it moved, remaining out of his reach. Twice again he approached the king of flowers with lavish praises and twice again it moved out of his reach. "All right, weed," the fox snarled revealing his true nature in a moment of stress, "Ninhursag sent me forth to collect eight of thy branches. Wilt thou givest them to me or art thou going to wait for the Great Mother to come and collect them herself?" The golden tamarisk shuddered and moved a bit further away. "I warn thee," the fox continued, "if thou givest those branches to me, they will be of thy choosing. Ninhursag might well decide to take all of thee. Which dost thou prefer?"

The golden tamarisk was still for a moment and then finally dropped eight small branches to the ground. "Take these," the tamarisk told the fox as it backed away from the small pile, "and tell Mother Ninhursag that I gave them willingly." With that the fox snatched up the branches and journeyed back to Dilmun.

When he arrived, he found that Ninhursag had already returned to the garden. He brought the golden tamarisk branches to Ninhursag saying, "I have brought thee the branches that thou requested of me. Now wilt thou do as thou hast promised?"

Ninhursag took the branches and drained each one by one of the food contained in their sap. And this food she mixed with the food of life and the water of life that Enki, in his illness, gave to her that she might heal him and when she had dined on these divine foods, she went to Enki's side that she might heal him.

Twelve

"And how did she do that?" Jael asked.

"Ninhursag sat Enki by her vulva," Nin-ti replied, "and then she gave birth to eight healing goddesses corresponding to his eight stricken organs."

"A curious way of going about it, I suppose," Jael conceded, "but certainly to the point."

"Sex and other related functions were seen as completely natural by the ancient Mesopotamians," I told her. "It was still wrong to go to bed with another man's wife, but the mere act of sex was hardly anything to cause shame or embarrassment."

"Sounds like a healthy attitude to me," Jael shrugged. "What was the fox's reward?"

"I don't know," Nin-ti replied, "Whatever he wanted, I suppose."

"What would a fox want, I wonder."

"Another fox?" Nin-ti suggested.

"What I want to know," I said raising an eyebrow toward Nin-ti, is why you told the story in a sort of Pseudo-Elizabethan when you seem perfectly capable of speaking modern English? For that matter how did you learn to speak any form of English?"

Nin-ti giggled, "Didn't you know? Gods can speak any language. It's an inborn ability. Jael can do it too."

"You can?" I asked Jael. She nodded. "But you're not a god, you're a demon."

"Demoness, if you please," she replied.

"Oh but she is," insisted Nin-ti. "The gods of one religion are often the demons of

another. It's all a matter of perspective." Jael nodded in agreement. Come to think of it, I'd had bull sessions back when I was a freshman on this very subject. "Anyway," Nin-ti continued, "I told the story in an archaic manner to suggest that it happened a long, long time ago."

"No offense intended but it seemed to ramble on a bit," I pointed out.

"And that was a specially shortened version," Nin-ti agreed. If I gave you a direct translation from the story on the cuneiform tablets, each line would have been intricately entwined with clever and obscure puns, sexual references, and political commentary. Those Blackhead scribes sure could go on!"

"Is that a submarine mountain up ahead?" Jael asked suddenly.

"No, child," Nin-ti answered her. "That is Enki's home. It is an exact copy of his Abzu temple that stood in Eridu back when we walked the Earth."

Sure enough as we came nearer to the great structure I could see that Nin-ti was correct. What at first seemed to be a large hill or a mountain was in fact a huge ziggurat in perfect condition. The detail work on it was not precisely as hypothesized by the archaeologists, but they certainly got the overall appearance and the majesty of the huge pyramidal structure down right.

"It looks sort of Aztec," Jael commented.

"Sort of," I agreed, "but the sides of theirs were not as steeply sloped. The Mesopotamian ziggurats had vertical or extremely steep sides faced with baked brick and were built in steps. It gives the structure a leaner look to it. You'll also notice that the stairway to the top is partially freestanding because of this design. This is actually closer in look to the step pyramids of the early Egyptians than to the American pyramids."

"But the Egyptian pyramids were tombs for their kings," Nin-ti pointed out, "Not the home of their gods. And they were much smaller than this. I don't know the Aztecs."

"They were a bit after your time and it's unlikely that your people would have had contact with their predecessors."

"Ah, that explains it then."

"Actually some of their temples were even larger than this. Like this one, the temple was on the top and the vast base was mostly debris, with assorted possible offerings to fill in." I paused to look up at the ziggurat that we now stood at the base of. "I am really not looking forward to climbing all these stairs."

"You could step off the path and swim," Jael suggested.

"Uh, no thanks. We've been walking down slope all the way here and we must be over a thousand feet below sea level. If I wasn't crushed by the sudden increase in pressure, I'd die of the bends when I reached the top. Breathing would be a major problem too."

"If you say so," she returned, unconvinced. I tried to stop her but she walked to the edge of the path and stuck her arm over the edge and pulled it back almost as rapidly. "You're right," she gasped. "No mortal could survive that. I'm not sure I could for very long either." The part of her arm that had been exposed to the area's true environment was starting to purple with a monumental bruise. She muttered a quick incantation and it slowly turned back to its normal color.

It took us over two hours to climb the stairs of Enki's underwater Abzu temple. Even after frequent rests I was exhausted by the time we reached the top. Jael tried not to show it, but she was breathing a bit heavily too. Only Nin-ti came through the climb as fresh as ever. It must be good to be a god.

"Ah, Nin-ti, my little angel of mercy," we heard a rich baritone voice emanate from

within the temple at the top of the ziggurat. "To what do I owe this delightful surprise visit to Abzu II?"

"Abzu II?"

"Enki has always had an odd sense of humor," Nin-ti said as an aside to me.

I looked back at the temple and saw a tall, well-built, ageless man, with long curly black hair and beard in long, multilayered robes. His eyes had pronounced epicanthic folds giving him a strong oriental appearance, but those same eyes were the blue of the South Pacific Ocean and gave the impression that they contained the wisdom of the ages. Also, his face was creased in an almost perpetual smile. He had seen it all and he got the joke.

That was my first impression of the ancient god of wisdom and waters. In short order, after Nin-ti's introductions, Enki invited us into his home and we found ourselves seated in a rough circle around a short table.

"And the next thing we knew," I said at the conclusion of telling my story to Enki, "we were wandering around Dilmun."

Enki nodded knowingly and looked at us with his vivid blue eyes, although he spent far more time looking at Jael than he did at me. Finally he said, "I will have to consider what you have told me. Ever since we were supplanted by younger less direct analogs of ourselves, I've believed that the land of Dilmun was a finite universe and a closed one as well. Now here you are, the first new faces we've seen here in three millennia, give or take."

"Most of you have been referred to as demons by some of the modern religions," Jael pointed out. "I've worked with some who claim to have been analogs of your pantheon."

"Not direct enough, I fear," Enki replied. "Newer peoples used us in different capacities. After a while our later analogs were barely recognizable, even to us. We had little trouble merging with our Akkadian analogs, although most of us prefer our Sumerian names. I, for example, am also Ea and have roughly the same function in the pantheon of Akkad. Marduk would be here but he merged well with later analogs."

"Indeed," Jael agreed. "He is now the head honcho in Hell under the name of Beelzebub although out of all his names he prefers to be called Lucifer."

"Really?" I asked. "The way I learned it Marduk was one of the chief good guys."

"It was a gradual change as I understand it. It was in his incarnation as Baal that he began to be aligned with Hell. It was really just a matter of perspective. To the people who worshiped him, he was the chief benevolent god, but to his enemies..." She left it hanging.

"Inanna did very well too," Nin-ti put in. "She was Ishtar in Akkad, and later Astarte. Then she managed, somehow to merge with Aphrodite and Venus."

"But you see," Enki recapped, "once we no longer had people to believe in us or our direct, mergeable analogs, our world became closed off. Now it appears that we are not as closed off as we thought."

"The key is belief?" I asked.

"I believe so."

"Well, I don't think that anyone is actually worshiping you these days, but archaeological expeditions in Mesopotamia over the past century or so have discovered tablets that when translated speak of your pantheon."

"Hmm. Perhaps our universe became closed when we were forgotten. Knowledge would, indeed, weaken the barrier, but I'm sure I would have detected a portal by now."

"What if it's one way?" I asked remembering Hell's service entrance.

"A century is still a fair amount of time. I'm sure someone would have stumbled in by

now if it had been there that long, even if it requires passing through this great World Tree you mentioned. You say it was just a bush or some small plant in my days?"

"So said the talking squirrel."

"Must be the Food of Life bush. I'll have to think about that. Maybe we can engineer a portal of some sort for all of us. It would be nice to see what you humans have come up with during our absence. Now the part that disturbs me, however, is this deal between netherworlds. I've always been a skeptic when it comes to coincidence, so I feel there almost has to be a connection between that and the fact that you are here."

"But if we came in by a one-way route, how do we find the way out?" Jael asked.

"Let me work on that while we eat." Enki spread his arms, palms upward and an unfamiliar sort of banquet was spread out on the table before us. I was unable to identify half the vegetables, although the porridge was easily identified and I'm not sure what manner of beast provided us with the roast, but after a solid diet of fruit and nuts even roast aardvark would have been a treat.

"I shouldn't eat this," Jael demurred. "A demon of Hell cannot consume earthly food without dire consequences."

"This food isn't earthly," Enki pointed out. "What dire consequences?" Jael told him. "Impossible!" he scoffed. "Here, let me check."

He got up and walked over to Jael and looked down at her. As she turned to face him, he took her face gently in his hands and stared deeply into her eyes. "Well, you might be right about earthly food," he said at last, "but I frankly doubt it. In any case, you'll find that you can eat any food in Dilmun and its neighbors without ill effect. And the fruit of this Yggdrassil should be neutral to you as well." He returned to his seat and said, "Party on, dudes!"

"Huh?" I was shocked.

"Oh, just a colorful little phrase I picked up while checking Jael. It's not a common expression where you come from?"

"Only in certain circles."

The meal was excellent, marred only by what passed for beer in ancient Mesopotamia - a warm brew sipped through long straws with occasional globs of semi-solid matter in it. I've always preferred a good porter or stout, but this would make even Bud Lite taste good. Enki saw my discomfort and inquired.

"Well," I began, "we drink our beers and ales differently these days."

"Oh? How so?" So we spent the rest of the meal discussing the relative merits of various modern beers. "Very interesting," Enki replied at last. "The notion of a clearer brew appeals to me. Maybe when this is over you can show me these modern brews."

"Count on it," I replied. "So now what do we do?"

"Time to look into the situation." He removed the feast by reversing the hand gestures that brought it into being, then he opened his arms again and the entire table was replaced by an impossibly large bowl made of a single piece of lapis lazuli filled with water on a short pedestal. I wasn't sure if it was an ancient fingerbowl or a birdbath. "Well let's see now," Enki said. Suddenly the water started emitting white bubbles that burst and left a dense fog over the surface as if a piece of dry ice had suddenly appeared on the bottom of the bowl. Enki negligently brushed the fog away and we had a clear nighttime view of New York City.

"You never told us you could do that," Nin-ti accused Enki.

Enki looked a bit embarrassed. "Well, at first we were all so depressed after it turned out we were trapped here that I didn't even try. Later, when most of us had come to terms with our new limitations, it seemed to me that it would be horribly cruel to give a view of a world we couldn't reach so I kept this to myself. I just wish I could have added audio capabilities to the bowl. I'd love to hear the sound track from "Casablanca"; there's only so much you can figure out from the video alone."

As I watched, the view of New York shifted and the scene seemed to simulate flying in and out of various offices, kitchens, and parking lots.

"Now here is one of the truly great mysteries of the modern world," Enki said, puzzled. I suddenly realized that we were watching the opening of David Letterman's show. "A lot of very strange things happen on this show and I haven't got the foggiest notion of what it all means." I promised that I'd explain it all to him when we had the time some day and he changed the view.

Instead of an actual scene, the surface of the water developed a brilliantly colored pattern that during the Late-Sixties would have been called psychedelic. I could make nothing of the seething pattern of fluorescent colors and Jael merely shrugged when I managed to catch her eye.

"There is something brewing," Enki confirmed, "and the general nature is indeed along the lines of the old dichotomy."

"The old dichotomy?" I asked.

"Good versus evil," he replied. "Order versus chaos. The forces of light against those of darkness. Call it what you will. I wasn't able to discern its details, but the gist seems to be that a small number of beings from various nether worlds are attempting to band together and upset the natural balance so that they will dominate not only the nether regions but the Heavens and Earth as well."

"Don't they realize that without the corresponding balance of Heaven to Hell the universe would collapse back into chaos?" Jael asked. "Are they mad?" Nin-ti just looked frightened.

"That I was unable to find out, although madness would explain a lot. No, on second thought I think it is more likely that they think that they can keep control somehow and prevent chaos until they can establish a new order. They can't, of course, but wisdom is not the strength of this alliance. Greed and maybe vengeance is."

"But what can we do now?" I asked.

"Your arrival, Marcus Steele," Nin-ti told me, "proves that this is no longer a closed universe. Knowing this, I'm sure that the Lord of Wisdom has already figured out a way to find an exit point."

"Your confidence is warming," Enki replied with a dryness to rival the Sahara. "However, while I may be wise, I am not omniscient. I do not yet know how to escape our garden paradise. But I do have a plan. Nin-ti, you must go to Enlil and convince him to convene a grand council of us all, even Erishkigal and Nergal."

"Will they come? The gods of our own netherworld have refused all contact with us for millennia."

"We'll need to send emissaries to invite them, of course," Enki replied smoothly.

"That could be very dangerous. Erishkigal used to delight in torturing those gods that she got within her grasp before killing them. After all this time, she may be unable to resist indulging in her old habits long enough to hear the invitation."

"First of all," Enki replied, "Nergal used to be the sky god. He has had a tempering

effect on Erishkigal's nature. And second, the emissaries won't be gods, well one of them won't be."

"You mean," I squeaked, "me?"

"And the lovely Jael, yes." I started to protest but Enki cut me off. "Marcus, of all the beings in and around Dilmun, you alone are mortal. It is something you carry with you and both Nergal and Erishkigal will be able to see that immediately. Because you are mortal, they will know that you have to be relatively new here. I'm sure that fact alone would make them listen to what you have to say."

"Because that means this dimension may no longer be finite?" I asked, trying to keep up and hold my own.

"Exactly! However, you won't go alone. Jael is going with you."

"I am?" she asked. "I'm no mortal."

"True," Enki agreed. Your status is roughly equivalent to the Anunnaki, the minor gods. However, the numbers of the Anunnaki are not so great that Erishkigal does not know them all. Also, you and Marcus will make an odd enough couple that she is likely to be very curious about the two of you. Because of that curiosity you'll be safe long enough to issue Enlil's invitation."

"You're certain about that?" Jael asked, unconvinced.

"Fairly certain."

"Fairly certain?"

"Trust me."

Thirteen

For the first time since we had met, Jael was not completely sure of herself. I must admit that it was nice to see Jael's flustered reaction to Enki's "Trust me," and since then she had been acting more than a little insecure. Initially I found pleasure from this observation, I think, from the fact that she was as confused by that remark as I had been by her fierce come-on technique with me when we had first met. But as I thought about it, she hadn't behaved that way since just after we picked Rona up, and my initial smugness turned to concern as Jael's insecurity continued.

Enki and Nin-ti escorted us back to the surface. Nin-ti, as per Enki's plan, went to Enlil, the air god who also reigned as king of the Sumerian pantheon. Enki then quickly guided us to the head of a poorly maintained path.

"Here," he said, giving us a water skin and a small red cylinder of sardonyx intricately carved with finely detailed figures. "You'll need the water once you enter the underworld and this seal," he indicated the cylinder, "is my personal seal. It will prove that I have sent you. Follow this path to the entrance of the Road of the Dead and then keep following that until you get to Erishkigal's city. Once there you can ask directions to the palace. Once you are on the Road of the Dead there will be no turning back. You should be allowed to proceed unmolested unless you turn around and try to return to the surface. Good luck, my friends."

While Nin-ti went to Enlil and we were in the Netherworld, Enki said he planned to continue attempting to divine a means to reopen Dilmun to the outside universe and quickly left us to find a quiet, contemplative spot.

We followed the unkempt path to a dark, ragged-edged cave mouth. This one almost looked like a mouth. Boulders on the ground and sharp cracks in the roof gave the appearance of monstrous teeth.

"Looks like it wants to chew us up and spit us out," I remarked pointing at the boulder-strewn opening.

"Close," Jael agreed, "but I somehow doubt it would spit us out. More likely it will swallow us whole."

"Cheerful thought. Shall we?"

Jael blanched a bit at the prospect but after swallowing hard said, "After you, my dear Alphonse,"

Resisting the temptation to reply, "No, no. After you, my dear Gaston," I merely took her hand in mine and we entered the cave together.

We had to duck under the upper lip of the cave mouth, but once inside, the cavern was a dozen yards wide and had a high ceiling. The path we had followed this far widened into a wide, straight, dirt road. The Road of the Dead was dimly illuminated by uniformly spaced torches that produced more oily black smoke than light but which also never seemed to burn out. Our eyes adapted rapidly to those tenebrous conditions and we cautiously walked down the sloping, subterranean road.

The temperature seemed to rise in inverse proportion to our depth below sea level and the humidity quickly dropped off to something drier than the average desert.

We held off drinking from the small water skin as long as possible, but we were soon desperately thirsty and took turns sipping from our meager supply. We knew immediately that the skin was enchanted, as the fluid emerged well chilled. An hour later I noticed that in spite of our careful conservation of water, we should have used up the supply by now but the skin was still full. I pointed this out to Jael.

"Let me see," she said, taking the skin. She took a deep draught from the skin and handed it back saying, "Drink your fill." I did so, drinking in at least a pint of a cool liquid.

"Hey! This thing is still full."

"I thought so. He is the god of water after all. I wouldn't try seeing if we can empty it out, though. It might not be bottomless, but he did at least supply one basic need for our mission. I just wish he had thought to give us a measure of salt."

"Salt?"

"Definitely. We may not be visibly sweating because the humidity is so low that our perspiration is evaporating as quickly as it can get out of our pores, but we're losing a fair amount of salt that we're going to have to replace before we succumb from heat prostration. Try licking your arm if you don't believe me."

I believed her but went ahead and licked my arm anyway. She was right, it had a mild, but pronounced salty taste. I looked around for possible salt sources - we were deep enough now for any salt mine - but all I saw was the same long and dusty road heading ever downward beneath a rough stone "sky."

After several more hours I was exhausted and Jael admitted that she was in only slightly better shape than I was. Since my summer vacation began I'd been doing more walking than ever in my life and had gotten considerably more accustomed to the exercise than I had been, but I had my limits.

"Enki told us not to turn back," I said between yawns. "Do you think it will be okay to take a rest break for several hours?"

"It had better be. I think we're both up against the wall. Let's see if we can find a comfortable spot to the side of the road."

Comfortable? Well maybe not, but in our current state we were both asleep in minutes. I woke up feeling the weight of the ages in my bones, but all the stiffness and soreness became a minor priority when I opened my eyes and looked around.

We were surrounded. At least a dozen, golden-haired, jet black-skinned -not dark brown, a true, matte black - people in the same white linen, multilayered robes that the upper world gods had worn, stood around us. They all held short spears with heavy metal spike-like spear heads. At first I thought they might have been cast from solid gold but quickly remembered that Ancient Sumer and Akkad were Bronze Age civilizations. As sleepy as I might have been, and maybe a bit delirious from water and salt loss in my sleep, I was all too alert to the fact that those archaeological wonders were all pointed at Jael and me.

Jael was still sleeping and I wasn't sure if I should wake her until one of these beings gestured toward her, clearly implying that now that one of us was awake, he was tired of standing around.

"Jael," I said softly, shaking her shoulder gently, "we got company."

"Hmm?" she asked sleepily. Then what I'd said percolated through her slumbering mind and she snapped awake instantly. "Satan, save me from my ancestors!" she breathed, taking in the situation. "Hiya, boys! How's tricks?"

"No talking!" snapped the same one who had told me to wake Jael up. I guess he was the leader. "Get up. The Queen has been waiting for you long enough."

Jael and I got to our feet with difficulty and were none too steady when we got there. The leader obviously noticed this and understood the problem. He reached into a pouch and pulled out a tablespoon or so of coarse, white, crystalline granules for each of us. Salt tastes good when you're too low on it and this stuff tasted absolutely wonderful. The only thing missing was the rest of the pretzel. We washed it down with Enki's water.

It may have been psychosomatic, but I felt better almost immediately and a few minutes later we continued, under guard, down the Road of the Dead.

We had to endure another eight hours of forced march in the company of our captors in the arid conditions of the road. The guards weren't malicious tormenters or even unpleasant, but they refused to talk to us beyond basic commands and insisted that we be silent too. They were career military that had become inbred to the point where even the most private thoughts came out of the manual and actions were dictated in their orders.

The road was uniformly dusty as it had been since we entered the cave in Dilmun and it continued to run straight on without so much as a one-degree bend. On one rest stop I chanced to look back toward the entrance. The sun must have been shining directly into the opening for there was a bright point of light like a solitary star on an otherwise overcast night.

The road ended when it made a rounded, right angle bend, narrowed, and turned into a labyrinth. The walls around the road had been roughly cut out into the various strata of rock and allowed ten people to walk abreast comfortably. In this ancient maze they were made of highly polished stone, that appeared to be some form of granite or another plutonic rock with basaltic intrusions and only afforded enough room for three at a time. The guards, or at least their captain, knew the way through, but it still took us an hour to traverse the maze.

At the end of the maze we found ourselves in a large open field. The humidity levels were far closer to normal and there were miles of neatly cropped, pure white, grass between us and a large walled city in the distance. We were given a few minutes to rest before the

march resumed.

The gate through which we entered the city made the Ishtar gate of Nebuchadnezzar II found at Babylon look like a practice piece. From a distance the gate, better than one hundred feet tall, appeared to have been made of a monstrous sized piece of gold-flecked lapis lazuli, but actually it was faced with glossy, brightly colored, fired bricks. These bricks were mostly bright blue, but many other colors formed the precise, geometric borders of the structure and several shades of gold and brown formed numerous lamassu and dragons in exquisite detail. Far to each side of the gate, in the same medium, were gigantic portraits that had to be of the king and queen of the dead, Nergal and Erishkigal.

Our march continued through the city. The city itself - I never learned its name unless it was simply the "City of the Dead" - was yet another maze of twisting streets and narrow alleys. Jet-skinned, golden-haired men and women in the same sort of robes worn by the gods of Dilmun stopped their daily chores to watch us proceed under escort. Even if we were not captive we would have clearly stood out. Aside from being taller than all of the people we had seen since arriving in Dilmun, with the exception of Enki himself who stood about my height, our clothing, modern in style and made of black silk, stuck out in a sea of white linen robes like a pair of wild rice grains on top of a pile of Basmati.

Eventually we came to a large, relatively clear, square with a wide, squat-appearing ziggurat in the far corner. I groaned at the base of the steps when I realized that we were going to have to climb the steps to the top of this one just as we had at Abzu II.

"Hunger pangs?" Jael asked, hearing my groan.

"Sore feet," I replied.

"Quiet, you two!" The captain of the guards snapped.

Enki didn't really care about the manner one went about climbing his ziggurat. After all this time he was happy to have visitors. Erishkigal, however, insisted that all who climbed the steps to her temple do it in slow, measured beats. We climbed eight steps and paused for one beat, seven steps, pause for two, six steps, pause for three and so on until after one step when we paused for eight beats and then started again. With a more interesting rhythm I could imagine Gene Kelly dancing cheerfully up the steps, music and all.

Jael had to help me up the last few steps although she was in only slightly better shape. The ritual required us to pause for fifty beats at the top before entering the temple and during that time the captain gave us some basic protocol lessons.

"When you enter you must bow down eight times as you approach the queen," he told us.

"The queen?" I asked. "What about the king?"

"The king is out," he replied.

"Out? What do you mean out?" Jael demanded, "Our mission is to both of them."

"Nergal disappeared over a thousand years ago. We don't know where he is." The captain looked embarrassed and quickly returned to his lecture. "On the eighth bow, you will go to your knees and wait for her to recognize you. When she does, you may approach her throne and kneel before her. Do not move before she tells you to." We started forward; eight steps to the temple doors, pause two beats while the doors opened...

We entered and the throne room was empty. The captain told us to skip the ritual approach and showed us where we would have been on the eighth bow. "Kneel or sit here until she enters, then bow until she recognizes you." The guards all retreated to various places along the wall of the room leaving us in the middle of the floor staring at a pair of empty thrones - two wide stools with lush padding.

An hour later, a beautiful goddess with pale white skin and shiny black hair entered the room. Her robe was of the same design as the rest but instead of being made of plain white linen it had been dyed in all the colors of the rainbow tastelessly forming geometric patterns that nearly glowed in the dark. She wore a crown that dripped precious gems and dozens of gold bracelets and other jeweled ornaments. But all the splendor didn't mask her inner core of liquid helium. Her black eyes flashed as she glance briefly in our direction. Then she sat down on her throne. Her back bone might have been replaced with a steel rod for all the flexibility she showed. The Ice Queen had arrived.

We kneeled there, bowing until our knees hurt. At last she commanded us, "You may approach us."

Us? The royal "We," I suppose, but for some reason I got the mental image that she really believed there was someone sitting next to her.

We got up and felt real pain as our knees unbent for the first time in over an hour, but we came forward and kneeled again, groaning only slightly. Erishkigal must have been expecting the groans as her pale lips formed a smile encrusted with frost.

"Your Majesty," Jael began, "we have been sent here as emissaries from Dilmun." Erishkigal frowned slightly but said nothing so Jael continued, "Enki is requesting that Enlil call a council of all the gods."

"And what is that to me?"

"Oh, great queen! It is felt that your presence is essential to the discussions. A matter of great import that concerns all the worlds is at hand."

"You lie! Enki has ever conspired against me. And Enlil always sided with my sister against me."

I put my mind into turbo mode trying to remember who her sister was. An ancient religions class entered from stage right and did a quick tap dance before my eyes. Her sister was Inanna, the queen of Heaven, aka Ishtar, aka Astarte, et al.

"Your majesty," I told her, "Inanna is no longer in Dilmun. It is unlikely that she will return."

"Liar! Enlidu," she said to the guards' captain, "take them down to our dungeon until we can devise a suitable punishment."

"Yes, Great Queen," Enlidu said coming toward us with his guards. "Come along, you two." The guards hauled us to our feet and started dragging us away from the throne room.

"Wait, Enlidu," Erishkigal said, her voice was several notes higher in pitch and her whole demeanor had done an instant thaw. "Who are these people? A living mortal? Here? How curious. And the other I detect was born to the netherworld, but not this one. How delightful. Please come here. Oh please. There's no need to bow."

"Great Lucifer!" Jael whispered, "She's bonkers."

Erishkigal evidently heard that. "Bonkers?" She said in wonderment. "Oh yes. What a delightful way of putting it. Oh you two must dine with me and tell me your stories. It's been so long since I've had company." She got up from the throne with a casualness a full pendulum swing away from the formality with which she had entered.

The meal was fine, I guess. Actually I don't remember all that much about it. It's difficult to enjoy or even notice a meal when you're waiting for the other shoe to drop. While we ate, Erishkigal was the epitome of charm, grace and courtesy. She asked intelligent, insightful questions about the outside universe and all that had happened since her world had been closed off and she listened politely while we told her about ourselves and the

reason for Enlil's council. She agreed that the council was necessary and that she would prepare to leave with us immediately.

We rose from the table with her at the end of the meal and then without warning she turned to Enlidu, who had stood to the side politely with his guards throughout the meal.

"Put these two in chains," she said in the same awful, frigid voice that she had used when she first entered her court, "and throw them in the dungeon."

Fourteen

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," I sang in my closest approach to basso vibrato. "Nobody knows my sorrow!"

"Oh shut up," Jael snapped. The light in our cell was nearly nonexistent, but I was certain that her face was showing both irritation and intense worry.

"No, no," a soft-spoken, masculine voice from the next cell objected, "Let him sing. It shows spirit and he has a pleasant voice and it's been centuries since I heard any music at all."

"Who's there?" I called. The walls of our cell were thick and the voice seemed to be coming from the other side of the door. I stood at the door trying to see someone on the other side of the closely spaced, heavy, bronze bars set into the small window in the door.

"Your neighbor, obviously," he replied. "I am Nergal and until my wife tricked me and had me imprisoned here I was the King of the Dead. And you?"

A quick introduction and a long story later brought Nergal into the ranks of the well informed.

"Well!" he said at last. "A combined netherworlds conspiracy. That explains our other neighbor."

"What other neighbor?" Jael asked.

"He's in the cell on the other side of mine. Strange looking fellow. You two look human at least but this guy has bright red skin with scales and a serpent's head. Now what world would he have come from? Do you know?"

I looked at Jael. She shrugged in the inadequate light and said, "Could be one of several, I'm afraid. That may not even be his natural form. Why not ask him?"

"I would, but when he first got here he was too upset to answer me. He just stomped around in there, talking to himself and banging on the door every once in a while, yelling for the guard. The guards eventually came in and beat him. After that he whimpered for a few days, since then he's been rather quiet."

"Is he dead?"

"No. I hear him moving whenever the guards feed us. He takes his food and throws the bowl back, then he settles down until the next feeding time."

"If you're the king," I asked, "how did you end up here?"

"Erishkigal, my wife and queen, is insane."

"We noticed," Jael said dryly.

"Mmm, yes. Well, one day she tricked me into drinking a sleeping potion. When I woke up I was here."

"But why don't the guards let you out?" I asked. "Are they so disloyal to you?"

"Not at all. I don't think they know who I am. I surmise that my wife arranged for me to be brought here by someone greedy enough to believe anything she promised. Then he or they were probably killed. The guards here are changed frequently and are all under orders not to talk to any of the prisoners. I've long ago given up trying to tell them who I am. Think about it. If you were in their place would you believe some prisoner trying to tell you that he was the king?"

"I guess not," I conceded. "A prisoner is likely to say anything in order to escape."

"Exactly."

Jael and I had been escorted back down the ziggurat in heavy bronze chains and across the large temple square to a low, sturdy-looking building in the opposite corner. The building was faced with colorful fired brick cones set into its mud brick sides giving it a deceptively cheerful look. However the building had only a few, very small windows, just barely enough for the guards in there to see by. There was a guards' room just inside the door and beyond that another door leading to a short corridor off of which there were five doors. I assumed they were all cells like ours. There was no basement although the word "dungeon" would normally imply subterranean construction. Basements were not common features in Sumerian architecture. When you live on a flood plain and the river floods almost every year, a basement is just as likely to become an indoor pool until your foundation of mud brick slags down into just another pile of mud.

Once inside, Enlidu and his men turned us over to the prison guards and left. Our chains were removed and we were thrown into the third cell down the hall. The prison guards evidently felt they had better things to do as they returned to the front room as soon as they had closed and bolted our cell door.

The cell itself was a small room, maybe as large as eight by ten feet with a thick wooden door. The door had a small window in it at about eye-level and that window was laced with heavy, bronze bars. There was also a little door at the bottom that we learned was used by the guards to feed us. The only source of light in the cells was a small window at the end of the corridor, although after a few hours our eyes adapted enough so that Jael and I didn't keep bumping into each other.

King Nergal and I stood near our doors when we talked so we were only about ten feet or less apart and didn't have to raise our voices too much.

"What sort of lock mechanism do they use on these doors?" I asked Nergal.

"A heavy bronze pin about a finger's width. Why?"

"Primitive but effective. I was hoping that the lock might be simple enough to pick. But this one's too simple. Nothing short of breaking through the door will do to open the lock from this side."

"And you'll not be able to do that either. The wood of the doors has been enchanted against all damage."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Try it if you don't believe me."

"What about the bronze lock and hinges? Are they enchanted too?"

"Probably not. Bronze is the strongest, hardest metal known. I could bend it if I had enough leverage, but even I haven't the strength to just power my way through these doors. Besides all the doors and walls are enchanted to drain away the strength from anyone trying to damage them."

"It's not the hardest metal. Bronze, that is," I told him. "Properly hardened and

tempered steel, like that of my pocket knife is tougher than bronze. There are other alloys even harder."

"Steel? Never heard of it. Will this magic knife of yours cut through the locks?"

"Unfortunately not," I admitted. "This door fits the frame too well. I can't get the blade through the crack. Ill try it on the door though. No good," I reported a moment later, between gasping for breath. "It's like cutting through diamond and you were right about the enchantment as well. The harder I tried to cut the door, the more exhausted I became. I nearly blacked out there at the end. Getting it to the lock probably wouldn't have done much good anyway. The knife may be harder than bronze, but that doesn't mean I can cut the bronze with a smooth blade, does it?"

"True," Nergal agreed sadly. "You would need a saw blade to do the job properly. I don't suppose you have an enchanted saw blade with you."

"Not hardly. Too bad this isn't a Swiss Army knife. So now what?"

"We wait," both Nergal and Jael said as one.

"And think," Jael continued.

"The guards feed us once each day," Nergal informed us, "but you'll be happy to know that you already missed today's."

"It's that bad?"

"You like gruel?"

"Never tried the stuff. Does it taste as bad as its name?"

"Gruel? It sounds worse than it eats, but it's no gourmet meal. However, the stuff they serve here will make you dream of gruel."

"That settles it," I decided. "I'm not sticking around for breakfast!"

I was wrong, however. Not only was I still there when the next meal was served, but for the next five as well. Nergal was right. I may never have eaten gruel, but it had to be better than the thin, sour, partially spoiled slop they gave us.

At Jael's insistence, I ate the stuff. "You've got to eat and keep up your strength, in case we get a break," she said - usually four or five times each meal. And to think I'd been tired of Yggdrasil's fruit.

The water they served with the meal was filthy too, but we still had our packs and the contents of Enki's waterskin helped to rinse the taste of the food out of my mouth. Sanitary arrangements, while not barbaric, were limited to a hole in one corner of the floor. After six days in Sumerian stir Jael and I were both still somewhat embarrassed by the publicness of it all, especially now that our eyes had adapted to the scant light in our cell.

Between meals and sleep we would talk to Nergal. I was impressed by the fact that after centuries in this place without even the guards to talk to he had managed to keep his sanity. His thoughts as he told them to us were intelligent and lucid and even after his long confinement he had a fine intellectual sense of humor. He was saddened to hear of his wife's worsening condition. He still loved her in spite of his incarceration and saw her insanity as the illness that it was. I told him how such conditions have been cured through the use of Psychology, a field of magic that interested him highly, and I soon told him as much about it as one semester had taught me.

Our first and foremost subject of conversation was escape. Nergal encouraged us to think about it even though every idea we came up with he had already tried. Literally, he was an eternal optimist and believed that he would some day escape this prison and restore his wife's mind.

On the seventh day, our conversation was suddenly interrupted by the unscheduled entrance of four guards.

"Well, well!" Jael remarked. "Don't tell me that we get two meals of that remarkable slop today. Oh aren't we the lucky ones!"

"Shut up!" a guard snapped as he entered the room. So much for getting lunch today. Up until now they'd just slipped it in through the slot on the bottom of the door. "Come along. The queen wants to see you."

"Give her my regards," Nergal said as we passed his cell.

"Do you think that may help us?" I asked.

"No," he replied as the door shut between him and the guards' room.

Enlidu was there with two of his men to escort us back to the queen. Thankfully we were not put in chains again. We were brought outside where Jael and I were instantly blinded by the relatively bright light.

"And how is Her Majesty today?" I asked as Enlidu gave us a few moments to let our eyes adjust to the light outside.

He looked at me for a moment and then said, "By the time we get there your guess is as good as mine."

"She's obviously in need of severe psychiatric help, you know."

After having had several intelligent conversations on the subject with Nergal I'd forgotten that Psychology was an unknown discipline here, but Enlidu took the term in its context and didn't question it.

"My oath of fealty requires me to serve the queen regardless of my orders."

"And for the sake of your oath to the queen," Jael said coldly, "you locked up your king?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The prisoner in the cell next to ours is Nergal."

"Impossible! Nergal disappeared on his way to Dilmun." Enlidu was visibly upset.

"Hey, don't take my word for it. Go look for yourself."

He thought about that for a moment, his face betraying a fierce battle within him. Finally he came to a decision and said, "You're lying. Nothing you say will keep me from delivering you to Erishkigal."

"But..."

"Keep your lying mouth shut or I'll have you gagged." He pushed us in the general direction of Erishkigal's temple and we started toward what I thought was our doom.

Abruptly, the world exploded in a nova burst of light. I felt someone grab my hand and drag me away at a sprint. Still blinded, I think that was the most frightening thing I have ever had to do. We finally turned several corners and came to a halt. I was not surprised to hear Jael's voice mutter an incantation. I never really thought that one of the guards was springing me. Soon I could see something other than afterimage from the burst of light.

"Neat trick," I said, still puffing and panting from our run. "You'll have to show me how you did it. Now what?"

"Our little escape will only be temporary unless we find a way to fit in. After that we'll have to get Nergal out of the slammer since it's obvious that he's our only hope of getting back to Dilmun."

"Well, I think I see a way to wear the latest in fashion," I said looking around, "but we'll still stand out in this crowd. Maybe you haven't noticed, but these guys have a really severe tan."

"I think I can handle that part," she said, "but what are you planning?"

"Trust me."

"You know, I'm beginning to understand why people always get so nervous when I say that."

I gave her an evil chuckle and told her, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Jael had ducked into an alley just outside the royal compound. From where we stood I saw some clothing hung on a line to dry across the street, but as I reached the head of the alley I realized that I was in an open market. Maybe I could buy the clothing we needed.

A quick look before leaving the alley told me that there were no guards in sight. I looked through my pack to see what was still in it. I had Enki's water skin, a change of clothes (although I had grown accustomed to the suit Jael had given me) a camera, a pomegranate from Yggdrasill that I'd forgotten was there during the entire week of slop, my survival guide, a few basic spell tools, and three pointing trowels. My pockets produced my wallet - with a couple of credit cards, ID, and some paper money both of the United States and of Israel - a few Israeli coins of brass and aluminum, and my pocket knife. "Not a whole lot to barter with," I thought, until I remembered that this culture was Bronze Age. My pocket knife would be worth a fortune, but I wasn't willing to part with that. However, thanks to Rona, I had a surplus of trowels.

"I'd better get this over with quickly," I muttered to myself as I cautiously entered the street and immediately attracted the attention of everyone in sight. I remembered hearing a story about how one man walked away from a large department store with thousands of dollars worth of merchandise, and even got the security men to help him load his truck merely by acting with self-confidence. Keeping this in mind I walked boldly through the market looking for a likely stall to try doing business in. I went a hundred yards down the street and was nearly out of the market before I found what I wanted.

The merchant's booth had a generous supply of cloth. He had not only the linen that was the most common cloth I had seen here and in Dilmun, but also a fair assortment of cotton and wool as well. He had evidently put a lot of whatever passed for currency here into his inventory. Maybe he was feeling just a bit anxious about turnover.

"Greetings, friend," I said cheerfully, approaching the merchant. It occurred to me that strictly speaking I was about to make a deal with a devil, but Jael did say that demons were just another sort of people, no more and no less, so I plunged on.

"Hello, stranger," he replied, starting cautiously. "Welcome to Nanki's Fine Fabrics. We produce the highest quality cloth and clothing known to gods and mortals alike. I detect that you are a mortal and while I'll admit that it's been a long time since I had any mortal customers here, I'm sure you've never seen anything as fine as my wares!"

"Well, yes," I admitted. "I am looking for something a little more, shall we say, stylish?"

"Of course, sir," Nanki replied, all of his salesman's instincts kicking in. "There's not a merchant anywhere, here or in Dilmun with more fashionable clothing. Why, Enlil himself was a frequent customer at my Dilmun establishment."

"You used to live in Dilmun?"

"Not exactly, sir. But before the Queen closed off all trade between here and there I had shop in the market there too. Profits have been halved since I lost that outlet."

"I understand," I replied smoothly, pulling out one of my trowels. "Tell me, friend. Ever seen anything like this?"

He looked the trowel over. "Except for the sharpened edge, the shape is not unlike a common masons' tool," he said at last, "but the metal looks a little like silver or electrum. Why would anyone want something like that in a precious metal?"

"Actually it's made of steel," I told him.

"Steel? What's that?"

"It's a new metal, an alloy of iron and carbon - harder than the finest bronze. It will hold an edge longer. You could make a needle that was not only stronger but smaller for fine work with it as well." The trowel had enough metal in it for hundreds of needles and I could see his mind working as he noted that and at the same time tried to calculate how wealthy he could become if he cornered the market in this new metal.

"So," he began casually enough, "how did you say this steel is made?"

"It's a secret process," I replied, confirming his worst fears. "Even I don't know it myself. I'm just the salesman, you know. All I have are a couple of sample pieces." In the end, I traded him two of my trowels for the costumes we needed and several healthy-sized handfuls of gold, silver, and bronze and pouches to carry them in as well.

On my way back to the alley where Jael was waiting for me, I noticed another merchant who was selling strips of roast mutton and for a small bit of silver managed to get more than enough for two along with a couple cups of some sort of fruit juice. After that impromptu feast back in the alley, it was Jael's turn.

"Well," I said, wiping my fingers off, "I got the costumes. So tell me how you're going to handle the complexion problem."

She replied with a wink and then merely snapped the fingers of both hands. In that instant her skin immediately turned jet black and her hair took on a metallic golden sheen and from what little I could see, the same had happened to me.

"Neat trick," I acknowledged.

"Thanks. I worked on it for most of the time you were gone although I'll admit that half of that time was setting the trigger."

"Trigger?"

"Keeping the spell on hold until I snapped my fingers. It involved setting up the holding spell or trigger first and then charging it with the spell that would produce what I wanted once it was released. It's fairly complicated to do manually. In fact it's the first time I've tried it in over a century."

"Well, I'd say you still have it."

"Thanks, but if I were really proficient I'd have added in something flashy just for the sake of being impressive."

"Like what?"

"Oh, a flash of light and a small thunderclap perhaps or a cloud of green smoke."

"Just as well," I told her. "This way you were able to change us without drawing any attention to us. That wouldn't have been the case if you'd decided to throw in a little thunder and lightning."

"Oops! I'd forgotten that."

"It was a good job anyway and certainly I'm not up to trying it, but there is one minor weakness to these disguises. Our facial structures are all wrong. Everyone here is of some

forgotten racial stock that doesn't even exist anymore in the modern world. Their faces are rounder and their eyes look a little bigger, but that may be an illusion caused by the set of their cheek bones."

Jael cast a quick glance at the street outside our alley. "I see what you mean," she said a moment later. "I'd better not try to correct that. This spell will wear off in a day or two but the only shape-changing spell I know is permanent and I might not be able to change us back."

"We'll have to take our chances then. It's only a minor weakness as I said. At least this way someone would have to be looking carefully to spot us. That brings us to our next problem. How do we spring Nergal?"

"I've been thinking about that" she said, "but aside from generalities I'm at a loss."

"What sort of generalities?" I asked.

"Well, we're never going to be able to take six prison guard by main force, so we're going to need either a distraction or some other way to catch them by surprise. Any ideas?"

"What about that light spell you used?"

"It's not really reliable enough. It will only completely blind someone looking directly at the source of light. Any one else will only see spots like from a photographic flash bulb. We can't be sure that all six guards will be looking in the right direction or even be in the room when we attack. Anything else?"

"Not yet, but why don't we test out our disguises. Maybe we'll come up with something by cruising the marketplace."

There was nothing unusual about the market. I had hoped that here in a land completely populated by demons - or minor gods depending on your perspective - that there would be all sorts of wonders for sale, but the market, while full of a wide assortment of goods, catered to the day-to-day needs of the city dwellers just like any farmers' market might. I guess that my professors were right when they taught me that the lives of the gods of the ancient world mirrored the lives of the people who worshipped them, although often on a grander scale. So rather than a market filled with the wonders of the ages, Jael and I spent the afternoon inspecting various foodstuffs, clothing, and jewelry. Jael bought herself a gold bracelet set with sardonyx that she said would go well with an outfit she had back home and managed to talk me into an electrum and lapis ring, but aside from those ornaments we found nothing of interest. However, judging from the conversations we had with some of the merchants, Erishkigal's approval rating from her subjects was in the single figures and most of the populace believed that Nergal was away on business and they wished that he would finish whatever it was and hurry back. A few believed he was dead. Their behavior implied that they thought Erishkigal had done it. Not surprisingly, however, no one would admit to that.

While there was no direct sunlight in the netherworld, it did get dark here toward evening. Given the strict regimentation of this society I didn't expect to find a place to stay for the evening, but I was wrong. As the merchants packed up and left we noticed a few lighted doors to which many of them retired to rather than driving their carts out of town. A closer look proved that there were taverns inside.

Jael returned with a pot of beer, saying, "I got us a room for the night too. Top of the stairs and around the corner, then the fourth door on the right. Comes with breakfast in the morning."

"Good enough. I don't suppose you got something to help us with our other problem."

"Hey! One step at a time. What's that you're reading?"

"Grey's Survival Manual. Everyone at Tell el Ahvram was required to carry one. I've

been flipping through it for ideas."

"Anything?"

"Not unless you want to burn down the prison. There's a good ignition spell here."

"No," she decided after some thought, "I don't think Nergal would appreciate being char-broiled. I wouldn't want to do that anyway; he's an ancestor of mine in a round-about sort of way."

"It wasn't a serious suggestion. Hey!" I said with sudden insight, "but where there's smoke, there's fire."

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious," Jael said sarcastically. "I assume you plan to explain that."

"There's a whole section here on camouflage in the Wild."

"Marcus, maybe you haven't noticed, but this isn't the Wild, and I think we are fairly well camouflaged already."

"True, but one of the spells is a magic smoke bomb."

"Here, let me see that," she said taking the book from me. "Hee hee, I remember this spell. I learned it when I was a kid. It's not very effective by itself and will only affect a small area, much less than the total space of the guards' room, if that's what you were thinking."

"Sort of, but not just a single use of the spell."

"Even with the two of us each casting one it still wouldn't be enough to fill the room adequately."

"True again. I was thinking of using six spells all told." Jael looked puzzled. "It was your trigger spell that gave me the idea. We can just load one up with six smoke spells and let it off in the room. Then, as the guards come out, looking for fresh air, we can pick them off one by one."

"Good plan," she conceded. "Too bad each trigger can only contain one spell."

"Didn't these disguises take four spells? Two each for the hair and two each for the skin?"

"No, only two spells. I set them to affect anyone within ten feet of me. A native would have never noticed that there was a spell on him. But it did take two triggers. That's why I snapped my fingers on both hands."

"You can set six triggers then, can't you?"

"Of course. Let's see, one for me snapping the fingers of my right hand, one for the left, and a third for clapping both hands together, then an equal set for you too. That will make six. Good enough?"

"Perfect!"

Fifteen

We decided to hit the "hoosegow" just before first light the next morning. After our beer we went to our room and Jael went to work.

"There," Jael said when she was finished. "Six smoke bombs. All triggered and ready to use."

"Good!" I replied, clapping my hands together, a gesture I immediately regretted. A cloud of sulphurous smoke surrounded me with a choking, suffocating intensity. Jael dragged me to the room's window and thrust me halfway through it head first, holding me there until I stopped coughing.

"Thanks bunches." She was sarcasm personified as she pulled me back into the room at last. "Now do you think you can keep from doing that again for a few hours or should I wait to reset that spell until we're ready to leave?"

"Do it now," I said contritely. "I'll try to control myself."

"You're sure you don't want to try the other two first? Maybe we can stay up all night and help the landlord fumigate this room."

"Enough, Jael, please! I may be slow at times, but the lesson does sink in eventually and I do, at least, try not to make the same mistake twice."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I've been rather on edge since we left Hell. I've spent my whole life there and the plan was to get you and Rona home. It wasn't my intention to go along with you. You can rest assured that Chayim is using my absence and inability to defend myself to his own benefit; I may be in for a demotion. I may not even be allowed back home."

"Where would you go?"

She looked at me for a moment, her face completely unreadable. "I don't know!" she burst out abruptly, tears flowing. I can't recall actually going to her and putting my arms around her, but I must have since my next clear memory was of holding Jael as we both sat on the bed and trying to tell her with varying degrees of success that everything would be all right.

I woke up a few hours later to the sound of a faint digital chirp and realized that my arms were still around Jael. She came awake as I twisted around to read my watch. It was still dark, but so far diurnal cycles had been the same from one world to the next and although I hadn't managed to keep track of dawn during my stay in Erishkigal's prison, I was fairly certain that it wasn't far away.

"Time to get up," I whispered to Jael.

"I'm up," she replied, disentangling herself. "What time is it?"

"Four A.M. and some odd seconds."

"Oh my! We're running late. Let's get moving. With luck we might be able to get back for breakfast."

"Jael, if we manage to pull this off, breakfast will probably be in the royal temple." I didn't need to say that if we failed, we weren't likely to consider breakfast a priority.

"Oh yeah."

The streets of the city were lighted but not very well. Still and all we could see where we were going and made our way back to the temple compound where the dungeon was. Along the way we picked up a couple of heavy pieces of wood that we could use for clubs.

There were two guards on duty at the gateway into the compound but, as often happens during the graveyard shift, they were asleep at their posts. We tip-toed past them and skulked our way down to the jail.

"Marcus," Jael whispered to me outside the building, "I just remembered that we never reset the sixth smoke bomb."

"No time to worry about that now. The sky's already getting lighter. Besides, four would probably be sufficient but I wanted a bit of insurance. Let's go for it."

"If you say so." She didn't sound too sure. "Marcus? Before we start, I just want to thank you for your comfort and kindness back at the inn."

"No problem. You've been helping me since we met. I owe you a lot."

"No, Marcus. I helped you because I thought I saw a way to advance myself. What you did for me was completely unselfish. You could have just let me cry myself out, you know. I'd have been all right after a while."

"Maybe, but that's what friends are for. We are friends, aren't we?" She looked at me strangely for a long moment, an unreadable half-smile on her face.

"Yes. I think we are," she said at last. Then without warning she threw her arms around me and kissed me with a passion I'd never experienced. Time itself stopped during that kiss and while it lasted I was aware of nothing but Jael as she pressed her body tightly against me. When, at last, the kiss ended she stepped back and looked at me again. Briefly, a smile flickered across her face and she seemed to be about to make the sort of wisecrack that she might have when we first met. Just as quickly the smile faded and was replaced by a more serious look just as intensely riveted on me. Once more she looked like she was about to say something and changed her mind again. "Maybe later," she said finally so softly that I nearly couldn't hear it.

"Ready?" I asked. She nodded and on a silent count of three we hit the door that opened directly into the guards' room and threw our smoke spells at the surprised guards. Then, just as quickly we closed the door again and waited for the guards to come out. Ventilation in the guards' room was poor so we didn't have long to wait.

Coughing and choking violently, the guards ran out one by one and as they did we clubbed them into unconsciousness. The fifth guard collapsed of asphyxiation as he stumbled through the door and when we realized that the sixth and final guard wasn't coming out, Jael cast a quick artificial respiration spell to restart his breathing.

Even with the door open it took ten minutes for the air in the guards' room to clear enough for us to breathe without coughing our guts out and after checking to see that the room was empty we dragged the unconscious guards back in and chained them together with the heavy bronze chain that was still here from when we were dragged in over a week earlier. The sixth guard was still unaccounted for.

"Did we miscount?" I asked quietly. Jael shook her head and pointed at the door to the cell block.

Like the outside door, this one opened into the guards' room so where we were able to push the door open suddenly on the way in, this time we would be at the disadvantage of having it open in our faces.

I cautiously listened at the door but heard nothing behind it. Whether that was because there was nothing to hear or the door was too thick I couldn't tell. I looked at Jael to see if she was ready and she nodded. As I began to open the door it was pushed forcefully into me, throwing me back against the wall. Jael, however was in position to take advantage of the situation and clubbed the sixth guard down as he burst into the room.

I was still a little shaken from hitting my head against the wall, but recovering fast as I said, "Well, that was anticlimactic." Perhaps I should have smiled when I said that for Jael gave me a dirty look.

"Terribly sorry. Should I have dragged it out a bit longer, let him come near to killing me a few times before I got in a lucky shot? Maybe I should have issued a challenge first. That would have been sporting."

"Sorry. It was a bad attempt at a joke. Let's get Nergal."

The locking mechanism was as simple as Nergal had described, but the bronze pin

was stuck after all that time of staying firmly in place. It took a few sharp raps with Jael's club to loosen it, and soon the King of the Dead got his first breath of freedom in two centuries.

In the guards' room I had my first clear view of Nergal. He was nearly six feet tall with curly blond hair and beard. His robes were tatters but after two centuries in durance vile they should have rotted off long ago. His most striking feature, however, were his eyes. They were the blue of a mid-winter mountain sky; the shade of blue that you think you can only find on a jigsaw puzzle until you actually see it in nature for yourself. The entire effect was startling in a god of death until I remembered that in his youth he had been one of the gods of the sky.

"Have my eyes gone bad," he asked, "or have you two changed since I last saw you?"

"Simple disguise spell," Jael said with deliberate casualness. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." Nergal simply nodded.

"I'm surprised that you managed to recognize us through the spell," I commented.

"Actually it was your voices that I recognized," Nergal replied.

"My king!" one of the guards gasped, still chained up. "Please forgive us. How could we have known you were our prisoner?" The others, at least those who were conscious, agreed.

"You couldn't have," Nergal replied. "The queen, my wife, planned this well. I doubt that those who abducted me knew who I was and if they did, I fear they're all dead now."

"Don't be too sure of that," I told him.

"What do you mean?"

"Only that while my skimpy research has shown that you're quite popular with most of your subjects, there's always room for one or two ambitious men near the top who would like to be even nearer to the top."

"Who?"

"Good question. Too bad I have a lousy answer. Fact is I don't know. I was hoping you might."

"I don't."

"There's no one you know who wouldn't like to take a step up in the world? No royal guard who might like to be captain? No captain who wants be your chief of staff? No one who thought he might be king?"

"Are you saying that it may not have been the queen who had me locked up here?"

"It's a possibility. How many could have given the order that the guards weren't to talk to the prisoners?"

"Any of several, but the order would have had to be backed up by one of the royal seals which only I and the queen possess. See," he pulled a small blue cylinder seal similar to the one Enki had given Jael and me. "This one is mine. Oh, I see what you mean. My wife had to be in on it so the seal could be used, but some other high-ranked member of our staff may have been working with her."

"Your wife might be blameless," Jael pointed out. Nergal looked confused. "How many documents come across a monarch's desk each day?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Can you read cuneiform? Can Erishkigal?"

"I can," he answered. "It would be my guess that my wife can only make out three words out of eight."

"Then it is at least conceivable that someone could have slipped her a clay tablet she couldn't read."

"And that tablet could easily have been the order that guards would no longer talk to the prisoners, or even for me to be arrested," Nergal finished for me.

"Who would your guards obey in a pinch?" Jael asked. "You or their officers?"

"I don't know," Nergal admitted sadly.

"I would follow you, my king," the guard who had first begged for mercy. "My life is yours. Command me to fight for you and I will be the first to the front. Command me to kill and whomever you want dead won't see their next dawn. Command me to die and I will kill myself without hesitation. I am your man, sire!" The others made sounds of agreement.

Nergal walked up to them and took hold of the bronze chain. Then with an almost indifferent effort he snapped the chain into several pieces freeing the guards. As a group all but two of them knelt at his feet. The other two were still out cold.

"You used excessive force, my friends," he said reproachfully. "No matter." He placed a hand on each of the two unconscious guards and they quickly recovered.

"My king!" they murmured, falling to their knees.

"Rise, my subjects," he said gently. "I do not doubt your loyalty." He turned to me next. "If there was a betrayal as you suggest, I doubt it would have been among the private soldiers. The officers, on the other hand, are all suspect."

"How about Enlidu?" I suggested, dropping the only name I knew in this context.

"Who?"

"Sire," the talkative guard put in, "He was a lieutenant at the time you disappeared and was promoted to Captain after Enduki was found murdered."

"Enduki is dead?" Nergal asked. "He would have been my prime suspect. So Enlidu is a captain now?"

"No, sire. He is the queen's chief of security."

"Sounds like a suspiciously rapid advancement," I commented.

"It is," the guard agreed, "but he is widely regarded as honest and honorable."

"A matter of the cream floating to the top?" I asked.

"In my experience," Jael remarked acidly, "the scum also rises."

"No, no," the guard disagreed. "It was his popularity with the troops that led to his rise. He was harsh but fair with us, and after his advancement to captain, his unit quickly became the best. Even if they weren't the Royal Elite, we all vied to join his unit. His next promotion was granted to keep the troops happy by giving more of them the chance to serve under him. Some of the general staff were afraid of him, but to my knowledge he always played it clean."

"This Enlidu," Nergal began, "he never received a promotion under suspicious circumstances?"

"Never!" the guard swore, putting his hand over his heart. "Except for his most recent advancement, openings were always created at least two levels above him. He advanced because his superiors all took a step up."

"How many who were on my general staff," Nergal asked, "are still around?"

"None, sire. The queen denounced them all one at a time."

"Then we may never know the truth of the conspiracy, but I suspect that there were

one or two members of the general staff who conspired with my wife to overthrow me. Later on, probably in insanity-induced jealousy, she had them killed. At least that's my theory. It fits with her behavior even before she started getting crazy."

"You'd know better than we would," Jael told him. "But the real question is how are we going to get you back on your throne and then up to Enlil's council meeting?"

"No doubt to be joined in progress," I added.

"If it isn't already over," Nergal pointed out.

"Sire, the private troops and almost all of your officers will follow you if you but ask," the guards' spokesman said.

"Very well, go and bring your captain to me here. When he arrives we will make further plans. Now I'd like to examine the other prisoner, that red, scaly guy. Would the rest of you," he indicated the other guards, "please bring him here?"

A few minutes later a whimpering red reptile was curled up in a scaly ball of fear at our feet. His face appeared human in spite of the complexion problem and if the expression of fear on it were replaced by a disdainful sneer and he were to take a more dignified posture, he'd be the archetypical demon.

"Not much fight left in the little devil," Jael remarked. "You say it only took one beating to knock the spirit out of him?"

"Must have not been much spirit to him in the first place, I guess," Nergal replied. "Well, come on little fellow, you're safe now. How about telling us what you're doing here." There was no response except another whimper or two. Nergal heaved a mighty sigh and placed his hands to either side of the red creature's head. The look of abject fear became moderated by a fragile flash of sanity in his eyes.

"Who are you?" Red asked. "Where am I? Please don't hurt me!"

"Relax, friend," Nergal told him. "We will not hurt you, and we will grant you conditional ambassadorial status. I am Nergal, King of the Dead in this realm and these are my dear friends Jael of Hell and Marcus of Earth, and by what name may we address you?"

"An it please thee, sire," old Rusty said, dropping into pseudo-Elizabethan, "I am called Athtar and I bear thee tidings from thy royal cousins, the kings and queens of all the netherworlds."

"You talk funny," Nergal commented suspiciously. "What do you want?"

Athtar the Red told him the other side of the Netherworlds alliance conspiracy. However, Mr. Scales made the whole scheme sound reasonable and in Nergal's position I might have found the prospect attractive if Jael and I hadn't already told him the other side of the story. The weakness in Athtar's story, of course, came out when he claimed that only his people had the means to allow Nergal access to the outside world.

"That's all very interesting," Nergal said after hearing the deal, "but I happen to know that access to this world already exists as my out-world friends here can attest to. Frankly if you've been lying about that, then you've probably lied about other things as well, and as for the Netherworlds conquering the other realms and ruling the universe, I don't buy it. There is a fundamental balance between the upper and lower worlds that must not be disturbed. Have you the faintest notion of the damage your plot could cause?"

"Great King, my lord, Lucifer Silvertongue the Mighty, the wisest of all, assures me that the balance of the universe would not be disturbed. The Universe will always balance itself."

"I must tell that one to the Universe," Nergal replied, "She always did enjoy a good joke."

"Athtal, Athtal," Jael muttered. "Oh yes, now I know who you are. You're one of those debased Canaanite gods we inherited a couple thousand years ago. Yes, after all this time you're still only one of Chayim's toadies." As she spoke her disguise spells on us gradually dissolved so that by the time she was finished speaking we both stood in our natural forms. "You know the red scales are an improvement. You've never looked better."

"Jael, you little slut! When I get you back to Hell, Chayim's going feast on your gizzard."

"You poor misguided failure," Jael replied coolly. "When I get back to Hell, Chayim's going to be just a tad busy keeping his own internal organs on the right side of his skin."

"Then I'll handle you here and now," Athtar threatened walking forward.

"You'll do no such thing!" Nergal said harshly. This was a side I hadn't seen of him. So far he had been soft-spoken and friendly.

"Stay out of my way, you old has-been!" Athtar didn't bother to waste courtesy on anyone who rejected him. I wondered how many of Chayim's ambassadors had his great sense of diplomacy. "Satan will cast you into the deepest abyss for all eternity for turning him down."

"Do you know who you are talking too?" Nergal growled, drawing himself up to his full psychic height. While his outward appearance had not changed he seemed to have undergone a terrible transformation. "I am Nergal the Lethal! Mine is the ability to kill man and god alike with my very will! Do not threaten me in my own demesne. Here I am invincible." Athtar cringed back from Nergal. "I promised to leave you unharmed, so you will remain my guest here for the duration. Take him back to his cell," he finished turning to the guards.

"No!" Athtar screamed. "Not again! you will not confine me again!" With that he ran for the door, knocking two guards out of his way. The door was still open and as he crossed through the doorway he vanished.

Sixteen

The gods of Dilmun were seated in a circle on carved, alabaster benches. Of them all I recognized only Enki, who was seated before his divinatory lapis bowl of water, and Nin-ti, who sat among several other goddesses about halfway around the large circle. A white-haired elder god, who was obviously in charge, noticed us before the rest of the council as we approached, and called out, "Nergal! Welcome at last!"

Jael and I stayed outside the circle of gods while Nergal walked into the center of the circle of benches in the council area and kneeled before the elder. "Father, you called for me and I have come," he said formally. "For the first time since my descent to the Netherworld, I have come."

"We have been worried about you, Nergal," the elder, who I correctly guessed was Enlil, God of the Air and king of the Sumerian pantheon, replied only slightly less formally. "Please be seated." Enlil gestured to a space next to his bench and one identical to his appeared, except that instead of alabaster it was fashioned of onyx. When Nergal sat down, he continued, "Pray forgive us, but we were considering invading your realm to learn the reason for your absence."

"The matter at hand is sufficiently grave that such an intrusion would have been well justified, Enlil, and it was nearly necessary." Nergal proceeded to tell Enlil about his

incarceration and subsequent rescue. "So, once I was freed, restoring my kingdom was as simple as showing myself to the troops. It turns out that all the conspirators were killed off one by one by my wife."

"I'm sorry to hear of your wife's illness," Enki said tactfully, "but if she is indisposed, how were you able to get away?"

"Mine is not the busy realm it was in the old days and the rules have changed a bit. You'll remember when that great banquet was held long ago, when I was still of the sky. Back then Erishkigal was not even allowed to leave the Netherworld and had to send a representative."

"Yes, I do remember," Enki replied with a grin. "As I recall you refused to greet her ambassador with due respect and she demanded your banishment to her realm so that she could torture you to death as a fit punishment."

"I never was able to thank you properly for the gift of those fourteen demons you gave me. They really saved my hide."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Back then there were fourteen gates to the Netherworld, instead of merely one as there is today. I stationed each one at a gate and then we swept inward and quickly captured Erishkigal herself, threatening to put her to death in my place."

"But you married her," Jael pointed out. "What changed your mind?"

"As I held her head up by her hair and was about to chop it off with my sword, she wept, begging me to spare her life and to become her husband and have dominion over her realm. I tell you that the power she offered meant little to me for one look into her eyes and I was in love. I have never regretted sparing her life and if we can gain access to the modern world, I swear I will import all it takes to cure her madness!"

"Well said!" Enlil approved, "but you still haven't answered Enki's question. If you're here, who did you leave in charge?"

"Ah. It turns out that in spite of Erishkigal's purge of the entire upper echelon, there was one officer of outstanding merit who was eventually promoted to chief of security - one Enlidu by name. I am confident that he can handle all the day-to-day matters that may come up during my absence. So what have I missed so far?"

"Only the obvious," Enlil told him. "We have recognized a state of emergency in regards to the Netherworlds Alliance conspiracy and have been fruitlessly exploring ways and means by which we might regain access to Earth and thereby join the fight on the side of the forces of Order. Judging from your story, I assume we can count on you to side with us."

"Of course."

"Good," Enlil acknowledged simply, implying that he would have expected no less from the King of the Dead. Then he turned to Jael and me, "I am unable to express my gratitude to you two for the service you have done us. We are all forever in your debt. What I am about to say will seem rude and ungrateful, but I must ask that you two leave us for a time while we sit in council."

"I'm afraid I'll have to contradict you, Lord Enlil," Enki interrupted looking up from his divinatory apparatus, "but their attendance here is not only proper but absolutely necessary. You see, they are intimately connected with the exit to the outer universe."

"An hour ago you told us that exit was in the Netherworld," Enlil said, confused.

"An hour ago it was in the Netherworld. Now it is here and in Marcus' possession." Jael and I had changed back into our modern clothing. The Sumerian styles were

comfortable enough in an exotic sort of way, but we were both more accustomed to operating in modern togs. Enki stood up and walked over to me. "Somewhere," he said, placing his right hand on my pack, "about here. Search your pack, Marcus."

I went through the pack but found nothing out of the ordinary. Enki had me lay the contents of the pack out while he examined each one. Finally, he picked up my spare shirt - the one that had still been in my pack when I arrived through Hell's service entrance, not the charred one that I'd discarded. He reached into the left breast pocket and pulled out a small chip of wood.

I heard myself asking, "Where did that come from?" mostly out of surprise although I had a sneaking suspicion.

"Well, unless I am completely mistaken - and I'm not - this is a piece of the heartwood of the World-Tree you told me about. The World-Tree, Yggdrasill by name," he told the others, stumbling over the word, "is a direct descendant of the plants I grow to produce the Food of Life."

"That is all very interesting, Enki, and I am sure that we would normally appreciate the botany lesson," Enlil said to the giggles of Nin-ti and her friends, "but could you please get to the point?"

"I'm already there. The Food of Life plant is actually an aspect of this Yggdrasill or maybe I should put that the other way around since the Food of Life predates the Tree. In any case, if Dilmun and the neighboring lands were still open to the outside we could travel by the Food of Life's relationship to Yggdrasill."

"But?" prompted Enlil wearily, anticipating the bad news side of Enki's speech and trying to move it along.

"But since the closing that exit has been barred to us. However, I know now how Jael and Marcus arrived here."

"How?" Jael and I asked together.

"A piece of the heartwood will enable anyone who possesses it direct access to the Tree from where ever they happen to be. Athtar must have had one on him so that he could leave too."

"But then why didn't I get out of Hell as soon as we picked up Rona?"

"A certain amount of concentration is necessary and since you didn't even know you had the chip, you could hardly have expected to leave that way. However it was the chip, acting through your inner thoughts, which caused the appearance of the Tree in Hell. You needed a way out and the chip provided it. Unfortunately you appeared at the base of the Tree and were attacked by its guardians."

"But you were concentrating on leaving Hell when we were in the hall of the Egress," Jael pointed out. "That explains why we never actually made it to the end of the corridor."

"Yes," I agreed, "We must have taken a single step on a limb of Yggdrasill and then fallen off on the next. It was such a fast transition that if you blinked at the wrong moment you could have missed it."

"Which I evidently did," Jael replied. "But how did you get a piece of the heartwood of the tree? The only piece I saw was the limb that the squirrel tossed you and that was dissolved in the Styx."

"It must have been Ratatosk, the squirrel," I guessed. "One morning I woke up to catch him going through my pack. I thought he was looking for another beer, but he must have hidden this chip there."

"Why couldn't he just have told you it was there?"

"Ratatask's regular job is to carry strife up and down the trunk of the tree. This was probably his idea of a joke while still being uncharacteristically helpful. So," I said turning to Enki, "what's the plan? Do we use that chip to get to the Tree so that each of you can get one of your own?"

"That would work," he acknowledged. "However, I believe that with the use of this wood chip, if I have your permission to use it," I nodded. "I can graft it to the Food of Life plant to establish a permanent gate to Yggdrasill and thereby the rest of the universe."

"So this world will once again be open?" Enlil asked.

"Yes and no," Enki replied. "The world will still be technically closed, but we'll have this one, limited gate. We won't be trapped here, but the way out will be more round about than we used to enjoy."

"It matters not," Enlil stated. "If this works we will soon be free to travel through the worlds again. Ah. Even the mere hope of freedom after so long fills me with joy. How soon can you do it and how long will it take?"

"By your leave," Enki replied, "I can start immediately. How long it will take, however, remains to be seen."

"Good enough. Please start at once."

"As you wish. Marcus, would you accompany me? After being in your possession so long this chip is attuned to you. I'll, no doubt, need your help." I agreed and we were off.

A geyser suddenly erupted from the ground and enveloped Enki and me in the surprisingly dry embrace of a large air bubble. The massive stream of water shot us in our bubble into the sky in a magnificent arcing course. At the top of the arc I could see the entirety of Dilmun as it now was spread out below me. The land was a moderately large island, dozens of miles wide and a little longer than it was wide. It wasn't a bad place to live with its carefully manicured paths and gardens, but from the air I could see that after some millennia of nothing else to do, the gods had pretty much done all they could to this paradise and instead of what must have once been a fresh and original land filled with wonders was now an over-planned construct that had been refined to the point of obsession. While it had not been readily apparent from the ground, the entire island had been divided and subdivided into small plots for each of the residents with a fair amount left aside for common areas. Even the small collection of snow-capped mountains at the north end of the island seemed to be too neatly planned.

The surrounding ocean was a brilliant, tropical blue except for the area around the northern edge of the island, which appeared to be frozen. In the sunlight of Dilmun the ice was a pristine-appearing white with blindingly bright highlights.

However, the single feature that effected me the most was a fact that I had not previously been aware of; the world was flat. There was not even the slightest suggestion of a global curvature in what I saw and the edge of this world was clearly in sight. The water of the ocean cascaded over the edge in the southern three quarters of the world. According to Enki, it ran across the back side of the world, froze and formed a glacier that flowed to the northern ice cap where it came around the edge of the world, melted and started all over again. He explained that the ocean floor was actually a large, shallow bowl so the rate of the great waterfall never actually exceeded the rate of glacial melt; but the churning, white color at the rim made it hard to believe that the ocean wasn't just emptying itself into space.

The ride upward was a fascinating opportunity to see the world I'd been visiting, but the downhill leg of the trip was an excitement that I would have gladly foregone. I have had the experience of riding some of the most impressive roller coasters ever known from small, rickety, falling-apart-and-stuck-together-with-chewing-gum-and-duct-tape ones to the mega-huge, super-deluxe, extra-special "Comet Blasters" with double rolls and triple loops

that culminate in a hundred foot free-fall onto yet another track that travels six feet beneath a river and then starts all over again at high speed. The experiences of all those rides were dwarfed by this one straight power-dive into the briny deep that Enki took me on.

There was no shock as we hit the water nor had I felt any acceleration or deceleration on the entire trip, but visually we appeared to slow down until we stood once more at the doorway into Abzu II.

"That was some ride," I said as we stepped into Enki's home.

"Thought you might have liked it the way you were screaming all the way," he laughed.

"We didn't travel that way last time," I pointed out.

"We weren't in this much of a hurry. You can be sure that Enlil and the rest are busy preparing to leave. They'll probably be here in an hour or so and we'd better be ready by then ourselves."

"But what's the hurry? You've been stuck here for the last few thousand years. Surely another day or two isn't going to make all that much of a difference, is it?"

"The length of our captivity here, Marcus, has very little to do with it. The situation in the outer world is rapidly becoming explosive. There is about to be a battle among the forces of order and chaos. The end result, if the sides are too even, could well mean the destruction of the universe - the entire universe. That includes the closed worlds as well as the open ones. We're all in danger and it behooves us to try to do something about it if it's within our powers to do so."

"Oh," I replied lamely.

"Not only that," Enki continued, "but battles on the celestial plane are almost always reflected on the mortal plane."

"They are?"

"Yes. You really didn't know that?"

Thinking about that I remembered being forced to read Homer back in high school. The way he told it, there was as much wrangling between the gods as there was between the Greeks and the Trojans. "It's been a while," I explained, "since the gods have taken such an obviously active interest in Earth."

"Do your modern gods really care so little about their people?" Enki asked in disbelief.

"Most modern religions are monotheistic and the three major religion groups of the Western World have common roots. If I understand this whole thing about divine analogs, the god of all three would either be the same being or be very direct analogs so it would be like fighting oneself."

"Could be," Enki conceded dubiously, "but could any one god have so much power?"

"He's supposed to be omnipotent."

"But then how could the Netherworlds Alliance even hope to mount a serious threat?"

"We have an old saying, 'God moves in mysterious ways.'"

"Sounds like superstitious nonsense to me," Enki concluded as he started searching through a large, gold-decorated, carved, wooden chest.

I merely shrugged. Only a fool argues theology with a god. Instead I asked, "So how are we going to graft a piece of dead wood to a living plant?"

"With magic, of course. But that piece of wood is not really dead. Any part of

Yggdrasill will always be alive if it exists at all. The Tree is a symbol of life itself just as its direct ancestor, the Food of Life plant is. Even if this chip were sanded down and varnished, instead of the roughly broken piece that it is, there would still be a spark of life in it.

"In a very real sense it is still a part of the Tree and because of that you were able to use it to leave Hell and could also get out of here too, except that you wouldn't be able to bring anyone you weren't in physical contact with at the time of transfer.

"However by grafting, it will not only be a part of the World-Tree, but it will also be a part of the Food of Life plant which, in turn, will become a part of the World-Tree again. When that happens we can get to the Tree, merely by touching the Tree and concentrating on its Yggdrasill aspect."

"Unless it leaves this world when it becomes a part of the Tree," I said, verbally dropping the other shoe on the subject.

"Oh my! That could happen, couldn't it?"

"That's the problem with symbolic magic," I replied, noticing that he had almost completely emptied the chest so far. "You have to set up the symbolism carefully without any chance of ambiguity. You're making a good usage of the Law of Contagion, but you're forgetting Murphy's Law. You'll need a good strong foundation spell to keep your Food of Life plant firmly affixed to this world."

"What's Murphy's Law?" He asked in confusion.

"Whatever can go wrong, will," I quoted. He smiled and then thought for a moment.

"No problem," he said at last. "Ninhursag gave me a good spell for fortifying a plant's root strength. I've never had to use it, but I think it should do the trick. Ah ha! This is what I was looking for."

The last object in the chest was an eighteen-inch-long rod of ebony with ivory tips. As Enki picked it up, there was a smile of triumph on his face. I, on the other hand, was rapidly losing a monumental battle to keep from laughing out loud.

"This," Enki told me, "is the Rod of Ninhursag. She left it when she merged with her later analogs. I don't think she would have wanted me to have it - we had some rather spectacular disagreements in our time - but I convinced the others that as the keeper of the Food and Water of Life, I was best suited to wield her rod of creation. Unfortunately neither I nor any of the others have been able to create with it." We started walking back toward the temple entrance.

"Then how are we going to use it?"

"I said that I couldn't create with it. However the rod has other properties that I am able to use. It also promotes health in all living things and will accelerate the graft." We were now outside the temple at the top of the ziggurat. "Ready?"

Before I could reply, we were swept up in another large bubble and continued our journey to the base of Abzu II. Once more the trip felt absolutely acceleration-free, but the speed with which we approached the sea bed was nerve wracking enough.

We landed on a side of the ziggurat where I had not previously been in a submarine garden about two acres in size. Enki had spent a lot of time here designing and building this garden. Like the normal gardens in Dilmun, it was filled with pleasingly curved paths and a central area with a pair of benches on either side of a table with an odd game board inlaid into its top. Unlike the surface gardens, however, this one was planted entirely with marine plants. Just like on the path from the surface to Abzu II, I was able to breath normally here and I remained dry although all the plants swayed with the water currents and fish were able to swim through the garden without trouble.

I followed Enki to a small unremarkable reddish shrub that grew to one side of the central area. He bent down and examined it, pushing branches aside to get a clear view of the trunk, then turning a few leaves over to look at their undersides.

"This is the Food of Life plant?" I asked, unimpressed.

"This? Oh no. This is just a new experimental hybrid water-hedge I've been working on. I figured that while I was nearby I would check to see how it was doing. We're likely to be gone for some time, you know. That dark green plant over there is the Food of Life plant.

The real thing was even less impressive than Enki's water-hedge. I suppose you could call it a shrub but it grew very low to the ground and spread out fairly extensively giving it more of a vine-like appearance. Its leaves were small and laurelate in appearance and there were clusters of blue-green, cherry-sized berries in various states of ripeness on the branches partially hidden under the leaves.

Enki knelt down next to me in front of the primeval Tree of Life and said, "Not much of a plant, is it?" I had to agree. "It's the only one that wasn't created by Ninhursag."

"If not Mother Nature, then who did create it?"

"We don't really know. I suspect it was created jointly by Tiamat and Abzu, the primordial oceans."

"Isn't your temple also named Abzu?"

"Yes it is. The original Abzu shrine, of which this is a copy, was built over the corpse of Abzu himself."

"How does an ocean die?"

"Not easily, I assure you. Before the gods were born, Marcus, there were only Tiamat and Abzu. Later, after we came into being, Abzu and Tiamat began to resent our unceasing activity. They said we were too loud and Abzu decided to kill us, although in all fairness Tiamat begged him to have compassion on us. Well to make a long story short, I finally managed to kill Abzu with magic and established my home over his remains. Tiamat went mad with grief over the death of Abzu and attacked us all in revenge. When we finally defeated her, we created heaven and earth by dividing her body in two, the world as it now is evolved from that initial division.

"Anyway, the Food of Life plant already existed when the gods were born, although I have had to transplant it from time to time, so we've always assumed that it might have been their creation, or maybe just that of Tiamat. Of course it's entirely possible that it just came into being on its own when the universe was born. It's that sort of plant; it might have actually been the agency that created Tiamat and Abzu. They had to come from somewhere.

"Well, this is an interesting subject of speculation, but I don't think we have the time to explore it now. Let's get to work."

The first thing Enki did was to recite the incantation that would keep the plant firmly attached to this world. When he was finished I could feel and see spiritual and intangible roots growing outward until they encompassed the world. These roots disappeared when they finished growing, but Enki assured me that they were still there and were now a permanent part of this world.

Then he produced a bronze dagger and, after some searching, he made a deep gash in what he explained was the main trunk of the vine-like shrub. When he had inserted the piece of Yggdrasil heartwood into the gash, he paused to tell me what he needed me to do.

"Now," he instructed me, "I want you to clear your mind of all extraneous thoughts and concentrate on encouraging this graft to take."

"How do I do that?"

"You had to ask? I'm not really sure. Just try imagining the heartwood bonding with the plant and becoming part of it, maybe that will work. As I said the wood seems to be attuned to you and if it senses that you want it to become a part of the plant, it is more likely to do so."

"All right. Ready when you are, Gridley."

"Enki," he corrected me.

"Never mind."

The incantation that Enki recited was in a language unlike any I'd ever heard. Whether it was ancient Sumerian or Babylonian, or some exotic tongue known only to the gods, I wouldn't know, but it is doubtful that I could have repeated the long, powerful spell even if I had been paying attention and without the magician's wand that he called the 'Rod of Ninhursag' I couldn't have done it anyway. However I had my own task to perform that required almost my entire conscious will; any impressions I received beyond the graft, were strictly the products of an undisciplined mind.

Soon the graft area began to glow with a pulsating, green-white light. As Enki continued the incantation, the glowing area expanded until it encompassed the entire plant. The spell seemed to take hours to cast and in all that time the entire garden was bathed in the mystic, pulsating light. Finally the light began to ebb, dimming first where the graft was now sealed over with a healthy coat of new grown bark and then spreading out to the rest of the plant - dying in the same way that it had grown.

"Done," Enki stated as he sat back exhausted. "Not bad, hey?"

"That light gave me the mother of all headaches," I complained in return.

"It might have been a side effect of the spell. That piece of the tree is still attuned to you and it's been under a fair amount of stress. Here, I think I can help you." He took Ninhursag's wand and waved it a few times over the Food of Life plant. "There," he said at last. "Is that better?"

"A little," I replied. The tide of pain had receded to the low water mark and my headache, while still there was now more of the nagging variety than one that might prohibit me from wanting to live. "I sure wish I had thought to pack a bottle of aspirin."

Enki told me the pain would fade completely soon and picked a generous handful of ripe berries. "Take these," He told me. "If you can find your fiancée's body, you might be able to use them to bring her back to life." He waved his hand and produced a small water skin similar to the one he'd given to Jael and me earlier. "This is the Water of Life, sprinkle it over her body and then feed her some of the berries. I make no promises, however. It's been a long time since she died and the Food and Water of Life may not be sufficient especially since it was magic that killed her in the first place." I thanked him. "Hungry?"

"Oh yeah. It's been hours."

"All right. We should have time for a quick meal before the others arrive."

Seventeen

"It's about time you guys got here!" That was the cheerful and friendly greeting we got from Ratatosk as Enki, Jael, and I stepped onto a particularly wide, low branch near the

trunk of Yggdrasill. "Hey! How many of you are there?" All around us gods and goddesses were appearing on the branch.

"About one pantheon," I replied casually.

"A whole pantheon?"

"What's left of it," Enki replied modestly. "We're very old."

"Old, hell! There aren't too many us that're young. I hope some of you clowns can fly, or at least float a bit. This poor branch can't take much more weight, it's one of the weaker ones. We may have trouble later when the armies are deployed"

"I shall take care of that, friend squirrel," Enlil said. He turned to the rest of the pantheon and commanded them to ride the wind that he would create and steer. One by one they stepped off the branch and appeared to sit down on nonexistent seats in the air. All but a dozen of them were seated on Enlil's celestial bus and followed the rest of us as we walked down the branch.

"Hey, Ratty!" I called to Ratatosk imitating his own manners or lack of same. "You said it was about time we got here. That implies that you were expecting us."

"Well, I was expecting you at least and the two girls you blew through here with a while back. Frankly, I didn't think it would take so long."

"We got delayed," I told him. "For that matter we just discovered that piece of heartwood you slipped in my clothes a little while ago."

"Really? Didn't it occur to you that you left Hell by a non-standard route? I would have thought that the cute demoness here would have realized that. You should have looked into the matter sooner."

"What do you know of it, rodent?" Jael demanded. "Of course we realized that there was something wrong, but there were a few other things on our mind and other problems to be solved first. Stupid squirrel!"

"Yeah, yeah." Ratatosk wasn't impressed. "Hey what happened to the blond babe? She almost has to have a better disposition."

"She's dead," I replied flatly. Nin-ti's amulet had protected me from becoming mired in my own depression, reducing it to a dull ache that I thought I could handle with ease. So easy, in fact, that I had removed the amulet back in Dilmun. Sure, some of the pain of her loss had come back to me then, but I resisted putting the charm back around my neck. That sort of painkiller can be addictive. Ratatosk's inquiry brought it all back to me and the emotional anguish shot a destructive and debilitating fire through my soul.

"Oh," Ratatosk said, embarrassed by his insensitivity. "I'm sorry, Marcus, really I am."

"That's all right," I told him, not sure if I actually meant it. "You didn't know."

"Damn! You'd think that after a thousand years or so I might have learned to watch my mouth."

"I don't think that's in your job description," I told him, forcing a smile. Well maybe it wasn't so forced. I'd lost Rona at least two weeks earlier and while it still hurt to think about it, life, as they say, goes on. I had come to grips with the situation and the pain was already ebbing again.

We walked on toward the trunk in relative silence until Enlil asked, "Where are you leading us, uh?"

"The name's Ratatosk and the forces of order are mustering even now on the Plain of Megiddo. I assume that's where you want to go."

"If that is where we are needed," the ancient God of the Air replied, "then that is

where we go."

"Megiddo?" Jael gasped. The name might have meant nothing to Enlil, but Jael and I both knew of the significance of Megiddo. "Are we now approaching Judgement Day? Will this be the Battle of Armageddon?" She grabbed my arm, seeking comfort. I responded in kind.

"I don't know," the squirrel replied uneasily. "It's a possibility. I understand that the location was chosen as a muster point because it was so well known. I doubt anyone really wants or even expects the battle to take place there, but it's a large enough area to hold the expected army. Plans will be made and the armies will be deployed from there. Hey, Marcus, I don't suppose you brought that steak dinner you owe me, did you?"

"Oh sure. I always keep one in my back pocket just in case I happen to blunder into a world where I owe someone a meal. About the only food I have with me that I can give you is that pomegranate you gave me. You can have it back if you like, but it's probably gone bad by now."

"No, it's still good. Fruit from Yggdrasill and its associated aspects never rots. But you'd better keep it, you might need it later. Personally, I abhor pomegranates."

"And you're none too fond of nuts and berries either."

"Too true!"

We came to the trunk and turned upward and followed it most of the way up the Tree. Just as I was beginning to have difficulty differentiating the upper branches from the trunk, we turned off on to a relatively small branch.

"This is the way," Ratatosk told us. "Take the second branch to the left and follow it all the way to its end and I'll meet you there." He turned and scampered heavily back down the trunk.

"Now what do you think he meant when he said that he'd meet us there?" Enki asked, "Isn't he going the wrong way?"

"Last time I was here," I explained, "Ratatosk told me that he and the other guardians of the World-Tree have the ability to be in two places at once. It seems fair, considering that otherwise they'd never have any time off."

"Two places at once?" Enki repeated. I could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he grasped the implications. "What a fascinating and useful talent. How does he do that, I wonder?"

"Squirrels move in mysterious ways, cousin!" Nergal replied in good natured banter.

"Hah!" Enki came back. "I just wish we'd had him around when I ate Ninhursag's special plants. I could have pinned the whole thing on him."

"Hey!" Nin-ti complained from Enlil's air bus. "That means I would have had to be born just to heal squirrel ribs. Feh!" Everybody laughed at that and the rest of the arboreal journey was filled with similar jokes. The gods of ancient Mesopotamia were enjoying an all-time high since leaving Dilmun and sounded as though they were feeling young for the first time in millennia.

As we walked down the branch, I showed the gods how to help themselves to the Tree's bounty, and after eating our fill Jael and I filled our packs with various fruits and nuts. I hoped we wouldn't have to survive solely on what we picked, but we would have been foolish to pass up the opportunity to stock up just in case.

At last we reached the end of the branch and stepped off on to a wide plain surrounded by mountains. The middle of the plain was split by a wadi that was dry now but in the rainy season was the Kishon River which flows to the Mediterranean just north of Mount

Carmel. The plain had an ethereal, holographic quality, as if we weren't actually there. The only thing that seemed real was a large and varied group of individuals who must have been the gods that comprised the forces of Order about a mile away. I mentioned this to Jael.

"I don't think we're quite on your world, Marcus," She told me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well we can see the Earth but unless I'm wrong we're slightly out of phase. Your mystics might call this an astral plane. All the points on this world coexist with Earth, but there's no physical contact between them except under certain conditions. However, if you concentrate, you can see what's going on in your world, at least you can see what ever you could see if you were on this point on Earth. You've heard how the gods watch over the world? Well this is where they do it from."

I tried concentrating and the Earthly plain came into focus. In the distance I could see a large number of men putting together a defensive position on the slopes of Megiddo, the rich archaeological site that was once one of Solomon's royal cities. It bothered me that the archaeological resources of that tell might soon be destroyed.

"Hey, Marcus!" I heard a high squeaky voice calling to me from a distance. Earth slipped out of focus and I was back on the astral plain of Megiddo. Ratatosk was approaching us from the group of mustering gods, waving as he drew near.

"Ratty! I thought we left you back there," I said pointing behind myself.

"Where?" he asked in feigned innocence. I looked behind me and realized that Yggdrasill had disappeared again. "Yeah, it does that a lot. Anyway I was sent to bring the lot of you to the muster. Lords Enlil, Nergal, and Enki," The cocky squirrel said with uncustomary respect, "you and your party are expected and you are invited to join the High Council which is meeting at this time."

"Thank you, friend squirrel," Enlil replied. "Where would that be?"

"Just up ahead, Lord, in the center of the muster. If you wish you may fly on ahead and I will lead your people to their muster point." Enlil thanked him again and then flew off with Nergal and Enki to join in the High Council.

We continued on toward the crowd. The gathering was much larger than I had at first thought. There were thousands of beings here spread out over three square miles and the place was still crowded. Not all the gods here were human in appearance, some, like Ratatosk, were animals, others were part human and part animal, and still others had forms I couldn't even begin to recognize.

Ratatosk led us to one side of the crowd saying, "You can set up camp, or whatever, here. There's been a lot of visiting between pantheons and you may feel free to indulge if you like, but be prepared to return here immediately when the Council breaks up."

"I would like to pay my respects to my mother, Ninhursag, if I may," Nin-ti said. Many others agreed. "Do you know where she might be?"

"Ninhursag? I'm afraid I don't know her," Ratatosk replied. "Do you know what her other aspects might be?"

"I believe her most modern one would be Mother Nature," Jael offered.

"Oh yes, I do know her - everyone does. Sorry, but she's on the High Council too. I'm sure you'll have a chance to talk to her later." Nin-ti was disappointed but she also seemed pleased that her mother still ranked in the upper-most echelon of the gods.

"Marcus," Jael said quietly, "There probably aren't too many people I know here, but I'd like to look around. Want to come along?" I shrugged an assent. It didn't matter much to me; I wasn't likely to know many in this crowd.

"Actually there's a fair-sized contingent from Hell here," Ratatosk offered. "Follow me."

We wound our way through the crowds. We passed a group of pleasant looking characters, male and female. They wore shiny white armor of some style that were normally only found in a low-budget "sword & sorcery" flick. Aside from that they wore wreaths of laurel and oak and ash in their hair. Some of them had green hair and fingernails. One even had green teeth. Too bad - she'd have been rather attractive otherwise.

"Minor nature gods of some of the modern sects," Ratatosk told me.

"You want to go talk shop?" I asked Jael, remembering that her job was to punish ecological sinners.

"No, thanks. I've talked to them before." She paused to wave at some who had obviously recognized her. "It's almost as bad as talking to the ecological extremists. I admire a good cause, but fanatics bore me."

The next group we passed appeared to be ancient Egyptian. From my study of Egyptian art styles I thought I recognized Horus and Isis chatting like long-lost buddies with Aton.

"Was their world recently reopened?" I asked Ratatosk.

"About a century and a half ago," he replied, "cracks appeared in the substance that enclosed them. They became fully open again during the Thirties when Tutankhamun's tomb was opened. It set off a whole bunch of nut groups worshipping them. They're still complaining about the odd things these new adherents expect of them."

We passed two other groups - Hindu, and Norse - before we finally came upon the hosts of Hell, not too far away from the center where the High Council were meeting. Jael's people were not the most friendly looking folks in the crowd. Most of them were the red, horned demonic types I'd seen working as guards.

"Don't worry about them," Jael tried to assure me. Those guises are just a form of magical armor. When they're not on duty, they look as human as I do."

"It still bothers me deep down, you know?"

"It's supposed to. We are demons after all."

"Oh? Can you do that too?" I asked.

"Of course. Want to see?" Before I could say otherwise her skin turned a deep red, small pointed horns grew out of her temples, and from her mouth a pair of short, but noticeable, fangs sprouted.

I took in the change and said, "On you it looks sexy."

"Oh yeah?" She started snuggling up to me and then kissed me as deeply as she had in the Sumerian Netherworld.

"Jael? Is that you, dear?" we heard a melodic feminine voice asking. I didn't know who it was, but for a brief moment I think I must have hated her. As Jael and I broke our embrace I noticed that she had returned to her normal appearance.

The lady who had spoken was looking at us with what appeared to be benevolent amusement. She was Jael's height, maybe a bit taller, with long golden hair with green highlights and her eyes were the color of new leaves. She was wearing a cream-colored chiton trimmed with green and brown and sandals, and her hair was tied up with a pair of brightly-colored linen bands with a short ponytail in the back.

To my surprise Jael dropped into a quick but graceful curtsy and said, "Your Majesty."

"Stand up, child," the queen said kindly, "and introduce me to your friend."

"Your Majesty, this is Marcus Postumus Steele of Earth. Marcus, may I present Her Royal Majesty, Queen Persephone of Hell and Goddess of Spring."

"An honor, Your Majesty," I murmured. Persephone offered her hand which I kissed while attempting a courtly bow with only partial success.

"The pleasure is all mine," she returned. "I don't get to meet many living mortals." Just then a gust of wind blew up and died abruptly with the appearance of a tall, wiry god in a short Greek get-up of some sort and with small wings on his feet. I recognized him at once, although the association would have been made even faster if he had been wearing the flat helmet he wears in the representations of him you see in florist shops. "Hermes!" Persephone greeted him warmly. "What brings you here?"

"Jupiter has sent me to request that Jael and Mr. Steele attend the High Council meeting. There are questions that they might be able to answer."

"Jupiter? Not Zeus?" I asked.

"He prefers Jupiter over Zeus or Jove," Hermes stated.

"We all have our preferences," Persephone told me. "I prefer Persephone to Proserpina, for example."

"Right," Jael agreed. "Just like Enki prefers that name to Ea, and Inanna now goes by the name of Venus."

"Please," Hermes began, "the High Council awaits."

"All right," I replied. "Let's not keep them waiting."

I thought that we would follow Hermes in the same way that we had followed Ratatosk. I was wrong. Without our moving so much as an inch, we were instantly whisked away and promptly deposited in the middle of a large circle of gods.

Looking around, I recognized only Enlil, Enki, and Nergal from actual experience, but it wasn't hard to figure out the identities of some of the others. To Enlil's right sat an impressive, white-bearded god in a toga who was obviously Jupiter. Further around the circle I spotted one-eyed Odin, king of the Norse gods. I also identified the Egyptian Amun-Ra as much from his headdress with the sundisk crest as from his appearance. There was a Hindu god - Rama, I think, although with the little I know it could well have been Vishnu. I soon decided that it was probably Rama who is supposed to be the seventh avatar of Vishnu, because I also spotted Buddha who was the ninth avatar. I didn't think that Buddha was supposed to be a god, but I also spotted two Chinese noblemen who I thought might be Lao Tsu and Confucious and they weren't gods either. Perhaps a certain level of enlightenment and a sufficient number of followers gave them a form of divinity.

I was surprised not to see Lenin or Marx, or even Mao Tse Tung but perhaps they were represented in some other way or else they stood with the forces of Chaos. I didn't really think that would be the case, but they were definitely not in sight.

Finally my eyes picked out an interesting entity. Seated next to an angelically handsome, curly-haired blond entity was a being whom I found hard to look at. In fact my eyes kept sliding off of him - or her, it was that hard to see - but when I concentrated I thought I could make out more than one distinct aspect. I realized that I was looking at God, the Judeo-Christian one, Yahweh, Jehovah. However, superimposed over those aspects was also Allah, the God of Islam. I quickly stopped trying to look at Him, remembering that it meant death to see the divine face and its overwhelming beauty. I suspected that He was hiding Himself to protect me from my own folly. I also decided that I didn't want to prove myself to be more of a fool than absolutely necessary. As I made that decision I felt a wave of approval flowing from my God.

I dropped to my knees, reluctant to show any form of impertinence. As I did, Jael also kneeled with me. I was surprised that she would also bow in this situation.

"My Lord Lucifer," she said with profound respect. So that's who the being who sat next to God was - that was a surprise! I started chuckling.

"Mr. Steele," Lucifer acknowledged me, "we are in a very serious situation at the moment, but we could all use a good laugh. Would you be so kind as to explain what you find so amusing?"

The thought of how dangerous it was to be laughing at the Devil only set me off still more, but in between laughs I explained, "I was just thinking about how the theologians would react if they were here in my place and saw you seated next to God as an ally in this struggle. That's not exactly the way they see your relationship."

There was laughter all around but as it subsided the Devil said, "Mortal theologians always have had difficulty understanding our relationship, haven't they?" he finished by turning to God.

"Indeed," God replied. "Marcus, my son, Lucifer and I have had our arguments from time to time, but we acknowledge that we embody the inevitable balance that is required in any religion. We have more often been allies than antagonists."

"After all I have been through recently, My Lord God," I replied, I think I understand."

"Ah!" Lucifer said. "Perhaps you do. It is because of what you have been through that we have asked you here. Please be seated." Jael and I were suddenly seated on two modest chairs - they weren't padded but it was easier on the knees this way. "Now in your own words, please tell us everything."

His voice was very compelling and I had to resist the urge to obey him literally, starting with my birth, trying to explain every thing I had ever learned, including the basics like how to tell red from green and then to attempt to explain everything I did not know as well. After a pause to control myself, I started with my arrival at Lod.

Once started, it was impossible to stop and I spoke without consciously trying to. In fact, after a few minutes my mind seemed to be somewhere away in a cloud. I was only dimly aware of occasionally pausing while Jael filled in parts of the tale. Finally we got to our arrival on the Plain of Megiddo and my mind unclouded.

"Thank you," God said politely. "Are there any questions?" There were none. God was supposed to be omniscient so He would know if there were questions, so I assumed that either His omniscience didn't apply to other gods, or he was following a mutually agreed upon set of rules of courtesy. "Have any of our scouts reported back yet? No? All right, my recommendation is that we take a break and then reconvene in an hour or when they get back, whichever comes first."

"Lord Yahweh," called a dark bearded god.

"Yes, Lord Brahma?" Okay, so I was wrong about the identity of the Hindu god.

"May I suggest that we convene a Grand Council with everyone present? Many of us have war lords with whom we'll want to consult when we decide upon war strategies in the next session."

"A good point. Any objections to Lord Brahma's suggestion? Very well, when we reconvene, arrangements will be made for everyone to be present." There was no noticeable signal, but suddenly all the gods were standing and, after a few minutes of talking together, they began returning to their delegations.

Eighteen

As Jael and I got up from our seats they dematerialized quietly and cleanly to where ever things go when gods make things disappear. I half expected that if I tried to sit down again, my seat would rematerialize but I decided not to try it. Looking around, I noticed that the same had happened to all the other seats and benches in the area.

"Where to now?" I asked.

"Well, I'd like to get back to Queen Persephone. I'm sure she'd like to hear my report and I've more than a few questions about what's been going on since we left. She seemed genuinely happy to see me, so I don't think I'm in big trouble, but I did leave my entire department on auto-pilot and I ought to find a way to check in, at least."

"That's a good idea, Jael," we heard Lucifer say as he approached us. "You left your department in good shape and everything's running smoothly, but they're working on a skeleton crew during this crisis and I'm sure they'd appreciate a word of encouragement. Persephone will help you get in touch. Run along now. I'd like to talk with Mr. Steele while we're still on break."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Before she turned to leave, she paused to give me a quick kiss. Even in that brief moment, as our lips caressed, I felt the magic that had passed between us during our previous kisses. "See you later!" She whispered and ran off into the crowd leaving me slightly stunned.

"I think she's genuinely fond of you," Lucifer observed.

"I like her too," I replied, a smile lingering on my lips.

"Ah, well," he sighed. "Tell me, Mr. Steele. What are your plans in this?"

Still in a daze as I watched Jael recede, I misunderstood what he was getting at. "I'm not really sure how a mere mortal can help on this plain, but I imagine that I'll find some way to be of help."

"An admirable attitude," he complimented me. "And after?"

"After?" I must admit that while this guy may not have been the ultimate in evil that I'd been taught he was, his reputation was not a total fiction. Even if I did misunderstand, he still brought the conversation neatly back to where he wanted it. Of course at the time I still didn't see what he was hinting at. "Well, as interesting as all this has been, my place is on Earth. If we don't succeed in destroying it, I suppose I'll return home, with my fiancée if possible."

"And if that isn't possible?"

"What do you mean? Enki gave me the Food and Water of Life to revive her with."

"Yes. They'll work, I suppose, but only if we can find her body."

"You think that we might not?"

"That's all too possible. I can only think of one use that Chayim might have for her." I looked questioningly at him. "Tell me, Mr. Steele, man to man, have you and Rona ever made love?"

Normally I might have been struck by the personal nature of the question but my mind had finally slipped into gear - only first or second, I'll admit, but at least I wasn't going in reverse. "She wanted to wait until we were married," I replied, sounding more than a bit lame even to me. "Virgin sacrifice?"

Lucifer nodded. "Virginity is still a potent magical symbol. However, from what you've told me, her body may no longer exist. Those pitchforks were never designed to retrieve living mortals."

"Then at least he won't be able to sacrifice her."

"Oh yes, he will."

"Huh?"

"Her soul is still a virgin and it too can be sacrificed. In fact, necromancy involving soul sacrifice is among the most potent magic in creation. But he hasn't done it yet, - we would know if that sort of power had been released - but there are indications that he's building up to that." I stood at the edge of an emotionally bleak desert and could only vaguely hear Lucifer saying angrily, "I don't care if he is my son, when I get a hold of him, he's going to fry." He walked away muttering about just what punishments Chayim would suffer before the end. I just stood there for a long while.

"Marcus?" I looked around but didn't see anyone. "Hey, Marcus! Down here." It was Ratatosk, he may have been big for a squirrel, but he still didn't come up to my eye level unless I was sitting.

"Oh. Hi, Ratty. What's up?"

"The scouts just returned and that cute demon babe just sent me to get you."

"Jael?" I said in my daze without really understanding what she had to do with anything.

"Yeah, that's the babe. Hey, Marcus, wake up!"

"Hmm? Oh yeah. Sorry about that. I've been riding too many emotional roller coasters lately. Know what I mean?"

"Not really, no."

"Lucky you. Okay, the scouts are in. What news on the Rialto?"

"I don't know yet. They're still reporting directly to their masters; but the Grand Council will be convening soon and Jael wants to talk to you before that happens."

"All right. Which way?"

I had expected to find Jael with Queen Persephone amidst the hordes of Hell. I was half right - she was with Persephone and also Nin-ti and a dozen others and they were all talking with a tall goddess with long hair that hung in loose, black curls. Persephone call her "Mother." So did Nin-ti. That figured, because she looked like a character from out of an old margarine commercial. I kept my mouth shut on that account, however. It's not nice to fool Mother Nature.

"Marcus!" Jael got my attention. "Over here." She made introductions all around then pulled me aside. "I found us a place in the campaign," she said excitedly. As the only living mortal in the contingent, I did not find this news as thrilling as she might have but I tried to sound interested.

"Really? What'll we be doing?"

"We'll be in Central Command helping coordinate the armies."

"Oh," I breathed with relief. "For a moment I thought you'd have us at the front hacking our way through blood, ichor, and gore armed with nothing but a hyperthyroid butter knife each."

"Of course not, silly, but I like your idea better. I could arrange it if you like."

"No, that's okay. It wouldn't be fair to put you to all that trouble. I'll learn to live with my disappointment."

"No, really," she teased me, "it's no trouble at all."

"Well, actually," I said, trying to draw myself up in a parody of pride, "I rather fancy that

I belong in Command. Ouch!" I winced as she punched my arm with a force just barely within playful limits. Just then the sun blinked twice like the lights of a closing department store and a soft but carrying, gong-like note sounded across the plain.

"That's our cue," Jael said. "We'd better get to the Grand Council before the meeting starts up and they run out of seats."

"They aren't really likely to run out of seats, are they?"

"No, but if we don't hurry we might as well be attending by teleconference from Boise."

"Got it."

We followed the crowds to where the head gods had been meeting, but the area now more closely resembled a political convention arena than it did a mere expansion of the circle of chairs that might have been expected. The format was still circular, but now each pantheon had its own wedged-shape section clearly marked and with extra room in the back for the odd, impromptu caucus. At the center of the circle, Enki was busy supervising the construction of a large marble pool with the help of several minor gods.

"Marcus! Jael!" Enki hailed us as we approached. "How do you like it?"

"It's very nice," I replied, "When do you plan to fill it?"

Enki grinned and said, "Right now." A cloud gradually coalesced over the empty pool. It started out as a few wisps of vapor, but it soon thickened into a puffy, white cloud. It continued to condense and became darker and darker. Finally it became transparent as the water vapor finished condensing into a large mass of water that still floated over the pool. Without warning the water suddenly dropped into the empty pool in one piece. The splash, of course, soaked everyone within fifty feet, except for Enki, who emerged pristinely dry from the deluge to the outraged cries of everyone present.

Jael turned a bright cherry red with heat and was instantly dry. Others in the crowd performed similar tricks and soon I was the only one left who was still feeling the effects of Enki's joke.

"All right. You got me," I conceded. "What's it for? It looks like the king-sized version of your divinatory pool at Abzu II."

"You're right," he replied. "That's exactly what it is. We'll be using it to show enemy troop movements and help in our initial planning."

"Sort of like a wide screen TV?"

"A what?" I explained. "Oh. Nice concept. Yes sort of like that. Hmm, I'm sure the modern gods could have done that sort of thing themselves."

"Perhaps they are showing you their respect by asking you to handle this." Jael suggested.

"Yes, I think you're right. At least I'd like to think that. I do have a reputation for pride, maybe too much so. Well, I think this should do the trick."

"Won't the people in the back seats have trouble seeing this?" I asked.

"Good point. What do you suggest?"

"An amphitheater. Have some god with power over the earth warp the terrain to form a large bowl-like depression with your pool in the center and the back seats at the rim." No sooner had I said this then the land smoothly transformed itself into that configuration.

"An excellent idea, my son," I heard God say behind me. "Thank you."

"One question, Lord," I said as I turned and started to kneel, eyes averted.

"No need to kneel here, my son," God said raising me gently back to my feet. "And you may look at Me. I shall keep My true countenance shielded from you for your protection." His face was the same clouded mass of mixed features that I had seen before. It was like looking at all gods at once. It occurred to me that He was an analog, although an indirect one, of all other gods.

"I don't mean to question your ways, Lord, but..."

"But you are wondering if I am truly omniscient. You see? Even that I know. No, don't be embarrassed. The question doesn't insult Me. I'm a lot thicker skinned than the ancients would have you believe.

"I do know everything, my son, but that knowledge is confined to the universe I created. My mind is, indeed infinite, but only as far as My Creation is concerned. And I do have that ability in the creations of the other gods, but only as They allow. I can be balked, for a time at least by other infinite powers.

"This current conflict is like that. The forces of chaos were able to plan without My knowledge because they were able to block Me outside My Creation. But when they started to move I became aware of them."

"But You are all-powerful, Couldn't You have stopped them without help?"

"Of course I could."

"Then why are we going through all this council and planning?"

"I could tell you that I move in mysterious ways or that you would never truly understand," God told me, "but that, as you might say, would be a cop-out. The truth of the matter is that this situation involves everyone in Creation, not just Jews, Christians, and Muhammadans, but everyone who is, who was, and who ever might be. Also the forces of Chaos are carefully not directly attacking My sphere of influence so in either case it would not be proper for Me to handle this Myself. Not only is it everyone's battle, but because I am not being attacked directly I am restricted by all that governs the forces of Order to combat in the modes of those planes that are attacked. Also if I were to attempt to handle this in my infinite power, the forces of Chaos could meet me with their own infinite power and that would likely unmake all the Universe."

"But with your Omnipotence we are sure to win, right?"

"It is not that simple, my son. If the forces of Chaos can upset the balance in their favor, then I and all the forces of Order would lose power and they will win." He saw my confusion. "We are the forces of Order, my son, Teamwork is a necessity in a confrontation of this magnitude. I and the other gods must work together or we are lost."

"I understand."

"Good. It is time we began. My son, while you are truly of My army, I would ask that you work with your friend, the God of Water and Wisdom for the duration of this conflict. You have talents that will best serve us at his side."

"As you command," I replied. I already knew that I would be working in Central Command from Jael but this made it official. Also, until now I hadn't known that I'd be working with Enki. I looked forward to that.

I was about to ask God about Creation itself - just which set of myths were true, but stopped myself realizing that they must all be true. We live in a universe that is compounded of many different cultures and the world is different for each of them. The world of the Australian Aborigine is not truly the same as the one I lived in, but the two worlds do overlap. I could meet an Abo, but I still might not see his world, nor might he see mine. The physical Earth is the same, but our spiritual worlds are different. With that realization I discovered that there is no "one true religion," They all have some validity. The concept was still a bit hazy in

my mind, but I felt I had made a great step toward understanding the universe. God was able to follow my thoughts, of course, and smiled at me as I reached this small bit of enlightenment. And then I really understood why He could not just barge in and solve the problem on His own; on the divine plane the universe is really a set of many Creations, each one valid, each one a universe in its own right. The concept made my head spin. It was worse that trying to understand the additional dimensions postulated by various quantum theories,

Then He turned and walked to His seat in a nearby section. While we had spoken it had seemed that we were all alone. Now I once again became aware of everyone around me. Lucifer and Persephone had just finished speaking to Jael and were now heading toward the section next to God's.

"Marcus," Jael told me, happily snuggling up to me, "I've just been ordered to stick to you like glue."

"Are you sure they meant it literally?" She merely grinned. "Oh, come on," I said, grabbing her hand. "We're supposed to stay with Enki."

Enki was already seated in the front row of his section to the right of Enlil and Nergal. As we approached, Nin-ti waved to us and indicated that she was saving two seats for us in the second row just behind Enki. A few minutes later, when everyone had found a seat, the show began.

A brief debate broke out over who should chair the meeting, but it was decided that Lucifer would continue to chair as he had during the High Council.

"All right," he said once that had been decided, "This is the situation. Enki?" Enki did something that caused the surface of his pool to cloud over and then resolve into a spherical image of the world. As the world spun on its axis at least two dozen bright red dots flashed on various parts of the globe. "The red areas indicate large and abnormally rapid build-ups of Wild Magic on various planes as they reflect on Earth. Our scouts have also confirmed that there are large numbers of the forces of Chaos present in or around these areas as well."

"This is ridiculous," a large, muscular, black-bearded god in the Greco-Roman section spoke out. "How can they hope to fight a war on so many fronts?"

"This is not a conventional war, Ares," Lucifer replied. "They appear to be using guerrilla tactics."

"Gorilla? Like the ape?"

"No, 'guerrilla.'" He pronounced it in Spanish. "Literally it means 'little war.' I think perhaps everyone here should become acquainted with Che Guevara's book on the subject."

"Allow me," Yahweh said softly. Suddenly I realized that I could quote Guevara word for word from the "Dedication to Camilo" to the Epilog.

"It's an interesting concept," Ares commented. "I'm surprised it hadn't been thought up earlier. Does it always work as well as the author claims?"

"Fortunately not," Lucifer replied. "It worked quite well in Cuba but failed in Bolivia." As he said this we were also fed all the particulars of every known use of guerrilla warfare. "They will most likely know as much about its strengths and weaknesses as we do now, but I believe we can expect them to use reasonable variations on proven strategies."

"That seems reasonable" Ares agreed. "Is there a preliminary plan to counter these impending attacks yet?"

"Not yet. That is what this meeting is all about."

After that the discussions became dominated by the various war gods although Yahweh and many of the other High Council members had opinions and suggestions to offer. On the whole the meeting proceeded much more smoothly and rapidly than I would have expected a committee of this size to manage. I think the main reason for this speed was that the gods who had specialized knowledge and experience with warfare were allowed to talk out their ideas while those who were not normally involved with such activity did not feel compelled to speak just for the sake of feeling that they were taking part in the meeting.

After only an hour, it was agreed to split the meeting into three sections. The first part was for the war gods, which in this case included both Yahweh and Lucifer. The second caucus combined the healing deities, including Mother Nature. They discussed ways and means of countering the effects of Wild Magic as well as comparing notes on healing more conventional wounds. The third was the smallest contingent of all - Central Command. There were only a few of us in this meeting: Enki, Hermes, Jael, Ratatosk and me, as well as a double handful or so of other messenger gods and the four harts from Yggdrasill.

"All right," Enki began, "your job is going to be relatively straight forward. Primarily we have to keep the lines of communications open between all of our various units. The bad news is that it looks like there are going to be nearly twice as many units as we have messengers, so you guys will all be doing double duty, except for Jael and Marcus, of course.

"Now I intend to set up the central command post on Yggdrasill. I am reliably informed that it is centrally located to the entire universe. Ratatosk, can you supply a sufficient number of pieces of heartwood for everyone?"

"Sure. It doesn't take much of a piece to do the job. I'll have them ready for everyone by the time we get to the Tree to set up base. Should I prepare some for the generals as well?"

"That's not a bad idea," Enki agreed.

"Lord Enki," a goddess with curly dark hair and eyes that kept changing color asked, "Are you sure you want to distribute so many pieces of this heartwood? If they can really give the bearer access to the World-Tree from any place in the universe, then they are very potent magic indeed. Isn't there a chance of them getting into the wrong hands?"

"Good question. Ah, your name?"

"Iris. I'm Queen Juno's private messenger."

"Well, Iris, you're right. They are very potent magic, but from all indications, the forces of Chaos already have them. A few more aren't likely to make much difference. I just wish we could afford to keep one of our units in the Tree itself."

"The combined guardians of the Tree ought to be sufficient for our needs there, Lord Enki," one of the deer said.

"Can they distinguish our side from the enemy?" a Hindu god asked.

"A good question. Ratatosk?"

"Hey, all you guys look alike to me," the squirrel replied with a big grin.

"Terrific. Okay, I need a volunteer."

"At your service," Hermes said before anyone else could.

"Good. I need you to run to the War Council and tell whoever's in charge there that we need some way for the guardians to recognize our troops so they won't attack them. I'm sure somebody there will come up with something."

"Wait for a reply, of course?" Enki nodded and Hermes zipped off.

"Any further questions?" Enki asked.

"What about our assignments?" a feathered Aztec god replied.

Enki spent the next few minutes assigning each messenger to two units. They would have to be running constantly between them and the Tree, bringing news of enemy positions to the generals and news of battle results to Enki.

"What will Jael and I be doing?" I asked when he had finished that.

"The three of us have the toughest job of all," Enki replied.

Nineteen

The organization of twenty-five armies is an impressive sight. I had expected that each pantheon would form its own unit and fight together, but the gods of war had another plan in mind.

Each army was actually composed of mixed units from several pantheons. Over each army there was one god of War as a general in charge but he or she would also have the captains of the mixed units under their command to advise them. It was hoped that the more cosmopolitan nature of these armies would add the strength of diversity in style and perspective to more than overcome the possibility of unease in the ranks from being unacquainted with their allies.

Perhaps it was the fact that gods are a basically strange bunch to begin with, but it seemed to me that the strongest developing friendships were occurring between the gods that seemed to have the least in common. Perhaps the gods and goddesses of Love may have been at work there, but I saw no evidence of it.

For that matter I would have thought that gods would be the bastions of conservatism and would attempt to counter guerilla tactics with conventional warfare, but it appears that I underestimated their flexibility and understanding of the situation. Just because almost all of them had come into being long before the modern era, there was no real reason why they should be limited by the cultural abilities of their worshippers.

Enki set up his command post on a large branch of Yggdrasil parallel to the one that led to the Plain of Megiddo. I had been suitably impressed by his divinatory pools before, but I hadn't realized that he could control more than one such pool and even if I had known that, I'd have had trouble accepting the fact that he could keep twenty-six of them going at once if I hadn't seen it for myself.

To construct the pools on the Tree, however he needed the help of Mother Nature, who persuaded it to grow natural bowls in the wood and bark along the branch. The twenty-sixth, however, was not a part of the Tree. As a matter of fact, it wasn't really a pool at all - more a large sphere of water suspended without visible support just off the branch. This was his tactical display. Each of the smaller pools would be attuned to one of our twenty five armies so we could see how they were doing and give strategic advice, but the tactical display would be tuned to all of them collectively so we could know where all things were happening in relation to each other and the universe.

"It was nice working with you again, Enki," Mother Nature said.

"Likewise, Ninhursag," He replied. "Where to now?"

"I need to get back to the plain. I'll be advising Quetzalcoatl." Instead of walking back

along the tree, she simply winked out.

I stared at the large floating globe of water, perplexed. "How do you read this?" I asked, unable to make heads or tails of the tactical display of the universe.

"Inside the sphere I have placed an image of the World-Tree."

"Where?" I asked. "All I see are red and green lights shining in the water."

"That's all I see too," Jael agreed.

"But it's so clear in the currents of the water."

I looked closely and thought I could make out something vaguely tree-like but, "I'm not a water god. Can you increase the contrast or something?"

"Yes I can play with the refractive qualities of the water." The image of the Tree, branches, roots and all, became a transparent green. "There. Better?"

"Yeah, but what about the green lights?"

"They represent our armies. That's why they're all still together on the Plain of Megiddo. The red ones represent the last sighted positions of the enemy."

"Why can't we tune directly in on them?" Jael asked.

"Because first I have to know exactly where they are. Instead I'll tune each of the smaller bowls to fixate on one of the armies as they leave the Plain of Megiddo."

"Can't you do that now?"

"Probably, but it would take more time. The process will center most strongly on the generals, although I'll be able to find any member of each army with varying degrees of effort as long as the unit stays together, but I need to know the precise location of each general to do the job correctly. Since they'll be marching out right past us on that branch there I can do the job far more reliably then."

The first was led through by Ratatosk, who had just finished passing out chips of Yggdrasil heartwood to all the couriers and generals. As they approached, the Tree started shaking violently.

"Hey, you jerks!" he said, using his diplomatic best, "Stop marching in lock step. You'll shake the whole Tree apart if you keep that up. Make believe you're crossing a bridge. Idiots! Hey, Marcus! How's it going? Can you believe these guys? All that shaking probably just made Las Vegas a seaport."

"Hi, Ratty! All ready to go to work?"

"Oh yeah, sure, all ready," he replied without much enthusiasm. "Right. I'm prepared to run both of myselfs all over the universe. Yep. Good thing I need the exercise. Uh huh!"

"Knock it off, rodent," Jael snapped.

"Problem?" I asked her.

"Not really, I'm just getting tired of his bitching."

"Hey!" Ratatosk objected. "It's my job."

"Excuse me, friend squirrel," Enki interrupted between tuning the first and second bowls, "But your regular duties are suspended for the duration."

"I know, but I wouldn't want to get out of practice."

"Try hurling insults at our common enemy."

"Okay." The Tree started shaking again. "Hey, One-eye! Get those guys out of lock step! Sheesh! By the time this is over we'll have triggered every fault in the world."

"Well, at least we won't have to worry about earthquakes for a while after this is over," I said. Ratatosk agreed. "Hey! Is that how omens come about?"

"Sometimes," he told me. "A good shake of the Tree will cause all sorts of unusual happenings on Earth like earthquakes, severe weather, volcanos, that sort of thing, but there aren't many klutzes among the gods - thank Heavens, all of them. Most omens are deliberate actions."

"Hmm," Enki said, more to himself than to us, "I'll probably have to refill these bowls after all the armies have passed by."

It took nearly three hours to deploy the armies and during that time we fluctuated between boredom and silliness. At one point Jael and I were sitting on the branch with our legs hanging over the edge. Ratatosk warned us to be careful - if we fell off here we'd end up in New York or California or some place even worse, Disneyworld maybe.

A little while after that, I felt some of the spirit of the occasion and was inspired to burst into song. I was singing a medley from "Man of LaMancha." About the time I was dreaming the impossible dream Thor walked by talking about the old days with Taru, the Hattic version of the Hittite Storm-God. They broke off their conversation when they got within earshot and stared at me. Unabashed, I continued on a bit louder.

"These humans are crazy," Thor muttered. Taru nodded his agreement and they marched on.

Runners started coming in even before the last army had been deployed. Enki assigned me to keep an eye on the monitor pools that stood to his right and Jael took the ones to his left. Our initial assignment was to just keep an eye out for the enemy. Once we had them spotted, Enki could set a locator spell on them that would appear in the big globe.

In spite of all his bitching, Ratatosk was not actually assigned as a runner. Aside from his normal job of carrying strife up and down the trunk of Yggdrasill, he also functioned as the Tree's early warning system. After he had finished guiding the armies through the Tree, he sat by on a nearby branch keeping an eye on the ground for attacks from the nether realms, where he was also available to advise us on the locations of all the dots in Enki's water representation of the Tree. Looking through the dense branches of the World Tree, I thought I saw him sitting on a branch directly opposite from us as well. Even knowing that he could be in two places at once, I was still surprised when his other self turned and waved at me. I waved back and returned to my scrutiny of the monitors.

Hermes flashed in and reported, "My Lord Jupiter's army encountered a small band of the enemy and routed them in minutes. The scouts report that there are other enemy units in the vicinity of Olympus."

"Good," Enki replied. "Better warn him to watch out for an ambush. A classic strategy is to send a few small units out to lead an opponent into a trap."

"Yes, Lord Enki, I'll deliver your message before checking in with Athena's army." He ran off at a speed almost impossible to follow.

A bird-like Egyptian messenger arrived to announce that Amun-Re had met with a large force of the enemy but felt that he had the situation well in hand and then went rushing off to his next assignment.

Next another messenger of indeterminate origin appeared and reported that the Army of Lao Tsu were using a calming magic to counter the employment of a dragon by the forces of Chaos. The dragon, he reported, should soon be asleep.

As each report came in, Enki did a quick check to see if he could pinpoint enemy activity and add it to his map. As the day wore on, the universal monitor began to resemble a Christmas tree, with many red lights and only the same twenty-five green ones that we had

started out with. After a while, He decided that he'd better differentiate between large and small forces and the lights all took on different intensities - the brighter the light, the larger the force it represented.

Six hours in, Enki suggested that I try to get some sleep.

"I'm not all that tired," I replied. "The fruit of Yggdrasill gives me more strength and energy than I might normally have."

"Save it for later, Marcus. Even with the fruit of the Tree, you'll be burning up reserves that we might need later. Get some rest. Jael and I will cover for you."

I had to admit that I hadn't been much use so far, so I walked a way down the branch to curl up and go to sleep.

I woke up to discover a flurry of activity going on back by the monitors. I called up an Yggdrasill orange, concentrating on the healing qualities of the Tree in the hopes of ridding myself of the inevitable stiffness from sleep on a branch. I ate it while I rushed back up the branch to find out what was going on. Enki was busy giving orders and I couldn't get past the crowd to talk to Jael who seemed equally busy with the entire left bank of monitor pools.

Someone handed me a wooden mug filled with steaming coffee. Looking down I saw that it was Ratatosk.

"Thanks," I mumbled around the rim of the mug.

"Welcome back," he replied. "Things have started getting hectic and I've been filling in for you. Now that you're back, I'd better take a quick nap myself, before I have to fill in for the babe. She doesn't need sleep as much as you or I, but she'll need a break eventually. It's a damned good thing Enki only sleeps for recreational purposes." He made a prodigious jump back to the branch he'd been watching the ground from and promptly went to sleep.

I glanced at all my monitors wishing that he'd taken the time to fill me in on what I was watching, but little by little I figured it out for myself. Touching the edge of a bowl would cause one of the green lights to blink on the tactical display so I knew where the army being monitored was. After checking everything I discovered that the monitors were still tuned to the same armies they had been when I went to sleep, even if those armies had mostly all changed position. The only problem was that I didn't know all the details of the Tree, so was only vaguely aware of where everyone was."

"Trouble?" I heard a soft, masculine voice beside me ask. It was one of the deer who graze on the buds of the Tree.

"Sort of," I replied and explained the problem.

"Ratatosk asked me to fill in for him while he slept. I'm Duneyrr, by the way."

"Thanks, I'm Marcus. What are your normal duties for the duration?"

"I'm one of the guardians of the Tree as well as the personification of Wind. Like Ratatosk I'm on look out duty in my quadrant, but I can continue to do that from here. Now, what do you need to know?"

By the time Duneyrr had finished briefing me and I thought I had a good grasp of the situation, Enki had sent all the messengers off with new instructions and had time to notice that I was back. I asked him about the general situation.

"Pretty much the same as when you went to sleep," Enki replied. "We're still encountering small groups with varying degrees of success. I think we're ahead, but they cut and run whenever we put any pressure on. Then they reappear somewhere else and start all over again."

"Well, that is the nature of guerrilla warfare," I pointed out.

"True. It isn't really unstoppable but it does make the cost of defense that much higher."

"We have limited resources?" Jael asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, but it will take time. At least it has pretty much kept to small actions and unless I'm mistaken, we're wearing them down. That means that on the mortal plane things are tense but there's been no major outbreak of war yet."

"You don't sound relieved," I noted.

"No, I'm not. I keep putting myself in the place of our enemy." Just then Iris showed up with news from Lucifer's Army. One of the leaders of the forces of Chaos, Huitzilopochtli, the blood-thirsty sun god of the Aztecs, had been sighted. Enki quickly found and marked him on the tactical display. "Quick," he instructed Iris, "bring this news to Quetzalcoatl. He'll know best how to handle Huitzilopochtli. His army has pretty much cleaned up their sector, so bring them to help Lucifer."

"Funny," I commented, "I'd not have expected Huitzilo... oh heck I never could pronounce it, but I wouldn't have expected him to side with Chaos. His society was extremely well ordered."

"True," Jael agreed, "but remember that the people who defeated his followers were Christians. He's likely to bear a grudge."

"You were saying something about putting yourself in our enemy's place," I reminded Enki.

"Right. Well, my point is that were I trying to accomplish something and meeting a lot of resistance, I would only put up with it for so long before I started bringing out the big spells."

"But in this case," Jael said, "that would mean Wild Magic."

Enki nodded and replied, "And sooner or later they will be desperate enough to do so. Wild Magic is Chaos, you know. In the end, its use is what separates Order from Chaos."

And what happens here is in some way reflected on Earth? I began to wonder if I would have a home to return to.

Quetzalcoatl did, indeed, know what to do about Huitzilopochtli, but it was an expensive means of dealing with the problem and a rather unproductive one at that. Quetzalcoatl came flying in above his army in the guise of a feathered serpent. Huitzilopochtli became so enraged that all reason fled and he met the great serpent in mid-air in his guise of a giant hummingbird. This might not sound like much of a contest to the modern mind, but bear in mind just how viciously a hummingbird's beak can be used as a weapon if the bird is some twenty-five feet tall and built to scale.

The struggle between the two gods lasted for three hours as they fought in the air, often grappling each other and falling hundreds of feet before breaking their mutual hold and circling upward again. As they fought they phased in and out of the mortal plane. There were numerous sightings by people on the ground, but as they were in the Russia, very few of the natives were able to recognize them. The Russian Air Force sent a pair of jets to investigate the strange radar blips south of Moscow, but by the time they arrived the two monstrous gods had destroyed two towns. The Russians took a few shots at the gods to no effect before they phased back into the divine realm.

Even gods get tired after a while and finally Quetzalcoatl managed to clamp his teeth around the neck of Huitzilopochtli's neck and open the jugular vein. Down they fell over a thousand feet and even on impact Quetzalcoatl maintained his death grip on his enemy's throat. It was thought at first that Quetzalcoatl had survived, cushioned by the hummingbird

body, but when his second in command, Isis, the principal goddess of ancient Egypt, investigated, it turned out that he had impaled himself on the tremendous beak of his enemy.

"I shall be reborn in time," he proclaimed haltingly in a hoarse whisper before he expired. A great moan went up from both armies at the mutual deaths of their leaders, but Isis managed to keep her army together and quickly defeated the remnants of Huitzilopochtli's army - those that didn't run fast enough anyway.

"Are they really dead?" I asked Enki after we had viewed the battle on the monitor pool.

"Yes, Marcus, they are," he replied.

"But what did Quetzalcoatl mean when he said he'd be reborn?" Enki had no answer, but Jael did.

"Some gods have the ability to be reborn after death. Evidently Quetzalcoatl believes that he is one of them. But I wouldn't hold my breath while we wait for that to happen. It may not be during this cycle."

Over the next week, the war started to become frighteningly routine. My days were filled with eating, sleeping, and staring into Enki's pools of water. It was not a boring time, by any means. Messengers flashed through with alarming regularity and there were times when Enki was so busy with really pressing situations that Jael and I had to send advice to the generals on our own.

Now that was, perhaps, the scariest thing I have ever done. On the first such occasion I sent word to Krishna that there were three medium-sized units around him and that he should split his army in two to take the forces attempting to flank him on either side and then use both halves to sweep back together to catch the third. Even though Enki commended me on my decision, I spent the next thirty-odd hours worrying until word came back that Krishna had scored a major victory.

But even after a week, Huitzilopochtli was the only enemy general we had managed to locate. They just weren't showing themselves. Enki spent every spare moment searching through his pools, but we never saw any general-level leaders.

"Maybe they're all somewhere else, sending their orders from some central command base of their own," I suggested.

"I think you may be right," Enki agreed. "Any ideas where that might be?"

"Niflheim!" Ratatosk stated emphatically.

"Do you know that for a fact?" Enki asked. The squirrel had no answer. "I thought not. So it's probably just a personal prejudice. Too bad."

"He might be right," Jael said quickly. "Marcus, remember you told me that there were rumors of Hell negotiating with Niflheim? Well, I asked Lucifer about it and he said it was the first he'd heard of it, but he also said that he wouldn't be surprised if Chayim had been bandying his name about down there in order to make the deal."

"All right," Enki said at last. "I'll take a look. Ratatosk, where is this Niflheim?" Ratatosk pointed straight down. Enki summoned a small sphere of water similar in nature to the tactical display only one tenth the size and then caused it to flow into that display. However, instead of merely merging with the big screen, it acted as a magnifier.

He moved this discrete sphere-within-a-sphere down into the representation of the World-Tree's root structure. Under Ratatosk's direction, he focused in on the ragged-edged root that grew into the realm of Niflheim. Suddenly the sphere went solid black, showing us nothing.

"I think you've found Nithogg's heart," Ratatosk said acidly.

"No," Enki disagreed, "Something's blocking me."

"That could be the normal state of affairs there," Ratatosk suggested. "Hela isn't one to allow us to peek in on her even at the best of times. Also while we've seen a few of her minions in the battles so far, none of the big players are involved openly. I suspect that she and Loki are working on freeing the wolf, Fenris. If this isn't quite Ragnarok, then we'll have a fair approximation of it, even if they are taking a few short cuts."

"Shortcuts?" Enki asked.

"Yeah, there are a number of events that must occur before the final battle in this frame of reference. Most of these things have happened at one point or another, so we can't go expecting them to happen again, but we haven't yet had Fimbulwinter, the three-year long period without a warm season."

We were interrupted then by another flurry of activity. Nergal's army had just encountered the largest force any of our troops had found so far and were calling for assistance.

"That's a break in the pattern, isn't it?" I asked.

"Sure is," Enki agreed. "It's precisely what I've been afraid of." Enki turned to the messenger, an angel of some sort wearing a tabard that bore the arms of England - Gules, three lions passant or - of all things. "Bring word to Lord Lucifer," he instructed, "He's the nearest general with an unengaged army at the moment." The angel flew off. "I was right," Enki said without any trace of glee, "See those red dots? They're starting to come together and form larger groups. Something's building up."

"Should we try an assault on Niflheim itself?" I asked.

"We may have to. We'll never win this conflict if we continue on in a defensive stance. We're going to have to initiate something and put them on the defensive soon. Let's see how Nergal and Lucifer fare. A force the size they're up against almost has to have one of their generals among them. Let's take a look."

We went to the bowl that had been attuned to Nergal's army. Enki made an adjustment and the viewpoint began moving, steadily soaring across the landscape, a truly bird's eye view of the terrain. Across a deep ravine we found the enemy army set up in a strongly defended position.

"Loki!" Ratatosk shouted suddenly, "The thin, wiry guy standing up giving commands is Loki."

"Ah, another general at last!" Enki said with satisfaction, tuning a special dot on the tactical display.

"Oh oh," Jael said softly. I saw the problem as soon as she said that. "Enki, this is some sort of trap."

"What do you mean, Jael?"

"That position is too heavily defended. Loki has no intention of actually attacking. He has some sort of treachery in mind."

"He always does," Ratatosk put in. "Loki isn't like your Lucifer, a nice guy with bad P.R. Loki really is as bad as the stories say, worse maybe."

"Hmm, I wonder which side the Trickster gods of the American Southwest are on," I said speculatively.

"Probably," Jael suggested an answer, "they're on both sides or neither, causing trouble as they alone see fit."

"This is not a great time for philosophy, troops," Enki reminded us, "but you've given

me an idea. I used to be quite the trickster myself and Loki is definitely one. I think he's creating a diversion of some sort. He'll hole up there making all sorts of noise trying to get us to deploy too much of our force there while his allies are attacking somewhere else."

"Should I head off Lucifer?" Ratatosk asked.

"No, but catch him while he's still in Yggdrasill, and give him the benefit of our thinking. Tell him to be creative."

"I'm already gone," Ratatosk said, scurrying off. Durathror came galloping up a few moments later to stand in for him.

"Now," Enki said, trying to concentrate, "what are they up to?" More runners came in then and we were all forced to deal with crises and troop movements for the next few hours. By the time we managed to find the time to consider the puzzle of the enemy's plan again, it was nearly too late.

Twenty

"Lord Nergal's down!" Hermes reported a day later.

"What happened?" Enki demanded. "Is he dead?"

"No, not dead. Not yet. Assassin," Hermes replied, before stopping to take a breath. "Last night someone, dressed entirely in black, got into our encampment and threw a razor-sharp, star-shaped device at his back. Nergal, even in his pain, reached out and the assassin dropped dead, clutching at his heart.

"The wound itself, while terrible, wasn't fatal, but the weapon had been poisoned. It was carrying some disease. Nergal is dying and his captains are starting to develop symptoms."

"Quick!" Enki commanded. "Find Mother Nature. If she can't control the disease, no one can."

"At once, Lord. Where is Gaia now?" Enki told him and he flashed out at light speed.

An hour passed with no word about Nergal's condition. Activity was moderate and we had work to do, but not so much that we could get this set-back out of our minds.

Lucifer took on an earlier analog of his, Baal-Marduk, and began raining fire and lightning down on Loki's army. There was no defense against the fury and intensity of his attack and Loki sounded a retreat causing his entire force to vanish, leaving nothing but brimstone and hell-fire crashing down where they once were.

"My boy Baal!" Enki said proudly. I had forgotten until that point that Lucifer, or at least one aspect of him, really was Enki's son. Religions cause some very strange relationships over the passage of time.

At last we received word of Nergal's condition and it came in a remarkable manner. An additional bowl began to form itself in the bark of the Tree. Enki shrugged and filled it with water and the face of Mother Nature instantly appeared in the surface.

"I'm impressed," Enki said out loud to himself as much as to her, "but I still can't hear you." I don't know if she could hear him, but she reached her hand forth and a written message appeared in the water.

"The rest of us can't read cuneiform," I pointed out.

"It says that the disease is one she has never before encountered. It is deadly and

virulent and capable of killing absolutely everyone it contacts."

"Great Satan!" Jael swore. "It will make the Black Death look like a mild cold."

"Ninhursag has quarantined the entire area and all messengers that have been there are being called back."

"We've been in contact too," I said, feeling a touch of panic.

"And from here, nearly the entire army has been infected," Jael finished that line of thought.

"Ninhursag created eight goddesses to cure you, Enki," I said quickly. "Can she do the same for this disease?"

"Maybe, if she can come to understand this disease. Know anyplace we can find a golden tamarisk?"

"Here in Yggdrasill, of course. Ratty?"

"I know the plant you're talking about," Ratatosk admitted, "but I don't know if we can obtain the blossom you'll need."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, it's a very special aspect related to the Tree of Life. First of all we'll only be able to obtain it from a single branch of the Tree and then only if we can convince the aspect to let us have the blossom."

"How do we do that?" Jael asked.

"Talk to it," the squirrel replied.

"All right," Enki agreed, "Ratatosk, go try to get the blossom."

"No can do, chief. I'm not exactly noted for my ability as a negotiator."

"I'll do it," I volunteered.

"Marcus," Ratatosk replied, "The golden tamarisk is as difficult to approach as all the other aspects of the Tree of Life. Do you really think you're ready to attempt the Quest for Life?"

"Let's find out." I wasn't as sure as I sounded, but somehow I knew that this was going to be my job.

"Very well. It's a fair distance away, so we'd better get moving."

"Marcus," Jael stopped me briefly to give me a quick kiss, "good luck!"

Ratatosk led the way at a fast-paced jog. I was tougher now than I had been at the outset of my journey. The endless days of walking had prepared me for the quest. With time running out for us all, I had to reach into every reserve of strength I had to get to the golden tamarisk. Instead of resting, we slowed to a brisk walking pace while I ate the most revivifying fruits I could call up from the Tree.

"It occurs to me," I said to Ratatosk several hours later when we finally stopped for a fifteen-minute break. "that Enki should have sent one of the messenger gods. Hermes, for example could have been to the tamarisk and back several times over by now."

"No," the squirrel disagreed, "I don't believe he would have been the right one for this quest."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't feel right. Enki is very wise. I think he knew, subconsciously, that you were the only one who could accomplish this mission. Something, some part of his being, told him so."

"Well, we don't have time to go back and ask him about it. How much further do we have to go?" Instead of heading inward, we had been running out from the trunk of the Tree.

"Not far as Vethrfofnir flies."

"How about as Marcus walks?"

"Too long that way. You'll have to fly."

"But I can't fly!" I protested.

"Well it won't really be flying."

A few minutes later I found out what he meant.

"See that branch down there?" he asked. "All you got to do is jump down to it. Follow me." He jumped effortlessly down to the other branch.

"Hey! What if I miss?"

"Don't do that."

I've said before that heights do not bother me too much. I really enjoy looking down from the top of a cliff or from an airplane to see the world spread out beneath me. On the other hand I have a well-developed fear of falling. Up until now I had always considered it to be a natural attitude and a guaranteed survival factor. I just stood there staring at the branch below and imagining the splat I'd make when I hit.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Ratatosk demanded.

"An elevator?"

"What?"

"Okay, okay. I'll settle for a rope ladder."

"Marcus, just jump, it's only about ten feet."

Only ten? It looked like a much longer jump than that. Quests aren't supposed to be easy, but I thought the big effort would be the speed we'd need to put on to get to this point and then to where Nergal was. That, however, was merely the first hurdle.

As I stared over the edge of the branch I began to feel ill. Was it my fear or was this the first symptom of the disease? I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. The branch was straight down and I stepped cautiously off the branch and fell.

A second or two later my feet made hard contact with the branch below and I tried to roll with it. I would have fallen off were it not for Ratatosk grabbing my arm and pulling me back up.

"Thanks, Ratty. I owe you one."

"You owe me several," he corrected me, "but right now I'll settle for a successful quest. The golden tamarisk can be found up ahead and to the left at the fork. I'll wait here for you."

"Why not come along?"

"No. On this part you're on your own."

"Of course! How silly of me," I muttered as I walked down the branch. "The hero always has to go it alone at the end of the quest." I kept walking for over an hour wondering when the branch would lead to the golden tamarisk. Would I have to leave the Tree? No. We already knew that it was part of the Tree. I kept walking, keeping an eye out for the tamarisk.

After the first hour I noticed that the end of the branch wasn't getting any nearer. Well, I'd run into this phenomenon before so I tried my previous solution, but walking backwards didn't help either. So much for the easy way out. I grabbed at another piece of fruit and

stopped to consider my situation. I was definitely developing a sore throat now and getting a bit dizzy as well, but I decided to struggle onward.

Another hour and my throat had grown a coat of sandpaper that gnawed at me each time I tried to swallow. I walked when I could and crawled when I had no choice - anything to keep moving.

Finally, near collapse and sweating profusely, I realized that I hadn't eaten lately - the sore throat hadn't exactly boosted my appetite. I reached out for a fruit, anything at all that might make me feel better, and pulled back a branch covered with golden flowers.

Perversely, my first thought was to toss it back and try again for an apple, but I caught myself before doing such a stupid thing. Carefully I tried to pick a blossom off the branch but it wouldn't come. No matter how hard I tried to pull or cut it, it stayed firmly attached to the branch. A quick experiment proved that to be true for all the blossoms.

"What do you want of me?" I asked the Tree without expecting to receive an answer. I may have been sick, but I was not quite delirious.

"Why do you want one of my blossoms?" came the reply. The voice of the Tree was a pleasant and sexy contralto that carried a genuine note of curiosity and confusion.

"Oh, God!" I whispered in shock. "It's all over. I'm going crazy. A talking tree. Time to lock me up and reforge the key into a picture frame."

"If you didn't expect me to answer, why then did you talk to me?"

"I was talking to myself," I replied.

"Oh. Sorry I interrupted. As you were," the Tree said, dismissing me. I remembered Nin-ti's story about the fox and how it spoke to the golden tamarisk. If talking to the Tree would complete my quest, then I'd talk to the Tree and worry about the absurdity of it all later.

"Wait! Since you do talk, I need one of your blossoms."

Silence.

"Hey! I spoke to you that time."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"All right." At first I thought it would let me take the blossom until it continued, "I wouldn't want to butt into a conversation uninvited, you know. It's very impolite."

"No, no. I really want to talk to you."

"Why do you want one of my blossoms? I warn you. I don't let them go lightly. They're very hard to produce in this color."

"I understand, but it's very important. The gods are dying of a new plague and we need your blossom in order to save them."

"The gods are dying," the Tree said in wonder. "Just as well, they've always been more trouble than they're worth."

"But even Mother Nature is dying. Would you let even her die?"

"Mother Nature is dying? Impossible. She can't die."

"It's true. See for yourself. Enki will show you in one of the pools."

"Wait. I'll see." The voice went silent and the branch of golden tamarisk flowers transformed into a branch from a plum tree. I helped myself to a plum and felt a little better immediately. A few minutes later the branch became a golden tamarisk again. "You were telling the truth," it said, worry shading its tones. "Here take a blossom. Take the whole

branch." The branch came loose in my hand.

I thanked the Tree for its generosity and started on back. It only took a few minutes to return to where I'd left Ratatosk.

Hermes was waiting with him. Evidently Enki didn't expect me to run to where ever Nergal and Ninhursag were - just get the necessary blossom.

"You don't look too good, Hermes," I said after polite greetings.

"I feel worse," he responded. "I doubt I'm able to move anywhere near my normal speed."

"Well, I'm sure you're still faster than I'd be even if I were healthy. Here's a whole branch of the flowers Gaia will need."

"I thank you," he replied taking the branch. He gave me a respectful bow and then turned to leave. He was right. He was moving much slower. I was actually able to follow his receding motion with my rapidly worsening eyesight. I wasn't going blind, but the world seemed to want to reproduce itself so there'd be one for each of my eyes to see.

"Come on, Ratty. We'd better get back to Enki. Long way around this time?"

"It's the only way back." We began walking. "Marcus, how did you get the Tree to give you a whole branch?" I told him. "That's it? You just asked and the Tree gave it to you?"

"Well you're over-simplifying the story, but that's the gist. What's the matter?"

"It was the quest for the Tree of Life. It's supposed to be the most difficult one a mortal can undertake and you just walked up and talked to the Tree for a while."

"Funny, it didn't seem that easy at the time."

"But you had no monsters to face. No insurmountable difficulties. All you did was talk."

"So I got lucky. What's the matter?"

"Humans!" Ratatosk snorted. "It was too easy." We walked on for a while in silence. "Marcus?"

"Yes?"

"I think that's why Enki sent you for the tamarisk. Many of us immortals live in a society of great strength and even greater egos. Most of us are immensely powerful and even a small argument between equals can level mountain ranges. When you have an ego and power like that you think along different lines. A simple request must be sandwiched between a few tons of flattery and stated in a manner that does not cause you to lose face. Immortal society is a strangely complex system of behavior that patterns one's thinking after a while.

"What I'm saying is that Enki sent you because you have the ability to just cut to the heart of the matter. A god would have started out trying to flatter the Tree. Now the Tree lives in a world all its own and doesn't really pay much attention to us most of the time, but it isn't stupid and it knows empty words when it hears them. I've spoken to the Tree every now and then. It doesn't speak very often and when it does it doesn't like to waste words, although what it considers important may not coincide with our own priorities. It just loves to talk about the weather."

"I imagine that's very important to a tree," I said. I was really getting dizzy and disoriented now, but I forced myself to pay attention to Ratatosk in an attempt to keep going.

"Mmm? Yes, I guess it is. The other thing is that a god would also have tended to try to sound as if he didn't care whether he obtained the blossom or not, which would have been exactly the wrong thing to say. The Tree only respects sincerity. So Enki was right in

choosing you for the job. You got right to the point and showed the Tree just how important the matter was." I stopped walking. The world had stopped being two and instead was becoming a gentle green and brown blur, but Ratatosk didn't notice and he kept going on. "You know, Marcus, I really admire you, and that's a real concession from me. Marcus? Marcus!"

I knew that I should say something but was couldn't respond and that was the last thing I was aware of for a while.

Twenty-one

"Marcus?" Throughout my delirium the one constant was the sound of my name. I heard many voices calling me. It started with Ratatosk's impassioned cry as I fell unconscious.

"Marcus?" I also heard the voices of Naomi Cohen and Doctor Trahan. Now what were they doing here?

"Marcus?" Nin-ti, Enki and Nergal called as well.

"Marcus?" Jael, I think, and Rona? But Rona was dead. I opened my eyes and instantly regretted it. The sun showed through a gap in the branches of the Tree as all the photons in the world tried to force-feed themselves into my eyes, no doubt trying to make up for lost time while they'd been closed.

"He's not used to the light," an unfamiliar female voice said. "Can we erect a cover?"

"How about sun-glasses?" I heard Jael ask. "I have a pair in my pack."

"Maybe." The other voice sounded unsure.

"It's worth a try," I heard my own voice croak out. Then I felt the glasses being placed on my face and I tried opening my eyes again. "Oh, that's better. Still a bit bright, but I can take it." Jael and the other goddess were holding me down. "Am I allowed to sit up?" I asked.

"You may try," the goddess said, "but let me know if you start feeling dizzy again." They both helped me up and I felt a pillow, or a reasonable substitute, being placed behind me to help prop me up. "How do you feel?"

"A bit weak and very hungry, but aside from that I feel okay. Healthy."

"Good. Drink this." It was orange juice, but it must have been squeezed from Yggdrasill oranges. I felt strength and energy flowing into me as I drank it. "I'm fairly certain that you're completely cured now, but I'm new at this and you're my only mortal patient, father. Your stomach will need to become used to solid foods again, but that shouldn't take too long with the fruits and nuts of the World-Tree to speed the process. I'll have some meats and high-fiber vegetables brought for you."

"Father? Why did you call me that?"

"Because you are my father, in an oblique sort of way." I was openly confused. "Well not biologically, of course," she explained. "Mother Nature is capable of giving birth without a male to impregnate her, but I owe my existence to your actions, so you're the closest thing to a father I'll ever have. Do you mind if I continue to call you that?" In the course of that speech she had transformed from a self-confident woman to a nervous little girl. She had obviously wanted to think of me that way, and in spite of her amazing, inborn knowledge of healing, and her apparent physical maturity, she was really just a little girl. And after she had

saved my life, I'd be damned if I were going to break her heart that way.

"It seems strange," I started and she seemed to be near to bursting into tears, "but I suppose I can get used to it." She smiled then and the tears she shed were of happiness as she hugged me. Jael, looking on, smiled too. If I were going to have a divine daughter, there was something I definitely wanted to know. "What's your name, child?"

"Oriel. It means 'window,' but I don't know how that applies."

"Neither do I," I admitted. "Maybe your mother just likes the name. It is a beautiful name."

"It is? I'm only four days old. I've been eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, but aesthetic values are something I have to learn by experience. Is it really a beautiful name?"

"Believe me, toots." Ratatosk said from a nearby branch, "It's as beautiful as you are!" Oriel was at a loss as to how to deal with him, so she just ignored him.

"You know," Jael said, looking alternatively at Oriel and me, "Oriel does sort of look like you, Marcus. The color of her hair and her eyes. She definitely has your eyes."

"Of course I do," Oriel said with childish confidence. "I am his daughter, after all." I looked closely at her face. Maybe Jael was right, her eyes were similar to mine, although much softer in appearance, and her hair was the same dark brown as mine, although my hair was straight and hers hung down in shoulder-length curls.

"Where are we?" I asked Jael. "I can see we're still in the Tree, but what part?"

"We're about two hundred yards from Enki's command post, off on a quiet side branch to stay out of traffic."

"How long have I been out of it and what have I missed?"

"You've been out for four days," Jael replied, "and you haven't missed much. The disease hit you much harder than any of the immortals except Nergal, who had it longest of all. Oriel's been a busy little lady."

"Is life always this hectic?" Oriel asked.

"In its own way," I replied, "yes, I think it is."

"But I don't think you'll be called upon to cure the universe of some deadly disease every day," Jael amended.

"Oh good."

"Didn't the forces of Chaos try to attack us while our army was sick?" I asked. "That's what I would have done."

"No, of course not," Jael replied. "They thought we all had an incurable disease and weren't about to get near. Besides if the disease were incurable, all they needed to do was wait."

"Well, how soon before I can get back to work?"

"Right after breakfast," Oriel told me.

The command post was quiet when I arrived with only Enki and Ratatosk on duty. After the appropriate greetings and mutual thanks, Enki began to brief me on what I'd missed.

"Thanks to you, we all recovered quickly," Enki began. "We expected a major push when it became apparent that the disease ploy didn't work, but either they relied too heavily on the devastation they expected the disease to cause or they didn't know themselves what to expect from it and were still waiting for results."

"The disease appeared on the mortal plane in an analogous form, but Oriel inspired

the best mortal healers and it was contained to a few small regions. I understand that they're working on a cure now."

"That's right," Oriel agreed. "If you're feeling better, father, I ought to get back and move them along." I smiled a reply and she left.

"Father?" Enki asked with a smile.

"At least she doesn't call me 'Daddy,'" I shrugged.

"Give her some time in the world," Jael laughed. "She might."

"Anyway, since the plague, they've been consolidating their forces to a few well-defended locations, and they have evidently found a way to defend against hellfire and lightning attacks like Marduk visited upon Loki's force. We're having trouble touching them but we so out-number them that they don't dare attack us.

"I did manage to track Loki when he retreated, however. Just as we suspected, he went straight to Niflheim. Odin is now preparing a force to invade that realm before Fenris can be freed." Three messengers came running in just then.

"Lord Enki," one of them began, "Heimdall has been struck down."

"Aye," another agreed, "and Hercules."

"And Izanagi," the third reported.

"How?" Enki asked.

"Assassins!" The first replied. The others nodded agreement. "Traitors within our ranks. They were struck down instantly, but not before the damage was done."

"Dead?" Enki asked in astonishment. "Are they all dead?"

"Heimdall yet lives. Hecate was on hand and saved his life, but Izanagi and Hercules are no more." Other messengers arrived then. There had been still more such assassination attempts. Lao Tzu would not be lending us his wisdom anymore either, and the mighty Horus, who had been reborn, was once more sailing on the river of the dead.

"Now we must watch our own backs as well?" Enki asked the sky. After all we had been through I would not have been surprised to have the sky answer, but mercifully there was only silence.

"Lord Enki," Jael suggested, "Lord Yahweh is capable of omniscience. What if He were to look into the hearts of us all to seek out other spies among us?"

"Already on the job," God replied in a serene voice from above us. Startled, we looked up to see Him hovering there. "They even tried to kill Me."

"A waste of time and effort if I ever heard one," Jael commented.

"True," God agreed. "It is not yet My time. All clear here. All spies have now been caught." And with that He vanished with a slow fade.

"Another crisis come and gone," I breathed with relief.

"Yes," Enki replied, "but we've lost four of our best. They'll whittle us down piece by piece if we let them. You," he turned to one of the messengers, "find Odin and get a status report. We need to launch our counter-offensive before they attack again."

Enemy forces had been reduced in number to five fairly large units that were making only token attempts at causing trouble. We left enough of our troops to keep them closed up in their strongholds, but a few hours later the rest of our army was amassed and ready to begin the assault on Niflheim. A loud trumpet note resounded through the Tree as the army began to march through.

"What was that?" I asked. "The Trump of Doom?"

"Maybe," Jael replied, "but more accurately I believe it was Heimdall signalling the order to march on his Gjallarhorn."

For two hours the army paraded down the trunk of Yggdrasill to the base of the Tree where the ground opened up to allow them to follow the gnawed root that led to Niflheim. The way to Niflheim must be a long one, for that immense army had totally disappeared into the subterranean tunnel before reports started coming back up.

There had been a fierce battle with the dragon Nithogg and his allied serpents of Hel and many gods had been wounded and died in the battle. Still casualties were not as severe as Odin had expected and the army pushed on.

Several hours later the report came in that Niflheim had been deserted by the forces of Chaos. They had left a token force behind to cover their retreat, but by the time the Odin's army stormed through that realm they had long since departed. The best news, however, was that Fenris was still in the chains that had held him firmly for over a thousand years. This was not yet Ragnarok and maybe not Armageddon. It was bad, what Confucius might refer to as "interesting times," but it wasn't the end of the world. Not yet anyway. Odin left an army to occupy Niflheim, just in case someone came back.

"Well, I wouldn't go breathing any sighs of relief yet," Ratatosk replied when that bit of news got to us. "It won't be over until we bring an end to this crazy war."

"Enki," I asked, "couldn't we find out where Loki went? You did put a tracer on him."

"He seems to have shaken it," Enki replied. "We're going to have to wait until our scouts find him and his allies again."

Another two days passed and the only reports we received were that all was quiet. There was absolutely no activity going on anywhere that we could detect. Even the known pockets of enemy forces were sitting tight and not doing anything except occasionally defending themselves when we tried to attack.

"What are they up to now?" I asked Enki.

"I haven't the foggiest. What's worse is that they've found some way to shield themselves from me."

"Couldn't you try the same trick that you used to discover the shield around Niflheim with?" Jael asked. "Then we could start looking everywhere your probe turns black."

"I tried that already. The universe is too large to check everywhere as finely as I did with Niflheim, so I tried a more general scan with no results. Wherever they are, they aren't using the same type of shield."

"Are you sure they're using a shield then?" I asked.

"While I don't still have a locator spell on Loki anymore, I picked up enough of his personal aura last time so that I should be able to spot him no matter where he is, but I can't even pick up a trace. No. The only way we're going to find them is by visual surveillance by our scouts."

"So we can't find them by locator spell. Would we see them through the monitor pools?"

"Yes, but only by a manual search. We have no mystic traces to follow."

"Well, we have some fifteen spares now that we've consolidated our armies. Maybe Jael and I can search this way as well."

"It couldn't hurt," Enki shrugged.

"And it will give us something useful to do. Now that we've consolidated a bit, you're capable of tracking everything by yourself."

Enki showed us how to control the divination pools in their current settings. Fairly easy, actually - all we had to do was to concentrate on where we wanted to look. We began by scanning those forces we already knew about. There wasn't much chance of finding any of the leaders if they hadn't been spotted already; but there was always a chance and we needed the practice anyway.

The next two days were spent searching anywhere that the scouts suspected there might be enemy activity. Loki turned up again along with Hela, the Norse goddess of the dead, but Enki was right about they're being shielded. Even having them clearly in sight, he could devise no spell that would lock any form of locator on them. Worse, as far as we could tell, their shielding was so perfect, that there was no trace of the spell that produced it.

With this in mind, Enki started using yellow lights to mark the locations of the last sighting of the generals of Chaos.

On the third day we picked out several more of their generals, all of whom were magically shielded. There were numerous forays into the areas where they were spotted, but they were as tough to catch as the fish that got away. No matter how fast we moved they were always gone by the time we got there.

They were up to something, but we couldn't figure out what it was. I happened to be watching when one of them, Ahriman, the Zoroastrian devil, appeared among a small unit of demons. He walked a few yards and then with the use of some strangely-shaped instruments he cast a spell that appeared to do nothing. He remained for a few minutes to talk with his captains and then vanished.

"What was that all about?" I said out loud without realizing that I had.

"Beats me," Ratatosk replied. Enki and Jael just shrugged. Oriel, who had returned a few hours earlier - her work complete for now - looked up from a book she was reading, a medical text she had lifted from a library at Harvard. Realizing that she wouldn't be able to answer if the older gods present couldn't, she went back to her studies. I made a mental note to have a talk with her about stealing, but this didn't seem like the appropriate time. Hermes arrived a few minutes later to report the same event we had just witnessed.

"We saw it ourselves," Enki told him. "Were there any detectable emissions?"

"Only for a brief moment," Hermes replied, "and then they stopped as if they were being swallowed at the source."

"They might have been."

"You have an idea?"

"Many," Enki replied with a straight face. "I don't know why I didn't think of this before, but I believe they're using a double-action damping spell."

"Is that possible?" Hermes asked.

"Definitely. I experimented with them myself a dozen centuries ago or so, but gave it up after a while when I wasn't able to find a practical use for them."

"What's a double-action damping spell?" Oriel asked.

"Well, a regular damping spell will suppress the residual magical traces of spells. For example, not too long ago I had to follow a trail that had been damped to suppress any tracking spell used on it."

"But if it was damped, how did you follow it?"

"That's exactly the point. While it had damped the effect of a tracking spell it didn't work on itself and with some ingenuity I was able to follow the trail by observing which areas had and hadn't been affected."

"So a double-action spell works on itself too?" She might have been young but she was very intelligent.

"That's the theory," I replied

"And the practice," Enki confirmed. Suddenly, a short, dark demon brandishing a curved, ivory sword materialized behind Enki.

"Look out!" I shouted, being too far away to get there in time. Jael, however was plenty close enough and threw a quick spell, freezing the demon in mid-attack. Hermes zipped around, removed the sword from the demon and tied him up with a piece of rope that seemed to materialize in his hands.

"Thank you, Jael, Marcus, Hermes," Enki said, a little shaken. "Why don't you take this assassin to Lord Yahweh for interrogation?" Hermes nodded and carried the demon away with him. "Well now we know they know where our command post is," he said ruefully.

"Should we move?" I asked.

"Too much work to reset everything. We'd better alert the Tree guardians to be alert for such entrees. Ratatosk, will you handle that?" The squirrel said he would and ran off to spread the word. A few minutes later Vethrfofnir flew by and perched on the branch just above us. Samuel stayed on his side of the Tree, but he also moved a bit closer.

We finally found out what the enemy was setting up a few hours later when it actually started to have an effect. Dvalinn ran up and reported that several key branches of the Tree were wilting.

None of the messengers were available at the moment so Enki turned to Ratatosk and said, "Quick! Get Mother Nature." The giant squirrel ran without even so much as a grunt. He knew that if he didn't hurry he'd be looking for a nice condo in Central Park West.

Yggdrasill was dying.

Twenty-two

Odin recalled his Niflheim occupation force to surround the base of the Tree. Nithogg and his companions might be dead but there were other monsters that might attack the Tree from below. Samuel flew to the other aspects of the World-Tree and reported that they were all suffering some sort of blight.

Mother Nature arrived with a full army of bird spirits who began to circle the Tree endlessly. Now it was protected from above and below.

"Now," she said, "I'd better see about protecting it from within. Oriel, dear, please work with me on this. I created you as a broad spectrum healer and I may need your talents."

"Yes, Mother, what do you want me to do?" Nature told her and they went to the trunk and started to work. Enki never looked up from his pools while Mother Nature was there and he continued to study them now.

"Find something?" I asked.

"Not yet, but I can't help but think that this attack is a diversion. I don't have any reason to believe it. If the Tree dies all the worlds will be isolated from one another, and that's the best we have to hope for."

"And the worst?"

"Marcus, it has been said that Yggdrasill holds the universe together. The destruction

of the Tree might be tantamount to the destruction of the universe."

"So why do you think this is a diversion?" I asked.

"Because the forces of Chaos will lose as much as we do if that happens."

"But would the destruction of Order at any price be the goal of Chaos?"

"Of Chaos? Well maybe if there is a living embodiment of that concept it would be, but Chaos is a relative term. The way we are using it, the forces of Order are protecting the universe as it stands. Those of Chaos merely want to change the way things are. If we had initiated this war against the netherworlds alliance, then we would be the forces of Chaos."

"Oh. So what do you think they're really up to while we're protecting the Tree?"

"I still don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the Tree is just a part of the other ploy."

"I don't follow."

"They might be draining the power of the Tree in order to do something else."

"We could try asking the Tree," I suggested.

"How?"

"I spoke to it when I got the tamarisk branch."

"Try it, Marcus," Jael suggested. Enki nodded in agreement.

"Uh, Tree? Can you hear me, Yggdrasill?"

Silence.

"Yes, I hear you," Yggdrasill replied at last. Its voice sounded pained. This was not a healthy tree I was talking to.

"We know that you aren't well," I told it, "But Mother Nature is working on that."

"Yes, I can feel her soothing presence and that of another as well."

"That would be Oriel. She's the new goddess created by the use of the golden tamarisk. We need to know where you hurt."

"Pretty much all over," came the reply, "but I feel particularly drained in my Jerusalem root."

"We'll check it out." Jael and I adjusted our monitors to tune in on the city of Jerusalem.

"It's a large city, Marcus. Where do we start?"

"I'll start looking at Herod's Gate in the north, you start in the south at the Zion Gate and I'll meet you somewhere in the middle."

"What if it isn't in the Old City?"

"It would almost have to be," I replied. "And if not, at least it's a smaller area to search than the entirety of modern Jerusalem."

"Better hurry, bunky," Ratatosk put in, returning from his last errand. "This old tree may not last too much longer." I looked up. All around me the pinate leaves of the great ash were turning brown and falling like some deranged blizzard.

For the next hour I diligently searched the Muslim and Christian quarters of the walled portion of the city, paying especial attention to the many sacred sites of the city. The only pauses in my search were to occasionally scoop ash leaves out of the pool I was gazing into.

Jael finished with the Armenian and Jewish Quarters at the same time and we

started looking at the Haram esh-Sharif, the ancient Temple platform that was now venerated as the third most holy site in the Islamic world. Almost immediately Jael discovered what was wrong with this picture.

"The Dome of the Rock is missing!" she shouted. Sure enough, where there had once stood the magnificent golden dome over a large octagonal shrine now there were only the stubbled octagonal-shaped remains with debris scattered all around the Haram.

We zoomed in on the rock itself in time to see just what all the diversions were trying to keep us from discovering. Chayim was preparing to enact an obscene and profane ceremony on a site sacred to two major religions - three if you count the entire city of Jerusalem as the site.

The rock there, according to Islamic tradition, is where the Prophet stepped as he ascended to Heaven. The shrine was built somewhat later by the local caliph of that time when another caliph in Arabia was waylaying pilgrims to Mecca and forcing them to swear allegiance to him. The caliph in Jerusalem forbade the pilgrimage to Mecca and established the Rock as an alternative pilgrimage. In Arabic it is referred to as "The Place of Remote Adulation."

It is certainly not coincidence that the rock is thought to also have been a part of the ancient Solomonic Temple and its descendants. There are members of all three religions that claim it marks the center of the world. Scholars disagree as to whether it was part of the altar where burnt sacrifices were offered or whether it was a part of the Holy of Holies. Jael didn't really know either as it was way before her time. However, Chayim was obviously of the former camp as it was a sacrifice he was attempting. He stood within a ring of apparently sourceless, levitating flames, with an obsidian knife that would have been the envy of every Aztec priest of Huitzilopochtli poised over his victim as he chanted a long incantation. Bound to the Rock by mystic means was Rona, or at least it was her soul. The distinction by that time would have been lost on me.

"We have to stop him," I declared vehemently, "Ratty, what's the quickest way to that site?"

"I'll show you," he replied jumping down to the branch I was on. "Follow me." We were off at a run.

"Marcus, wait!" I heard Jael shout behind me, but time was critical and I was seeing red anyway, so I paid no attention and just kept running. "Oh, Hell!"

Ratatosk and I ran at top speed - mine, his top speed was much faster - down the branch and several side branches. A few minutes later we were at the end of the branch and I was suddenly about ten feet above Chayim and falling fast. I'm not sure if my scream was in fear of falling, in berserker rage at what Chayim planned to do to the soul of my beloved, or a calculated attempt to distract the bastard, but it was at that moment that one cold fact dawned on me. Aside from those weapons that God bestowed upon me at birth, I was unarmed.

Of course I didn't have much time to dwell on that fact of minor importance as just over a second later I did my best imitation of a professional wrestler, smashing down on top of Chayim. Ratatosk had come along with me and started gnawing on Chayim's leg.

Well, that did distract him. I was dimly aware of his flames suddenly extinguishing themselves and of his obsidian blade shattering on the floor of the former shrine. Then he flexed his muscles with almost casual ease and Ratatosk and I went flying through the air not to touch down until we hit the pavement at the top of the Wailing Wall, with a bone-breaking crunch that reintroduced me to the wonderful world of unconsciousness.

Twenty-three

When my eyes opened I was in a darkened, musty-smelling tent. The light I could see through the cracks between the flaps and the fact that it was mighty hot and stuffy here meant that it was daytime outside. It took me a moment to get my bearings, but I was suddenly back in my tent at Tell el Ahvram.

"Was it all a dream?" I wondered to myself. I knew immediately that it was not. It had to have been real - it was all too vivid and detailed. It had felt real in exactly the way a dream is not. When I dream, no matter how vivid that dream may be, there is a certain unreal quality about it. Somewhere at the back of your mind, you know that somewhere else you're stretched out on your bed safe and sound. This had not been like that.

"Knock, knock!" I heard a familiar female voice say just outside. "Time to wake up. Are you decent in there?"

In my book, there's only one answer to that. "No, but I'm dressed."

The tent flap was thrown open letting the desert sun continue its long and patient work at bleaching everything I owned. I looked at the silhouette framed in the doorway trying to identify her.

"Naomi?"

"Right on the first guess, hero. Doc Trahan says that you've slept in long enough. Pack your gear and then go get yourself some breakfast. When you're done you can help strike the tents. The mess tent will be the last to go but we want to be all packed by evening."

"What's happening?"

"We're leaving, Marcus. Remember? Last day of the season. Of course you missed most of it and I don't envy what you went through to manage it, but we all have to get going. You have a plane to catch tomorrow night and I have to start writing the end-of-season reports, so let's get moving."

I was a bit stiff, but I managed to throw my stuff haphazardly into my pack and roll up my sleeping bag. I decided to lash the bag to my pack after breakfast. Then I jogged on up the slope to the mess tent with my gear.

The mess tent was still the great green monster I remembered but when I went inside all the sorting tables except one had been removed as well as most of the kitchen. A small two-burner stove stood in the near corner with a mini-refrigerator sitting next to it. The tent was otherwise empty except for an attractive blond girl sitting at the table.

"Rona?" I squeaked.

"You're half right, sport," she said, turning around. As I started toward her, she was transformed into another familiar and pretty female of my acquaintance.

"Jael?"

"More sort of half and half," she said, rising to hug me and changing back to look like Rona.

"Care to explain that?"

"Well," Jael answered, switching back to herself, "after the war was over Lucifer and Persephone felt they owed you. Actually every god in the forces of Order owes you, but they especially felt that you had more coming to you than a healthy pat on the back." She got up and started serving me breakfast from whatever was left over in a large pot and a frying pan on the stove.

"They wanted to bring me back to life," Rona said in her own voice but with Jael's semblance, "but that pitchfork destroyed my body so they couldn't do that without a volunteer willing to donate her body." She grabbed a can out of the refrigerator and started back toward the table.

"Naturally," Jael said in her voice but Rona's semblance, "I volunteered. With all we've been through I am rather fond of you and after that hot kiss in the netherworld beneath Dilmun, well..." She deposited the plate and can on the table and indicated I should sit.

"Marcus!" Rona shrieked, "what have you been doing since I died? Did you just jump in bed with the first girl to come along?" I looked at the meal - canned spaghetti and powdered eggs with a beer chaser. A standard breakfast for the last day on a site.

"Not at all," Jael replied, rummaging through my pack. "I was already there, remember? And that kiss is nothing compared to what I plan." They kept that up while I ate. After the open rehearsal for Armageddon I'd just been through, this was a minor squabble. As they argued Jael pulled the pomegranate that Ratatosk had given me from the pack and tore it in two giving me half and keeping the rest for herself. "This should give you a nice energy boost," she said as she started eating hers. "Oh, nearly forgot. Enki was wrong I cannot normally eat Earthly foods, but I have a sort of dispensation since Rona and I are sharing this body."

I nodded. Compared to everything else, it made sense. "Last I remember, Chayim was using me for volley-ball practice. What did I miss?"

"You were too preoccupied to notice at the time, but when you and Ratatosk dashed off to Jerusalem, Hermes was just showing up from the other direction. I took off in hot pursuit and Enki sent Hermes off to get Lord Lucifer.

"I arrived just in time to see Chayim giving you that flying lesson. You were out of it, really badly injured, but not quite dead and Chayim wanted to finish the job, but first he had to contend with me. He was always better at fighting than I was, but I managed to hold him there until Lucifer showed up. Now there was one disappointed daddy. Chayim is going to be spending the rest of his existence doing penance in Hell, the same as any other damned soul. Knowing that you have to be truly repentant is only going to make it harder for him. I would have just destroyed him, but Lucifer was really angry."

"You say I was in bad shape? I feel fine now."

"Oriel insisted on healing you herself. Mother Nature stood by as did several other healing deities, but your daughter didn't need any help at all."

"And what about on the mortal plane? Was there a major war?"

"Thank Satan, no. Hmm, I'm going to have to watch that expression in the mortal realm, aren't I? There was a really bad out-break of terrorism this summer as expected, but we managed to keep our activities down to a level where they wouldn't cause a war. There was the problem about the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, but we managed to get it blamed on a group of Shiite extremists."

"Frankly," Rona added, "I wouldn't have believed it for a second, but evidently it worked and Israel is making points with her neighbors by promising to assist in the rebuilding of the shrine.

"On the personal front, however," Rona told me, "as far as anyone here on site is concerned you made an heroic trek through the desert to rescue me and then got lost for a few weeks and only just stumbled back in late yesterday afternoon. Doctor Trahan is citing it as yet another example of why he requires us to carry the survival guides. In actuality, we just materialized here and God planted the memories of our appearance in the minds of everyone still on site."

"Anything else?"

"Not worth mentioning now," Jael replied. "Oh by the way, Enki sends his best wishes and asks to be invited to the wedding. Nergal seconded that as did Nin-ti, Charon, and Ratatosk. The Tree can't make it, but promises to send a present. Ratatosk also reminds you that you owe him a steak dinner."

"No problem. We'll have to set the date soon."

"Oh! and Oriel wants her 'Daddy' to have custody. She plans to go to med school while you work on your M.A. and PhD."

"Using what for money?" I asked.

"No need to worry about that. That's Yahweh's gift to you. I still think He should have made you rich, but He did guarantee money to cover food and tuition until you have your PhD. Anyway Mother Nature thinks that it would be nice for Oriel to get to know you and will let her move in as soon as we're married. Next spring, right?"

"Hey!" Rona protested, "Marcus and I are getting married. We have laws against bigamy."

"If my body's getting married," Jael pointed out, "then so am I. We'll just have to share him and what the law doesn't know won't hurt it. Besides, who would ever believe that we share a body?"

"Marcus," Rona demanded, "I absolutely refuse to share you on our wedding night!"

"Oh, you can have him then," Jael told her. "I'll just get my share before hand."

"Girls! If you keep this up you'll drive me straight into the ozone."

"Don't worry, dear," Jael said with a smile. "We'll work this out in time."

"I don't think I'll live that long."

"Of course you will. I checked your pack when I retrieved it from Yggdrasill. You still have the Food and Water of Life that Enki gave you. You're going to live for a very, very long time."

I recalled that the Chinese ideogram for trouble was something like two wives under a single roof. I wonder what they would say about two in one body. I live in interesting times!