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A Plethora of Deities
Book Three:

The Seed

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

I never know where new ideas are going to come from and often enough I don't even know when they are going to arrive. I've come up with at least half my stories by just sitting down with a legal pad and thinking about what I'd like to work on next. Inspiration for the other half, however, is something else.

Sometimes ideas just come to me. Believe it or not, that usually turns out to be more work than simply contemplating with pen and paper. The following story is just such an example.

I have a small vegetable garden and every year I buy more seeds than I can possibly use because I like growing stuff I can't just buy in the market, which is the only part of the following story that is at all

autobiographical. Seeds generally arrive in late winter and get planted as per the instructions on the packets. Some things do well, others are disappointments and there are always a lot of seeds left over for the following year; sometimes for years to come. My surplus of seeds has so grown in some years that I have taken whole bunches of them I didn't have much luck with and planted them together in a single pot labeled, "Darwin." Much the same as with evolution, I never know what I'm going to get next.

Anyway, I was busily planning the spring crop for 2005 when I noticed how so many seed companies give away free seeds with various-sized orders and I got this weird notion. What if one of those seeds had come from the Tree of Life?

It was an intriguing idea, but how would I use it? After a few hours of mulling it over, I realized I had a perfect set of characters for such a story – all the odd gods and goddesses of the "A Plethora of Deities" non-series. At least I still thought of it as a non-series at the time. The first two stories just barely fit together because of a common supporting cast, but the background worlds differed. In the first one, *Downhill All the Way* (a title I never liked, by the way), the world was one in which magic worked, but there was no sign of that sort of thing in the second story, *In the Sky With Diamonds*. There was a perfectly good reason for that, but I never actually bothered to explain because it never came up in the story.

There were other flaws, not the least of which was that in the first story I tried wrestling with the concept of the nature of divinity and was not particularly happy with the results, so I tended to ignore that in the second story. Some fourteen years later, I found I was ready to go back and try again and in *The Seed* I managed both of those with considerably more satisfaction. The explanations also helped to draw the stories together into a real series.

As with all the others, 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.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport, Massachusetts
December 31, 2005
The Seed

Prologue

"Why the hell are we here?" a very large man-like creature asked bitterly. He was very tall, impossibly

tall one might say. Had he not been crouching in the alley between two brick buildings, he would have stood some eighteen feet from head to toes. His hair and long beard were white, his eyes were glacier blue and he was dressed in furs that might have come off of a woolly mammoth.

“The Boss says we wait here for the man,” his companion growled. The other figure was even larger, standing two feet taller. Both figures were wielding large axes as they waited in ambush.

“Why here?” the first one grumbled. “I don’t like all this hiding. He’s just a man. We could destroy his house while he sleeps. There’s no need to hide away like this.”

“Are you questioning the Boss?” the second giant asked. “He wouldn’t like that you know. He wouldn’t like that one bit. You remember Ondalmir and what happened to him?”

The first giant shuddered involuntarily. “Yeah, yeah, I get you. But I still think this is a waste of time. Who cares if anyone sees us? What would they do in any case? We’ve been spotted plenty of times over the centuries, but nothing ever happens. People just don’t believe any more. That gives us power, you know. We can do anything we want, but the Boss,” he said that word with contempt, “wants us to play hide and seek.”

“Do whatever you want,” the other one told him. “If you don’t care if the Boss wears your teeth and fingers on a necklace, it’s your lookout, not mine. I just want to see Jotunheim again.”

The first giant growled lowly at that, but said nothing. Another hour passed and finally they saw an elderly man walking down the Southeastern New England street. “Is that him?”

“Maybe,” the second giant mumbled. The approaching man was bundled up in a woolen coat, hat and scarf to protect him against the harsh winter weather so that only part of his face was visible. He made his way carefully down the old bluestone slab sidewalk, avoiding patches of ice and small piles of snow where shopkeepers had been sloppy in clearing away the snow from a recent blizzard. He was carrying a plastic bag full of groceries by the handle and while he was obviously in his eighties, he was still quite capable of walking unassisted.

The town of Hattamesett was typical of Southcoast Massachusetts with a small business center with shops and restaurants interspersed with homes. Some of the buildings in this part of town, like the two the giants waited between, were made of brick, but most were faced with cedar shingles. The business center, such as it was, stretched across six blocks, but if all the businesses were situated right next to one another, they would have barely covered three of them, not counting the actual harbor. There was a modest marina on the other side of the street and a few hundred moorings in the river beyond, although there were only one or two boats still at their moorings this late in the season, left there by careless owners, who had thought to get just one last warm weekend around Thanksgiving, only to have the weather turn nasty on them as it usually did by that time of year. If they were lucky their boats would survive the winter and only need a few repairs come spring.

“Yeah,” the second giant finally grunted. “That’s him. We’ll jump him as he walks past.”

“Not so fast, boys,” a deep sexy voice from behind stopped them. Both giants turned to see a woman with a deeply tanned complexion and vivid violet eyes. Her loose, curly black hair hung nearly down to her waist and a pair of small but cute horns that sprouted from her temples proclaimed her to be a demoness. Like them, she was dressed for the weather, but instead of furs she wore a long, blue woolen coat and white leather gloves. In spite of the horns, she was quite sexy and adorable from almost anyone’s point of view. What was neither sexy nor adorable, however, was the large weapon resting on

her shoulder. It resembled a rocket launcher, except that its muzzle was covered with a large glass lens.

Before either giant had time to react, she squeezed the trigger of her weapon and what can only be described as a flash of anti-light burst forth from the lens. It wasn't darkness. It was completely invisible; a flash of nothingness that completely enveloped the two startled giants and when the flash of nothingness ended, only the demoness was left standing in that alley.

"Well, that's two more frost giants who won't be around for the next Ragnarok," she commented in a satisfied tone.

"You actually enjoyed that, didn't you, Jael?" a higher feminine voice accused her from within her own mouth. For a brief moment, the demoness' hair lightened toward blond, and then abruptly darkened back to its previous raven shade.

"Shut up, Rona," Jael replied tiredly in her sexy contralto. "You know better than that. Besides we still have another eight alleys to clear out before he gets home."

"I wish he lived in a safe neighborhood," Rona complained.

"This *is* a safe neighborhood," Jael retorted. Their bickering continued as they slowly faded from view.

Seed

One

Eddy Salem lived just two blocks away from the center of Hattamesett. It was a pleasantly quiet town, especially in the winter. Even in the warmer months, his neighborhood was fairly quiet. Tourists and students from the academy up the street rarely made their way down his block, so it was an ideal retirement home as far as he was concerned. His home had a very small front yard, but the back yard had more than enough room for a garden that took up much of his time over the summer.

In mid-February, however, there was little to do but to plan that garden. Eddy made his way up the three steps to his front door, noting that the afternoon sun had melted some of the snow piled upon either side of the short walkway. He made a mental note to keep an eye on it later, in case some of the water pooling there froze before it could drain off. It would probably be dry by nightfall, but if not, it was not much of a chore to spread a bit of rock salt. *No*, he reminded himself, *hardly anyone uses rock salt anymore*. These days most folks used whatever sort of salt-free ice-melter the local hardware stores chose to buy. "Heh!" Eddy chuckled to himself. "Even our driveways have to cut back on their salt intake, these days."

He unlocked his door and pushed it open to discover a small pile of mail blocking the way with only moderate success. He stepped around the few items lying there and then closed the door behind him and made his way into the kitchen. He put the groceries away and started making a pot of coffee. He had been thinking of buying one of those new one-cup coffee brewers in which you simply insert a pre-measured cartridge of ground coffee, push a button and watch your cup fill with fresh coffee in a minute or less, but so far had not wanted to spend the money.

While the coffee was dripping, he finally made his way back to the front door where he collected the mail. There among the bills, magazines and advertisements, was a heavy corrugated envelope from the Springtime Seed Company; the first of his annual seed order had arrived. On returning to the kitchen, he instantly tossed out the junk mail and put the bills in a small cranberry scoop. He used it to hold bills until he got around to paying them. Then over coffee, he started sorting and organizing the seeds.

He pulled out a small note pad and a pen, then opened the package and spilled the contents out on the kitchen table. He took notes on the instructions on each package then he started grouping them together according to when they should be planted. He put the tomatoes together with the eggplants and peppers, and the radishes and carrots with the snow peas. Then he found a somewhat different seed packet at the bottom of the pile. The others were in nice glossy paper packets with vivid photographs of what the gardener could only hope might come out of his garden, but the final packet was made of some sort of cloth. The fibers of the material were large, flat and shiny, but the material was soft and flexible. There was a large black question mark on the front of the packet and the top had been sewn shut with a paper tag that said simply, "Not to be planted before March 18." Feeling the strange cloth packet, he was able to tell there was a single, large seed inside it.

There was also a white envelope with the words, "Read this first," on it. Eddy opened the envelope and read the words on the letter within.

Dear Mister Salem,

Congratulations on being the grand prize winner of the Springtime Seed Company's Mystery Seed Giveaway!

Eddy frowned at that. He vaguely remembered something about a contest, but had not paid any attention to it when ordering his seeds. He never won anything and figured that since the contest promised that all customers would receive free seeds, he would get a packet of poppies or Baby's Breath or some other relatively inexpensive flower. He certainly had not expected to be a grand prize winner, whatever that meant. He continued reading.

You out of all our customers this year have been chosen to receive this truly unique seed. We guarantee it will be the gardening adventure of your life and give you more excitement, satisfaction and fulfillment than any other plant ever could.

Eddy snorted at that. He had made a career of writing advertising copy and this was just more of the same, although he felt he could have done it better. It was too blatant and not verbose enough. The writer of this note should have been more subtle and built up to the grandiose promises. He caught himself trying to rewrite the letter in his head, shrugged and went back to what the letter actually said. The instructions were unusual, he thought, even if the concept of free seeds with an order was not.

Please keep the seed at room temperature inside its protective envelope until Four PM on March 14 and then place it, packet and all in your freezer. Leave it in the freezer until Seven-thirty on the evening of March 17 at which time you should remove it from the freezer and open the packet. Then place the seed in a glass of water and leave it there until the actual planting, which should take place at precisely six minutes past Eleven on the morning of March 18th.

The instructions went on to specify the size of the pot it was to be planted in, the recommended planting soil and the temperature of the water to be poured into that pot.

We will be contacting you shortly to confirm the delivery of the seed and to arrange for representatives of the Springtime Seed Company to visit you and to be on hand for the planting next month. Thank you once again.

Sincerely yours,

E. Waters, CEO of the Springtime Seed Company

EW/nt

“Well, that’s different,” Eddy commented wryly to himself. Then another thought came to him. “They’re coming here?” That bothered him deeply. He rarely had visitors these days. He only knew a few people he had not out-lived and none of them lived anywhere near Hattamesett. He wasn’t comfortable with the idea of strangers coming here.

He read the letter again and then some of the other enclosures, one of which reminded him that by entering the contest he had agreed to allow the company to come and witness the planting of the seed and growth of the plant that would come from it. There was nothing, however, that even hinted at what sort of seed it might be.

Eddy considered calling the company up and telling them to take the seed back, that he didn’t want their grand prize. It sounded like more bother than he was willing to put up with, but he knew his wife would never have allowed him to back out of this merely because it made him uncomfortable. Furthermore, he had never been a quitter and had never gone back on his word. He may not have expressly agreed to this contest, but he did feel that by entering it, he had agreed to its terms. He knew that Julie would have wanted him to go through with it. “So they’ll come in and take a few pictures,” she would have assured him. “So what? They aren’t coming to live with us.”

“Yes, dear,” he would have replied after a long debate, and put up with the nuisance. Since Julie had passed on, many of his decisions had been made by imagining what she might have told him to do.

Eddy put the seeds, including the mysterious special one, in a small file box, arranged in the order he planned to plant them. He looked out of the picture window into his back yard. It was not a very large yard, but it had room for a small vegetable garden, several flower beds and even a few grape and berry vines, which were his favorites. Everything appeared to be in order and Eddy was a firm believer in an orderly garden. He had trimmed the grape vines a month earlier during the January thaw and there was nothing left to do until it was time to turn over the soil in the beds, probably not for a month yet.

He caught a flicker of movement in the far corner of the garden and for one brief moment thought he saw a tremendous squirrel, but when he looked again it was just another normal-sized critter. It was a black squirrel. Nobody knew for certain where the black squirrels had come from. Most squirrels on the Southcoast of Massachusetts were gray, but a generation or so earlier the black-furred variety had suddenly appeared in a neighboring town and had been slowly spreading around the region ever since.

He watched the squirrel for a few minutes, and then he went into his living room to read the magazines. The next day more seeds arrived from various other companies and by the time his phone rang a few days later he had nearly forgotten about the mystery seed.

Two

“Hello, Mister Salem,” a warm and professional voice greeted him over the telephone. “My name is Jael Steele and I am the head of Customer Relations for the Springtime Seed Company. How are you today?”

“I’m doing all right for an old man,” Eddy replied. It was his standard reply to the question. “And you?”

“I’m well, thank you,” Jael replied. “I’m calling to verify that you received your shipment of seeds.”

“Yes, yes,” Eddy told her, nodding unnecessarily at the phone. “Everything appears to be in order.”

“Good, good,” Jael replied in nearly the same tone of voice.

“Actually I’m glad you called,” Eddy admitted. “I have quite a few questions about the contest seed.”

“Heh!” Jael chuckled, “I’m not surprised. You haven’t opened the packet yet have you?”

“Not yet,” Eddy confirmed. “Is it really that sensitive?”

“Not really,” Jael admitted. “In fact, the species is a fairly resilient one, but we don’t like taking chances. Our Director of Research and Development determined that was the best way to ensure the seed’s safety, so that is how we sent it. I do hope you didn’t find it alarming.”

“Not alarming,” Eddy replied. “It was just a bit odd and confusing.”

“I am sorry about that,” Jael replied. “We felt the planting instructions would be enough to be getting on with for now. Besides several of us will be on hand for the actual planting and I’m sure our R&D expert, Ms. . . Meter,” she paused ever so slightly before saying that name, but Eddy didn’t notice the verbal stumble and Jael quickly recovered before he could, “will be happy to answer your questions at that time.”

“How many of you are invading?” Eddy asked Jael suddenly. “I don’t have a very large home, so there’s not enough room for a horde of seed company executives.”

Jael laughed politely and replied, “No need to be concerned, Mister Salem. There won’t be more than a handful of us present. In fact I’ll be operating the camera myself.

“Look,” Eddy protested mildly, “do we really need a camera for the occasion? I mean it’s just a seed, isn’t it?”

“It is a very special seed, Mister Salem,” Jael corrected him gently in a tone that Eddy imagined he could see her smiling at him in a most friendly manner across the phone lines. “We don’t often have one like it, so I hope you will forgive us if we take a special interest in it.”

“What’s so amazing about that seed?” Eddy finally asked bluntly. “What kind of seed is it?”

“I’m so very sorry,” Jael replied, “but I am not permitted to discuss that at this time, but I can tell you it is quite valuable and I’m certain it will lead to the most unusual gardening experience of your life.”

“Yes, yes,” Eddy told her impatiently, “I’ve read the marketing hype you included with the thing, but you haven’t even given me any care and feeding instructions.”

“We haven’t?” she asked, then corrected herself, “Oh yes, that’s right. Don’t worry, Mister Salem. Ms. Meter will be able to tell you everything you need to know. For now just keep the seed at room temperature in a dry location and follow the other planting instructions when the time comes. We’ll see you in a couple of weeks, okay?”

“Very well,” Eddy shrugged after a pause. “This is starting to sound like more trouble than it is worth.”

“No,” Jael disagreed firmly. “The seed is worth any amount of trouble you can imagine.”

The next two weeks were exceedingly strange to Eddy. He went about his usual business, often walking into town to pick up a few items. Once a week he would drive into Fairhaven when he felt the need to buy more than a few groceries. He also bought a few seedling starter trays and a new pot for the mystery seed. He didn’t really need the pot. He had a fair collection of them in his shed, but it just seemed right to him that the special seed should get a new pot.

He often found himself taking the seed packet out of the file box and looking at it, but no amount of staring earned him any insight into the contents of the packet. However, he couldn’t completely disassociate the seed from the series of mysterious events happening in Hattamesett.

The local newspaper, a weekly publication, featured a front page article on the odd people who had been seen briefly in the harbor area. According to the two teenagers who had spotted them, one had jet black skin and six arms and the other had green skin and white hair. According to the account the odd pair had merely been seen walking around the corner, but when the teenagers followed them, they were nowhere to be seen. A young woman claimed she saw a unicorn coming out of the woods on the north side of town near Interstate 195 and had nearly struck it with her car. A bird watcher claimed to have seen an impossibly large eagle soaring over Buzzards Bay and several people claimed to have seen a young woman with a rocket launcher lurking in the alleys. None of those sightings had been confirmed, but Eddy was forced to admit they may have actually happened when he found several size-thirty footprints in his vegetable bed while turning the soil over. He wasn’t completely certain what may have made the other prints, but at six inches across, it had to have been too large to be a dog. He kept a close eye on the garden after that but never saw anything that might have left those prints.

As it had been a warmer than normal late winter, Eddy got the peas, radishes and carrots in early for a change. In the house he had three trays full of various seedlings and still had another few trays to fill as the growing season drew nearer. It was still over a week before the day he would plant the mystery seed when he nearly lost it forever.

The morning started out normally enough Eddy got out of bed just before dawn, got dressed and went into the kitchen where the last few drops were just falling into his automatic coffee pot. He dumped the grounds and poured himself a cup of the hot brown liquid. Half an hour later he heard the morning paper being slipped in through his mail slot and he spent another hour reading it, before he turned on the television to get the weather forecast.

Not for the first time, it occurred to him that he ought to take his daughter’s advice and buy a computer so he could get his news and weather off the Internet. He had heard about all the wonderful things he could do with a home computer and he did admit it would be pleasant to be able to see his daughter via web phone instead of only on the rare occasions she could manage to fly in. He had also heard of

viruses, worms, spyware and other nasty species of troublemaker on the Internet and wasn't sure he really cared to put up with that sort of trouble. Garden pests were bad enough, but he knew how to handle that sort of bug. With all the work of his garden, he really did not need another hobby.

The morning news programs devolved into game shows and sensationalistic chat shows so he turned off the television and got into his car to do some shopping in Fairhaven. He bought a few bags of groceries, a six-pack of stout and spent almost an hour looking at computers in an office supply store, but eventually decided he did not know enough to buy one intelligently. Perhaps next winter, he would have the time to take a class and then he could ask what sort of machine he should buy.

He returned home to discover someone had broken into his house. He immediately called the police, but after looking around he found that nothing was actually broken and the only thing that had been stolen was a flat from his greenhouse. The flat contained what would have been tomato seedlings had they been allowed to sprout. After the officers left, Eddy shrugged and started straightening the place up, making a note to look into having a home burglar alarm system installed.

As he straightened up, Eddy wondered why anyone might break in and steal a flat of seedlings, and then he suddenly realized that whoever it had been might not have been looking for free tomato plants. They hadn't taken anything of real value, but then his mind jumped from tomato seeds to the mystery seed. He raced to the file box he kept his seeds in and found it had remained untouched.

He wondered why it had been overlooked when nearly every drawer and closet had been emptied by the intruders. He eventually decided that whoever had broken into the house had been thinking too deviously. He had been assuming the seed was well hidden rather than practically being out in the open. "Either that," Eddy muttered to himself, "or I'm imagining things. The cops said they must have been looking for stuff they could sell quickly." But he knew that couldn't have been it. They could have stolen his television; it was a fairly new model and quite expensive. His stereo equipment would have brought them a few dollars as well.

It took three days to finally have his home back the way he liked it and he had replaced the stolen tomato seedlings. By that time, when nothing else strange had happened he forced the matter out of his mind, save to order an alarm system. He finally breathed a sigh of relief when the alarm was installed.

Eddy had not realized it, but he had been badly frightened by the incident and the fear only subsided after the alarm system had been installed.

Three

At precisely four o'clock on the afternoon of March 14th, Eddy took the woven packet and placed it on a shelf in his freezer. After that he planted a flat of cosmos, so there would be some early flowers in the garden.

The next three days continued to be dry and unseasonably warm, so Eddy was able to clear the early weeds out of his flower beds. He considered buying some very early pansies for the front beds that lined the short walk to his front door and decided that would be pushing the season too much. Perhaps in another month, but in the middle of March there were still too many chances for freezing weather. They might look nice, but they would also be a waste of time. Maybe he could get a flat and let it grow inside for a few weeks.

Then at last, on the evening of March 17th, Eddy got his first actual look at the seed. Pulling the packet out of the freezer, he cut it open and dropped the frigid seed into his hand. It was a shiny, light brown, teardrop-shaped object, being round on one end and slightly pointed on the other and averaged half an inch in diameter. As he looked at it, frost began to form on its surface, but after a few seconds the frost melted and for just a moment he could have sworn it was glowing. A second look proved it was an ordinary, if large, seed. He shrugged, figuring it was just his imagination getting the better of him and dropped it into a waiting water glass, where it floated on the surface for a few minutes then slowly sank to the bottom.

Eddy had trouble sleeping that night. Several times he awoke from troubling dreams in which the seed was in some sort of danger and he would get out of bed to investigate. Each time he rushed to the kitchen only to find the seed still resting on the bottom of the glass. He finally fell asleep around three thirty and did not wake up until a quarter past eight.

He was just barely dressed when the doorbell rang. "Oh, that is all I need on a Saturday morning," he grumbled, thinking he was being visited by particularly aggressive salesmen or religious proselytizers. He was tempted to ignore the door and go straight to the kitchen, but when the bell rang again, he turned around automatically and walked to the front of the house.

Opening the door, he saw four fairly ordinary-looking people, or at least they looked ordinary at first glance. One was a man who appeared to be in his late forties. He stood five feet nine inches tall and had curly black hair and a pleasant smile on his face. "Mister Salem?" he asked, holding his hand out toward Eddy. Eddy grasped the hand and nodded. "E. Waters. May I present my companions?"

Eddy recognized the name from the seed company's promotional material and replied, "It's cold out there and you're all covered with snow. Why don't you come in first?"

"Thank you," Waters replied as he allowed the three women with him to enter first. Once they were inside and had their overcoats safely ensconced in the front hall closet, Waters continued "This is Ms. Dolores Meter, our Director of Research and Development."

Ms. Meter was a tall woman, standing an inch or two over Waters. Her hair was long, wavy and dark brown, but as Eddy looked at her he could swear the brown color was actually a combination of every natural color all blended strand by strand. Like Mister Waters she appeared to be in her forties, although also like him, she seemed to have the weight of the world in her eyes. She had very few wrinkles around them, and yet her eyes seemed infinitely old. She and Eddy exchanged perfunctory greetings and Waters moved on.

"This is my administrative assistant, Miss Therib," Waters told Eddy, indicating a slim woman who Eddy guessed was in her mid twenties.

She had a large pastry box, which she handed off to Waters before greeting Eddy. "Please call me Ninti," she told him as they shook hands. Ninti, in spite of her diminutive height, somehow seemed statuesque, with straight, medium length, dark brown hair that she kept tied back. Her strangely round-shaped face also sported a fair sized nose, which somehow accented rather than marred her beauty.

"And I believe you have already spoken with Mrs. Steele," Waters concluded.

"Jael," Jael corrected him, "and it's so nice to meet you at last, Mister Waters." Eddy found himself looking 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 lilac-scented perfume that tickled at Eddy's senses rather than invading them brutishly as such a scent might normally do. "You've been well, I hope?" Jael was also in her mid-twenties and unlike the others, did not have eyes that looked as though they had seen the world too many times to find any novelty in it. Her bearing made it obvious she was supremely confident in her abilities, but she was not above being surprised. The others looked as though they had been through the end of the world and had somehow gotten over it. Jael's world was still here and now.

"I forgot to set my coffeemaker last night," Eddy apologized, "but if you don't mind, I'll make a pot now."

Ninti retrieved the pastries from Waters and told Eddy, "I'll do that for you."

"That's all right, Miss Therib," Eddy began.

"Ninti," she corrected him automatically.

"Ninti," he repeated, "but I'm sure Mister Waters didn't bring you all this way just so you could serve the coffee."

Ninti laughed and told Eddy, "You never know," and led the way into his kitchen as though she had lived there all her life. The others followed. When Eddy tried to insist on making the coffee, Ninti just laughed and indicated he should have a seat with the others at the kitchen table. She did it in such a natural and gentle manner, that Eddy had no choice but to obey.

While he had been having that interchange with Ninti, Jael pulled out several small dishes from a cabinet, grabbed five placemats from a drawer and set the table. She was just returning with coffee mugs and spoons as Eddy sat down between Waters and Ms. Meter.

"I see you gave the seed a place of honor," Waters remarked, seeing it in the center of the kitchen table.

"It was the safest place in here I could find," Eddy informed him. "The kitchen is warm and the table is wide enough that I figured I wouldn't go accidentally knocking it over."

"Good thinking," Waters replied. "I'll have to keep that in mind next time I try fiddling in Ms. Meter's lab," he added with a wink toward the somewhat stern-looking woman.

"I thought you had learned your lesson on that count millennia ago," Meter countered, frowning.

Waters merely shrugged, but Eddy chuckled at the exchange, Meter shot him a hard glare, but it just made him laugh all the more. "Millenia!" he chuckled. Waters joined him, and then after a few moments, Ms. Meter smiled as well. In the background Jael and Ninti shared a look and rolled their eyes as though this were an old joke to them. Jael finished placing the pastries on a platter, while Ninti brought the coffee to the table.

"So, Mister Salem," Waters continued as Ninti started pouring. Of them all, only Ninti and Jael put milk and sugar in their coffee. Everyone else took it black. "How long have you been gardening?"

"Most of my life," Eddy replied. "I started out helping my parents in their garden. I grew a few plants in my dorm room back in college and even before my wife and I had our own house we grew plants in pots and window boxes. I did not really spend most of my time at it until after I retired though, but it's been

almost twenty years now and I don't have any other hobbies. Not much time for them really. Gardening is a year-long cycle, you know."

"True enough," Waters agreed. "So what are you growing this year, besides the special seed, of course?"

"I have five different types of tomatoes," Eddy replied, a glimmer of enthusiasm starting to show. "I bought six varieties, but I had a break-in a couple weeks ago and the burglar stole one of my trays."

"A burglar?" Waters asked, alarmed.

However Eddy shrugged it off and continued. "I ordered a new alarm system the next day. Anyway, there were enough leftover seeds to replant five varieties, but I'd used up all the ones of the sixth. It's not a big deal, I'll buy a few seedlings later in the season and I can always buy more next season. I've also got six varieties of peppers; hot, sweet... various sorts. My eggplant seedlings don't seem to be doing very well this year. That happens sometimes. I over bought again this year. I can't help it. There are so many things to try and I don't have room for them all.

"I'll have a small patch of kale. It's been a few years since I grew any. And there'll be radishes and peas and I found some purple carrots this year. We'll see how they go. I always grow basil and cilantro and dill and several other herbs. Not sure why I do anymore, Julie was the cook, not me," he told them. A shadow crossed through his eyes as he spoke about his wife, but his enthusiasm for growing things carried him through.

"I used to plant parsnips, but I stopped doing that a few years ago too. I do fairly well with green onions, I have a variety that reproduce from top onions, although all parts of it are edible, so to get more each year I just have to replant some of the top onions. That part of the bed has been producing for over ten years now as has my asparagus bed.

"And I usually grow flowers too, since no garden is complete without them. I have lilies, dianthus, peonies, irises, lilacs, day lilies and more along those lines for perennial color, and I usually grow a variety of annuals to keep the garden colorful all season long."

As he spoke, Ms. Meter's manner changed. At first she had been cool and distant toward Eddy, as though he were emitting some sort of distasteful odor that she was being forced to endure. However, as he spoke lovingly about his garden and the plants in them, she started smiling gently and she nodded approvingly when Eddy explained how he had been breeding the day lilies and Japanese irises.

"I haven't achieved anything really spectacular," he admitted modestly, "but some of the colors and petal shapes are unique in my experience."

"Sometimes it's just a little change that makes all the difference," Ms. Meter told him.

"True," Eddy agreed, "but listen to me, going on about the little things I've done. You must have been producing new varieties by the dozens or hundreds, Ms. Meter."

"Please call me Dee," she told him warmly with an almost flirtatious smile.

Jael, sitting on the other side of Waters from Eddy, made an astonished noise and tried covering it up by pretending to clear her throat. Eddy noticed her reaction but did not understand it. He decided that maybe a bite of her bearclaw had gone down the wrong way.

They spoke pleasantly about plants and gardening for the next hour and a half until Waters finally told them, "It's time. Mister Salem, you have the pot ready?"

"Yes, of course," Eddy replied. "It's in the greenhouse. Well, it's not really a greenhouse," he admitted as he grabbed the glass with the seed in it, "It's more a south-facing, glassed-in patio. We originally built it as a solarium, but it didn't take long to realize it was the only good place I had to put the potting bench, at least during the winter. He led the way through the living room into the greenhouse. There was a trio of comfortable chairs there with a triangular glass coffee table between them. The previous day's newspaper still resting on the table next to a pot of jonquils Eddy had forced, betrayed the fact that he still used the room for its original purpose.

The pot Eddy had chosen for the seed was a plain terra cotta one. It was not much to look at, but he planned to put it inside a pretty wicker basket anyway so there was no need to use a fancy pot. While choosing it, he also considered that if he needed to repot within the year, a likelihood given the size of the seed, he thought, he would not have spent too much on a temporary pot. The pot sat on the potting bench and the basket on a shelf just above it.

Eddy fished the seed out of the glass and held it up to take one last look at it. Once more he could have sworn it was glowing, but when he blinked his eyes, it looked normal once again. He looked at it a little more closely. It had swelled a bit overnight as it absorbed the water, but Eddy decided the glowing appearance had to have been a matter of the light glistening off the water that dripped off the seed itself.

Eddy had filled the pot with moist soil the evening before just after plunking the seed in the glass. He poked a hole two inches deep into the surface of the soil and paused to look at the others. Jael was avidly following his every move with a digital camera that he had not recalled seeing her with until just then. He shrugged that off. He had not actually been watching her very closely. If he found any of the women more attractive than the others, it had to be green-eyed Dee who obviously shared his fascination with plants. Dee, Ninti and Mister Waters were all watching him interestedly as well, however. To go by their reactions, Eddy would have thought the planting of this seed was truly unique and earth-shaking.

Up until then he was willing to believe it was all in his head, but the reactions of the seed company people convinced him. This must really be the seed of an unusual plant. It seemed they were holding their breaths in anticipation, so he turned back to the pot, dropped the seed down into the hole and covered it over. The others started breathing again, but Eddy wasn't finished yet. He reached for the basket, placed it on the table, put the pot's saucer into the basket and then finally lowered the pot into it.

Satisfied, he turned to the others and was a bit surprised they chose to applaud his actions. It wasn't the politely amused applause of the sort one might use to encourage a friend, but a heartfelt clapping of hands to honor what he had done. And what had he done? Poked a hole in the dirt and dropped a seed in. Eddy wondered if these people had been working around seeds a bit too long and then wondered if maybe he was guilty of the same problem.

Once Eddy was done, Dee pulled a long, thin device that looked like a knitting needle with a small computer glued on its head from her purse and stuck it, point first into the soil. "Hmm," she commented. "Humidity and temperature are perfectly within range. Keep it just like this and it will sprout at precisely 9:57 am on the first day of April."

"You can pinpoint it down to the exact minute, huh?" Eddy asked skeptically.

"Yes, I can," she replied calmly, letting his skepticism pass unnoticed. "It's a talent I've always had," she

added. "Here, take this," Dee handed Eddy the needle-like device. "This measures temperature and humidity in the soil. I notice you haven't bothered with some of the more modern gardening devices."

"I never really saw the need," Eddy confessed. "Well, I did buy one once, but it didn't work very well."

"You'll find this one works very well, indeed," Dee informed him. "It's a prototype, but we're thinking of offering it in our catalog next year. Think of yourself as a beta-tester."

"A beta-tester?" Eddy asked. Had he been more acquainted with computers, he might have known the term.

"A term from the world of computers," Jael informed him. "Companies like to have people test their products before they are sent to manufacturing. They especially want testers who did not actually write the code and who may not use the program in question in quite the way that was intended. It weeds out flaws that might not otherwise have shown up until after the release date."

"This device is quite simple to operate," Dee told him. "Just stick it in the pot and so long as the temperature and humidity lines fall within the green zone, you're fine. Otherwise, just keep the soil moist, but not too moist. Your mixture here drains nicely so I doubt we'll have a problem with that and this green-room of yours seems to hold in the heat quite well, even in the midst of a snow storm."

She was right. Outside, the snow had been falling heavily and at least four inches had fallen since their arrival. "That's more than was forecast," Eddy commented. "There was not supposed to be more than half an inch before it turned to rain."

"The storm went further to the south than your weather service predicted," Dee told him in a matter of fact way. "Don't worry, it will be raining within the hour, although the areas to the north and west of Boston will get all snow; almost two feet of it."

"That's quite a lot for a late season storm, isn't it?" Ninti asked.

"Not around here," Eddy chuckled. "This is Southeastern Massachusetts; Mark Twain was only a few miles from here when he made his now famous commentary on New England weather."

"What commentary was that?" Ninti asked.

That surprised Eddy. He thought everyone had heard that particular nugget. It was probably better known than Tom Sawyer tricking his friends into doing his chores, but Jael spoke up immediately, "If you don't like the weather, just wait a few minutes and it will change."

"Well, well!" Waters intoned, smiling. "Just enough time for another cup of coffee, then we must be off."

Seedling

One

Before leaving, all four of his visitors gave Eddy their business cards with instructions to call one of them

if anything unusual happened.

“What’s likely to happen?” Eddy asked, suddenly concerned.

“You never know,” Waters told him. “Don’t worry, I doubt anything of particular note will occur until after it sprouts, but don’t take any chances, and please let me know if you suffer any further break-ins here. You may have a good security system, but if it needs to be improved, the company will be more than willing to pay for those improvements.”

“Maybe we can set up a web cam for the plant,” Jael suggested. “Eddy, do you have Internet access?”

“I don’t even have a pocket calculator,” Eddy told her.

“We’ll have to do something about that,” she said decisively.

“We’ll discuss that at our next meeting,” Waters remarked. “Mister Salem, you aren’t actually opposed to computers, are you?”

“No, they serve their purpose, I suppose,” Eddy told him. “I’ve just never felt the need to have one.”

“Well, let us weigh the options and we’ll see what we can do. Jael, put a proposal together, will you, dear?” Jael nodded before helping herself to another bearclaw. A few minutes later, they all left, promising to be in touch although Waters himself, mentioned he probably would not be able to return until April First.

It was a warm and sunny morning two days later when Jael returned with two strong young men carrying several boxes. “Morning, Eddy!” she greeted him cheerfully. “Guess what I have!”

“A fan club?” Eddy asked, indicating her companions.

“Who? The boys?” she laughed. “No, they just offered to help me cart in your new computer.”

“Now what am I going to do with it?” Eddy asked. “I’ve never used a computer in my life.”

“You don’t do Windows, huh?” Jael teased him. “Well, time for that to change. Besides, there’s really nothing to it these days. It’s not like you have to know how to program anymore. You just turn the box on and click on the icons of your choice. Think of it as magic if you like. Oh, don’t worry. I’ll show you how to use it. That’s part of the deal. I wouldn’t dump a PC in your lap and then just take off. Actually, most of this is furniture. I thought you might like to have this set up in your greenhouse and since you don’t have a computer, it occurred to me you didn’t have a computer desk either and as it happens you have a perfect spot for it, right near the potting bench, which is good since that means we won’t need to set up a wireless camera.”

“Whoa! Slow down, girl,” Eddy told her. “You’re going to wear me out.”

“Me too,” Jael replied in a higher voice than she normally used.

“What was that?” Eddy asked, perplexed.

“Sorry,” Jael apologized in her normal voice. “I guess I was letting my enthusiasm get the best of me. Don’t worry, you’ll love it. And I already have your Internet access arranged. We’ll have you surfing the

web this afternoon.”

Jael’s helpers made quick work of unpacking and setting up the computer desk, while Jael happily unpacked the computer itself along with various peripherals, lining them up on the potting bench. When the desk was assembled the two men broke down all the boxes as one of them asked, “You want any help setting that machine up, Jael?”

“That’s all right, Ashtaroth,” she replied. “This is the fun part. I’ll take it from here. Will you handle the boxes though?”

“Of course,” Ashtaroth replied and the men bundled up the boxes and left by the front door.

A few minutes later, when Eddy happened to look out front, the boxes were nowhere to be seen. “That was nice of them,” he noted, “but they could have left them on the curb for pickup tomorrow.”

“What was that?” Jael asked, looking up from behind the tower where she was attaching a seventeen inch LCD monitor.

“The boxes,” he replied. “Your friends took them with them.”

“Of course,” Jael smiled. “We wouldn’t want to make a mess of your neighborhood. Now just hold on a few minutes and we’ll be able to turn this baby on. Hey! Where’s the pot with the seed in it?” she asked, finally noticing it was no longer on the potting bench.

“I moved it to the coffee table,” Eddy explained. “It’s safer there now that I’m actually using the potting bench for potting.”

Jael glanced over at the triangular table and smiled. “You’re right and the basket it’s in looks right there. Well, let me finish up.” She hunkered back down to the computer, plugging various peripherals in. Eddy watched her for a while but he soon realized that he barely knew a keyboard from a mouse and while it was obvious that metal box Jael called a tower was the main computer and the thing that looked like a flat-screen TV was the monitor, that pretty much summed up his knowledge of computers, so when she smiled and told him, “All set! Let’s turn this baby on,” he smiled back at her and let her show him how to turn it on.

Jael spent the next hour showing him how to use the web browser and the e-mail client, telling him his new e-mail address was esalem@springtimeseed.com. When his eyes started to glaze over, however, she smiled and patted his hand. “Information overload, huh?” she asked. “I know it’s a lot to learn all of a sudden, but just start off with e-mail and the web and within a week you’ll be totally comfortable with this rig. Looks like I’m going to have to get that wireless webcam after all, though.”

“Why?” Eddy asked her.

“I was planning on the plant being on the potting bench, but you moved it,” she replied.

“I can move it back again,” Eddy told her.

“No,” she shook her head. “You were right. That is a better place for it. Besides you’ll want to move it outside come summer. We’ll need a camera we can move anywhere soon enough.”

“It’s an outdoor plant?” Eddy asked.

“Very much so,” Jael assured him.

“What sort?” he pressed, but Jael merely smiled. “You’re still not going to tell me, are you?”

“Ms. Meter would kill me and feed me to her plants,” Jael replied, and while she smiled while saying it, Eddy got the impression she was completely in earnest.

“She doesn’t seem all that bad to me,” Eddy opined.

“I’ve known her longer than you have,” Jael laughed. “Still, she seems to like you. Who knows?”

“What are you talking about?” Eddy asked, then suddenly realized what Jael was saying. “I’m old enough to be her father at least.”

Jael smiled, and replied quietly, “Not really.” Louder, she added, “but I think we both need a break. Why don’t you surf the web for a bit while I make us something for lunch?”

“You’re company,” Eddy told her. “I should be cooking for you.”

“You need to get comfy with that computer,” Jael told him and promptly went to the kitchen, leaving Eddy in the greenhouse room with the computer. He decided to try out the search engine Jael had shown him, typed in “Alyogyne huegeli” and started viewing the various pages that came up.

Jael was showing him how to send e-mail yet again two hours later with an actual letter to Eddy’s daughter when the phone rang. “Hello?” Eddy answered the phone.

“Yeah, uh, hi,” a male voice replied. “Is Jael there? This is her husband.”

“Oh sure,” Eddy replied, “just a moment. It’s for you,” he told Jael. “Your husband.”

“Thanks,” she told him, taking the phone. “Marcus? Is that tonight? Oops. No don’t worry, I’ll be there.” She hung the phone up and turned to Eddy, “Sorry, I gotta run. I’ll be back tomorrow and the next day. By then you ought to be a pro. Go ahead and finish that letter. When you’re done just click on send and it will go, okay?”

She started heading for the front door, but Eddy stopped her. “How do I turn it off?”

“Click on ‘Start’ and then on ‘Shut Down,’” she told him hurriedly.

“‘Start’ then ‘Shut Down?’ Who came up with that idiocy?” Eddy asked.

“Hey, don’t blame me,” laughed Jael and she slipped her coat on. “But if it makes you feel any better, there’s an entire region in Hell reserved for wasteful programmers. Ask me and I’ll say that little corner’s going to be pretty full in a few more years. Tomorrow, Eddy. Have a good night!” She rushed out the door. Eddy thought of one more question but by the time he rushed to the door and opened it, she was nowhere in sight.

Two

Jael returned the next day with two more pieces of equipment. "No need to worry about these," she assured Eddy. "This is the camera I told you about and this is the wireless access point for it. This shouldn't take long."

She mounted the camera on a tripod and focused it on the pot. Then she ran a few programs to install the camera and program what it was supposed to do. Finally, she turned to Eddy and told him. "From now on, don't turn the machine off unless you have to reboot it for some reason."

"Why?" he asked. "What did you do?"

"I just made that pot and basket a star," she chuckled. She opened the Web browser and typed in an address and was quickly transported to the Springtime Seed Company's website. Another click of the mouse brought her to a page on which there was already a picture of the pot sitting on the table. "See?" she asked. "Almost live. I have the webcam set to send a new picture once every thirty seconds. Just remember to smile for the camera if you sit in the outside chair."

They spent the next two hours with Eddy's computer training and then again the next morning before Jael decided, "I think you can handle this on your own now, but you can contact me and the others by e-mail now if you like, although don't hesitate to use the phone in an emergency. Okay?"

The next morning Eddy found he missed the company. The attention and company of a pretty young lady was flattering and far easier to get used to after his hermitage than he would have expected. He checked his e-mail and discovered letters from both Jael and his daughter. His typing skills were still very rusty so it took most of the morning to reply to both of them. Then he spent the afternoon in his garden where a few early flowers were finally showing some color.

That became his new routine and later he was amused to see how easily it came to him. He was not surprised to hear from his daughter each morning, but did not expect to hear from Jael every day, but she always answered his posts with one of her own.

As the week progressed, he did become more comfortable with the new machine and soon he wondered why he had not bothered to buy a computer before. It was instantly becoming invaluable as a research tool and when he discovered the gardening news groups on Usenet he felt as though he had almost come home. Jael warned him about the unmitigated rudeness he might find on the news groups, but the gardening groups seemed civil enough. After a few days the novelty of having a computer wore off and it was just another part of his daily routine.

Except for Jael's letters he had no contact with the people from the Springtime Seed Company until March 29th. However, strange sightings around town continued to make headlines not only in the weekly local paper, but in the daily regional one as well. However, Eddie saw nothing unusual himself for the next few days until he returned from shopping on the afternoon of the 29th.

The front door was locked as usual and nothing was visibly out of place as Eddy entered his home, but there was an unmistakable feeling of presence there. While he heard and saw nothing, Eddy instantly knew there was someone in the house with him. He put the grocery bags down on the floor quietly and looked for something to defend himself with, but found nothing more substantial at hand than his umbrella. *Better than nothing*, he thought to himself, wishing he had an axe nearer than the tool shed. *Maybe I ought to get a baseball bat to keep in the umbrella stand*, he considered. Then he quickly changed his mind, figuring that it was more likely to give an intruder a weapon to use against him.

He made his way quietly through his house, thankful there was no upper floor to worry about. From the living room, he peeked inside his bedroom but was quickly distracted by a soft click from the greenhouse. He walked as softly as he could, brandishing his umbrella in what he hoped was a threatening manner. There was someone sitting in a chair in front of the pot.

As he stepped down into the greenhouse, Dee turned around in the chair and asked, "Why are you carrying an umbrella? It won't start raining for hours yet." She had been sitting there calmly drinking a cup of coffee while contemplating the pot.

Eddy stood, dumbfounded, seeking the right words. He wanted to ask, "What the hell are you doing here?" He wanted to demand, "How did you get inside without setting off the alarm?" He also wanted to get an answer to, "Who the heck do you think you are?" However, before he could get any of those questions out the earth shook.

It was a gentle rumble, a bit unusual for Southern New England but not unheard of, it lasted for maybe three seconds before stopping. "She's waking up," Dee told him, smiling fondly at the seed's pot.

"She?" Eddy asked.

"Or he if you prefer," Dee shrugged. "She'll be both, you know."

"No, I don't know," Eddy told her peevishly. "Not all plants are hermaphroditic, and you still haven't told me what species of plant this one is."

Dee chuckled mysteriously and commented, "I doubt Linnaeus ever heard of this one."

"Who?" Eddy asked.

"Carl or Carolus Linnaeus," she replied. "The Father of Taxonomy. He was the one who invented the current system of species classification. Oh, it's been revised numerous times, but his basic system is still in use today. What some people refer to as species Latin names are more accurately referred to as Linnaean names. There were Latin species names in use before Linnaeus, but they are generally considered invalid under Linnaeus' binomial nomenclature and hierarchical classification system."

"Binomial?"

"Two names," Dee explained patiently. "Genus and species. Like Homo sapiens - mankind, Camelia sinensis - tea, Ursus arctos - brown bear and Cannabis sativa - marijuana."

"If you say so," Eddy shrugged. "What did you mean by, 'She's waking up?' You told me it wouldn't sprout until April Fool's Day."

"Did you know April First used to be the traditional start of the New Year?" Dee countered. Eddy shook his head. "Well, it was in some Western European cultures anyway. For example in France the New year was celebrated for eight days starting on March 25 and culminating on April 1. That ended during the reign of Charles IX in the Sixteenth Century when the Gregorian calendar was introduced. That calendar reform moved New Year's Day to the first of January, to name just one particular change, but the tradition of jokes, pranks and japes continued."

"You're just a font of information today," Eddy observed. "So are you going to tell me what sort of plant he or she will be?"

“You wouldn’t want me to spoil the surprise now would you?” she countered playfully.

“Who says?” Eddy shot back. He waited but she just continued to smile at him. Deflating slightly, he sat down across from her and asked, “So what does her waking up have to do with April Fools Day?”

“Not very much,” she admitted easily. “The seed will not sprout for a few days yet. That’s true, but she is germinating right now.” Another mild quake shivered lightly through Hattamesett. Some dishes chattered against each other for a few seconds, then it got quiet again. “I must say you’ve been taking exceptionally good care of the seed, Eddy,” she told him, taking another calm sip of coffee.

“Just following directions,” Eddy replied.

“It’s more than that,” she disagreed. “My instructions weren’t all that specific. As in any set of planting instructions there was room for error. You might have watered it too much or let it dry out. You might have over-fertilized or let it get too cold. No, you’ve treated this seed in exactly the right manner. I won’t hide the fact that I did not want to let just anyone raise this plant. I really wanted to do it myself, but Enki, uh... Mister Waters,” she corrected herself watching Eddy for a reaction. He showed no sign of recognizing the name so she continued, “insisted we make it the... uh... contest’s grand prize.”

“And the boss always wins,” Eddy nodded. “Yeah, I’ve heard that song before. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve crafted a perfect advertisement, only to have it shot down by my boss.”

“You used to write ads?” Dee asked.

“That was my job,” Eddy admitted. “It’s been almost two decades since I did it though. I don’t miss it a bit, though; gardening is more fun. It’s honest work. Copyrighting often isn’t. Oh you can’t blatantly say anything demonstrably false, but all too often I was forced to imply all sorts of things that I knew weren’t true. A lot of people in the business get rather cynical about the whole process. They hide the fact that their job is to lie, even from themselves, by adopting a sort of worldly-wise kind of attitude and tell others that’s business in the modern world. Honestly I didn’t realize how bad it was until six months after I stopped doing it.

“My wife and I were watching a commercial one afternoon. It was one I had been working on shortly before my retirement. Well, one of my colleagues evidently got the word to juice it up a bit and while the parts I did were still evident, the additions stood out to me in sharp relief.”

“What was that advertisement for?” Dee asked.

“Orange juice,” he replied “Can you imagine that? Like we really had to imply that drinking one particular brand of OJ would make you slimmer, sexier and more popular than any other. It was an eye-opener, I’ll tell you that. Then I looked at my garden and realized that at least here any problems were relatively honest ones. Anything in the garden is either here intentionally or is a weed or a pest that must be removed. It was at that moment, however, that I stopped thinking about going back to work. Up until then I kept feeling like I was on a too long vacation and that eventually I’d have to go back to work. I actually wanted to get back to the office and would occasionally doodle sketches for ad copy. Not after that, though.”

He got up then and went to the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee for himself, then decided to bring the pot back with him to freshen Dee’s cup. They sat quietly watching the pot for a few minutes until a sudden loud bang could be heard from outside.

Deeshot out of her chair and raced for the front door, with Eddy making his way as best he could behind her. Her greater speed as they ran reminded him of how old he was getting. As it was, he arrived at the front door just in time to see a well-built uniformed policeman with curly dark brown hair and beard, pushing a somewhat larger and scruffy-looking person into the back of his cruiser. "Thanks, Here!" Dee called from the door stoop.

"Just doing my job, Dem... uh ma'am," he quickly corrected himself.

Eddy took a second look at the cop, wondering when the local regulations had been altered to allow officers to wear such long hair and beard. Then he wondered if there even were such regulations or if it was just the fashion the local police all adopted. As the policeman got into the cruiser, though, Eddy noted that the troublemaker seemed to have a pair of long sharp horns on his head.

"Must be the fashion in one of the local gangs," Dee surmised, when Eddy pointed it out to her.

"I guess," he shrugged. "I don't know much about gangs and their habits, local or otherwise."

"Don't worry about it, then," she advised. She looked at her wrist and commented, "I didn't realize it was getting so late. Sorry to rush off. I'll be back in time for the big event." She grabbed her coat from the front hall closet and dashed off down the street, leaving Eddy to wonder how she had gotten there without a car.

Three

The next three days were nervous ones for Eddy and indeed for most of Hattamesett. The occasional earth tremors persisted and according to the army of geologists who descended on the normally quiet town, the epicenters of all the tremors were all in or near the town's business center. A cluster of so many minor quakes, some said, was highly unusual.

During all the hubbub, Eddy attempted to go about his business as usual, but he started doubting his own eyes when presented with fleeting views of what appeared to be six-foot tall lizard dogs, angels of various choirs – Eddy was not sure which was which, but remembered that the number of wings was essential – Demonic-looking creatures from a number of different pantheons and much more. When he took a second look, they generally assumed more normal appearances. Not that he recognized them all on sight. Usually he had to get back home and search for the creatures he had seen on the World Wide Web. The more he learned about such creatures, the more convinced he became that senility was catching up with him.

Once he could have sworn he saw Jael toting a rocket launcher on her shoulder and he recalled a similar sighting being reported in the paper. Twice he could have sworn he saw the world's largest squirrel in the large oak tree that shaded part of his back yard. In all, it was an unnerving few days.

Eddy did not sleep well during the night of March 31st. He kept waking up from nightmares of monsters, demons and once, a giant mutant goat that tried to eat the new plant. The worries they engendered caused him to check the pot every time he got up. Each time he would turn the lights on and walk into the greenhouse to find the pot in its usual place on the coffee table. Then he would trundle on back to bed only to wake up again a few minutes later and start the cycle all over again.

He felt like he had just finally fallen into a deep and restful sleep when the doorbell rang. Opening his eyes, he realized he must have been out for two or three hours, but it still felt as if no time at all had passed. He was still fumbling around for some clothing when the bell rang again. "I'm getting mighty tired of 'Westminister Chimes,'" he muttered to himself, referring to the doorbell. Come to think about it, he'd heard the door bell more in the last three weeks or so than he had in the previous three years.

The bell rang for a third time before he stumbled to the door in his bathrobe. He opened the door to find Waters, Dee, Jael and Ninti standing on his front stoop. Lightning flashed behind them just as Eddy opened the door. The rain was pelting down and looking past them, Eddy could see pea-sized hail in the grass. "Well, come on in," he told them, holding his hand out for Dee. She accepted it, stepped through the doorway and to the side to make room for the others.

"We're a bit early," Waters observed. "My apologies for letting our enthusiasm get the better of us."

"It's not a problem," Eddy replied, "There's coffee and doughnuts in the kitchen. Please make yourselves at home while I get dressed."

He rushed back into his bedroom and quickly slipped into a pair of slacks and a flannel shirt and rejoined them in the kitchen. Jael and Ninti were happily chatting about the details of the video of the sprouting they were about to shoot, while Dee and Waters sipped at their drinks.

"I hope you don't mind, Eddy," Dee said by way of greeting, "but I helped myself to one of your teabags."

"Not at all," he told her. "I only drink tea occasionally. You're welcome to all you want." Then he spotted a pastry box on the table he hadn't seen there before. "Who brought the pecan rolls? Thanks, I think these will be better than the doughnuts."

Half an hour later, Jael noted, "I'd better start setting up the camera. The web cam might be lucky enough to pick up the actual moment the plant sprouts, but I wouldn't count on it. Besides, I want to put this whole segment in the web page archives."

"You were in advertising, Mister Salem," Waters commented as Jael and Ninti went to the greenhouse. "Did you do many ads on the Web?"

"None at all," Eddy admitted. "You have to realize that the Internet is a relatively new resource for commercial interests. When I retired, it was a much smaller community and businesses were just starting to explore the possibilities. Most Web sites were academic and the few business sites were mostly informational in nature. The idea for using them to advertise was still a notion we were arguing about. At the time I figured the Internet would be as much of a fad as CB radios were in the Seventies; a few years in which everyone would want to have computers and then after the novelty wore off just a few serious users would still be on-line. I guess I got that one wrong."

"Maybe not," Waters replied. "It's been less than twenty years. Who knows what the world will be like in another twenty? I know I'm always amazed on how fast everything moves these days."

"You know, the idea of the web cam is a good one in general as an advertising gimmick, but I can't help but wonder how many people are really going to be interested in watching this plant grow. Certainly the view so far has been less than interesting."

"The web cam," Waters explained, "is as much for the employees of Springtime Seed as for the public;

maybe more so. Most of us take a very keen interest in the seed and the plant it will produce, you see, but it wouldn't be fair to you or safe to the plant if they all came over for a personal visit."

"I appreciate that," Eddy replied, wondering how long it would be before his life could return to its normal quiet routine.

Outside there was a crash of thunder and the rain started beating down thunderously. "Will your greenhouse roof take this sort of pounding?" Waters asked nervously.

"This is hardly the first storm I've weathered here," Eddy assured him. "It's a typical late season nor'easter. Twenty, thirty miles north of here it's probably snowing. The forecast out of Boston last night predicted six to eight inches in the city. Down here this storm will be almost entirely rain. The winds seem to be stronger than expected, though."

"Sustained winds are averaging about forty-two miles per hour with gusts of sixty-five and higher," Dee commented. The lights flickered just then.

"Good thing I have a working fireplace," Eddy noted, "in case the power goes out. Will Jael's camera keep working, though?"

"It has a battery pack good for two hours of recording time," Dee replied. "We ought to make our way to the greenhouse. We have a while to go yet, but I'm sure Jael wants to plan her shot."

The electricity flickered again as they arrived where Jael had set up her camera. Now there were two tripods with cameras aimed at the pot, but to insure she got her shot, she also had a small hand-held digital video camera ready to go.

Then the power failed for a few seconds and they all heard the insistent beep of the computer's uninterruptible power supply. That lasted only a few seconds before power was restored and they all breathed a sigh of relief. Then the winds started to howl even louder.

Eddy caught Waters looking at Dee and cocking his head slightly to the side. She looked upward through the roof of the greenhouse and for a moment the rain stopped and the winds died down. A few short seconds later, however, the wind picked up again and the rain came down even heavier than before.

The rainfall was so heavy they could not see more than halfway across Eddy's backyard for a while. Dee looked back at Waters and shrugged. Waters then pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and placed a call.

"Eddy, will you sit over here," Jael indicated one of the seats around the coffee table. "I'd like to have you in the shot. You are the star of the show, after all."

"Ratty?" Eddy heard Waters say into the phone, even as Jael and Ninti tried to distract him further.

"Well, the co-star," Ninti corrected Jael.

"You got a line to Heimdall?" Waters asked into his phone.

"True," Jael agreed readily and a bit more loudly than strictly necessary. "The plant is the real star, right?"

"Well, just tell him to keep his eyes peeled, will you? Thanks. I'll talk to you later," Waters finished his

call and hung the phone up. "Sorry about that," Waters apologized to Eddy. "Just remembered I had to call my broker. You know how that goes."

"Must have been urgent," Eddy agreed, "to have to call him on a Saturday."

"The pastry and doughnuts were nice," Dee cut in suddenly, "but I think we could all use a more substantial breakfast. Why don't I see what I can whip up?" She hurried out of the greenhouse while the others caught Eddy up in polite, but meaningless chatter.

She returned a short time later to announce that breakfast was served. They arrived in the kitchen to discover Dee had prepared a large cheese, bacon and onion omelet, put out a tray of fresh toasted bagels with cream cheese and lox and also some toasted English muffins with butter and orange marmalade on the side. It was such a nice spread it didn't occur to Eddy until much later that he could not possibly have had half the ingredients for the meal in his refrigerator.

Finally, Dee commented, "It's nearly time. We'd better go back to the greenhouse if we don't want to miss it."

"I still don't see how you can possibly know when it will sprout," Eddy commented as they walked toward the greenhouse.

"Long years of experience, Mister Salem," Waters replied. "In all my years, I've never known anyone who knew her plants better than Dee does."

"But only you know how some of them tasted," Dee told him acidly.

"An error of youth," Waters countered. "I know better than to cross you these days."

"You'd better," she replied, giving him a sharp poke in the ribs.

"What was that for?" Waters asked.

"Just a thanks for the memories," Dee replied acidly.

"Good thing we have Ninti with us," Waters told her.

"Why did you think I hit you there?" she asked.

None of the byplay made much sense to Eddy except to confirm that they had known each other a long time. That he had suspected of all of them. They worked together too well to have met only recently. Eddy had seen many business teams in the course of his career and could always tell the difference. These people did not just have a natural affinity for each other, but had worked together for a fair number of years.

It had been a dark and dismal day so far, but as Eddy approached the greenhouse, it grew even darker. There was a blaze of lightning that occurred with a loud click followed immediately by a roar of thunder that drowned out the beep from the computer's power supply. When the thunder died down, the power came back on and the sound of the precipitation became sharper as the rain turned to sleet. The sleet piled up quickly to a depth of half an inch until it too was replaced by snow. The snow was coming down so furiously that they could barely see a few feet into Eddy's backyard.

The snow only lasted a few minutes before turning back to rain that thundered down on the greenhouse roof so loudly they were unable to hear each other speak. This kept up for a quarter of an hour until just before Dee's predicted sprouting time of 9:57 AM. With just a few seconds to go, the rain suddenly stopped and there was relative silence broken only by the sound of water draining off the peaked roof.

In that silence, a small hole in the clouds opened up to bathe the greenhouse in sunlight just as a bit of potting soil moved to one side and the baby plant sprung up to greet it. Over the course of the next minute it gradually straightened to a height of three quarters of an inch as the cameras captured the entire scene.

"She's beautiful!" Dee whispered, breaking the silence at last.

"Mmm," agreed Jael wordlessly.

"So what kind of a plant is it?" Eddy asked. He got the feeling he might have recorded the question for all the times he had asked it over the last few weeks. However, he did not get an informative answer this time either as they all just smiled mysteriously at him. "You're still not going to tell me, are you?" They shook their heads and turned back to the sprout, but Eddy could detect an ecstatic joy in all their eyes. To him it was just another plant; something to be appreciated, to be sure, but for the others this was obviously something so much more.

Eddy studied the young plant, but so far all he could see was the short trunk and the seed leaves or cotyledons. It could be almost anything. *Well, not anything*, he corrected himself, but there was not enough definition to narrow it down in any meaningful way.

Waters and his people stayed for another hour, then, thanking Eddy for his hospitality, headed for the door. "What about care and feeding?" Eddy asked Dee.

"Keep the moisture just the way you have so far and water with a diluted general purpose plant food as needed," she told him. "You have the knack, I can see that. Don't take it outside at least until May and then be sure to let it harden off gradually. We don't want the leaves to get sun burned, do we? And don't worry too much about it. I'll, we all will be back between now and then, I'm sure."

Four

If Eddy had thought the previous three weeks had given his doorbell a strenuous workout compared to the previous three years, they turned out to merely be a set of warm-up exercises for what followed the next few days. It didn't start until the next morning, when soon after breakfast the bell rang.

"Good morning, sir," a young lady greeted him as he opened the door. She was dressed in a conservative blouse and skirt, with a college blazer of some sort over that, but her pink and orange hair clashed badly with the outfit. After a long introductory speech she turned out to be selling magazines in an attempt to pay her way through college.

It was a commendable attempt, Eddy thought, but he was not interested in buying any magazine subscriptions. Neither was he interested in mops and brooms, vinyl siding, having his windows washed, buying into a new form of digital communications, whatever that turned out to be, or even speaking to one of the dozen or so Amway-clones who seemed determined to inhabit his front stoop for the next few days.

When not fending off door-to-door sales people, he was busily hanging up on telemarketers. He had put his number on the “do not call” list years earlier, but that did not seem to help. He eventually broke down and bought an answer machine through which to screen his calls. He did not really like doing that, he never liked talking to answer machines himself, but it did afford him a few minutes of peace from the barrage of sales calls he was being forced to suffer.

“Darned good thing I don’t have a cell phone,” he told himself while driving into town for groceries a few days later. It was his first time out since the plant had sprouted and the first relief from the sudden crop of sales people. He had no notion where they had all come from all of a sudden and even more mysteriously none of his neighbors appeared to have been bothered by them when he found the time to ask. Had someone pinned an invisible “Kick me” sign that only salespeople could see on his back? He made a mental note to call Mister Waters when he got home and demand to know whom the Springtime Seed Company had shared his name, address and phone number with. Perhaps it was time to get an unlisted number altogether.

The shopping trip went all too quickly for Eddy’s peace and comfort and he soon rolled back up his short driveway. He was just putting the grocery bags down on his kitchen counter when he heard a soft thump coming from his back yard. It sounded to him as though something had fallen. With all the wild weather lately that did not surprise him. It was probably a tree branch that had been weakened by the recent storm, he told himself and started putting the food into his refrigerator.

When he heard a second, louder thump, however, he went to investigate. Once again he found himself wishing he had something to defend himself with, but that didn’t stop him from blundering onward when he saw the door of his garden shed open. Items were flying out the door too. Someone was inside and tearing the place apart. Wasting no thoughts as to his own safety, Eddy charged outside toward the shed. As he approached an axe came flying out and landed at his feet.

He picked the axe up and shouted, “Get out of there!” a moment later he got the surprise of his life when two six and a half foot tall monstrous beings with dark skin and hair and glowing yellow eyes leaped out. When they opened their mouths in snarls, Eddy saw their tremendous yellow fangs. Before he could react one of them leaped at him and grabbed the axe out of his hands. The other picked him up and threw him back at the house.

Eddy hit the cedar-shingled wall and lost consciousness.

Eddy did not wake up all at once. He heard voices around him and they sounded quite concerned, but he could neither understand what they were saying nor figure out who they were. He tried to open his eyes to see who they were, but he had only a fleeting glimpse of fuzzy colors and shapes before losing consciousness again. Another long interval passed before he was able to open his eyes and focus them.

There was a young woman sitting beside his bed. She was just finishing taking his pulse and smiling at the results she got. “Oh, good morning, Mister Salem,” she greeted him politely. “Are you feeling better?”

“That I’m feeling at all is an improvement,” Eddy replied. “I’m certainly not as sore as I would have expected.”

“Being alive ought to be a mild surprise as well,” Jael commented dryly from the other side of the bed. Turning toward her, Eddy saw Dee seated beside her.

“What hit me?” Eddy asked.

“The side of the house, is my guess,” Jael replied.

“Mine, too,” Eddy agreed, “but what were those things that tossed me against it?”

“Asuras,” Dee informed him, “not particularly intelligent ones, fortunately. They were still tearing up your shed by the time the cavalry showed up.”

“I thought they were some sort of gang members at first sight,” Eddy told her.

“They were, in a sense,” she agreed, “and their gang leader should have sent some of his smarter people to do that particular job. Although I’m not complaining. First of all those two weren’t smart enough to even think of looking elsewhere until they had completely dismantled the shed, and if they had an ounce of gray matter between their ears they would have killed you, so I’m doubly happy.”

“Why would they kill me?” Eddy asked, then before she could answer he continued. “Ah, what do I know about gangs? Just what I see on TV, right?”

“Well, we’re all glad you survived, Eddy,” Jael told him.

“I should probably see a doctor or something,” Eddy noted.

“I am a doctor, Mister Salem,” the third woman told him. “I have been all my life. Right, Mom?”

“Yes dear,” Dee nodded. “Eddy, this is my daughter Oriel and a finer doctor you’ll never meet.”

“Pleased to meet you, Oriel,” Eddy told her. “I’d have thought you were still in school.” Eddy’s guess would have been she was no older than nineteen or twenty.

“No,” she smiled. “I graduated four years ago and spent an internship at University Hospital in Cleveland. I’ll bring you my diploma if you really want to see it.”

“That’s okay,” Eddy chuckled. “Is it okay if I try sitting up?”

“If you feel up to it,” Oriel nodded, “although let’s do it slowly. If you start feeling dizzy don’t try to tough it out, just lie back in the bed.”

“All right,” Eddy nodded and sat up. “Not bad,” he noted. “I guess I wasn’t too badly bruised, huh?”

He missed the look Dee shot at Oriel coupled with a silent “Don’t say it,” that Dee mouthed to her daughter. “Do you feel all right, Mister Salem?” Oriel asked again.

“I feel fine,” he assured her. “Better than I have in years, in fact. You must be one heck of a doctor!”

Oriel blushed at the compliment, but assured him. “Any healing came from within you, Mister Salem. All I could do was encourage it.”

“Well, could you do something to encourage a little breakfast, dear?” Eddy asked her. “I’m starved.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jael laughed. “Why don’t you get dressed and meet us in the kitchen?”

“Is that okay with you, Doc?” he asked Oriel.

“You tell me,” she replied.

“I’ll join you all shortly,” he promised. He dressed quickly and hurried to the kitchen where he found Dee fixing up a batch of blueberry waffles. He wondered where the blueberries had come from then berated himself for even bothering to wonder. Dee or Jael must have brought them. They had made such a habit of bringing some sort of food – pastries or bagels or some such usually, that he had begun to take it for granted. He made a mental note to buy some cheese rolls, a local variety baked with the cheese in a long strip inside the roll, next time he went into town.

“I forgot to ask,” Eddy admitted as he sat down on a stool by the kitchen counter. “Is the plant safe?”

“Very safe, Eddy,” Jael told him happily. The, uh, cops scared the two Asuras off shortly after they tried bouncing you off the walls.”

“Asuras,” Eddy mused, “where do the gangs get their names these days?”

“In this case, it’s Hindu mythology,” Jael informed him as he took his first sip of coffee. “Asuras are a sort of demon, although that’s not an entirely accurate description. The word demon denotes a somewhat more sinister connotation than is often the case. They are demons because they are often at cross purposes with the gods, but there are stories of them working with the gods when their interests coincided. Some things never change,” she added enigmatically. “Actually they used to be gods themselves thousands of years ago before the rise of Hinduism. The invading Aryans into India brought their own gods with them, but incorporated the older Vedic gods into their system of beliefs. A bit before my time, you understand.”

Eddy smiled indulgently. “So we have a gang who named themselves after a bunch of defrocked gods. Terrific. Why were they trashing my shed? Surely they should have been more interested in stealing the computer or my stereo, shouldn’t they?”

“I said they were stupid,” Dee reminded him. “They were also making a lot of noise. That’s why there was someone on hand to save you.

Eddy looked around and suddenly realized that the sunlight was coming from the wrong part of the sky. It was not late afternoon, but morning. “How long was I out?”

“About fourteen hours, I’m afraid,” Oriel told him. “It was best to let you sleep it off. Sleep is one of the greatest healers, you know. It’s amazing how many people do themselves harm by merely not getting enough of it. But don’t worry, you’re much better now.”

“I still think you must be one heck of a doctor,” Eddy told her. “The last time I slept round the clock, I woke up all stiff and sore. This time I feel just fine. What sort of medication did you give me?”

“None,” Oriel replied. “It was not necessary. You may want your regular physician to reevaluate these medications you have on the counter though,” she added pointing at a series of orange plastic cylinders. “I don’t think your blood pressure or cholesterol levels are severe enough to require those dosages.”

“I’ll talk to him about it. I have an appointment next week anyway,” Eddy nodded.

Just then the doorbell rang. Eddy started to get up, but Jael stopped him, “No, you start eating. I’ll get the door.” She walked off muttering, “It better not be any more of those missionaries. Sent three pairs of them packing already.”

She returned a minute later with Mister Waters, Ninti and another woman. “Mister Salem,” Waters greeted him. “I’m so happy to see you up and about. I’m not embarrassed to say you gave me quite a start. Oh, you won’t have met Miss Loveall yet.” Miss Loveall gave him an odd look at the sound of her name, but he continued right on. “Ina, this is Eddy Salem. Well, you know that, everyone in the company knows you on sight, Mister Salem.”

“They do?” Eddy asked. “How? Why?”

“The web cam, of course,” Waters explained. “You may not have been aware of it, but you’ve been having your morning coffee with all of us thanks to modern technology. Oh, Jael, I don’t think we need to post this particular incident to your blog.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Jael replied. “Waffle?”

“Thank you, I don’t mind if I do,” Waters replied, reaching for a plate even as others were handed to Ninti and Ina. “And speaking of minding, Mister Salem, would you mind terribly if we were to improve the security around your property? You made a good start with the burglar alarm, but I’m thinking we should be able to arm the perimeter of your property, and a fence that goes all the way around, I should think. You only have fences in the front yard, and I believe those, what were they, Rakshasas?”

“Asuras,” Jael corrected him.

“Whatever,” Waters shrugged. “They likely just crawled through your lilacs, a fence may not have slowed them down much, but if it were bugged to detect intrusions, we could have had security here before you arrived home. I’d also appreciate it if you would allow one of us to be with you at all times. That’s why I brought Miss Loveall with me.”

“I can stay with Eddy,” Dee told him with a hard edge in her voice.

“My dear,” Waters replied, “Even you cannot be everywhere at once and you do have other responsibilities.”

“I can delegate,” Dee insisted.

“And I can fill in for Dee as needed,” Jael offered.

“That’s fine,” Waters agreed, “but you have many other responsibilities as well, Jael, and don’t think I don’t know that Marcus would like to see you at least once or twice each week.”

“He knows how important this is,” Jael countered.

“But there is no need for him to sacrifice any more than necessary for it,” Waters told her firmly. “Jael, you are just shy of what the modern world thinks of as a workaholic. Keep this up and you’ll be burned out in short order. Besides, what do either of you have against Ina?”

“Well, nothing,” Jael admitted, “I just. . .”

“You were just backing Dee up. Yes, I understand. Dee?” Waters asked.

“Ina and I have known each other forever,” Dee replied. “You know that. It’s nothing personal, really.”

Waters paused as though listening to the conversation on a different level. Eddy tried to discern what it was and came up blank. “Good!” Waters replied at last. “I’m sure you can work any schedule problems out between the three of you.”

“Don’t I get any say in this?” Eddy protested.

“Did I hear you correctly, Mister Salem?” Waters asked amusedly. “Three delightfully gorgeous women are fighting to be at your side and you’re actually complaining?”

“Not when you put it that way,” Eddy admitted.

“I should say not,” Waters laughed. “Well, then. That’s settled. Jael, how about another of those wonderful waffles?”

Five

“What’s wrong, Eddy?” Dee asked a few days later. Eddy was looking out his front window and had been for several minutes now.

“Traffic on the street and sidewalk seems heavier than normal,” he replied. “This is a fairly quiet neighborhood and I can usually recognize anyone walking by. There are a lot of strangers out there lately.”

“Well, you get a lot of summer people in Hattamesett, don’t you?” Dee asked.

“Not in the middle of April we don’t,” he told her. “Oh, we may get a few people down from Boston for the long weekend coming up, but they wouldn’t come in until Friday afternoon and most of them have cottages with an ocean view. This isn’t normally a street they would walk or drive down. The cars might be coming this way if Front Street is blocked off. It might be, of course. A storm drain may have gotten clogged up or a street light burned out or maybe the DPW is repainting the crosswalks.”

“Why is there a long weekend coming up?” Dee asked.

“Patriots Day,” Eddy replied. On seeing a blank look on Dee’s face he continued, “Well, I can tell you’re not a local girl. It’s the anniversary of the Battles of Concord and Lexington. You know, ‘Listen my children and you shall hear, Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere, On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five; Hardly a man is now alive, Who remembers that famous day and year.’” he quoted the Longfellow poem. “We had to memorize that first stanza back in grade school. That was a lifetime or two ago. Paul Revere rode on the eighteenth, but the Battles themselves were the next day. These days we hold it on the third Monday of April regardless of the date but when I was a kid it was on the nineteenth regardless of the day of the week it fell on.

"I don't blame you for not having heard of it though. It's only observed here in Massachusetts . Oh! And in Maine , of course. I think that's because Maine used to be part of Massachusetts before it became a state on its own."

"I must use this opportunity to catch up on local history then," Dee told him. "Sounds fascinating."

"I still don't know why there are so many people walking by on a weekday and in April at that," Eddy told her.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Dee told him calmly. "Would you like tea in the greenhouse?"

"I'd like coffee," he replied, "but you can have tea if you want. It's more or less time to start moving seedlings into the cold frame, I might as well do that this afternoon."

"That makes sense. You do want them to harden off, but is there something else wrong?"

"Dee," he told her, "I appreciate all the attention, but I feel like I'm under house arrest. I can't even go grocery shopping. No need to, since you, Jael and Ina keep bringing things in, but I want to do my own shopping, or at least some of it."

"That sounds reasonable," Dee admitted. "You know you could use some new clothing."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Eddy asked.

"You have two flannel shirts and they're both as threadbare as they are out of fashion," she told him, "and when was the last time you bought a new pair of slacks? What am I saying? You ought to have a pair of jeans to work in the garden with. The chinos and khakis are all right for a casual party or lounging around the house, but these are just short of disreputable. No I correct myself, this pair is disreputable, and the others aren't much better."

"You sound like my wife," Eddy commented quietly. "Well maybe you're right. I haven't bought anything new to wear in a long while. I suppose we can go off to the outlet stores."

"So you can buy still more of last decade's clothing?" Dee asked with a gently smile. "No, let's take a trip into Boston ."

"I don't really like Boston , Dee ," he told her. "I'll meet you halfway, though and take you to the Silver City Galleria."

Dee cocked her head slightly as though trying to decide whether to debate it and concluded she had already won. "You're on."

Taunton, Massachusetts , the seat of Bristol County , is a city of industrial diversity. Boston might be called "The Hub" because of its location at the center of a mixed system of concentric "ring" roads and "spoke" roads, but Taunton sits at an ideal location where several of those rings and spokes converge. During the colonial period, it was a major center of iron production and bars of iron even served as units of currency. Founded in 1638, it was only the fourth settlement in Plimoth Colony. Later it became a center of silversmithing and thereby gained the nickname of "Silver City."

While most silver operations had since moved off to greener pastures, that part of her history is still commemorated in the names of various businesses including the Silver City Galleria, situated on the south

side of the city, putting it in an ideal location for shoppers, not only from the Greater Taunton area but from New Bedford, Fall River, Attleboro and other population centers within Bristol County.

The skies were heavily overcast that afternoon as they headed north on Route 140. Dee commented that it was a dismal looking day, but Eddy countered, "Dismal? Maybe, but a lot easier on the eyes. Less glare this way. At least it isn't raining. Maybe I should have checked the forecast before we left."

"No need," she told him. "It won't start raining until sometime this evening."

"So it might be raining if we decide to take in a movie," he commented.

"Is there something showing you want to see?" she asked.

"Not really. It's been a while since I've seen a movie that wasn't on television," Eddy replied.

"I suppose we could rent or buy one and bring it back," Dee suggested.

"What would we watch it with?" he asked as he turned off the highway. "I don't have either a VCR or a DVD player."

"No? Why not?" Dee asked.

"Never felt the need for one," he replied. "When I was a kid we didn't even have TV and certainly no way to record what was on it. I mostly only watch the news anyway. I don't like most of the shows on these days, although an occasional movie is all right."

"You might feel differently if you had cable," Dee pointed out. "You have a fairly nice TV set, though. There are larger screens, but twenty-seven inches isn't bad. Why did you get such a large set if you barely watch it?"

"My old one died," he explained, turning into the mall's parking lot. "The new one was on sale as a close-out. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Well, let's get you a new wardrobe and then maybe we'll think about the DVD player," she suggested.

"I don't need it, but if you want it," he told her, "I'll consider it while I buy a new pair of slacks or a shirt."

"You'll buy several of each," she told him firmly, "and if you don't pick them out yourself, I'll just have to pick them out for you and have them delivered."

Eddy pulled into a parking space outside Filene's. "You're used to getting your own way a lot, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," she laughed. "As a matter of fact, no matter how long it takes I always get my way eventually, so if you're truly as wise as you have appeared so far, you'll give up now and save yourself hours or days of arguments." She was smiling as she said it, but something in her tone made it a challenge it would be best not to meet.

Still his ego would not allow him to give up without showing some resistance as he replied, "Only if there is something worth wearing."

“Well, of course,” she replied, getting out of the car. “That goes without saying,” leaving Eddy to wonder how he had lost the argument so rapidly.

They spent the next three hours finding clothing for Eddy that Dee approved of and while Eddy fought most of the way, he did have to admit privately that Dee had a discerning eye for classic men’s fashion. What he did resent was her insistence that she pay for all the new clothes.

“I can certainly afford to buy my own clothing,” he protested in the second store in which she had slipped her credit card to the clerk while he was in the changing room.

“Of course you can,” she replied calmly. “I just did it first. Besides, I’m forcing you into this, the least I can do is pick up the tab. Oh, and in the next store, why don’t you change into some of the new things. I think we can toss the old stuff, don’t you?”

“But...” he started to complain.

“What?” Dee asked. “You already agreed it was time to replace that shirt and slacks. Now’s as good a time as any, and if you really want to pay for something, I’ll let you buy me dinner.”

Eddy did that. He also slipped away from Dee while she was in a bookstore and bought a DVD player and a dozen movies he hoped she would like. He slipped them into the car, beneath some of their earlier purchases before going back to join her. If Dee had noticed his absence, she made no mention of it. Then after dinner, as they were heading back to the car he found a florist and to her delight, bought an assortment of unusual flowers. They had stayed at the Galleria longer than planned and drove back to Hattamesett through scattered showers, but Eddy didn’t mind the rain and felt the trouble had all been worthwhile to see the smile on Dee’s face every time she looked at the flowers he had given her.

“Where have you two been?” an aggrieved Ina demanded as they walked through the front door with their first load of shopping bags. “Shopping? And you didn’t take me?”

“A spur of the moment decision, Ina,” Dee explained. “Eddy needed to stretch his legs.”

“Not bad,” Ina commented, looking at the new outfit Eddy was wearing while he headed out to the car for another load, “but did you have to dress him up so conservatively?”

“Eddy is a conservative gentleman, Ina,” Dee replied calmly, “and my tastes have always been on the conservative side as well. You know that.”

“I do,” Ina agreed, “but a little more flare or color might have been nice.”

“Oh, we have some of that too,” Dee laughed, “That’s just what he chose to wear first. Oh, darn!”

“What?” Ina asked.

“We forgot to buy a pair of jeans,” Dee replied. Just then Eddy returned with another load of bags including the bag from the video store. “What are these?” she asked, seeing the DVDs within.

“You said you want to watch a movie tonight,” he replied. “Pick one or two while I go get the player.” Then he went back out to get the final load and lock the car up.

“He got these for me too?” Dee wondered.

“What do you mean too?” Ina asked. “Oh the flowers. Well, I could tell he was sweet on you. As to the jeans, can’t you just, uh, whip them up?”

“I’ve been doing a bit of that all month,” Dee replied, keeping an eye on the door. “He isn’t stupid. He’ll notice if I do anything that blatant.”

“Good thing I noticed he already had some microwave popcorn for the movies then,” Ina smirked. Eddy came in, carrying the DVD player box and her attitude changed abruptly. “You should have left a note. I’ve been sitting around this empty house for hours since my shift began, you know.” Eddy closed the door behind him, affecting not to notice the argument between Dee and Ina.

“Good,” Dee replied. “I counted on you to protect the seedling while we were out.” Eddy continued into the living room where he started unpacking the DVD player.

“But I didn’t know where you were,” Ina insisted.

“Didn’t you think of contacting Ratatosk?” Dee asked. “He had at least one eye on us the entire time.”

“I’ve never been particularly comfortable around him,” Ina confided.

“He’d be devastated,” Dee chuckled. “You should have called him anyway, or Ninti. He would have kept her apprised of what was happening.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Ina admitted reluctantly. “I’m still a bit new to this particular team.”

“Don’t worry, you generally catch on eventually,” Dee assured her. “You know the dumb blonde act doesn’t really suit you,” she added a bit more quietly.

“My hair isn’t blonde,” Ina replied, “today.” She was right. Since she had started coming to Eddy’s home, Ina’s hair color had been a light brown with reddish highlights.

“Blonde is just a hair color,” Dee told her. “Dumb blonde is a state of mind. We both know you’re better than that.”

“If anyone else talked to me like that, I’d have them for breakfast,” Ina replied quietly. “Why is it I don’t mind hearing it from you?”

“Probably my dumb luck,” Dee laughed. “So let’s make some of that popcorn and watch a movie or two.”

Six

Eddy woke up one morning two weeks later near the end of April and decided it was time to put the tomatoes in the ground. “Don’t you think you’re rushing the season?” Jael asked him when she stopped in an hour before lunch.

“Maybe,” Eddy replied, but we’re way past the frost date and while it might get cold, the vines will just

slow down, not die altogether. My garden is very well sheltered and slightly warmer than the climate zone map would normally indicate. I guess I just got a lucky microclimate.”

“If you say so,” Jael told him. “Hey, I brought some of those cheese rolls you like. Want to break for a cup of coffee?”

“I only have a few seedlings left to plant,” Eddy replied. “Let me get them in and I’m all yours.”

“Okay,” Jael told him. “I’ll go make a fresh pot then. Remember, just a few seedlings!”

Eddy chuckled. He really only had three plants left in his tray, but Jael was referring to a week earlier when he had been weeding and said he’d stop in just a few minutes. Two hours later he found a cold cup of coffee waiting for him with a very amused Jael.

When he entered the kitchen, he found Dee grilling three cheese rolls and Jael pouring the coffee. He washed his hands and started looking around for a tray, but Jael did not wait, she scooped up the three full mugs and carried them out to the greenhouse. Dee put the three rolls on a dinner plate and told him, “All set, dear. Shall we join Jael before she drinks all the coffee?” Dee had been calling Eddy “Dear” quite a lot since their trip to the mall. He liked the attention and had no complaints when she curled up in the crook of his arm while they watched movies together each night, but he could not shake the feeling he was robbing the cradle. He was nearly twice her age, after all.

“Eddy! Come on!” Jael called.

He entered the greenhouse and sat down in the remaining chair surrounding the young plant. He took a bite of cheese roll and a sip of coffee, took a deep relaxing breath and looked at the pot in the center of the coffee table. “You know,” he commented relaxedly, “I don’t think I sat at this table more than two or three times before you lot showed up on my doorstep last month.”

“The more fool you,” Dee replied, smiling. “Even without the tree here, this is an ideal place to relax.”

“Ah!” Eddy jumped on her statement at once. “So it is a tree.”

“Well, of course she is,” she replied easily. “Look at her. She’s obviously a woody plant of one sort or another, and she’s not a shrub, although I suppose that isn’t obvious yet, although she is already starting to develop a thin layer of bark on her trunk.”

Eddy took a close look at the baby tree. “It’s does look like a maple seedling,” he observed. “Sugar maple, or maybe Norwegian.”

“Looks that way to me,” Jael opined.

“Yeah,” Eddy nodded. “Only yesterday I could have sworn blind it was a young red oak.”

“No need to concern yourself with that,” Dee told him between bites. That sort of thing is normal for this species, especially when it’s so young. You’ll find it will probably change in appearance fairly rapidly for a while, but it will eventually settle down.”

“What?” Eddy asked.

“Growing plants often change a bit as they mature just like people,” Dee told him. “It’s natural. Don’t

worry about it.”

Eddy thought about it and decided that maybe she was right. *I suppose a developing sugar maple leaf might look a bit like a red oak leaf*, he told himself, working at convincing himself. *At least they both have pointed lobes*. He kept telling himself that all afternoon as Jael helped him search the Internet for various species of breeds of maple trees. He was so preoccupied with trying to discern the exact species that when he went into town to rent a couple of movies for the night he brought back “The Big Trees” with Kirk Douglas and “The Flame Trees of Thika.”

The next morning over a breakfast of coffee and the last of the cheese rolls, Eddy noticed that while the leaves still looked like maple, they were now a darker shade of green. He pointed that out to Dee, but she merely smiled and repeated, “It’s natural. Young leaves soon grow darker.”

“Overnight?” Eddy countered. “Leaves usually get a bit lighter overnight and darken with exposure to daylight. One evening is not enough for all these leaves to mature this much and some of these are just starting to open. Just what sort of tree is this, Dee?”

“A very special one, dear,” she told him calmly. “Don’t worry you’ll learn all about it in time.”

“Why not now?” Eddy asked seriously.

“Soon, dear,” she replied. “Soon.” However, soon turned out to arrive long before she had planned.

It was only two days later when Eddy was sipping his afternoon coffee with all three of his female guardians that the doorbell rang. The tree had continued to look like a maple, but now the leaves were dark red. Dee started standing up, but Jael stopped her. “I was just going to get another muffin,” she explained.

A minute later Eddy, Dee and Ina heard a high-pitched voice that might have belonged to Alvin the Chipmunk’s second cousin, once removed say, “Hiya toots! How are the two of you?”

“Eeew!” a female voice, unfamiliar to Eddy replied.

Then he heard Jael demanding, “What in the deepest Hell are you doing here?”

“I’m on a mission, gorgeous,” the chipmunk-like voice replied, obviously approaching the greenhouse.

“Are you out of your mind?” Jael replied angrily, “or have you been eating fermented berries again? No! Not out there!” As she said that, Eddy saw who she was shouting at, a giant squirrel, roughly the size of a German shepherd, with mostly gray fur, but with a reddish tint to his tail. He also had a red leather shoulder bag.

“Too late, babe,” the squirrel told her and turned to face the others. “Hey, not bad, man! I think you have the three most beautiful women in all the worlds right here.”

“Ratatosk!” Dee growled at him. “How dare you come here like this and at this time? Speak up! And you’d better have a damned good reason or I’ll see you devolved into a lizard.”

“I’m a mammal, Nature,” he replied annoyingly. “You know even better than I there aren’t any lizards in my ancestry.”

“A small lizard-like synapsid then,” She snarled at him. “Something from the Permian, I should think.” She lifted her hands as though about to cast some sort of spell.

“Okay!” the squirrel shouted. “Okay. I’m here on a mission from an authority that outranks even you.”

“Who?” Dee demanded.

“Yggdrasil,” the squirrel replied.

“Gesundheit,” Eddy responded automatically.

“Thanks, buddy!” the squirrel replied just as automatically and then did a comic double take and told him, “I wasn’t sneezing. My name’s Ratatosk, by the way. Yeah, I know; you’re Edward Salem. Anyway, Yggdrasil is the name, well one of the names of the great world tree, depending on your religion that is. It varies to one extent or another, but most religions feature trees that have special significance. Yggdrasil is all of them.”

“Ratty here is one of the guardians of Yggdrasil,” Jael explained to Eddy. “Don’t mind his brusque manner. It is his job to carry strife and gossip up and down the Tree to various parts of the worlds. The nature of the job tends to be reflected by his own nature.”

“Thanks, cutey!” Ratatosk told her.

“However, while rude, crude and lewd,” Jael continued, gaining Ratatosk’s protest, “he is most definitely on our side. I fought with Ratty on the limbs of Yggdrasil at the end of the last cycle.”

“What do you mean when you say you’re on a mission from Yggdrasil?” Dee asked harshly.

“Just that,” Ratatosk replied. “Told me he had a present for the child.” With that the squirrel whipped a small flask out of his shoulder bag, uncorked it and poured the contents into the pot.

The small tree began to glow and as they all watched rapidly doubled in size, adding several new limbs. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Ina demanded of the squirrel.

“Hey, you try arguing with the Tree, why don’t you,” Ratatosk shot back.

“You still should have asked first,” Dee told him sternly.

“What was in that bottle?” Eddy asked, barely taking his eyes off the small tree. It was no longer visibly glowing, but he could swear he could feel an aura emanating from its leaves and branches.

“Just some water and nutrients collected from pools along some of the branches from it’s mother... father... parent, whatever,” Ratatosk replied. Dee was still glaring at him. “Look, Nature, this was the first time in over a millennium the Tree has spoken to me about something other than the weather. That’s how I knew it was important.”

“What?” Eddy asked, “to dump some sort of magic potion in the pot?”

“That’s part of it, although just a small part,” Ratatosk told him.

“Magic!” Eddy scoffed. “Right.”

“Haven’t you got the faintest notion who these ladies are?” Ratatosk asked him.

“Ratty, no!” Jael shouted.

“Sorry, toots,” Ratatosk told her. “I got orders.”

“This is not the time, rodent,” Dee told him menacingly.

“You’re wrong, Nature,” Ratatosk told her. “The Tree sees and knows more than almost any of us.”

“The Tree is not omniscient. She can be wrong,” Dee replied.

“Same goes for you,” Ratatosk retorted. “Look, the real reason I’m here is this. Yggdrasil thinks you’re going about this all wrong. You shouldn’t be trying to hide the truth from Mister Salem here. It’ll warp the seedling if you’re not careful.”

“We’re being careful,” Dee told him.

“Not careful enough,” the squirrel replied. “Eddy, this plant you’ve been given the task of protecting is...”

“Stop!” Dee commanded. There was a growl of thunder that came from the clear skies outside and the room’s temperature dropped noticeably. “Say nothing until my return.” She walked into the house and there was a sudden popping noise.

“Well, Mister Squirrel,” Eddy said lamely, “I don’t believe I just said that.”

“Name’s Ratatosk,” Ratatosk reminded him.

“Right,” Eddy continued. “We’re having coffee and muffins. Would you like to join us?”

“Hey, man! You’re all right!” Ratatosk told him delightedly. “I wish more mortals took my existence as easily and yeah, coffee and a muffin sounds good for a change.”

Eddy stepped into the house and brought back a large mug of coffee and a plate with a corn muffin on it. Ratatosk was nibbling on his second corn muffin sometime later when Dee returned.

“You win, Ratty,” she told him, “but I’ll do the talking. You will keep your mouth shut if you still want to have teeth next time you sit down to dinner.”

“Sure thing, toots,” Ratatosk replied.

“You may have been able to explain away metamorphic leaves and all sorts of strange happenings in town, Dee,” Eddy commented, “but I doubt even you can convince me a giant talking squirrel is natural.”

“Actually, Eddy,” she told him tiredly. “Ratty is natural. Supernatural too, yes, but still quite natural to his habitat, which is the branches of the great tree that grew out of the body of the father of the Frost Giants, Ymir. And on those branches hangs the universe itself.”

“Okay,” Eddy nodded, “so he generally hangs around on a mythological tree. What’s he doing here and

why has he been hanging around in my back yard?”

“You saw me?” Ratatosk asked, amazed.

“You’re kind of hard to miss,” Eddy pointed out. “A dog-sized squirrel sitting on the branch of a normal-sized oak.”

“Most mortals don’t actually see me, outside Yggdrasil, that is,” Ratatosk replied.

“Eddy isn’t most mortals,” Dee cut in. “Eddy, the point is that seed we gave you was not just any seed.”

“I figured that out for myself about the same time it arrived,” Eddy told her.

“But you can’t have figured out just how special it is,” Dee replied. “There are many other names and aspects of Yggdrasil; In Norse mythology it is indeed the giant ash Yggdrasil, in the Bhagavad-Gita it’s the Asvattha, a *Ficus religiosa*, which grows with its roots in Heaven and its branches spreading down to the Earth. In Buddhism, it is the bo tree under which Buddha himself gained enlightenment. The Mayans called it Yaxché and in Islamic tradition it is the tree on whose leaves the names of every living person is written. You may well have heard of it as the Tree of Life, from which Adam and Eve ate before they were cast out of Eden, although it is also the Tree of Knowledge, from which they also ate which was why they were cast out. Each aspect is different and has different meanings within various religious contexts and yet it remains a sacred tree.

“The tree does not reproduce very often. As with more natural trees it only produces once each cycle. For a normal tree that cycle is a year, but for Yggdrasil that cycle is the entire history of the universe. The great tree produces many seeds and fruits, of course, but only once in each cycle is such a seed fertile.”

“Those cycles seem to be getting shorter all the time,” Ratatosk commented sarcastically.

“Quiet, you,” Dee told him harshly. “When I say cycles I don’t mean the destruction of the universe, not like mortal cosmologists do. That event may bring about the end of the cycles, but in each cycle the world sort of resets at the end so that what goes on from there pretty much picks up from where it left off before things started falling apart, although there are always some changes.”

“I like to think the universe learns from its mistakes and is trying to get it right,” Jael put in.

“Perhaps,” Dee allowed, “but when you have been through as many cycles as I have, we can compare notes. Let’s leave previous cycles aside for now. They are not only in the past, they are literally different worlds.”

“You make it sound like some sort of religious apocrypha,” Eddy remarked.

“Not so apocryphal, Eddy,” Jael told him, “but otherwise you have the gist of it. The Tree is an important symbol in every major religion and quite a few of the minor ones.”

“It’s not all that surprising,” Ina remarked. “I know a lot of religious scholars have tried to use the Tree to show how many religions are related, but so many of them miss the obvious. Look at a tree, any tree. That old maple over there, for example. It is impressively tall, long-lived, and incredibly useful. You can sit in its shade or use it to protect other plants that are sensitive to sunlight. You can use its wood to build so many wonderful things or burn it to warm yourself, cook your food, tan leather.”

“Not with maple smoke,” Jael corrected her.

“Really?” Ina asked. “Oak then, perhaps, although maple smoke can be used to help preserve one’s food. You can also collect the sap of a maple in early spring and reduce it into a delightful syrup. Trees can provide shelter, heat and sustenance all of high quality. Why should people not consider them holy objects to one degree or another? What?” She addressed that last to Dee who was looking at her strangely.

“I have never heard you give such a well-thought out speech, Ina,” Dee replied.

“You told me to stop playing dumb, didn’t you?” Ina replied. “After several millennia, even I have learned a thing or two.”

“Several millennia?” Eddy asked, slightly amused.

“Not bad for an old hag, hey?” Ratatosk added.

“The point is,” Dee interrupted sharply, “only once each cycle does the Tree produce a fertile seed. We never know when that is going to happen. It could take place right at the start of a cycle or just at the end or anytime in between. The current cycle is only a few years old, so this is one of the early ones, I suppose.”

“If that seedling falls into the wrong hands it could be a very short cycle, you know,” Ratatosk pointed out.

“It could, but it isn’t very likely,” Dee disagreed, “well, then again yes, but not in the way you mean.”

“I still don’t understand what you mean by a cycle,” Eddy admitted.

“It’s not all that difficult a concept,” Jael replied. “Think of the seasons; spring is for birth, summer for maturity. Autumn brings old age and winter is death. The year is a small cycle, but the world goes through similar, but longer cycles. Take Rome for example. The founding of the city and the monarchy was the Cyclical equivalent of spring. The Republic and Principate were summer. The Empire was a long autumn with several bouts of Indian summer, of course. And the decline and fall of the Empire was winter.

“And then, much like the phoenix, Medieval Europe arose from the ashes of Imperial Rome in the next spring,” Jael continued, “starting yet another cycle. Every culture goes through such cycles. Often enough they coincide.”

“And where are we now?” Eddy asked. “Deep winter?”

“No,” Dee told him, “this is very much spring. The world ended only fourteen years ago or so.”

“Strange,” Eddy mused. “I would have thought I’d have remembered that.”

“That’s just the point,” Dee told him. “It didn’t happen in this world. This world only came into being after the old one ended.”

“And my childhood memories?” Eddy asked. “Delusions on my part are they?”

“No,” Dee smiled. “This world was created in retrospect. It came into being with a history and the

history is almost exactly as that of the world that preceded it. There was an Eddy Salem in that world and he did all the things you remember. In a way you did them in this world except this world came into being with you having done them.”

“This is sounding needlessly mystical, if you ask me,” Eddy remarked. “You could just as easily say that each moment is a whole new world, built in the way you are describing.”

“You could, yes,” Dee agreed, “quite a few philosophers have thought so, but that’s not the case. Cycles. The world you know is based on many cycles tied together by what you think of as history.”

“Except that each cycle is somewhat different from the last,” Ina added.

“How so?” Eddy asked.

“Well,” Jael cut in, “in the last cycle technology was based on magic. Everything you do with electricity, for example, was done by carefully controlled magical energy. The world didn’t look all that differently, mind. People still flipped a switch to turn their lights on, kept their food in refrigerators and freezers, cooked over a stove and all that. Even TV looked the same, unfortunately. For such an imaginative race, you would think humans could come up with something better than sitcoms, soap operas and reality programming, and don’t get me started on what passes for drama these days. Sure glad to see local theatre is making a comeback or I’d lose hope altogether.”

“There were some major differences in the laws of nature,” Dee added. “Using magic instead of electricity, although in truth electricity was used, it was just that what the people of that world called the electromagnetic force was magic. In fact by the end of that cycle, manual magic was only practiced in universities and then only by specialists and students hoping to specialize and even there the term magic was more often used in conjunction with wild magic.”

“Wild magic?” Eddy echoed.

“Uncontrolled or chaotic magic would have been a better description,” Dee explained. “It was an interesting phenomenon that occurred most frequently in regions in which civilizations had once flourished and then died or else in former war zones. Much of it was actually a form of magical pollution with a very long half-life, although in the wild it tended to join and mutate a bit on its own. People going into the wild had to be very careful to use magic and magically-powered devices that had been certified to not interact with the conditions of the wild.”

“There were several good survival handbooks on that subject,” Jael added in the soprano voice Eddy had heard her use just after opening the door for Ratatosk. When he looked, her hair had lightened by several shades and her heart-shaped face had lengthened ever-so slightly. He blinked and she regained her normal appearance. “Marcus was pretty good at the spells they recommended as I recall.”

“Wait a minute!” Eddy told them, shaking his head. “How do you know about such previous worlds if we were all recreated in the new ones?”

“This should be good,” Ratatosk chuckled. “How are you going to talk your way around this?”

“Shut up, Ratty!” Jael shot at him.

“A bit more gently, dear,” Dee told her calmly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jael replied contritely.

“Yeah, you tell her, babe!” Ratatosk crowed.

“Shut up, Ratty!” Dee snapped at him just as harshly as Jael had. “Eddy, the truth of the matter is the Springtime Seed Company is a sham. It doesn’t really exist except as a vehicle by which we could bring you this seed. We remember the previous cycles because we’re not human.”

“In Ratatosk’s case it’s obvious,” Ina added. “He is the squirrel who climbs up and down the great world tree, carrying strife.”

“It shows,” Eddy commented sourly.

“Thanks, bud!” Ratatosk replied happily.

“Mister Waters is actually Enki or Ea, the Mesopotamian god of water and wisdom,” Ina informed Eddy, adding, “I’ve occasionally been skeptical about the wisdom part. His assistant, Miss Therib, is actually Nin-ti, healing goddess of the rib, an early aspect of Eve, although a fairly distant aspect as these things go. I, myself, have had many aspects and have been known by quite a few names; Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte, Ishtar and Inanna to mention some of the more well-known ones. Enki shortened that last to give me the name you know me by.”

Eddy nodded mutely, trying to convince himself this was all some strange dream. He looked at Dee who introduced herself, “Ninhursag, Gaea, Demeter, Ceres... In the modern world I am usually referred to as Mother Nature. Oriel really is my daughter, although in a way that only gods can reckon descent. She is also the daughter of Jael’s husband, Marcus. Don’t look at me like that,” she added. “He and I never... Well, we didn’t. Birth among the gods can be a fairly esoteric process.”

“And you?” Eddy asked Jael hesitantly.

Jael looked nervously at Dee, who smiled slightly and nodded her head. Jael took a deep breath, then allowed her natural appearance to manifest. The differences were minimal, but striking. Her skin tone darkened just a bit and two small horns sprouted from her temples. Her hair, which had been gently wavy and black remained that way, but seemed to have just a bit more body to it and while her face and body remained the same, save for the long arrow-tipped tail she had to readjust herself in her seat to accommodate, there was an aura of sexiness about her.

“I’m not a succubus,” she explained, “but most demonesses are cast in pretty much the same mold. Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful,” she added smiling gently when she noticed Eddy trying to back up into his seat. “My job, when I’m not on extraordinary duties, is the punishment of polluters in Hell. I’m fairly good at it, but I seriously doubt you’ll ever be one of my clients, Eddy. You’re too good. Also you should meet my other half.”

The tail abruptly disappeared and her skin and hair lightened to pink and blonde respectively. Her facial features and body shape were both still attractive, but entirely different. “Hi, Mister Salem,” she greeted him in a much higher voice than Jael used. “My name is Rona Steele.” She held her hand out to shake, but Eddy looked at it as though it was poisonous. “What’s wrong? It can’t be my breath and I’m as human as you are.”

“You’re possessed?” Eddy asked, morbidly curious.

“More like the other way around,” Ratatosk snickered.

“Shut up, Ratty,” Rona told him in exactly the same way Jael and Dee had.

“Jael is possessed by Rona’s soul, sort of,” Dee explained. “It’s a rather long and involved story and if you like we’ll explain it to you some other time, but we’re getting off on a tangent. The seed we gave you is the only fertile one Yggdrasil will produce this cycle.”

“So it produced,” Eddy observed. “What’s the big deal?”

“Each new seed, if it sprouts, heralds the birth of an entirely new world. A new universe if you would rather,” Dee explained.

“A new universe,” Eddy repeated uncomprehendingly. “So?”

“Normally we have tried to let such new seedlings grow and develop without interference,” Dee continued. “We have learned the hard way, however, that a deity can influence the development of a new world by aligning it to Him or Herself as it matures. In essence this makes Him or Her the supreme deity of the new world or universe. There is a lot of power to be gained and that power can be used in this world. The last five new Trees have been destroyed in the divine struggles to obtain that power. Those wars of the gods also destroyed the nascent worlds the Trees represented. We want to prevent that this time.

“All we need,” Dee told him seriously, “is one year. One year during which the seedling can grow and develop without divine interference. After that no amount of power will suffice to align it to any one deity. That is when, next April First, in fact, the new world will actually manifest and the young world tree will be translated to that world.”

“Right now,” Ina added, “it is only a possibility. Only by bringing the new tree to adolescence will the new world emerge.”

“You really expect me to believe all this?” Eddy asked.

“Hmm, I had not counted on incredulity,” Dee admitted.

“And there I thought you were an expert on human nature,” Ratatosk taunted her. She glared at him and he backed down. “Okay, okay. Just making an observation.”

“I can fix that too if you’re not careful,” Dee warned him. “Yes, I am an expert on all sorts of nature, but I’m not omniscient. I am capable of making errors, especially of oversight. Eddy, perhaps if we show you Yggdrasil...”

“Dee,” Jael warned her, instantly flashing back to the appearance by which Eddy was used to seeing her, “you know the seedling is only safe when in Eddy’s presence.”

“Yes, dear,” Dee replied. “I know. I don’t think we’ll need to leave for this.” She gestured toward Eddy’s backyard and proclaimed, “Behold Yggdrasil, the great world tree that holds the universe together.”

Eddy turned to see, not his own backyard but an immensely tall and magnificent ash tree. It might have been an illusion, he was not sure about that, but he could feel the grass and cool moist soil under his feet,

A chill wind blew in his face even as a warm sun beat down on it. The Tree, while seen from a great distance seemed to stretch upward and outward infinitely, even though he could actually see its shape and limits as well. As the initial moment passed, he suddenly realized intuitively that this was not illusion. Somehow Dee had brought him to this place. This was all real and true just as the incredible stories they had been telling him. He turned to admit as much, but before he could do so the immensity of the notion caught up with him and he fainted.

Sapling

One

“Good morning!” Waters greeted Eddy when he woke up a few hours later.

“Morning already?” Eddy asked. He had only blacked out for a few minutes that afternoon on glimpsing Yggdrasil. Dee, Ina and Jael had helped him over to the living room couch where he had napped since then. *No*, he corrected himself, *Mother Nature, the goddess of Love and a demoness*. He was having a harder time dealing with that than he did with the concept of raising a new Tree of Life. Sleep seemed the best way to avoid dealing with either issue.

“Not really, no,” Waters replied. “I hear you had a bit of a shock today. It’s not the way I would have chosen to break it to you, but Ratatosk has always been more than a bit blunt.”

“It wasn’t Ratatosk,” Eddy snapped at him. “I can deal with a giant talking squirrel. He, at least, was honest about what he is.”

“Ah,” Waters sighed. “Then blame me. The subterfuge was all my idea. The way we approached you, it was my plan.” Eddy looked at him wordlessly. “Well, what should I have done? Walked in out of the blue and announced, ‘Hi, I’m Enki. Trust me! You may not have heard of me, but I used to be the god of water. Of course, most folks have never heard of me these days. That’s why I carry American Express.’”

Eddy laughed in spite of himself. “I haven’t seen that commercial in years,” he told Waters.

“Well, I’ve been around a long time,” Waters chuckled. “Not as long as you have, but...”

“You’re thousands of years old!” Eddy protested.

“True, but until fourteen years ago I was trapped in Dilmun for more of those years than not. I’m still working on catching up.”

“Where’s Dilmun?” Eddy asked.

“On another plain,” Waters replied. “You might say it’s in another dimension, although that’s an inaccurate, comic book sort of notion. Think of it rather as another membrane of reality. I’ll take you there sometime when this is over. It’s a nice place to visit. It’s not even a bad place to live so long as you can leave every century or two. You really should have asked ‘What is Dilmun?’ though. The answer to that is it’s the Sumerian version of Heaven. It’s also the Sumerian version of the Garden of Eden. It was the home of the gods; my brothers, sisters and other family members.

“If you’ve studied comparative religions you may have noticed how many religions have certain similarities between them. Religions mostly don’t just happen. You don’t just sit down and say, ‘Today I’m going to invent a religion.’

“Well, there have been a few cults that probably started that way,” Waters continued, “but mostly beliefs grow and develop over time. Even when a prophet comes along and makes sudden pronouncements from on high, his or her ideas are still open to interpretation and those new ideas are incorporated into a larger system of beliefs and thereby modified by others.

“As religions grow and develop, as they change with time, so too do the deities involved. We refer to it as developing new aspects. For example to the Sumerians, I was Enki. To the Akkadians who conquered them, my name was Ea. There were some minor differences between my Enki and Ea aspects, but not very many and I can easily move myself between them. I was also known as Ninšiku and Nudimmud and there were minor differences between those aspects of me as well. I had more titles than even I could keep track of in those various aspects; ‘The Stag of the Abzu,’ ‘Mummu’ which means ‘the Genius,’ and more. I was the god of fresh waters, hand-washing, wisdom, craftsmanship, the arts and of magic. That’s a lot to incorporate in a god of that period. I’m neither omnipotent, omniscient, all-wise nor infinite like the God of your religion. Well, I had all those aspects. Several millennia later, there are no differences at all, since I no longer have worshippers and I have merged my various aspects. There is fashion among the gods, believe it or not and those of us who have either chosen against or just could not translate to the modern world, consider it more fashionable to inhabit a single aspect. Most of us merge all our aspects to accomplish this. I could diverge them again if I wanted to, but there is really no need. I’m quite content with the way I am.”

“All right, so you’re a wise old god,” Eddy remarked. “I hope your track record was better in the ancient world.”

“Yes and no,” Enki smiled. “I was also a bit of a Trickster type of character. Most religions have a Trickster of one sort or other. Many of them are fairly malicious, like Satan or the Norse god Loki, although Loki is not absolutely evil, just too clever for his own good. Then there is the Native American Coyote god who is sometimes malicious and sometimes helpful depending on his mood and which tribe you ask.

“My trickery is more of the clever and humorous sort. I was considered one of the more benevolent and, as you might say, human-friendly gods in my day, but I did like my little tricks. And I did get in trouble more than a few times. Ninhursag, Dee that is, got particularly angry with me for a great number of reasons. First of all She and I were a divine couple, but when She left Dilmun for a time as She must or else there would be no seasons nor annual renewal with the coming spring I cheated on her. I’m somewhat embarrassed by that on a number of counts some of which were considered almost normal behavior for a god, but certainly not in the mundane world. Then I cheated on the goddess with whom I had cheated and then again and again. Then She created eight new sacred plants and I turned round and, thinking to gain a new insight into the plant world, I ate them. So She cursed me eight times; each curse to a different part of my body.

“Well, that would have killed me had a fox, a creature sacred to Ninhursag, had not pleaded for my life, so She relented and created eight healing goddesses. Ninti is one of them. The others are no longer with us, sadly.”

“You and Dee are married?” Eddy asked.

“Not in millennia,” Enki replied. “We had quite a few children and were reconciled for the remainder of the cycle, but she moved on with the world to eventually become Mother Nature while I became trapped in Dilmun. When we met again fourteen years ago, we were friends, but nothing more. She is not really the goddess I knew back then.”

“How did you get trapped in Dilmun?” Eddy asked.

“That is a much shorter story,” Enki smiled. “Religions grow and develop. They also die out. Some gods are adopted into new religion, or have counterparts, aspects, in related religion. They can and usually do merge with their more vital, still worshipped selves. Some choose not to merge, especially if the personality of a new aspect is displeasing to them, but mostly those of us who are left behind do not have close enough aspects into which we might merge. We get left behind. When a religion dies the divine plane of that religion becomes a closed system. It is cut off from the rest of the universe with no way to get out except under extraordinary means. Fourteen years ago, thanks to Jael’s and Rona’s husband, Marcus, what was left of my family found a way out and we’ve been fairly active in a benevolent way ever since. These ancient stories, though, aren’t helping you in your situation, are they?”

“How can you tell?” Eddy asked.

“Haven’t you been listening,” Enki laughed. “I’m the god of wisdom. Remember? What’s really on your mind?”

“Why me?” Eddy asked.

“They always ask that question,” Enki shook his head.

“Why did you choose me to grow this new Tree of Life?” Eddy amplified his question. “Why didn’t you do it yourself or have Dee do it?”

“Let’s handle your first question to start with,” Enki suggested. “You have of course heard of prophecies.”

“I’ve heard of them, but how many of them are accurate or even easy to understand until after the fact?” Eddy countered.

“Mortal prophecies get garbled in translation,” Enki replied. “The prophet is forced to put it in his or her own words and sometimes he or she doesn’t truly understand what is about to happen. When gods prophesy for themselves, such predictions are far more precise and intelligible.

“That must be convenient,” Eddy remarked dryly.

“Not really,” Enki told him. “Even for Us a prophecy is not a step-by-step guide to success. At best it is a roadmap with only a few roads marked on it and which we can not completely unfold while driving down the highway without running headlong into a lorry.”

“A lorry?” Eddy asked.

“A truck, sorry,” Enki apologized. “It’s a British word, my English was picked up in bits and pieces. My fault again. I can actually speak any human language spoken by magic, any god can, but even after all the millennia I find I’m still interested in language, philosophy and everything that goes with them. I’m still trying to grasp quantum mechanics, but I think there must be a flaw in the thinking behind the various

theories which is why it hasn't all come together just yet. Now in my spare time, of which I haven't nearly enough, I'm trying to figure it out before the mortal scientists do."

"Couldn't you just ask one of the omniscient Gods?" Eddy asked.

"I could," Enki nodded. "I could also divine the answer, but both ways would seem like cheating. I want to figure it out for myself. And in only a vaguely related way, that brings us back to your questions. We chose you because of a divine prophecy. We know you are not the world's greatest gardener. You probably aren't even in the top forty."

"Gee, thanks. Inflate my ego some more, why don't you?" Eddy replied sourly.

Enki laughed, "We didn't pick you to run Kew Gardens or the National Arboretum. We chose you to raise a single plant. According to our prophesy you are the one person in the entire world who is most likely to bring the new Tree to maturity."

"Me?"

"You," Enki assured him. "Oh, I'm sure part of it is location and timing, but a lot of it is also your own hard-learned abilities in the garden. A few years ago we needed to put a baseball team together."

"Baseball? You?" Eddy asked, incredulously.

"Yes, us," Enki nodded, "and most of the other gods, angels and demons of the world. We had an entire league of teams. It was an attempt to give ourselves a non-violent means by which we could compete. After the first year we decided that playing a full season was a bit much so now we only have a few games each season; one game each with all the other teams. However, our team really knew nothing about the game and we needed to hire an expert to teach us. Once again we used divine prophesy to seek him out. The man we found was a retired minor league player and coach named Samuel Wilton."

"Never heard of him," Eddy replied.

"On the field he was known as 'Hawk Wilton,'" Enki explained. "Does that name ring a bell? Yes? Not too many people have heard of him even by that name, though. He was a minor league player all his life, however, he was the best choice for our particular team. Our divinations informed us that he was the man who would bring out the best in us. He would be the man who would give us our best chance at success."

"How did you do?" Eddy asked.

"We came out at the top of our league, but lost in a special play-off game at the end of the season," Enki remarked. "Still, it was better than we had hoped. All we had in mind from the start was to put on a creditable performance. And this is where it comes to you. We don't know that you are going to succeed, but we do know that if you give this your full participation and enthusiasm, we have our best chance of getting a new Tree of Life."

"Me," Eddy repeated. "Why not one of you? I would have thought Dee could do it with her eyes closed."

"In a way that is part of the problem," Enki replied. "Ninhursag, Mother Nature as She is known in the modern world, or Dee as she likes to be called by you at least, is certainly better qualified to grow and

raise any plant or animal you could care to name. And in a world in which there were no dissenting deities, maybe she would have done just that. But, you see, the new tree will align itself to any god who has it in his or her possession at the time of its maturity.”

“Yes,” Eddy agreed. “Deetold me about that. It would give that god the power to be the supreme deity. That would upset the current balance of power, wouldn’t it?”

“Indeed it would,” Enki nodded.

“Would it be so horrible if Dee became the most powerful among you?”

“For my own part,” Enki replied, “it wouldn’t bother me in the least. She has always been more powerful than I am. However, I am far from the only deity in the universe. There are those who would not wish to see Her gain such an ascendancy. Also there are others who want that tree for their own purposes. I believe you were told the last five seedlings were destroyed. They were destroyed in wars fought by the gods. Five new universes that might have come into being vanished into the never-has-been because one or more gods wanted to own them and others chose to oppose such a move. No, had Dee chosen to nurture the new tree, it would have already been destroyed.

“We do know this, however,” Enki continued, “The tree will be safe so long as it is in your keeping.”

“They told me that too,” Eddy replied. “So shouldn’t the others just stop bothering to try?”

“With a universe to be gained?” Enki countered. “Would you? Well, perhaps you would. That’s part of what makes you the ideal guardian. Besides, the others are not aware of our prophecy and even if they were, I’m not sure they wouldn’t try anyway. There’s too much to be gained, you see.”

“So everyone has their own reasons for what they do, huh?” Eddy observed.

“Pretty much,” Enki confirmed. “You did create Us in your own image, after all, and We created you in Ours. In a feedback loop like that you have to expect the divine plain to mirror the mortal one. Now what’s wrong?”

“I’m never going to get my house back to myself, am I?” Eddy asked.

“Do you really want to?” Enki countered. “I’ve spent time by myself, it’s fine for a rest but the whole point of life is to share it. Hermitage is not a natural state for gregarious beings such as gods and men.”

“I have not felt particularly sociable since Julie died,” Eddy confessed.

“Ah, yes. I felt much the same way when Ninhursag left me for the final time,” Enki admitted.

“At least she did not die,” Eddy pointed out.

“No, but She might as well have. When a god merges into a new aspect he takes on the nature of that aspect. She was no longer Ninhursag and so was lost to me. All right, I understand. It was a full century before I recovered. Nin-ti and her sisters tried to comfort me, but could not. By the time I was feeling up to social interaction, Dilmun had become entirely cut off from the rest of the universe.”

“I don’t have a century,” Eddy pointed out.

A strange expression crossed the water god's face. "Humans do heal faster than gods. Besides, as comforting as withdrawal might seem, it is not healthy. You need people around you."

"And instead I'm surrounded by gods, goddesses and... a defrocked demoness?"

"Hah!" Enki laughed. "No, Jael still very much has her frock. Part of the reason she is unable to spend more time with you is that she still has responsibilities in Hell. The other reason is that she is very happily married to a young but prominent archaeologist. Actually, you'll see a bit more of her now that summer is almost here. Marcus will be off on a dig, so she and her mortal half, Rona, will have more time to spend here."

"And what does Rona do for a living?" Eddy asked.

"They tell everyone she is a social worker," Enki chuckled. "Well, I suppose she and Jael together are social workers of a sort, since their job is to punish and reform the souls of those who were polluters in life."

"Nice work if you can get it, I suppose," Eddy remarked.

"No, not really," Enki corrected him, "but it is a job for which they are both ideally suited. Actually Rona hates it, but that's part of why she is so good at it. However, that is a story all by itself. Ask them about it sometime if you are really interested."

"So now what do I do?" Eddy asked.

"Keep living is my advice," Enki told him. "Hey! It's not every man who can start a new career at eighty-four."

"Not outside WalMart or McDonald's anyway," Eddy remarked.

Two

Enki's words helped a little, but only for a while. After that Eddy could not help but see Dee in a whole new light. Whereas before he was flattered by the attention of a beautiful woman he thought of as being half his age, now he was certain she had only behaved that way calculatedly to get him to raise the tree. He resented the fact she might do such a thing and that by doing so she would obviously not trust him with a simple request for help.

For her own part Dee tried to behave as though nothing had changed, but after being rebuffed several nights running when she tried to snuggle with Eddy while they watched movies, she eventually started keeping her distance. She felt she was moping around the house and overcompensated with forced cheerfulness, which only convinced Eddy he was right about her from the start.

They were barely talking to one another and not at all to Ina who after getting caught between them once, had the intelligence to stay out of their way. So a week later, when Jael returned after clearing away her other responsibilities, most communication within the house had been reduced to a few terse words and some inarticulate grunts.

"Hi, Eddy!" Jael greeted him enthusiastically. "Did you miss me?" She froze in her tracks when Eddy's

eyes widened slightly and he took a slight step away from her. "Oh dear, I was afraid of this."

"Afraid of what?" Rona asked from Jael's mouth.

"Rona, hush dear," Jael told her gently, "you'll figure it out. Let me talk until you do. Eddy, I'm a demoness. That's the problem, right? I knew you were having trouble with Dee. Inanna told me, but I didn't realize it extended to the rest of us. I don't frighten you, do I? Oh, of course I do.

"Eddy," she continued. "You've known me for almost two months now. A short acquaintance, I'll admit, but aside from the fact of my species, I've never kept anything about me hidden from you. I think you know me fairly well by now. Forget I'm a demoness for a moment. Before you knew that how would you have described me?"

"I thought you were a nice girl," Eddy replied carefully. "Intelligent, personable, capable of just about anything you put your mind to."

"Thank you on several counts," Jael replied, smiling. "For starters I'm a thousand and fourteen years old. Not bad for an old gal, hmm? However for my own kind and especially compared to Dee, Ina and the others, I'm still a child. Secondly, and more importantly I should say, you mentioned my intelligence and personality, but not the way I look. I would like to think I'm not vain about my appearance but I know that even with my horns I'm gorgeous. You saw past my outer beauty and I appreciate that. It also shows you know me pretty well."

"Or at least his opinion of you corresponds with your own," Rona cut in, slowly changing in appearance. "Seriously, Mister Salem, Jael is a nice person and I ought to know. I've been sharing her life more intimately than you can possibly imagine for over a decade now."

"Well maybe I did behave badly toward you, Jael," Eddy admitted.

"And toward Dee," Jael told him, regaining her normal appearance. "Where is she, anyway?"

"In the garden," Eddy replied stiffly.

"What's your problem with her?" Jael demanded. "The only thing she did to you was to hide her true identity."

"She went too far," Eddy grumbled. "I trusted her, but she was just playing around."

"Are you kidding?" Jael asked incredulously. "Inanna might have been playing around had She been in Dee's place. Honestly I thought She was going to feast on Enki's eyeballs when he introduced her as Miss Loveall," Jael snickered. "I mean Loveall's a legitimate name, but you have to admit when it's applied to Aphrodite... Well, She has a long history of sleeping around in all Her aspects. Dee doesn't, however."

"She had children with Enki," Eddy pointed out.

"Did she?" Jael asked. "Oh yes, I suppose technically Nin-ti is their daughter just as Oriel is both Dee's daughter by Rona's and my husband Marcus. That doesn't mean they were having sex."

"Actually they were," Rona cut in, changing back. Eddy decided it was her natural appearance and that she did it without thinking about it. "Not with Marcus; that was different, but she did with Enki. The

ancient scribes of Mesopotamia were fairly graphic about that, but that was normal enough and while Enki was sleeping around, and fairly disgustingly, I might add, Dee certainly was not. She was the model of a faithful wife so far as I know.”

“And in her other aspects?” Eddy asked.

“She never married as Demeter or Ceres,” Rona replied.

“What about her daughter Persephone?” Jael asked.

“Zeus raped Her,” Rona replied. “Zeus slept with every one in his family and many many more. Talk about a dysfunctional family! Demeter did not go running around after that and even though unmarried She was considered a goddess of marriage.”

“Eddy,” Jael took back her body and the conversation. “Mother Nature is Dee’s current aspect and I can tell you this much; she has not taken that kind of interest in any man, whether divine or mortal in two millennia or so. And she does have genuine feelings for you too. Maybe you didn’t notice, but I did. She was genuinely jealous when Enki brought Ina here. It’s like I told you - Ina will sleep with just about anyone and if Dee were not already in love with you she probably wouldn’t have cared.”

Eddy thought about that for a long while as Jael waited. “I have been treating her badly,” he finally admitted. “I suppose I ought to find a way to apologize.”

“That would be a good start,” Jael noted.

Eddy had never been very good at apologies, especially when he had stubbornly held to a wrong position. One of the many things he had loved about Julie was that she never actually demanded a spoken apology after a fight, but he would do little things for her and by doing them, she understood that he was admitting she had been right all along. Dee was not Julie. They had very little in common in fact, but Eddie fell back on old habits and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. When the water was boiling he made a pot of tea and took it with a pair of cups out into the garden.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked Dee hesitantly. She looked up from the wooden chair she was reading in and after a moment replied. “Yes, I’d like that. Will you join me?”

They sat together sipping their tea until it was gone. Finally it was Dee who broke the ice, “I’m sorry,” she told him. “I should have told you sooner or found a better way...”

“No, it was my fault,” Eddy replied. “I’m just an old coot, I guess, too stubborn to let anyone else have their way without a fight.”

“Perhaps,” Dee smiled, “but you’re my stubborn old coot... at least if you’ll have me?”

“I’ve missed you, Dee,” he told her sadly.

“I was here all along.”

“So I’m a foolish old coot as well,” Eddy admitted.

“Then it’s a good thing I suffer fools gladly,” she chuckled.

After that, they were able to reestablish their old routines as though there had been no interruption. Jael and Ina stepped carefully around the two of them for the next day or so, but once they were convinced Eddy and Dee had reconciled, they too became more relaxed.

“Is it me?” Eddy asked a week and a half later, “or are the attempts on the tree becoming more frequent and blatant?”

“No, dear,” Dee replied, sipping her morning coffee. “at least it does not seem that way to me. You’re just more aware of them now. Of course now that you know who we all are, we aren’t as worried about keeping you from seeing our defenses, so maybe that’s why you’re more aware. If you think back about it, you’ll realize how many times the forces of Chaos have made a move on the sapling.”

“What is this Chaos you keep mentioning?” Eddy asked.

“It’s a label we’re using in this conflict,” Dee explained. “I doubt they see themselves as chaotic. But it is not a fight between Good and Evil nor is it one between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Our side seeks to maintain the current order of things. They are seeking to change that order so we have labeled them Chaos. It’s a convenience, nothing more, at least not this time. There have been struggles in the past that truly were between those who sought to maintain the Order and those how sought to replace it with Chaos, but this time, I think they merely want to replace the existing Order with one of their own choice.”

“You think? You don’t know?” Eddy inquired.

“They’ve hardly consulted me, have they?” Dee countered. “This is just speculation on my part, but it seems to me that had they truly wanted to destroy the sapling, they could have done it any number of times. Our defenses are the best we can manage, but I can think of a dozen ways to get past them, if destruction was my only goal. So either we are dealing with stupidity, which I seriously doubt, or the current forces of Chaos want the sapling for themselves.”

“Who are the forces of Chaos?” Eddy asked.

“We’re not entirely certain,” Dee admitted. “There have been a preponderance of Frost Giants of the Norse mythological plain, so we think they may be allies of Loki. He has used them in the past and it appears they do not learn from their mistakes very well. I would have thought Loki had calmed down after the last cycle, but maybe not. I know He never completely settled accounts with Odin and Thor, but not only is He the best pitcher on their team, He is the one who came up with the whole idea of sublimating Our divine competitiveness in the game of Baseball. Did Enki tell you about that?”

“He mentioned it,” Eddy replied, “yes. But it still seems strange to me.”

“It is not the most natural thing in the worlds,” Dee smiled. “As it happens the only team that would let either Ina or me play on it was the Lamassu, the ancient Mesopotamian team, and that was because they were desperate to fill their roster. Still we both proved our worth by the end of the season. TheOlympus team tried to recruit Us both after that, but We told them where to get off.”

“Could this be some sort of pay back from that?” Eddy asked.

“Hmm, interesting notion,” Dee remarked, “Zeus does occasionally succumb to bouts of petty revenge, but I seriously doubt He would do this. Oh, He would love to get His hands on the sapling. It would reestablish him as supreme deity, but most of His court would rebel if He so much as tried. Now that you

bring Him up, though, I suppose I'll have to keep an eye on Him and some of the others who may be in a position to gain from possession of the sapling."

"That could be just about anyone," Eddy pointed out. "Who was among the forces of Chaos last time?"

"Loki was one of the leaders," Dee replied. "That's why I think of him now. Huitzilopchtli, the hummingbird god of the Aztecs, was another. I haven't heard much from that quarter lately, but you never know. There was a contingent of aggressively competitive demons from hell who wanted to supplant Lucifer Himself. They won't be in on this, however."

"Why not?" Eddy asked.

"Lucifer saw to that personally. Some, although not all of them, were reborn at the beginning of the current cycle, but Lucifer never gave them a chance. He killed them all over again. If He is in a good mood, He may allow them entry level jobs next time around, but I personally doubt it.

"As I recall, most of the leaders last time around were normally considered minor deities," Dee continued. "Well, that's not so surprising, is it? The ruling deities don't generally have much to gain by upsetting the Order. This time around, however, it is an entirely different matter. There is no one who does not stand to profit from aligning him or herself to the new Tree as it matures. I cannot even be completely certain that those who profess to be on our side do not covet the sapling for themselves, Eddy. It is a great temptation even to those of great power like Me.

"No, I will not attempt to take the tree for My own," She assured him. As She spoke, Eddy detected a greatness within Her. It was as though She had truly been an ordinary human before but now Her divinity was peeking through. He could feel Her capitalized pronouns as She spoke them. Thinking back, he realized he had been able to detect them in the speech of others from time to time, but not always. When in mortal guise, "They" were only "they" and you could hear the difference if you listened.

"If there are so many who would stand to gain," Eddy asked, "are we at all certain the forces of Chaos are unified at all?"

"Good point, and no, We have no proof of that either," She remarked, "although for now they may be working with one another in the hopes of walking off with the grand prize at the last moment. I wouldn't be surprised by that at all. Each may have their own motives for joining with Chaos.

"The acquisition of power may be the main reason They are doing it again. Jael tells us there is a small coalition of demons from her Hell who she is certain have joined Chaos for just that reason. Most of her fellow demons are extremely competitive. They aren't the utterly evil beings your theology paints them as, but many of them aren't nice people either. They are constantly competing for position and advancement within their own society, doing their jobs as well as they can while trying to make others look bad so they might eventually rise to the top. Of course they have friends and enemies within their society. Most friends are in different fields of endeavor, and most enemies are competitors. It's not entirely unlike life in the business sectors of New York City, really."

"Or Boston," Eddy added, "or any large commercial center I suspect. Why else do you think I retired to sleepy little Hattamesett? I worked in Boston, but while the cultural life is more exciting there, I decided even while I was still working that quiet on the weekends was worth having to drive an hour to go to the theatres and museums. So Julie and I bought this house and when we retired we decided to move here permanently. Too bad I'm still on the waiting list for a mooring. I've only been waiting for twenty years now. The list is thirty years long, I'm told."

“Then why put your name on it at all?” Dee asked. “Do you even have a boat?”

“No boat,” Eddy confirmed. “Why bother if I don’t have a mooring? Anyway, we put our names on the list in case our daughter wanted it some day. She was still working in Massachussetts at the time. I stay on the waiting list because she might move back. She does talk about it sometimes.”

“An interesting attitude,” Dee remarked.

“Most of the small harbors around here are like that. That’s why there’s so much enthusiasm whenever a new marina opens,” Eddy told her.

There was a crashing sound from the back yard and the alarm started making enough noise to make death less deep than a cat nap, but by the time they got there the only one around was Jael. She had the odd weapon that looked a little like a rocket launcher on her shoulder and there were two wisps of vapor near a section of fence that had been broken through.

Had this happened before Eddy had learned the truth about his companions, he would have had to go to the hardware store to buy materials to repair the fence. Now, however, Dee calmly deactivated the alarm and then made a quick phone call. A few minutes later several male gods showed up in work clothes. They went to work immediately and a few minutes later there was no way to tell there had ever been damage.

The first time this had happened, Eddy got very upset, but on the third repetition in a single week, it was just an ordinary occurrence. “Just what is that thing,” Eddy asked Jael. He had seen it a few times, but this was his first close look at it.

“It doesn’t really have a name,” Jael told him. “What it does is teleport a soul straight to the afterlife.”

“So it’s a death ray?” Eddy asked.

“In essence, I suppose,” Jael replied. “It’s not a very accurate description, though.”

“Close enough for me,” Eddy told her. “Why do they keep trying to come in through or over the fence?”

“Would you rather they were tunneling?” Jael countered.

“Not really, but it seems they would figure out this isn’t going to work,” Eddy replied.

“That depends on why they are using this tactic,” Jael told him. “I think they’re still testing our defenses before trying something a bit more desperate.”

Little incidents like that continued for the next two weeks. Eddy got a bit grumpy after being awakened five nights running by what at first seemed like false alarms until they found some deep scratches on the gate from the front yard. But if Eddy was getting grumpy, some of his neighbors were getting even grumpier. They, like Eddy, had always enjoyed the quiet little neighborhood.

“Morning, Eddy!” one of them called over the fence one morning.

“Hi, Bill,” Eddy replied as amiably as he could given the early morning wake-up he had suffered. To make matters worse, Dee had been out of the house most of the previous week, returning at odd hours

and then often off again just after breakfast. Had she not taken to getting into Eddy's bed to snuggle, he might not have seen her at all.

"Had a bit of activity over your place lately," Bill observed.

"Yeah, sorry about all the noise," Eddy told him. "Maybe I tried to do too much at once. I got a new burglar alarm."

"So I heard," Bill replied dryly. "What happened? Didn't you listen to the installer while he was showing you how to use it?" Bill laughed at the thought.

Eddy forced himself to join in. "Who ever does?" he countered. "Actually I have to blame it on my houseguests. I seem to have been inundated by family lately."

"Well, that's nice, at least," Bill commented.

"I think they just want to be in my will," Eddy feigned sourness. "I never knew I had so many cousins. Anyway with so many of them coming and going, there's always one in the house I haven't had time to explain the system to. At least I don't have any kids running around pushing the buttons to see what they do."

He walked back inside and saw that Ratatosk had returned. "Hiya, Eddy," the squirrel greeted him. "Getting tired of the view yet?" he jerked his paw back toward Ina and Jael.

"What do you want, Ratty?" Eddy asked tiredly. It was the first time he had called the squirrel that, but it seemed to fit.

"Let's see, a pepper-blue steak, extra rare, with a nice red wine. A Shiraz, perhaps, and if you insist on serving a salad leave the fruit and nuts on the side," Ratatosk replied.

"What?"

"Well you did ask," the squirrel shrugged.

"Next time I have the barbecue grill going," Eddy told him.

"Really?"

"Why not?" Eddy nodded. "I've been feeding everyone else. So what brings you here? Hopefully it's something my neighbors can sleep through."

"They ought to. You won't even be on this world," Ratatosk replied.

"Hey, Ratty!" Jael called from the greenhouse. "You should have been here yesterday. Eddy had the barbecue going all afternoon and evening. Most of the old gang was here."

"Memorial Day," Eddy explained. "Don't worry, we'll do it again on the Fourth of July."

"Timing is everything," Ratatosk sighed.

"I can offer you a cup of coffee," Jael told him. Eddy recalled the squirrel had gulped down three cups

on his previous visit.

“Oh, okay, thanks, babe,” Ratatosk replied as they headed for the kitchen.

“Have you ever actually had a beefsteak, Ratty?” Jael asked, ignoring the ‘babe’ as she always did when it came from that particular source. “I know you ask for one often enough, but...”

“I have,” Ratatosk replied. “Just not very often. Is Nature in the house, by the way?”

“I am now,” Dee told them as she materialized in the kitchen.

Since their reconciliation, Eddy had told Dee she did not need to maintain the pretense of coming in and out of the front door. It had been another few days later, but he had told her, “Maybe we’re not family, but you’re certainly closer than mere company. Besides it might cut down on suspicion from the neighbors if you are not seen going in and out at some of the more unusual hours.”

They decided the same applied to Jael and Ina at least when they were showing up after nine in the evening or before seven in the morning. “We don’t want the neighbors to notice all the activity without their seeing any of us come and go,” Dee had pointed out.

“What did you want to see me about, Ratty?” Dee asked as Eddy handed her a cup of tea.

“All of you, actually,” the squirrel replied. “This is going to take some planning.”

“What is?” Dee pressed, trying to make Ratatosk come to the point.

“The Tree wants to meet Eddy,” Ratatosk told them.

“Impossible!” Jael exclaimed. “You know that, Ratty.”

“Jael is correct,” Dee told the squirrel. “You know the prophecy as well as any of us. The sapling is only completely safe when it is in Eddy’s care. It’s bad enough we have to marshal our forces every time he goes shopping.”

“Okay, so you’ll be at Defcon Five,” Ratatosk shot back. “You know Yggdrasil doesn’t know a prophecy from a professorship and wouldn’t care if he did.”

“Yes, I know,” Dee replied. “Yggdrasil is a fine old tree, but she has no concept of the problems of the normal world. She’s above all that, really,” she explained to Eddy.

“And you know we all owe our lives to the Tree. You can’t deny the request,” Ratatosk pressed on.

“Very well,” Dee agreed at last, “but we’re going to need time to plan. We’ll arrive by Midsummer.”

Ratatosk, having the face of a squirrel couldn’t really smile, but he was able to convey that expression anyway. “I think Yggdrasil would appreciate a visit on Midsummer. Hey, babe, I’ll see if I can find you some St. John’s Wort.”

“Whatever for?” Dee asked.

“I hear that when used properly on Midsummer’s Eve you can divine the name of your future husband,”

Ratatosk laughed. He stopped laughing abruptly when lightning flashed suddenly to accompany Dee's dark look at him, followed by a very long roll of thunder.

Three

If activity around Eddy's home had been frenetic before Ratatosk's second visit, it was still placid compared to the next three weeks. More of Dee's friends showed up to evaluate and strengthen the perimeter defenses of Eddy's property. The fortifications no longer relied on strictly physical detection. The gods who arrived worked on weaving what they explained to Eddy was a mystical fence. He looked at the fence and saw nothing that had not been there before. "Looks good," he told them.

He had already repotted the sapling once before but it went through a growth spurt and was soon over five feet tall, and he knew it needed a still larger pot. Dee wasn't in so he talked to Jael about it. "I don't have a larger pot in the shed and last time I spoke to Dee, she didn't want me to put the tree in the ground for another few weeks."

"Does it really need repotting so soon?" Jael asked.

"I'm afraid so. I've never seen a tree grow this fast," Eddy told her. "It's completely pot-bound. Imagine walking around in shoes one or two sizes too small."

Jael winced at the thought, but asked, "How do you know I'm not the sort of demon who has hooves instead of feet?"

"I thought female demons didn't," Eddy admitted.

"Where did you hear that?" Jael asked. "It's true, of course, but I'm surprised you know that."

"I probably got it out of a comic book or something," Eddy admitted.

"I wonder who's got a night job in the comics industry," Jael commented.

"It could just be a lucky guess," Eddie told her. "Besides I don't really know where I heard that, I just thought it was the case. I do need that pot, though. Can we have it brought in?"

"No, afraid not," Jael shook her head. "All matters pertaining to the tree are supposed to be decided by you. I'm fairly certain that includes choosing a pot. We'll have to go out for it."

"I can go by myself," Eddy told her.

"No," Jael told him quite seriously. "You're even more vulnerable than the tree. Eventually they are going to realize that and make another attempt on your life."

"Another?" Eddy asked.

"There were quite a few on you before you actually received the seed and shortly thereafter. I should know. My little zap gun stopped quite a few of them."

"I suppose I ought to say 'thank you,'" Eddy told her.

“I suppose you should,” Jael smiled. “You’re welcome. In any case, forcing your car off the road would be quite easy. I had better go with you. I wish we could recruit one or two more to go with us.”

“Ina’s just inside,” Eddy pointed out. “I don’t think she likes this forced inactivity any better than I do”

“She hates it,” Rona put her own two cents worth in.

“Rona’s right,” Jael agreed. “Inanna was never content to sit back and just wait in any of her aspects. But I’ll need to arrange for someone to watch the sapling in our absence.” Eddy expected her to run inside, but instead she pulled a cell phone out of the air and started pushing buttons. “Why don’t you tell Ina to get ready?”

Eddy shrugged and walked in to the kitchen where Ina was standing in front of the open refrigerator door. “If it’s cool air you want,” Eddy told her, “I can turn the AC on.”

“Sorry,” she apologized instantly. “I’m feeling a bit peckish, but there’s nothing here I really want.”

“So instead you just stood there, staring at the food,” Eddy finished for her, “Yes, I do that all the time. Would you prefer to have lunch out today?”

“I don’t think I ought to leave you with only Jael for protection,” she told him.

“That’s why I asked” Eddy replied. “I need to go out and buy a new pot and thought you’d like to go shopping too.”

“You’re taking me shopping?” Ina asked. “You sweet man! When do we leave?”

“As soon as Jael’s reinforcements show up. Can’t leave the tree without protection, can we?”

“What about Isis and Her friends who are working on the fence?” Ina asked.

“I’m not sure how long they can stay or if they’re up to fending off a frontal attack,” Eddy replied.

“Isisprobably could,” Ina told him. “She’s pretty tough.”

Just then the front door bell rang and Eddy went to open it. There were two muscular men in blue security guard uniforms at the door. One had brown hair, beard and eyes and looked familiar to Eddy. “You’re Hercules, right?” he asked.

“That’s right, Mister Salem,” Hercules replied and indicated his partner. “This is Gilgamesh.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Eddy told them.

“Likewise,” Gilgamesh replied. “Jael said she needed some force inside the house this afternoon and it was our turn to patrol. Actually, we’ll only be here until the others show up.”

“Well, there’s coffee and doughnuts in the kitchen today,” Eddy told the ancient heroes. “Help yourselves.” Jael walked in and greeted the two heroes warmly. “Who else did you call in?” Eddy asked her.

“Enki is sending over the team he’s picked out to hold down the fort at Midsummer. They’ll be here in a few minutes but we don’t need to wait,” she replied.

Finding a new pot was simple enough. Eddy drove them to a garden supply shop just on the other side of New Bedford and chose the largest one they had.

“Don’t you want to get one of the fancier ones?” Ina asked. “This one is so plain compared to the last one.”

“It’s only for a couple of weeks or so,” Eddy explained. “Why spend big money on a pot I won’t have a use for after that?”

They got the pot into the trunk of the car and wedged it between two large bags of potting soil, but it was too large to close the hatch, so they used rope to tie the trunk lid down as much as they could. “Lunch now?” Ina asked.

“If you like,” Eddy told her. “I was thinking of stopping by the Mall just up the street. I did promise you a shopping trip, didn’t I?”

“You are sweet!” Ina told him fondly. “Too bad Dee got you first.”

Much to Eddy’s surprise, neither Ina nor Jael bought very much. They actually enjoyed window shopping more than actually walking into the stores, although they both spent a fair amount of the time in Filene’s. Eddy spent most of that time sitting in the food court sipping a diet soda until Jael and Ina came running excitedly up the main concourse and dragged him back down the way they had come.

“You’ve got to see this, Eddy!” Jael told him. “It’s on all the stations!”

They hurried down the long mall corridor to an electronics store where a wall of television sets was displaying columns of smoke rising out of cities around the world. Crowds of people were gathered around the display as scenes of destruction were shown from New York, Los Angeles, London, Frankfurt, Haifa, Jakarta and Minsk. The commentators were also talking about attacks in Ho Chi Minh City, Kampala, Cairo, Port Moresby and Jerusalem with more reports still filtering in. It was being characterized as the largest, most organized series of terrorist attacks in history.

“It may be much more than that,” Jael whispered to Eddy. “It may be the start of World War Three.”

Four

“What do you mean?” Eddy asked her.

“Better not discuss it here,” Jael whispered back. “We had better get home in a hurry.”

“I’m calling ahead,” Ina told them, pulling out her cell phone as they walked briskly back to the car. Eddy at first worried her side of the conversation would be enough to attract unwanted attention until he realized that over half the people in the mall were doing the same thing. No one was really listening to anyone else.

“I really wanted to pick up some groceries,” Eddy pointed out.

“It may be best to have someone bring some in,” Jael countered. “Ninti, perhaps. She’s been hinting that she’d like to see the tree again anyway. Make up a list of what you want. For that matter, maybe Dee can turn the whole kitchen into a cornucopia.”

“A what?” Eddy asked. They left the mall and started across the parking lot.

“Literally, a horn of plenty,” Rona’s voice explained. Eddy looked over, but noticed that Jael’s face was still there. Evidently they could both speak without changing appearance. “They are usually depicted as a horn-shaped basket of some sort, overflowing with fruits and sometimes other foods as well. The point is they never run out, no matter how much you remove from them.”

Jael’s voice cut in, “Although it doesn’t have to be a basket. The magic could be adapted to a refrigerator or a cabinet. On second thought, that sort of magic takes a horrendous amount of energy and even on the divine plain E still equals emcee squared. That power could well be detected and used against us. That’s why we’re only using magic where absolutely necessary.”

“There’s not much to eat left in the fridge for tonight,” Eddy told them, “and after your buddies Gil and Herc get through, there may be even less.”

Jael laughed at the thought. “Could be,” she admitted as Eddy unlocked the car. “So we’ll call out for pizza.”

“The local shops don’t deliver,” Eddy told her, “and they’re better than the further ones who do. Still there’s a good one just two blocks from the house.”

“Then I’ll pick it up myself,” Jael retorted. “Here, let me drive, please.”

Eddy handed her the keys. “Do you even have a license?” He got in on the passenger side of the vehicle.

“Of course I do,” Rona’s voice assured him, although it was obvious it was Jael under control.

“I’m just very nervous,” Jael explained, “and I’ll feel better if I at least have control of the car. Okay?”

“Fine by me,” Eddy told her, strapping himself in.

“We’re on our way,” Ina said into her phone as Jael started the car. “Everything is fine there, but Demeter just showed up and She’s really angry. I think we’re in trouble.”

“So be it,” Jael replied grimly. “Well it’s been a good life. Not very long by divine standards, but good.”

“She wouldn’t really kill us, would she?” Eddy asked.

“Of course not,” Ina replied. “What kind of Goddess do you take Her for? We might not be very comfortable for a while, though.”

Jael ignored the speed limits all the way back to Hattamesett much to Eddy’s discomfort, so that by the time his home came into view he was almost looking forward to Dee’s displeasure, figuring it could not possibly be as bad as Jael’s driving.

Hercules and Gilgamesh came out just as they entered the driveway and unloaded the pot and soil for

them, but Dee was waiting for them just inside the front door. Her face looked stormy and She was obviously not doing anything to maintain her mortal guise. Eddy thought her hair was showing highlights of green."

"It was my fault," Jael told her immediately. "I thought Eddy had to be the one to choose the new pot."

"What are you talking about, child?" Dee asked, confusion showing through cracks in her apparent anger.

"Our shopping trip," Jael replied. "I thought Eddy had to be the one to choose the new pot."

"You thought correctly, Jael," Dee told her. "And you arranged for security perfectly."

"Then why are You so angry?"

"Angry?" Dee forced a laugh. "I'm not angry. I'm worried. With everything happening I was afraid there was another attack on the sapling. I was also worried about your own well being. All those attacks..."

"What do they have to do with us?" Eddy asked. He had been meaning to ask all the way back, but somehow he just could not get the words out.

"Reflection," Jael told him. "Events on the divine plane are almost always reflected on the mortal plane. As soon as I saw that newscast, I was afraid the attacks were reflections of attacks on the new tree."

"Not on the tree, child," Dee corrected her. "On you all, Eddy especially. The thing is, Chaos didn't know where you were, so they were all over the place. You might have run into them anywhere. Since they didn't know where to attack, however, that got reflected as a wide range of terrorism all over the globe. They must have been lying in wait in all of Eddy's usual shopping places."

"We did not go to one of my usual places," Eddy remarked, "or at least not since all this started."

"That probably saved your lives," Dee told him. "Tell me, though. Did you break your usual shopping habits because you sensed something like this might happen?"

"Hah! No," Eddy replied. "I just thought it would be nice of me to give Jael and Ina a chance to go shopping."

Dee's eyes widened in surprise at that. She looked back and forth at Jael and Ina who cringed a bit under Her glare. Finally, Her head went back and She started laughing. Eddy could see it was the laughter of relief and he also saw her slip back, perhaps unconsciously completely into her mortal guise as she started to relax. "That was your idea, Ina?"

"It was mine," Eddy told her.

"I jumped at the chance, though," Ina admitted.

"I'm sure you did," Dee agreed. "Well, for once giving into temptation seems to have saved us. Can't argue with results. Did you go shopping for food while you were out?"

Two hours later, after the others had left and only Jael and Ina were left in the house with Dee and Eddy, Dee decided they had watched more televised news than was likely to be useful. "They're just repeating

themselves now, and playing useless interviews with various politicians. And if they play that insipid statement by your president just one more time, I'll give them a real disaster to talk about." She waved her hand at the screen and it went dark.

"All those deaths aren't enough?" Jael demanded.

"They're far too much," Dee replied calmly, "but hearing about them repeatedly is not going to bring them back to life. We have more important worries. I wish it was otherwise, but there you are. We need to know how this connects to the divine plane."

"And there I was hoping you could enlighten us," Enki said from the television screen. They all looked up to see him against a green leafy background. Ratatosk was standing on his left side and Nin-ti and a deer were on his right. "We're up here on the Tree trying to scope out the trouble."

"No luck?" Dee asked.

"None yet, Ninmah," he replied. "Nothing appears to be out of the ordinary."

"Don't you just hate that?" Ratatosk commented. "Something this big ought to be out in plain sight."

"I don't see why," Eddy remarked. "The terrorists were hidden until they actually struck."

"But they did strike," Enki replied. "So where did our opposition go? What did they do?"

"You got me," Eddy told him. "Have none of our allies been attacked? Can You set traps or the equivalent of time bombs for each other?"

"We can," Enki confirmed. "Who was responsible for the terrorist attacks?"

"If we can believe the politicians and the reporters," Jael replied, "it was a coalition of various Islamic activist groups. I'm not sure how accurate that might be, though. The list sounded like the usual suspects that get blamed whenever this sort of thing happens."

"That doesn't mean it's not true though," Enki replied. "Sounds like I need to have a little chat with Allah."

"He isn't easy to find," Dee warned him.

"He stayed neutral at the end of the last cycle," Jael added.

"He's already an aspect of the current supreme deity," Ina commented, "He's infinite in every way. What could He have to gain?"

"Who says Allah is to blame?" Enki asked pointedly. "But as you say, He is infinite. He is also omniscient. Maybe He will answer a few questions. I'll let you know what I find out." The screen went black again.

Jael got to her feet and told them, "My best contacts are infernal in nature, but maybe they'll provide insight in quarters the rest of you don't have access to."

"You may want to start with my daughter," Dee suggested.

“Oriel?” Jael asked, her tone indicating doubt of the wisdom of that.

“Persephone,” Dee corrected her.

“Oh,” Jael replied. “Yeah. It slipped my mind for a bit. I was going to start in Central Processing, but the throne room is good too. Wait a moment, it’s spring.”

“For another two weeks, yes,” Dee replied with a smile. “Try Olympus. And while you’re there ask her to come here, will you, dear. I think I’d like her in charge of the defenses here on Midsummer Eve.”

Five

“How long before they get here?” Eddy asked. He was sitting in the garden with Dee, Ina and Jael having one last cup of coffee before leaving for Yggdrasil. At least that was the plan, although their backup seemed to be later than expected.

Since the recent outbreak of terrorism, the mundane world had quieted down again and researches on the divine plain had come up dry. Jael had returned a day later with Persephone in tow. Together they had poured through the computerized files of Hell and come up with nothing. Jael had called colleagues and acquaintances in other underworlds, but no one seemed to know anything about unusual activities on the divine plain.

Owing to the nature of the groups on whom the acts of terrorism had been charged, they both took an extra careful look at the Islamic Hell and the demons who lived within. Iblis, Himself, was not available to see either of them, a fact that annoyed Jael and insulted Persephone, but they were able to speak with a high-ranking demon named Azbab. Jael was not sure if he was *ashaidan* or *ajinn*. She had never found it necessary to keep track of demonic species outside of her own aspect of Hell and the residents of the Islamic netherworld were among the most standoffish of the demons.

Azbab, however, had been more friendly and open than most demons she had met from this particular quarter. Most of the aspects of Hell she had been aware of tended to accord each other professional courtesies, but requests to this quarter were often ignored, so they counted themselves lucky to find someone willing to help them. Unfortunately, even with his assistance, they were unable to track down any source of trouble. And with the mortal plane quieting down again, they were not likely to be able to find any.

Ina was reading the newspaper and giggling. “What’s so funny?” Dee asked her.

“This story,” Ina replied. “There’s a place called Kansas, according to the story, where there are people who are demanding that the Theory of Evolution no longer be taught in their schools. Very amusing. What?” she asked looking around. Then she looked back at the paper. “You mean this isn’t fiction?”

“It’s real enough,” Eddy told her.

“What are they trying to replace Evolution studies with?” Jael asked. “Creation Science?”

“No, that was evidently stuck down by the courts there, so they rewrote that notion and now call it ‘Intelligent Design.’”

“In the hopes that nobody will notice it is essentially the same thing,” Dee commented. “Silly people.”

“Don’t forget Scopes lost the Scopes Monkey Trial. On the other hand, it must be interesting in Kansas right now,” Jael smiled, “What with trying to explain the ‘Intelligent Design’ of the dinosaur skeletons the state is so proud of while denying evolution because it’s ‘just a theory.’ I have been tempted to start a new charity, ‘Dictionaries for the Religious Right’ just so maybe they might have the opportunity to look the word ‘Theory’ up.”

“Maybe they’ve been brought up to believe that God is capricious,” Dee added, “changing His mind on a whim or curious as to what might happen if you drop a mucking great boulder in the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Perhaps they think the dinosaurs were actually quite evil?” Ina suggested.

“We must send representatives from Kansas to California,” Jael laughed, “so when the ‘Big One’ hits they can explain to the Californians that all is well, and this is part of the ‘Intelligent Design’ and aren’t they all honored to have been killed directly by God? I’m sure it will be a great comfort. Hmm, for starters let’s send them out into the world right now. I doubt anyone in the Indian Ocean Basin has forgotten the great tsunami or that the people of the Gulf Coast no longer think about the hurricane season of 2005.”

“Or any number of disasters spawned by earthquake or volcano,” Ina added.

“I’ll chip in for a few one-way tickets,” Eddy commented, “but I must admit you all are the last folks I’d expect to be arguing pro-evolution. Don’t most theologies say their God or gods created the world?”

“And so we did, Eddy,” Dee told him. “It was also produced by natural forces and life came about by the rather random process we call evolution. Not only that, but all the religions are true even when they conflict with one another, because each one has its own reality. In the religious reality of the divine plane, the universe has been created many times and in many ways and there are divine truths that are paradoxical on the mortal plane while remaining perfectly true nonetheless.

“These paradoxes reflect on the mortal plane in the form of religions,” Dee continued. “So, yes, in some of my aspects I did create the world, or at least co-authored it, but your God also created it in six days without any help, as did Allah and all the other creation stories are true as well on the divine plane at least. However, on the mortal plane, the world also coalesced from stellar debris and life came about sometime in the Precambrian epoch and took some amazingly strange forms before the first tetrapods made it to land, thereby setting the shape of all land-borne, non-insectile life. There have been several great extinctions along the way, the worst of which occurred in several waves at the end of the Permian period. However had it not been for that, the first mammals might not have evolved out of the synapsids. That also gave rise to the first dinosaurs who, themselves, died at the end of the Cretaceous.

“Then finally about five million years ago, give or take, an odd-looking primate used his hands to climb down from the trees, which were dying out in his part of the world, and started walking around on the ground. Once his hands were no longer needed to keep him in the branches, he found other uses for them and eventually figured out how to make a club out of a stout stick or bang a couple of rocks together in just the right way to make a chopping tool. And that was just the start of invention.

“Several species of the genus *Homo* later,” Dee explained, “Mankind invented the gods. And clever

creatures that you are, you invented us in retrospect so that in essence we were eternal, to one degree or another, depending on the religion involved. We had always been here even though We had not existed until you invented Us. And We in turn created you.”

“A convenient circularity,” Eddy opined.

“An inevitable one, I think,” Dee told him. “Your ancestors felt there had to be something greater than they were, so they invented that something. They invented it many times, in fact, and in many ways. They did not think of it as invention, of course, but as seeking the truth. The part I find most fascinating is that this particular truth was invented too, but is no less true for having been invented. We gods have Our own theories on that subject as well, at least those of us who are not omniscient. The omniscient deities are probably chuckling in their beards at Us the same way Inanna was chuckling at your fellow man a few minutes ago.”

“I don’t have a beard,” Ina protested. “Oops, slipping back into dumb blonde mode again, aren’t I?”

“You’re getting better, dear,” Dee assured her. “The point is the Theory of Evolution is valid. The Holy Scriptures, the Bible, the Koran, the Bagavad Gita, the Tao and its Power, the Sutta Pitaka, Dhammapada, Mahajanaka and other parts of Buddhist scripture, as well as many more, are valid. They are all valid even though they often disagree, because in their own parts of the divine plane they are true.”

“So are you saying there is no paradox on the divine plane?” Eddy asked.

“Each religion has an associated region on the divine plane. Those regions are often two-fold or more in nature,” Dee explained, “which leaves room for places like Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Olympus, the Elysian Fields and all the rest. The divine plane is infinite, Eddy. It has room for anything and everything. It is even large enough to accommodate paradox.

“So, while on the mortal plane, Mankind is the product of about fifteen billion years of activity since the Big Bang. He also came about when God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our own image.’ You really can have it both ways,” Dee concluded.

“And since they believe, no, they mandate that God is ineffable as well as omniscient, omnipotent and all the rest, how can they then turn around and claim they know that God didn’t do it both ways? The one way those folks in Kansas and the others who think like them can’t have it,” Ina concluded, “is to claim they can know the mind of God so long as their beliefs tell them they can’t. They need to realize that this is the way things are and perhaps they ought to just deal with it, rather than trying to change the nature of the universe to suit themselves.”

“But from what you’ve told me,” Eddy replied, “that is precisely how the gods came into being?”

“True,” Jael agreed, readily, “but they aren’t trying to create a new religion, although they are coming perilously close since they are playing with new religious beliefs. Take it from your friendly demoness though; God may be infinitely forgiving and He may smile on those who seek His truth, but He isn’t particularly pleased by those who reinterpret scripture for their own purposes. This lot is walking a tightrope no wider than a razor blade and it doesn’t matter what they intend, only what they accomplish. We see a lot of souls down my way who in life tried to use the Holy Word the way they wanted.”

“So was the Bible truly the word of God?” Eddy asked.

“Yes and no,” Jael replied easily. “If your religion states it is the literal word of God, then it is. If it states

it is a divinely inspired set of stories, but that they were written by people, then that's true as well. If you find a religion that says it's just another best-seller, then that's true as well. I can tell you this much, however, Whether or not a religion claims the Bible was authored by God, none of them claim God was the editor and publisher as well. People took over that chore, that's why there are so many versions available."

Just then the gate to the front yard opened and Enki and Nin-ti entered with Persephone and half a dozen others into the garden area. Enki's choice for a reserve guardian force was a mixed lot. Directly behind Persephone was Loko, the Haitian loa who was also a West African god of trees. He was dressed in red jeans and a bright white shirt and carried something that might have been an odd walking stick, except for the palm fronds and feathers as well as the fact that he did not actually use it to walk with. Behind him, stately Sylvanus, the Roman tree god, entered the garden. He looked like he should have been wearing a toga or a long robe, but instead wore modern slacks and a Hawaiian print shirt.

On learning that one of the Egyptian God Osiris' attributes was as a patron of trees, Enki had quickly recruited the god who was more frequently associated with death and the dead. Osiris only stood five and a half feet tall, but had an imposing presence and Eddy knew Osiris was a powerful god in His own part of the divine plane.

Behind them was a tall, powerful blonde woman with a stormy visage and a sword strapped incongruously to her belt. Eddy had met her earlier in the week. She was the *Valkyr* Skuld also known as Necessity. Beautiful though she was, Eddy would not want to have met her alone in a dark alley. There was something about her that left him cold.

However, Enki had not only chosen for power and two dryads, wood nymphs, entered the garden giggling behind Skuld. Eddy had not met them before, but Dee had explained that they would be capable of communing with the sapling far more intimately than the others, even the gods of trees, would. They would be capable of knowing precisely what the sapling wanted at any given moment.

"Have a nice trip," Persephone told them.

"It's a nice day to travel," Enki noted. "I brought a van for transportation."

"You lot have been popping in and out of here for the last two months," Eddy observed. "Why are we taking a van? Nice van, though." The vehicle in question looked like something out of an auto show that had been tricked out along an ancient Egyptian theme with a painting of the Sphinx and the pyramids of Giza on the side and special fender and bumper work in which hieroglyphics and pharaonic monuments had been embossed.

"Thanks," Enki replied. "I told the guy who customized it that I wanted it looking like something from ancient Mesopotamia, but evidently he didn't know the difference between Iraq and Egypt. Nice job, though, I'll admit that." Inside there was comfortable seating for eight amid deep shag carpeting, mood lights, a kitchenette and a small coffee table bolted to the floor.

"Use this a lot, do you?" Eddy asked.

"It has come in handy a few times," Enki replied, "although I will admit that in retrospect I probably should have left the exterior alone."

"You can always sell it on eBay," Jael suggested as Nin-ti started the van.

“Yes, but why are we driving to the Tree?” Eddy asked.

“Your home is no longer easily accessible from Yggdrasil,” Dee explained. “The area around your home, for a mile or so, is cut off from the Tree and will remain so until the sapling is a mature Tree in its own right. We haven’t been able to pop in or out of your neighborhood in almost two weeks now. The area that is cut off will grow as the sapling gets larger. That reminds me. When we get back it is probably time to put the sapling into the ground. It won’t be long before the roots break through the pot she is in now. Contact with the Earth will also give her strength in a way no fertilizer could.”

“Then why haven’t we done so sooner?” Eddy asked.

“Earth power is too strong for a young sapling of this sort,” Dee replied. “Oh, she might have survived, some seedlings have, but it might have been stunted or damaged her in some other way if exposed too early in her life.”

They drove a bit over a mile outside of Hattamesett before the changes started happening. The changes were subtle at first, but when the color of US Route 6 changed from black to deep golden yellow and the mixed deciduous trees were abruptly replaced by palmettos, Eddy realized they had left what he thought of as the normal world. “Is this the divine plane?” he asked.

“Not as such,” Enki replied. “Strictly speaking, I suppose you could say we have one foot on the mortal plane and the other on the divine, but more accurately we are in a space between the two planes.”

“The two branes,” Jael corrected Him. “That’s the new term. Eddy, the ancients thought of the world as flat. Well, many of them did anyway. A flat world essentially describes a two dimensional geometrical construct called a plane. Hence, the mortal plane. Since they saw their world as flat, they also saw the home of the gods as built on similar lines but on a different plane of existence; the divine plane.

“The reality,” Jael continued, “is that the so-called mortal plane actually appears to be a universe of four-dimensional space-time. Physicists are currently debating over whether in reality it has either ten or eleven dimensions, but since those extra dimensions are so small as to be undetectable by current technology we don’t need to consider them. So the universe can be seen in four infinite dimensions; height, width, length and duration. Are you following this?”

“Every other sentence,” Eddy admitted. “You seem to be lumping time and space together. That’s not the way I learned it, but for the sake of argument I’ll go along.”

“Not the way you learned it? The concept of four-dimensional space-time isn’t that new. Einstein came up with it fairly early on,” Dee remarked.

“Dee,” Jael told her, “mortal grade schools are woefully behind the times when it comes to teaching modern physics. Give them another century and they’ll start by teaching Special Relativity, maybe. Okay, so you more or less understand life in four dimensions.”

“Up until now, anyway,” Eddy replied.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” Jael assured him. “Believe it or not, modern physicists really do believe in other universes. Maybe not alternative universes like you see in science fiction stories, or maybe they are. It’s hard to tell since we can’t go there and take a look for ourselves.”

“Then how do we know they exist?” Eddy asked.

“Mathematics,” Jael explained. “In order to make the various currently debated, if not accepted, universe models work, they need to be there. Some models only predict a single other universe. Others see us sandwiched between two more or less similar universes. There may be still more, but beyond the neighboring universes they don’t apply to us, or at least we don’t think so at the moment.”

“Now we call the four-dimensional construct these universes exist within a brane,” Jael continued, watching Eddy closely for signs of information overload. That’s short for membrane as the visual image we often use as an analogy are a pair of tissues floating side by side, perhaps as close as a millimeter apart.”

“If the next brane is so close, why don’t we see it?” Eddy asked.

“Simple,” Ina put in. “It is in a direction you cannot normally travel. Consider it a direction perpendicular to reality, and you won’t be far off.”

“We use the gap between branes to travel not only between the divine and mortal planes,” Jael continued, “but from place to place on the mortal plane as well, making it seem as though we are just materializing. Only we can’t do that around your house anymore because the Sapling is temporarily conjoining branes in that area. There is no gap available there.”

“So that’s why we needed the van,” Eddy concluded. “Okay, I understand that, but why is the road gold-colored here?”

“This isn’t any particular reality,” Enki told him. “Instead it is a land, for want of a better word, of potentials. We can manipulate it as we choose and through careful manipulation get to where we need to be. The golden road was just for variety’s sake on my part.”

As Eddy watched over the next hour the scenery outside the van was constantly changing. They stayed on the golden road most of the way even when it reached an impossibly long bridge that stretched out ribbon thin and without guardrails over a seemingly endless sea. The bridge turned into a tunnel after a while. It was in the tunnel where Eddy suddenly noticed how fast they were moving. Looking out over the sea it was difficult to gauge their speed, but with the walls of the tunnel so close he estimated they were traveling somewhere between one hundred thirty-five and one hundred fifty miles per hour.

The van burst out of the tunnel and rocketed down a steep mountain side. They rapidly descended over half a mile and then leveled off just in time to cross another patently unsafe bridge. This second bridge was not as long as the first and as it crossed what was either a very large lake or a small sea, the road continued on into a desert. A minute later the road ended, but Nin-ti drove on deep into the desert for another fifteen minutes.

She finally came to a halt near the base of a small mound surrounded by dunes deep in the heart of the desert. At first Eddy did not see anything but sand, but then as they walked around the edge of the mound they found the remains of an ancient doorway. There was very little of it left except for a heavily worn stoop and two stubs that must have once been door posts.

“Where exactly are we?” Eddy asked.

“Southern Israel,” Enki replied. “We are deep in the heart of the Negev. We did not really need to come this far,” he explained, “but I was concerned that someone might try to follow us. The route we took was hard enough to navigate without needing to keep an eye on someone else.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to just follow?” Eddy asked.

“No,” Enki explained, “it wasn’t as simple as just taking the same turns. Every time I changed the area around us, pursuers would have just seen us disappear. If they didn’t choose the right change they would lose us altogether. I took us through so many changes only an omniscient being could have stayed with us.”

“There is always the chance we are up against an omniscient deity,” Jael pointed out.

“I don’t think so,” Enki disagreed. “The sapling would already have been toothpicks if that was the case. None of us are perfect and an all-knowing God would have known precisely how to get past our defenses. Our defenses are holding. Therefore the current forces of Chaos are as fallible as we are.”

“Leave it to you to both assure and frighten me at the same time,” Ina told him sourly.

“I’m multi-talented,” Enki told her smugly.

“You’re all wet, Grandfather,” Inanna shot back, “and I have out-clevered you before.”

“Only by getting me drunk first,” Enki laughed. “You’ll notice I haven’t been drinking with you much lately. Well, we’re here and it’s too hot to stay any longer than necessary.” He waved his hand at the remains of the portal and the parts that were missing suddenly appeared as a ghostly, translucent depiction of the missing posts and lintel. A moment later the doorway was full of still more milky white light. “Let’s go,” Enki encouraged them. He stepped forward into the reconstructed doorway and promptly disappeared.

“Is that safe?” Eddy asked nervously.

“It hasn’t hurt me yet,” Jael guaranteed.

“You’ve been through there a lot?” Eddy asked. “Oh, I suppose you must have.”

“This particular portal?” Jael asked. “Only once about fourteen years ago, but yes, we travel through portals like this almost as often as we tread the path between realities like we did getting here. Come on, Eddy! It’ll be fun.” Skipping through the door, she too disappeared.

“My turn,” Inanna told them. She was followed unhesitatingly by Nin-ti.

“Just you and me, dear,” Dee told Eddy. “Shall we cross over together?” She took his hand and as one they stepped through the mystic doorway.

Six

They stepped out of the arid Negev and into a situation Eddy could never have imagined. They were standing on a tree branch so wide that it seemed more like a walkway covered in bark. The branch stretched out of sight in both directions, lost in the leafy shadows of the thousands of branches that formed a canopy above them. Eddy looked down over the edge of the branch and saw still more massive branches and, much further down, the deep, rich earth.

He tried looking outward, but had only fleeting glimpses of the world beyond the leaves. The view, however, seemed to change as he watched, except that he never had a clear view so he wasn't sure if the view was really changing or if the shifting leaves just made it seem so.

"Quite a view, huh?" A high-pitch voice asked from just to Eddy's right, but from below his waist. Eddy looked down and saw Ratatosk. The giant squirrel somehow looked far more natural here on the branches of Yggdrasil.

"It is," Eddy agreed, "but I'm only seeing leaves clearly. No, I take that back, the leaves are so far away I just see green. What sort of leaves are they?"

"The Tree in her Yggdrasil aspect is an ash," Dee told him. "The leaves are pinnate; lots of little leaflets making up a single larger leaf. There are many other aspects, of course."

"So you've told me," Eddy admitted. "So this is the Tree. It looked smaller on TV"

"You haven't seen her on TV," Jael pointed out.

"I meant in that vision Dee showed me," Eddy corrected himself peevishly. "This is tremendous! Will my tree get this large?"

"In time and with proper care, we hope so," Dee told him.

"Hey, kiddies!" Ratatosk yelled to get their attention, "We have a long walk ahead of us yet so if you want to get there before the cycle is out, we had better start now. We're not even on the right branch."

He started off in the direction of the trunk and the others followed double file. The trunk was half a mile away and because Eddy kept stopping to rest and look around it took them half an hour to get there.

The trunk itself was immense. To Eddy it appeared to be a wall that curved away only slightly to either side. When Ratatosk started climbing it effortlessly, however, he balked, unable to climb without hand or footholds.

"It's not a tree, Eddy," Nin-ti told him gently. "It's a road."

"Don't be silly," he retorted, "It's not a road it's a..." he trailed off. As he looked at her, the tree suddenly turned on its side and metamorphosed into a wide highway with many side roads joining it. "How did you do that?" he asked Nin-ti.

"You did it yourself," she told him. "All I did was to make the suggestion. The Tree has many aspects some of which are purely metaphorical, but some of those metaphors are easier to traverse than others. You could have thought of it as a vast river system, then we'd be swimming upstream, or rather you would. The way you see it doesn't affect the way we see it, after all."

They continued walking up the road for maybe a quarter of a mile passing several branch roads before turning off on one of them. The scenery abruptly twisted back into the Tree they had found themselves on in the first place and Ratatosk led them through a maze of branches.

While he could see the great tree was an ash, Eddy had glimpses of other sorts of tree limbs all around him. On his left he thought he saw a maple intertwined with an oak, and on his right he could swear was

the branch of an apple tree with ripe fruit on it. Dee reached out and plucked one of the apples and offered it to him, "Hungry?" she asked.

"Maybe a little," Eddy nodded. The branch had disappeared. "How did you do that? Or is it a goddess thing?"

Deelaughed. "No, it has nothing to do with who and what I am. While the Yggdrasil aspect is the Tree's persona, if you will, in Norse mythology, she is actually every sort of tree imaginable. Just as you envisioned her as a road in order to climb the trunk, you can use your imagination to see other aspects of the Tree. I did so in order to find a branch with ripe apples. You can have just about any other sort of tree-growing fruit or nuts for that matter; oranges, peaches, pomegranates, pears, walnuts, almonds, you name it."

"Is that why the squirrel keeps asking for a steak dinner?" Eddy asked.

"Ratty is not a natural squirrel," Dee replied with a mixture of humor and disapproval, "although I can understand how such a diet might pall after a couple millennia. Meat is not really good for him; I think he prefers the potatoes he usually gets with a steak, but he's such an ornery critter, he'll eat the steak too, just to make the point. He isn't stupid, though," she added in a whisper so Ratatosk would not hear her. "He knows it isn't his natural diet and in spite of all his talk, he really does prefer the food Yggdrasil has to offer."

"Uh, didn't Eve give Adam an apple?" Eddy asked suddenly, reluctant to take a bite.

"It wasn't an apple," Jael laughed from just in front of them. "It was a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, so it could have been an apple. Might even have been the same branch that came from. The Tree is all trees, remember. However, do keep in mind that mortals have been free to eat of the Tree of Knowledge since that time. It's the Tree of Life you are barred from except under extraordinary circumstances."

"The Tree of Life?" Eddy asked.

"Look up," Jael told him. He did so and saw another tree high above him growing upside down. "The Tree of Life grows with its roots in Heaven and its branches spreading down toward the Earth similar to the Hindu holy *Ficus*."

"It seems a bit cruel to leave it there just out of reach," Eddy opined.

"It's not out of reach, Eddy," Jael told him. "You can get there if you try, although the quest for the Tree of Life is perhaps the most difficult any mortal can undertake and almost none succeed."

"I'm surprised anyone could," Eddy remarked, continuing to look at the upside down aspect of the Tree.

"Marcus, our husband, did," Jael and Rona told him proudly in unison. Jael continued. "He didn't even have a very difficult time of it, but that's because he truly did not seek it on his own behalf. He did it to save the lives of the gods and nearly died in the process, but I think brushes with death are required in that particular quest."

"If I ever meet him, I'll have to ask how he did it," Eddy remarked.

"You'll meet him," Jael assured him. "Remember you invited us all to your Fourth of July barbecue."

You'll get to meet Hawk Wilton, Nin-ti's husband, too. He also found his way to immortality without even trying. That might be part of the key," Jael added thoughtfully.

"No," Dee disagreed, "You cannot succeed in that quest without trying. Hawk just didn't know that was his ultimate goal. As far as he was concerned, he was just the manager of a baseball team, trying to get to the end of a successful season. The road to immortality is different for every mortal who undertakes it. Eddy, I'm not sure you would learn much from Marcus or Hawk on that count, if you truly wish to seek the Tree of Life. Their paths would probably not work for you."

"Just as well," Eddy replied. "At the moment I have all I can handle just raising the new Tree. Hey, Ratatosk! Do we really need to do all this walking?"

"You got wings?" Ratatosk shouted back. "If so, feel free to use them, otherwise walking it is."

"I meant I came to meet the Tree," Eddie told him. "We're here, why are we wandering all over her branches?"

"We're not wandering," Ratatosk snapped at him, "and if you don't like it, blame the Tree itself. It chose the place, not me. Besides, we're almost there."

They continued on for another few minutes, working their way down through branches of ever decreasing thickness until they reached a place where they had to walk single file. At that point the gods stepped aside to allow Eddy to walk in front, just behind Ratatosk. Finally they reached an area that appeared to be a basket of branches and leaves. "Have a seat," Ratatosk told them and they all found comfortable places in the small area. Dee came to sit nearest Eddy, but he noticed that she was still just out of reach.

"Hello, Mister Salem," a sweet, rich voice greeted him from every direction at once. "Thank you for coming today."

Eddy was proud of himself for neither jumping in surprise nor foolishly asking who was talking. "It was my pleasure," he replied. "It's a nice day to visit."

"The weather is pleasant," the Tree agreed. "It rained gently yesterday. That was nice too, but I understand most people prefer not to get wet except when bathing."

"I would have brought an umbrella if that was the case," Eddy remarked. "A little water wouldn't have killed me."

"It's good for you," the Tree told him. "All life requires water. Even the gods must have water to live."

"I'll drink to that," Enki replied quietly.

"It has been a lovely damp spring here, Mister Salem," the Tree continued, ignoring Enki the Water God. "How has the weather been in your country?"

"A bit warmer than normal," Eddy remarked. "It was a nice change over last year when we were still having frost warnings in May and it was so wet I couldn't open the garden until it was too late for some of my usual vegetables."

"Is that why you asked him here?" Ratatosk demanded of the Tree. "To discuss the weather?"

“The weather is very important, Ratatosk,” Yggdrasil replied.

“To a tree, perhaps,” the squirrel shot back.

“To everyone,” Yggdrasil replied calmly. “The average temperature in the arctic has risen a bit, but springtimes in the temperate zones are showing signs of becoming wetter and cooler, Ratatosk. What does that mean to you?”

“Sounds like it’s all averaging out,” the squirrel snapped back with a wink to the others. He was obviously baiting the tree. “Or is this about global warming again? In another decade or two we’ll have the same climate as Miami here. Sounds pleasant enough.”

“You are hopeless,” Yggdrasil told him. “At least the deer listen to me.”

“The deer?” Eddy asked.

“There are four deer representing the winds who run across the branches of Yggdrasil eating the buds,” Dee explained. “Their names are Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr, and Durathror.”

“Don’t bother trying to tell them apart,” Ratatosk advised. “I sure can’t - they all look alike to me. There’s a goat meandering around the tree as well, but I don’t see him very often. He may only exist in certain sub-aspects of the Tree.”

“The goat’s name is Heidrun,” Dee explained, “She produces mead in the same way others produce milk and that mead is drunk by the warriors of Valhalla. I think I prefer my mead by letting honey-water ferment, but there you go.”

“There are also two winged guardians,” Jael told him, “Vethrfofnir the hawk and Samuel the eagle.”

“Samuel?” Eddy asked. “That’s an odd name for the denizen of a Viking-age tree.”

“He’s a recent addition,” Jael replied, “And a bald eagle at that. He joined the crew when the previous eagle retired. A bit of modernization. That happens in some pantheons. Others stay true to their heritage.”

“Mister Salem, do you like plants?” the Tree asked when the others had finally stopped talking.

“Yes,” Eddy replied after a moment of thought. “Yes, I do.”

“Why?” Yggdrasil asked.

“Many reasons,” Eddy answered, “but perhaps the most important reason is that plants don’t ask anything from me except respect. Sure they have their needs, water, food, the right amount of sunlight, pest control, that sort of thing, but that is no hardship. It’s predictable. Plants are predictable. Animals and people might do any old thing whether it is logical or even correct. Plants aren’t about doing. They are about being. That’s important in a world overrun with animals all doing things. It’s all part of some sort of necessary balance, I think.”

“Thank you, Mister Salem,” the Tree responded warmly. Then there was silence in the natural bowl, broken only by the whisper of the breeze blowing through the leaves.

They waited a full minute before Eddy asked, "That's it? That's all you wanted to know?"

"I wanted to be certain my child was in good hands," Yggdrasil replied.

Seven

They were only halfway back to their entrance point on the Tree when they felt a soft tremor that made the entire Tree vibrate slightly. "I didn't like the feel of that," Ratatosk muttered. "Something big is happening. Something bad. You lot keep going, I have to check it out." He abruptly leaped upward to the next branch and then again and disappeared from view as he scampered down that second branch.

"He sure can move when he has to," Eddy remarked.

"He has good cause," Dee replied.

"Do you know what's up, Ninmah?" Enki asked.

"Not in detail," She replied, "but there is a force of evil on one of the branches of the Tree."

"We should investigate for ourselves," Enki suggested.

"You may if you wish," She told Him, "but if it's a diversion, I want to be near Eddy. He's the most likely target, you know." The tree shook a little more just then and Enki looked around nervously. "Go if you need to," Dee encouraged. "Jael, Ina and I will handle it. That's our job as long as you don't mind getting back to Hattamesett on your own."

"What about me?" Nin-ti protested.

"Your choice, dear," Dee told her. "The three of us are assigned to Eddy. Your help is appreciated, of course, but if you feel you should go with Enki..." She trailed off.

Before either Enki or Nin-ti could make up their minds, Ratatosk dropped back down onto the branch they all stood on. "Nasty stuff," he reported. "We'd better get all of you off the Tree as soon as possible."

"Why?" Jael asked. "What's wrong?"

"An army of Afrits just got on the tree and they're headed this way," Ratatosk explained.

"Afrits? Are you sure?" Jael demanded.

"Maybe they're djinn," the squirrel shrugged. "I never could tell the difference."

"You seem to have that problem a lot," Jael told him sourly even as she let him start herding them along.

"I never forget a squirrel's face, babe," he countered. "Just keep moving and take the next branch to your left."

"That's not the way we came from," Enki noted.

“No, it isn’t,” Ratatosk agreed. “I told you, we have to get you off the tree. Those Islamic demons look like they were eating nothing but raw meat for the last millennium until two weeks ago when they stopped eating altogether. Even you and Mother Nature would have trouble fending this lot off. Sam and Vethrfofnir are doing their best to slow them down, but I get the impression they’re both going to need feather toupees if they keep it up much longer. Run!”

They hurried down the branch as Ratatosk directed, too quickly to have time to talk, then turned off on another side branch and another until there were walking single file again on a narrow branch that soon gave out leaving them in the leaves. Eddy fleetingly wondered why he was not having trouble keeping his balance when suddenly he experienced a falling sensation.

He fell for just an instant, then felt the ground beneath his feet, stumbled for half a step and then regained his balance. The world around them had changed.

They were in a large, modern city, surrounded by people rushing about on business of their own during what Eddy could only assume was about the middle of the evening. The sky was not totally black, but in the middle of a city and on the longest day of the year, that, he knew, was the best estimate he was likely to come up with. No one seemed to notice them except to step around them on the sidewalk they were partially blocking.

“Where are we?” Eddy asked. “New York?”

“No, the buildings aren’t tall enough,” Jael responded, “although even on Manhattan, the buildings aren’t of uniform size.”

“It’s a big city, though,” Ina remarked. “I can feel it.”

“We should probably stop blocking traffic,” Enki advised. “Let’s find a place to sit down and maybe have something to eat or drink. Then we can figure out our best route back to Eddy’s place.”

“We’re in London,” Jael noted a few steps later.

“How can you tell?” Nin-ti asked.

“The Tube station over there,” Jael pointed, “the double-decker buses, the newspapers on sale in the shop we just passed. Hang on a second, we need an A-to-Zed.”

“A what?” Eddy asked, but Jael had already hurried back into the news and candy shop. She reappeared two minutes later with a small red, white and blue book labeled, “A to Z Street guide to London.”

“There,” she told them. “Can’t get by in London without one of these. Even locals carry them around. Now let’s go find a pub. I could kill for a pint of bitter.”

A few minutes later they were relaxing around a table sipping their various beers and ciders, while Jael and Enki debated their best path back to Hattamesett. “We can’t just pack Eddy up on the next plane back to Boston,” Jael insisted. “He doesn’t have a passport.”

“We can fake that, can’t we?” Enki replied.

“Oh, I suppose we could, but it would also take too long,” she replied. “If the Concorde were still flying it might be okay, although that would have landed him in New York, so I don’t know how much time it would have saved overall.”

“We also cannot very well keep him safe that way either,” Dee added.

“Well, I wasn’t really planning to do that anyway,” Enki replied at last. “It was just a thought. The question is, do we go back for the van, or just hire a car here and continue on our way.”

“We’ll leave too much of a paper trail with rentals,” Nin-ti told them. “The way I see it; the *afrits* or whatever Ratatosk saw must have been Islamic demons, or is that anti-Islamic demons? Well, demons from the Islamic part of the divine plane anyway. We shouldn’t be surprised, of course, since most of the reflected activity on the mortal plane has been from the Islamic world as well.”

“There are not always direct correlations between the mortal and divine planes,” Ina pointed out.

“True,” Nin-ti nodded, “but they are more often than not. Besides, we’re not in doubt at the moment as to who we’re trying to avoid.”

“Islamic demons,” Jael mused. “I wonder why they’re so active all of a sudden. Neither their Heaven nor Hell would have anything to do with the Celestial League, not even now that we only play a few games each year.”

“A lot of pantheons refused to join the league,” Dee remarked, “but I will admit that both their angels and demons have been steering clear of the rest of us as much as is possible since the end of the last cycle. Why now?”

“Don’t forget the frost giants,” Jael told them. “There has been a preponderance of frost giants involved lately too. We might be dealing with an alliance between Odin and Iblis.”

“An odd sort of alliance,” Enki commented.

“Maybe not,” Jael countered. “They both have something to gain. Odin would love to be top dog again, I’m sure, and Iblis... Well, let’s not forget who He is. Pretty much the classic devil, cast down into Hell for disobeying Allah. Of course by some modern standards His original crime wasn’t all that bad; he refused to worship Adam when so ordered, but to an absolute God rebellion is rebellion, and certainly the sins of Iblis have multiplied since then. I have not met Him, but by all accounts he’s a fairly nasty entity. Getting hold of the power of the new Tree would allow Him to topple Allah from His seat of power.”

“They may not be allied,” Dee commented. “They may be as much in opposition to each other as they are to us.”

“Confusion to our enemies, then,” Enki pronounced, raising his glass. The others did likewise. “Finish up, we need to get moving again. Now that I know where we are, I know how to get us home.”

Outside, once more they started walking, when two blocks behind them there was a terrible explosion. They turned around in time to see a second flash of light followed by a deep roar. “Keep moving,” Enki instructed them over the noise, and then suddenly there was silence and they were walking through a grassy meadow.

“Nice trick,” Eddy commented. “What happened back there?”

“Other than the obvious?” Jael asked. “We’ll see it on CNN when we get home, I suppose.”

“Sure, why not?” Ina agreed. “They seem to broadcast anything sensational. Too bad they don’t really report the news.”

“You don’t like the way they present their shows?” Dee asked.

“Most of them seem to have an agenda,” Ina replied. “And the stories they choose to report always seems to support those agendas. And don’t get me started on the game show mentality they use in covering politics.”

“There are networks who are even worse that way,” Eddy told her.

“I’ll try not to watch them,” Ina replied. “I think we need to move faster, Enki.”

“You’re right,” Enki admitted. Suddenly a large bubble formed around all of them and they flew up into the air.

Eddy looked down and instantly regretted it. He swallowed hard and asked, “Why didn’t we travel like this to the Tree? This seems faster than the van.”

“Much faster,” Enki confirmed, “but I was trying not to attract undue attention. Doesn’t look like that worked, but you’ll have to believe me when I tell you we’re far more noticeable this way.”

They flew on over an ever-changing landscape until the sun seemed to flicker for a moment and an unimaginably loud shriek filled their ears. Looking upward, Eddy saw a giant bird of some sort swooping in at them from out of the sun. “I don’t suppose that’s one of Ratatosk’s buddies,” Eddy commented.

“Not even a little,” Jael told him tightly. “It’s a roc.”

“It’s sure dropping down on us like a stone,” Eddy shot back.

“No a roc, like in...” Jael never completed the sentence. As the gigantic bird swooped down on them, its yard-long talons pierced the bubble and all pretense of flight ended instantaneously.

Jael and Dee grabbed hold of Eddy even as they fell through the sky. Nin-ti was nearby, screaming. At least Eddy thought it was Nin-ti. He had his eyes closed so it was hard to tell. Opening them, he saw the ground far below but approaching fast. There was another scream, a deep bird-like shriek met by one of a much higher pitch. Twisting around, Eddy saw the roc, with Enki clutched in its talons. However, it was soon forced to release the water god in order to defend itself from Inanna, who, with wings and great birdlike feet, was attacking the roc in its own element.

Enki fell for only a few seconds before he reformed the bubble back around himself and floated once more. Meanwhile, the others continued to fall, but then were met by a ferocious wind which Eddy thought at first was due to their acceleration toward the ground until he realized he was being set down gently. The wind died off and he saw Dee spread Her arms wide and take flight back toward the roc.

“Are you all right?” Eddy asked Nin-ti who appeared far more shaken than Jael.

“I should be asking you that,” Nin-ti responded.

“I survived,” Eddy told her, “and if that wasn’t enough to give me a heart attack, I guess I’m in better shape than I deserve. Jael? You didn’t panic. I take it flying is commonplace to you?”

“Only in an airplane or similar apparatus,” Jael replied. “I’m just not a screamer, I guess, although on the way down I’ll admit I had a strong urge to join Nin-ti in a duet.”

The battle continued high above them, but as soon as Dee reached the others, the roc began to glow a bright blue and then with a loud squawk, flew away at high speed.

“That is why we used the van on the way out,” Enki told Eddy a few minutes later. “Maybe we had better see if we can get back to the tree. That army we were avoiding has probably passed through by now.”

“I didn’t realize you could fly,” Eddy told Ina as Enki’s bubble picked them up into the air again.

“That wasn’t one of my nicer aspects,” Ina replied. “Actually, I haven’t used it in a long time and hope I don’t have to again. I’m a much gentler goddess than I used to be. That part of me is painful to use so I only do so when I have no other choice.”

A few minutes later they were hovering beside Yggdrasil. “What are you all doing back here?” a large hawk demanded, from just above.

“We’re still trying to get home,” Enki informed him.

“Not through the way you came here,” Vethrfofnir told them. “The demons are blocking the way there just in case you returned.”

“I should have realized they’d do that,” Jael muttered. “But I know somewhere they won’t dare to follow us. There’s a broken branch of the Tree somewhere... There!” she pointed to spot about midway up the tree. “Enki, set us down there, please.”

A minute later they stood at the edge of a stub that was all that was left of a branch on the Tree. Eddy could feel the intense heat radiating up from just below, carrying with it a fair scent of brimstone. “I’m afraid we’ll have to jump,” Jael told them and led the way. Ina went next and then Dee indicated Eddy should join them.

From the tree it looked like he would be falling for miles, but on landing it felt like just an inch. From a lovely sylvan vista, Eddy now found himself in the middle of an infinitely huge volcanic caldera. In the not so far distance, 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 beat down on the landscape with its dark malevolence.

He turned around to see a sign sticking out of the lava just to the side of a gravel path he was standing on.

Hell

Service Entrance Only

Customers Must Use Front Entrance

“Careful, Eddy,” Jael advised him, “If you stray off the path you’re going to get very burnt. And try not to breathe in too deeply. This stuff isn’t very good for you. It’s not exactly wonderful for me, really, but then I don’t stay here very long.” The others appeared a moment later and Jael told them. “Let’s go. If I wasn’t here, you’d all have to walk backwards, it’s how we keep the uninvited out. Fortunately I can counter the spell that does that and we can go right in. Damn! But I need a shower.”

They walked a few paces forward and were soon inside a well-lit, overly air-conditioned room with the sound of dozens of telephones randomly ringing and being answered. They were facing a dark wooden door set into a beige wall, but turning, Eddy 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. It looked like 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. “Don’t want to know what’s in the coffee pot, do I?” Eddy asked.

Jael put her head over the pot and sniffed. “JamaicaBlueMountain,” she reported. “Want a cup?”

“I prefer something heavier,” Eddy replied.

“Me too,” Jael confided. “Welcome to the administrative offices of Hell. I won’t pretend this is where we get the real work done, but if it wasn’t for all this we’d probably never actually get to the real work. Eew! Our clothes really stink, don’t they. I hate using that entrance. Well, we’d better just burn what we have on, because we’ll never get the stench of brimstone out of the cloth. Hold on a minute and let me call my secretary. Then we can all shower off and change.”

“Change into what?” Eddy asked.

“Clothing, I assume,” Jael told him. “I mean you can run around here naked if you want. If there is one place in the cosmos you can do that, this is it. Well, one of two, anyway. You’re free to do so in Heaven too; there’s no shame in Heaven after all. However, I find most of our visitors are more comfortable wearing clothing. Just let me make the arrangements.”

She stepped over to an empty desk and picked up a phone. “Gwenwyn? Everything smooth and easy? Good. I’m just passing through at the moment, but I need a favor...”

“Good to have her on our side,” Enki told Eddy. “In spite of her easy way, this isn’t the friendliest place to strangers. I doubt we could have just strolled in and gotten a lot in the way of hospitality, at least not this quickly. I wouldn’t have known how to get here in any case and while Lucifer is on our side in the current conflict, He is not the most enthusiastic of allies.”

“We could have tried for Olympus,” Inanna told Enki. “Demeter and I both have aspects there.”

“Olympus is neutral at the moment,” Enki replied. “Zeus would not have appreciated it if we led some of the forces of Chaos into His home.”

“Olympus may be neutral, but the Olympians are picking sides,” Ina insisted.

“Another reason to avoid the mountain,” Enki told her. “We don’t know who might be on the other side. Similar problem in Asgard, although Odin has officially declared Himself in league with us.”

“Okay, folks,” Jael told them as she put the phone down. “Let’s go get the brimstone out of our nostrils.” She led them through an open doorway and down a series of halls until they reached a pair of doors facing each other on opposite sides of the hall. One was marked with an “M” and the other an “F.” “Fresh clothing should be here in a few minutes,” she told them as she entered the “F” door.

Enki and Eddy entered the other door as Enki remarked. “I always preferred co-ed showers, but one must conform to local customs.”

The room they entered was a monumental restroom - all tiles, mirrors and disinfectant. “First time I’ve seen a restroom with all black tiles and a mirror on the ceiling,” Eddy remarked.

“Maybe they are sometimes co-ed,” Enki laughed.

“Hades Hilton?” Eddy asked, looking at a large black bath towel with gold embroidery.

“I think someone has a sense of humor,” Enki noted.

“Either that or the Hiltons are branching out,” Eddy shot back.

By the time they had showered, fresh clothing had arrived. Eddy wasn’t sure how Jael had known his size, but everything fit perfectly. “Not much variety in the color scheme,” Enki remarked. Everything from the skin out was black, even the embroidered “H” on the silk shirts’ pockets. “Still, you can’t beat basic black.”

“It’s slimming, I suppose,” Eddy replied tiredly.

“Running out of energy?” Enki asked. “It’s been a long day.”

“And while I may be the youngest member of the party,” Eddy told him, “I’m also the oldest in a sense. Yeah, I could do with a nap, I think.”

“Here,” Enki said. He reached out with his left hand and laid it on top of Eddy’s head. Eddy felt energy flowing into him for a minute. Then he felt wide awake and ready to run a marathon. “Better?”

“Much,” Eddy replied. “Thanks. I’m not going to ask how you did that.”

“I’m not sure I could teach you,” Enki replied. “It’s just something that comes naturally, but if it makes you feel better, you’re probably a better gardener than I am, although I have tried.”

“Thanks,” Eddy repeated. “So how do I get home?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Enki assured him as they started toward the door. “I’m sure Jael has a back way out of here.” He opened the door and held it for Eddy.

“If Dante was at all correct, the only way out is at the very bottom of the Pit,” Eddy replied.

“We don’t have time for the guided tour,” Jael told him. She, Dee and Nin-ti were waiting for them in the corridor. Eddy noticed none of them were wearing black. Jael was in her customary blue, Dee and Nin-ti wore green. “However you are correct, there is only one exit. We call it the Great Egress. Last time I escorted a visiting mortal out we had to go the long way, but this time we can take a short cut.”

Ina joined them just then. Like the others, she wore a dress that was both simple and stylish. Hers was red. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” she apologized. “You wouldn’t have thought Hell would actually run out of hot water.”

“These guest rooms don’t get much use,” Jael explained, “and they were built larger than the hot water tanks could actually handle. Just another stupid case of form over substance. You get a lot of that in bureaucracies.”

“Let me tell you my side of the Tower of Babel story sometime,” Ina remarked with a wink.

“Sounds like fun,” Jael laughed. “Normally I would stop in my home and make sure the plants are watered, but my secretary has been taking care of all that, so let’s be off.”

She led them down another series of corridors to a dark archway that seemed to be filled with nothingness. Then she stepped through and disappeared. By now that was an almost commonplace happening to Eddy and he followed without hesitation, with the others directly behind him. They found themselves in a long corridor with a door at one end and a blank wall at the other. Jael continued to lead them to the end of the corridor with the blank wall. When they were within a few yards of the end, the scene suddenly changed and they found themselves back in Eddy’s living room.

The house was in a shambles. Osiris and Loco were lying on the living room rug. “What happened here?” Enki wondered aloud.

“They’re dead,” Dee told him. “Quick! Let’s find the others.”

They found Persephone lying on the kitchen floor. They thought she too had been killed, but as Dee examined her, she groaned and Dee tried to heal her with only marginal results. “Call Oriel,” Dee commanded Nin-ti. Nin-ti nodded and pulled a cell phone from her purse.

While Dee was examining Persephone, Enki and Ina started searching the house. “Nin-ti!” Enki shouted for her from the bedroom just as she was finishing her call. “Get in here.”

“What’s the matter?” Nin-ti asked as she charged into the room only to find Sylvanus lying in a pool of blood on the bathroom floor. “Is he dead too?”

“Not yet, dear,” Enki replied, “He appears to have been stabbed in the ribs and has lost a lot of blood. Seems to me you might be able to help him. You are the ‘Lady of the Rib’ after all.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Nin-ti assured him.

While that was going on, Eddy and Jael went to check the greenhouse and garden. They found a lot of broken glass and overturned furniture. Jael started to enter the garden but stopped when she heard Eddy’s groan. “What’s wrong?” she asked, then immediately regretted it. The real question was whether anything was right at the moment.

“The tree,” Eddy moaned. “It’s missing.”

Eight

Eddy rushed out into the back yard even before anyone could follow him into the greenhouse. There was something different about the yard. He was not sure what it was, but something indefinable was different about the way the yard felt. All spring this had been a special place. Eddy thought it had felt emotionally warmer here ever since the seed had sprouted. Now, it was just a back yard again.

“Is it safe to come out?” a tremulous voice asked from his right. Eddy looked and saw one of the wood nymphs poking her head out of the oak that grew there.

“It’s safe,” Eddy told her as Jael came out into the yard. “Where’s your sister?” He wasn’t certain why he thought the nymphs were sisters. They had not been introduced as such.

“I am over here,” the other dryad announced as she phased out of the maple at the far end of the yard. There was a great gash on her arm and one in her side that were still bleeding. Jael rushed to clamp her hand over the larger wound and helped the nymph into the house.

“What happened?” Eddy asked the first dryad.

“No,” Enki stopped her from the doorway. “Come inside and sit down, Nina, then tell all of us.”

“I would rather be outside,” Nina replied. “It feels safer here.”

“Of course,” Enki agreed gently.

It was another half hour before they finally got the story. Oriel arrived just a few minutes later and instantly went to work, but while she had Persephone back on her feet, albeit shakily, Sylvanus remained unconscious even after she had healed his wounds. “I’m afraid he may not recover any time soon, if at all.”

Several Olympian gods arrived to carry Sylvanus to his home where it was hoped his healing might be faster. “Zeus is very angry,” Hermes told them.

“This was Sylvanus’ choice,” Enki replied. “I didn’t force him to help us.”

“He is not angry at You, Water God,” Hermes clarified his earlier statement. “He is angered at those who would do such a thing. He wishes me to tell you that you may count on his assistance for the duration of this crisis and, if resolved successfully, until the new Tree reaches maturity.”

“Thank him for me, please,” Enki requested. “Tell Him there will be a council meeting soon to plan what must be done next. I’ll send a messenger.”

Hermes nodded and told him, “I’ll be in touch as well,” and left.

Finally, Dee helped Persephone into a garden seat and the others gathered around the two dryads. Persephone was still too shaken to answer questions so Nina started speaking, “It was Skuld,” she told them. “The Valkyr went crazy. She murdered Osiris and Loco about an hour after you left, then I think

she must have attacked Sylvanus when he went to investigate what was happening.

“We were in the greenhouse at the time with Sylvanus and Persephone,” Nina continued. “When we heard him shout, however, Persephone told us to take cover when she went inside. We didn’t at first though, not until we saw Skuld attacking Persephone with that awful sword.

“That’s when we ran for the trees,” Nina told them. “I made it safely into the oak, but Mina had further to go. Skuld attacked her even inside the maple.”

“That’s how I got these wounds,” Mina indicated her side and upper arm where a thin red line still showed. “She would have killed me had I not been in the tree. Poor thing; he still has wounds I must heal.”

“In a few minutes,” Dee told her. “That maple is strong enough to withstand those cuts even as you were.”

“So Skuld stole the sapling?” Eddy asked Nina.

“With the help of two giants,” Nina replied. “They arrived soon after we took shelter. Then they just picked up the pot and left.”

“They could be anywhere by now,” Enki growled. “Tracking is going to be difficult. We can only see where the tree isn’t, not where it is.”

“I know where he is,” Mina told him.

“You do?” Enki asked.

“Rather, I can find out,” Mina corrected herself.

“How?” Dee asked her.

“When I saw Skuld try to kill Persephone, I tried to hide inside the sapling, but it wasn’t mature enough to let me,” Mina explained, “but I was able to leave part of myself within.” She held up her right hand. Her little finger was missing. There was no wound there, just a flat area where the finger used to attach.

“I didn’t know you could do that!” Dee exclaimed.

“Neither did I,” Mina admitted. “I think it was the sapling’s idea. All I know is that the finger disappeared but I can still feel it in contact with the sapling. I think I can help track the tree down.”

“Can you give us a direction?” Enki asked.

Mina’s beautiful face screwed up in concentration for a minute. After a long while, however, she looked defeated. “He’s everywhere,” Mina told them sadly. “I thought I could do it, but...”

“We’re not defeated yet,” Enki told her, suddenly more confident. “That just means they’ve taken the tree off the mortal plane. As long as you can stay in contact with the tree, there’s a chance we can find it.”

“Him,” Mina corrected him boldly.

“Him, her, it, whatever,” Enki shrugged. “The World Tree is above mere gender concerns. The World Tree... yes! Ninmah, is my war room on the tree still there?”

“It’s probably a little overgrown by now,” Dee replied. “The Tree never stops growing after all, but I’m sure She will allow us to restore that center. Is that where you want to go next?”

“No, we need to meet with all our allies and we need to do so in a place that is totally secure. Dilmun should be ideal. There’s only one way in or out.”

“Not quite,” Jael corrected him. “The first time I was there with Marcus, we fell in off the side of a branch of the Tree. I went back to try to find that spot but even with Ratty’s help I never found it again. And you may recall sending us on a mission into your version of the underworld. We met a demon of some sort there. I wasn’t certain at the time what sort he was, but now I think he might have been a Jann. And there we thought the Islamic demons were neutral last time around.”

“He may have been an independent agent,” Enki suggested.

“Iblis doesn’t tolerate a lot of independent thinking when it comes to that sort of politics,” Jael commented.

“I thought you didn’t know much about that side of the family,” Dee commented.

“We’ve exhausted the limits of my knowledge,” Jael admitted to her. “Now, I’m just inferring from the little I do know, but I know people who ought to know more. Too bad we just left Hell. I’ll have to go back on my way to Dilmun. How soon is your council meeting?”

“At first light tomorrow,” Enki told her. “That would be midnight in the zone you call Greenwich Mean Time.”

“I’ll see you then,” Jael promised. “Dee, I know you’ll have favors to call in too, so Ina, don’t leave Eddy’s side, no matter what!” She left the garden. Eddy expected her to just fade out, but a few moments later he heard his front door close.

“Remarkable,” Dee commented. “I’ve known Jael for years and I still catch myself underestimating her.”

“What do you mean?” Eddy asked. “Just because she guessed you were going to have to leave me with Ina?”

“No, not that,” Dee replied easily. “The fact that she has obviously realized what we never told her. The Sapling has already formed an attachment to you, Eddy. It’s not the sort of alignment one would attain at the moment of transcendence, when she reaches maturity, but it is a strong attachment nonetheless. If you were to die right now, so too would the sapling.”

“And if the sapling were destroyed?” Eddy asked. She remained silent.

Nine

Eddy was surprised to learn that Dee had a home in Dilmun. He knew She and Enki had lived here many

years previously, but it was beyond his comprehension to consider that she might still have a home here some millennia later.

“It was in quite a state when I returned a few years ago,” Dee admitted. “You simply can’t believe the condition this place was in after several thousand years of neglect. If I hadn’t had magic to assist me, I’d still be cleaning the place out today.”

“You have a nice view,” Eddy told her.

“Thanks,” She replied and chuckled. “That’s what you get when you have the penthouse apartment on a ziggurat.”

“It almost looks as if I can see the edge of the world,” Eddy noted.

“You can,” She told him. “Dilmun is a flat world and a fairly small one. So that isn’t an illusion. It really is the edge of the world. Don’t worry about it. The laws are different on the divine plane, that’s all. Actually they’re different in many ways. Each world or region of the divine plane has its own set of rules all determined by how the worshippers of any given religion envisioned this place.”

“Quite extraordinary,” Eddy remarked.

“Of course,” Dee laughed lightly. “You should always expect the extraordinary from your gods.”

“I suppose I should,” Eddy sighed. “Dee, are we really going to be able to find the sapling?”

“I think so, dear,” She replied. “We still have nine months before she transcends.”

“But she also needs transplanting into the ground, you told me,” Eddy countered. “Are we going to be able to move her back to Hattamesett?”

“That would be much more difficult,” Dee admitted.

“Then we need to find her very soon,” Eddy told Her, “so we will still be able to transplant her without damaging her root structure.”

“That’s a good point,” Dee agreed.

“Then why are we still having council meetings here?” Eddy asked. “Why aren’t we out trying to find the tree. A week ago Enki thought he could use Mina’s connection to the sapling to find it. Why hasn’t he even tried yet?”

“I suppose he’s thought up a dozen other ways in the meantime,” Dee replied. “Enki’s very clever, but sometimes he’s far too clever for his own good. Well, don’t worry, dear, the council meeting ended last night while you were sleeping. We’ll be relocating to the command center for our theater of operations after breakfast.”

“Where are we going?” Eddy asked.

“Back to Yggdrasil,” She told him. “We set up a fairly good place to work from in the war that accompanied the end of the last cycle. You can literally see the entire universe from there.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Eddy, you know we’ve been meeting practically around the clock since we got here. We’ve taken a few breaks for social purposes, but you have to understand we don’t need to sleep like you do. We can sleep, of course, but it’s for recreation, not necessity. So yes, the meetings have gone on all night, although not with everyone there at once. We’ve tended to break up into smaller units, caucuses if you will, at night to try solving small but intense problems. We may call ourselves the forces of Order, but we are anything but orderly. Last night, however, we wrapped all that up. We’re in agreement and ready to move out. Now if you’re ready, Inanna has invited us to breakfast with Her in Her home.”

“Second ziggurat on the left?” Eddy asked, looking out over Dilmun.

“That’s right,” Dee agreed. “How did you know?”

“Just lucky. I was trying to be amusing,” Eddy admitted.

“Oh,” she smiled, then laughed. “I suppose I should have answered, ‘and straight on ‘til morning.’ So are you ready?” He nodded then she took his hand and they rose up into the air and flew directly to Inanna’s temple-home.

“Good morning!” Ina greeted them as they landed. Behind her Enki and Jael were already seated and coming up the stairs were Nin-ti and a man Eddy had not met yet. He looked to be in his mid-thirties and wore a royal blue baseball cap with a bit of cuneiform embroidered on it in gold thread.

“Eddy, you haven’t met my partner,” Nin-ti said by way of greeting. “This is Sam Wilton. Hawk, dearest, this is Eddy Salem.”

“Good to meet you, Mister Salem,” Hawk Wilton told him, sticking his hand out. “Nin-ti has told me a lot about you.”

“Likewise, Mister Wilton,” Eddy replied. “Are you really the baseball player?”

“You’ve heard of me?” Hawk asked.

“Oh yes. You look pretty good for an old bird, but by now I shouldn’t be surprised,” Eddy remarked.

“I don’t know why not,” Hawk laughed. “I’m constantly being surprised. Maybe I’ll get over it if I last another century or two, but somehow I doubt it. I was only a minor leaguer, though. When did you ever hear of me?”

“I saw you play once in Durham. I got your autograph on a baseball that day,” Eddy told him. “My daughter has it now. She’s always been more of a baseball fan than I was. It always made me wonder why she moved to Alaska.”

“Hawk’s been our ballteam’s manager since we founded the Celestial League a few years back,” Enki cut in. “It was one of the two best choices I ever made when I hired him. The league’s on hiatus for the duration by the way, Hawk. Sorry about that.”

“So we’ll get them next year,” Hawk nodded. “Nin-ti’s told me what was happening.”

“Good, but we did agree to expand the season next year, so we’ll need you more than ever then,” Enki

told him.

“I’ll be here,” Hawk promised. “Just try not to lose any of the team, huh?”

“I’ll do my best,” Enki replied solemnly.

If Eddy expected to fly again after breakfast, he was sorely disappointed. Instead they walked down the long flight of stairs to the gardens of Dilmun. Eddy knew where they were going and had been dreading it all week. They walked through the gardens past fountains and palms, various flowers and benches until they reached the beach where the path they were on continued down into the sea.

They stepped down into the water and on a gently sloping ramp until they were just below the surface where a long staircase downward began. “Breathe, Eddy,” Dee reminded him.

“I hate this,” Eddy told her between clenched teeth. “Every instinct I have is telling me I ought to be drowning. I can feel the water on my skin. I’m wet. Why can I still breathe?”

“Special enchantment on the path, Eddy,” Hawk explained. “I know how you feel. It gives me the willies too, but you do get used to it after a while. To tell you the truth, I have more trouble walking along the branches of the Tree.”

“But they’re so wide,” Eddy argued. “It’s like crossing a bridge.”

“To tell you the truth, I have trouble with bridges sometimes too,” Hawk admitted. “Fortunately I’m not going there today. I just thought I’d see you all off.”

Deeventually found that by taking Eddy’s hand he calmed down considerably and they soon made their way down to a wide flat area on the ocean bottom where the path branched. Down one way Eddy saw what looked like a submarine mountain, although Dee had already told him it was Enki’s home. “Why would a god of fresh water choose to live under the sea?” Eddy had asked her at the time.

“Why underwater at all?” Dee had countered. “He’s always had an odd sense of humor and this just appealed to Him for some obscure reason. I never actually asked why. It wouldn’t have been considered polite.”

They traveled a short way down the other path to where it opened out into a wide circular area in the middle of which an odd low-growing shrub lived. “This is our version of the Tree of Life,” Dee told Eddy.

“Not quite as impressive as some of her other aspects,” Eddy remarked.

“Ah, but good things can come in small packages,” Jael laughed. She reached down, picked a small ripe berry and popped it into Eddy’s mouth even as the others tried to stop her.

Unthinkingly Eddy bit down on the berry and flavor exploded within him. It was as though every fruit in the world had been condensed into a single berry only to be released all at once. He could taste the flavors of apple, raspberry, cherry, pear, strawberry, peach, mango and much more both combined and individually. He lost awareness of all time and of the world around him until the flavors finally faded.

“Have a nice trip?” Enki asked.

“Wow!” Eddy replied, unable to think of much else to say.

“Maybe he isn’t quite over it yet,” Ina added. “Jael, what were you thinking?”

“It seemed to me, Eddy was being so good about tolerating the situation that he deserved a treat,” Jael replied.

“Perhaps, but was that the time?” Enki asked her.

“It may just have been,” Jael nodded thoughtfully. “Think about what’s happening. It could have been the only time.”

“What happened?” Eddy asked, finally. He looked around and realized they were no longer on the bottom of the sea, but up on one of the branches of Yggdrasil.

“Jael fed you fruit from an aspect of the Tree of Life,” Dee explained.

“Seems only fair since it was my boss that arranged it so you couldn’t get any under normal circumstances,” Jael shrugged.

Dee ignored her. “That one berry took a decade or two off your life.”

“It was worth it!” Eddy replied.

“No, you misunderstand,” Dee insisted, “I mean that it made you a decade or two younger.”

Eddy thought about that. “Really?” he asked. Jael held up a small mirror from her purse. Eddy looked at himself and noted that while he was still not a young man; his hair was no longer all white. There was a lot of dark brown mixed in with the gray hairs. “Then it was definitely worth it. Is there a down side?”

“You mean like side effects or cancer?” Dee countered. “No, none I am aware of.”

“And as Mother Nature,” Eddy pointed out, “You certainly would be aware of any.”

“That’s the first time you’ve admitted it,” Dee told him wonderingly.

“What? That you’re a goddess?” Eddy asked. She nodded. “Out loud perhaps. Frankly, you’d be pretty incredible even if you were a mere mortal like me.”

Dee blushed, but Enki brought them all back to the matter at hand, “We need to get in position. The others are waiting for us.”

They hurried down the branch where a number of messenger gods were waiting for them. There were over two dozen natural wooden bowls on short natural pedestals which grew directly out of the Tree. Dee had been right, they had continued to grow in the decade since Enki had last been here, but only in that the bark had spread to cover the open wood and started joining the bowls together and fill them in so that now there were a series of twenty-five almost flat bumps on the wide branch. Enki and Dee worked together to persuade the tree to reform the bowls. “They’re a bit smaller than last time,” Enki observed, “but they are higher too. I won’t have to bend over to look closely. One or two more things, though.” He concentrated for a moment and the bowls filled with water. Then a large sphere of water formed directly over them, hovering in the air. “There,” he said, opening his eyes once more. “Now we can go to work.”

For the next hour or so, Eddy found himself feeling rather useless as his companions studied Enki's divinatory bowls looking for signs of the tree. The messengers popped in and out with news of possible sightings and of the movement of their forces, but still no one had seen either the sapling or those who had stolen it.

"Not only is it blocking itself from our view," Enki explained, "but its aura is shielding anyone around it."

Ratatosk, who had been among the messengers, came running up just then. "Heimdall wants to know if you'd like him to assist here or remain on Bifrost."

"I thought he needed to be standing on the rainbow bridge to see all he sees," Enki replied.

"Not hardly," Ratatosk told him. "He stands there as a guardian of Asgard, and it's not as noisy a place as Valhalla so his senses are less likely to be blocked."

"Well I can certainly use a god of his perception here," Enki agreed. "Yes, please ask him to hurry."

"You got it, Wet One!" Ratatosk replied and scampered off again.

"I think that's the most respectful thing I've ever heard that squirrel say," Enki chuckled.

"He's a troublemaker and a gossip," Dee reminded him. "His respect is hard to gain. Sometimes it is worth the trouble, though."

"Actually, he is always quite respectful toward Marcus," Jael remarked.

"I'm not surprised," Enki laughed. "Marcus not only proved he could hold his own against that flea-bitten tree-rat, but managed to do something he could never do in a thousand cycles."

Eddy was about to ask what that was when a tall blond Viking-like man came walking toward them from the far end of the branch. "Ah, Heimdall!" Enki greeted him happily. "Good to see you again!"

"Ratatosk told me you needed me here?" Heimdall asked. Eddy stared up at the Norse god. He was only a few inches taller, but much larger in every other aspect.

"Indeed," Enki replied. "I need the best eyes in the cosmos to help watch all these displays."

"These are the same you used last time around?" Heimdall asked. Enki nodded. "I recall being able to see things from Bifrost you could not from here."

"Only because I only had a few pairs of eyes to watch all twenty-six displays," Enki replied. Also, what they show is dependant on how I tune them. In turn I could watch things you could not."

"There is that," Heimdall admitted.

"Also you can see so much from Bifrost, but you don't have a telescope to give you a closer view. We can do that with these," Enki told him.

"I'll be glad to help," Heimdall told him formally. "The Tree must not be lost this time."

"Glad we agree," Enki chuckled. "All right, what I've been doing is to use these bowls to scan potential

areas as they are reported to us. However, because of the unique nature of a world tree, we cannot track it directly, so..."

"So you are looking for something that is not there," Heimdall finished for him. "I understand why you called me, although that would be difficult even for an omniscient one."

"The Omniscients need to stay out of this," Enki replied. "You remember what happened last time."

"I was there," Heimdall replied. "You were not, were you?"

"I was on an enforced vacation from Earth at the time," Enki replied, "but I was able to observe from Dilmun. A lot of what I was able to watch made no real sense. It was just a lot of images, but as to what happened to the last tree? That I had no trouble figuring out. Some things never change."

They spent the next two weeks scanning the lands that made up the world in both their mundane and divine aspects to no avail. Enki showed Eddy how to use the bowls, a process that turned out to be surprisingly simple so long as your mind did not drift and they all kept watching the bowls as new reports came in. Occasionally someone thought they had seen something and Enki would tune in the large sphere to that area so they could take a closer look.

There were only three times when they thought they had really spotted something and messengers were sent off to tell various field commanders where to investigate. Eddy tried to keep up with his companions but each evening he would naturally grow tired and would be forced to rest. He was grateful for the berry from the Dilmun aspect of the tree of Life Jael had given him. The mild touch of youthfulness may not have turned him back into a teenager, but he was certain he would not have been able to sleep on the tree limb if he had still been his natural age.

As the days passed, various gods and goddesses stopped in to consult with Dee and sometimes with Enki. They were usually politely interested in Eddy as well although he found their attention to him very disturbing. He couldn't shake the feeling they were politely smiling at him and then going off to have a good laugh at his expense, which did nothing to help him sleep nights.

Not that all the gods were thoughtless about him and his comfort. One early morning Eddy woke up with a ferocious thunderstorm going on all around him. As he sat up, however his head brushed against a canvas tarpaulin. "Hey watch out in there," he heard Jael say, "We haven't finished out here yet." Eddy lay back down and through the flashing light of the storm saw the canvas being raised still higher. A few minutes later both Jael and Dee rushed into the makeshift tent just as it started raining heavily outside.

"I thought you two didn't need to sleep," Eddy remarked.

"An occasional break is appreciated though," Dee explained, "and Nina and Mina just arrived with another two of their sisters. They're helping Enki now," She stretched out next to Eddy and put her arms around him.

"It's about time," Eddy commented and jumped a bit as a particularly loud crash of thunder deafened him for a moment. "I seem to remember something about it being a bad idea to wait out a lightning storm in a tree."

"This is a special case," Jael told him, "and they'll only be helping if they can stop communing with Yggdrasil. Dryads! Put them on a tree this big and powerful and all they can think of is sex." She positioned herself on Eddy's other side and then pressed close to him as well, although back-to-back.

Eddy briefly wondered how he'd manage to fall back asleep between the two women and with the loud storm going on, but it turned out to be his last conscious thought for the next few hours.

Ten

Both Dee and Jael were gone when Eddy woke up the next morning. He crawled out of the tent on to still-damp bark which he noticed was steaming where the bright rays of summer sunlight touched it through the leaves. He had become adept at conjuring fruit and nuts from the tree, but after two weeks he could see why Ratatosk kept asking for steaks. He was about to reach for an apple, when an entirely different aroma reached his nostrils from the direction of Enki's war room section of the branch.

"Who brought in the pizza?" Eddy asked as he joined the others.

"Hermes just blew through here," Jael replied. "He figured, and correctly, that we could use something besides fruit to eat."

"Well, I haven't had pizza for breakfast since leaving college," Eddy remarked.

"I told him next time to try for coffee and doughnuts," Ina added.

"Odds are he'll have them here in time for dinner," Dee laughed.

"How goes the search?" Eddy asked Enki. The water god was busily scanning one of his displays with the dryad Mina holding firmly to the edge of the bowl. Heimdall and three other dryads were watching other bowls.

"I'm picking something up," Enki informed him, "but it isn't very helpful."

"Why not?" Eddy asked.

"Mina's attachment to her finger is too close and the sapling's area of influence has grown, so all I see from here is a blank where the missing plant is, but I cannot move back far enough to see where that blankness is. Effectively the tree is hiding itself and its captors from us."

"Remind me to have a word with that child when we find him," Eddy remarked sourly.

"When we find him, that effect will be to our advantage," Enki reminded him.

"Maybe I could teach him to leave a trail of leaves, or breadcrumbs or something if this happens again."

"Once is more than enough," Enki told him firmly.

"So if all you can see is a blank, why do you keep looking?" Eddy asked.

"I'm hoping to break through and see what's inside," Enki answered.

"Maybe you're still too close and all you're seeing is the inside of the sapling?" Eddy suggested.

“I don’t think so, but it is possible, I suppose,” Enki admitted.

Two imposing deities arrived a moment later. One looked a little like Heimdall, but with white hair, a longer beard and a patch over one eye. The other was dressed in an odd, multi-layered robe, had curly black hair, streaked with white and clear blue eyes.

“Lord Enki,” the Norse god greeted him, “I am afraid I owe You an apology.”

“I can’t imagine what for, Lord Odin,” Enki replied. “Father Enlil, good to see you.”

“I should have taken a more active interest in the new Tree, Lord Enki,” Odin explained. “Perhaps if I had, it would not have been stolen from Mister Salem’s keeping.”

“How do You figure that?” Enki asked.

“Since the last cycle, it appeared that Loki had settled down. He was behaving more like a team player, especially in the Celestial League. The League was even his idea, you may recall. Consequently I stopped keeping My eye on him and turned My attention to other matters.

“Had I not done so, I might have realized he was behind the attacks on the new Tree and its keeper. I have summoned him to My court several times since the Tree was stolen and he has refused to appear.”

“I can’t say we didn’t suspect him,” Dee cut in, “all those frost giants had to be taking orders from someone. They’ve never stepped outside the bounds of their mythos on their own so far, after all, but we know that Loki is allied with someone else. There are too many different sorts involved for him to have organized them himself.”

“That could be, Nature,” Odin replied, “but keeping Loki in line would have kept him out of the mix. As it is I should have realized he still seeks to supplant Me as king.”

“And without going through the hassle of *Fimbulwinter* and all the other accoutrements of Ragnarok,” Enki added. “That scamp!”

“Very funny, Lord of the Water,” Odin replied flatly.

“Well, You shouldn’t beat Yourself up too badly over this. Loki fooled us all. That’s his specialty, after all,” Enki pointed out. “What we need to do now is find a way to stop him and whoever else is on his side. And the best way to do that will be to regain possession of the sapling.”

“It’s long past time she was transplanted,” Eddy added.

Odin turned on him and fixed His single eye on Eddy for a long time. Finally He nodded, “Yes, Mister Salem. You are correct.”

“So how are we going to go about finding Loki?” Eddy asked.

“Up until now, that has never been the problem,” Odin replied sardonically. “Getting rid of him, on the other side...”

“I’m all for getting rid of him,” Eddy growled.

“Ah yes,” Odin nodded. “He did make some attempts on your life, didn’t he?”

“My life? I’m more upset by the billions of lives he’s threatening,” Eddy told Odin, “not to mention the billions of potential lives in the world of the new Tree.”

“No offense, Mister Salem,” Odin told him, “but you’re not a young man anymore. You talk like you expect to be in the battle that will stop Loki and his allies.”

“You try keeping me out of it,” Eddy shot back. “That tree is my responsibility and I take what happened personally.”

Odin raised his eyebrows for a moment, then relaxed and nodded slightly and went back his discussion with Enki, Enlil and Dee.

“Wow, Eddy!” Jael breathed. “Where did that come from? It wasn’t all that long ago you were giving us the “Why me?” routine.”

“It takes me a while to commit,” Eddy admitted, reaching out for a third slice of the breakfast pizza. “Julie eventually got tired of waiting and asked me to marry her. Once I’m in though, I’m in for the long haul. So how long before we make a move?”

“We need to know where to go first,” Ina reminded him.

“I’m starting to think we might do better by blundering around at random,” Eddy noted. He walked over to the display pool Mina was still standing at, statue-like with her delicate hands clamped on the rim of the dish. Eddy casually looked into the water and noticed shapes. “Hey, Waters!” he shouted to Enki who had wandered further down the branch with Odin, Enlil and Dee.

Odin glared at Eddy for the interruption with storm clouds gathering on his face, but Enki looked mildly surprised and curious. “Yes, Eddy? What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? I don’t know,” Eddy replied, “but I thought you said this display was blank.”

“Isn’t it?” Enki asked mildly.

“No, I can see the sapling,” Eddy told him.

“What?” several gods and goddesses asked at once as everyone raced over to that particular bowl.

“It still looks blank to me,” Enki noted as he looked into the pool.

“Are you blind?” Eddy demanded.

“Could be,” Enki replied easily, “as it still looks blank to me.”

“Right there!” Eddy pointed into the water. “It’s the sapling. There’s the pot I put it in.” He traced the outline of the pot on the surface of the water and was only mildly surprised when he left a trail of light in his finger’s wake. “The trunk, and branches,” he continued, tracing the outline. As he finished tracing the silhouette, the entire tree came into view for everyone.

“Now I see her,” Dee remarked, “but just the sapling and her pot.”

“Not much around her to identify the place,” Eddy told her. “We need to pan back a bit. Maybe a lot.”

“Go ahead,” Enki invited him. “You know how, and you’re the only one who can see everything around the tree.”

Eddy concentrated on what he saw in the divinatory pool. Slowly the view moved back and away from the sapling. As he modified the view, it became obvious the tree, his tree, was being kept in a house somewhere. The tree was not really getting enough light. It wasn’t likely to be hurting just yet, but he had already hardened it off to outside conditions. It needed full sunlight and was at best only getting two or three hours.

He was soon able to see the area around that house. It sat alone in the midst of a pitch pine forest. It was not even very close to the nearest road. There was a narrow, packed dirt driveway leading to the house and the next nearest house was nearly a quarter of a mile away. “I still can’t tell where they are,” Eddy reported, tracing the roads he saw on the surface of the water.

He kept giving the pool a wider view until suddenly Enki told him, “Now I see something!” Enki took over from there and pulled the viewpoint even further back until they could see not one but two coasts.

“Cape Cod!” Eddy exclaimed. “They’re on theCape .”

“Makes sense,” Jael commented. “They wouldn’t want to move the tree very far or for very long. We would have seen the area we couldn’t look into while it kept moving. They would have wanted to be in place before we returned to Hattamesett.”

“Also setting up so close to where we were would throw us off,” Ina added. “I honestly expected them to be somewhere on the other side of the world. Vietnam or Zimbabwe or someplace like that.”

“Instead, they’re just a few miles off the Mid Cape Highway,” Eddy noted. “Anyone here up to drawing a map?”

“Just trace out the lines,” Enki told him, “and I’ll arrange for copies.”

Eddy did so then asked. “How soon do we leave?”

“We, Eddy?” Enki asked. “What makes you think we can afford to risk your life?”

“What makes you think you can leave me behind?” Eddy countered. “This is my responsibility. You lot have told me that often enough. If you didn’t mean it, perhaps you should have chosen different words of encouragement.”

Enki laughed. “As it happens we need you to retrieve the sapling. You may not have noticed but gods are a contentious lot and even our allies don’t trust us or each other to be in possession of the tree unless you’re present. It was hard enough to get a consensus on how to handle Yggdrasil’s request to meet you and who to leave with the sapling. Heck! It was hard enough to get some of them to agree to allow you to do your own shopping.”

“I haven’t done that in nearly two months,” Eddy pointed out.

“Well, once you knew what was at stake,” Enki admitted, “it was easier to get you to stay with the

sapling. It's been a major balancing act on my part, believe me. Anyone who uses the metaphor of herding cats has never tried to broker a treaty involving the gods of a world full of pantheons. Still I may be getting the hang of it. This is the third time in fifteen years I've been involved in such an undertaking."

"First time you've been in charge since the old days, though, Father Enki," Ina told him.

"I've had a nice long vacation, Daughter Inanna," Enki replied, smiling. "I guess I was just ready to go back to work. Eddy, We do need you there, but it's going to take a day or two to prepare. You need to be there when we actually take the sapling back, but I want to have that house completely surrounded, not only on the mortal plane, but on the divine as well. The armies of Chaos and Order may both be going in there, but only we're coming back out again."

"I'd hardly call either side an army," Ina remarked, "not compared to the last time."

"Daughter," Enki told her. "You are a real spoilsport."

Eleven

Eddy was almost immediately ushered back to his home. Dee, Jael and Ina accompanied him to the trunk of Yggdrasil where they met Ratatosk.

"Where're you going?" the squirrel asked.

"Back to Hattamesett," Eddy told him and then went on to explain what had happened.

"So why are you going this way?" Ratatosk pressed.

"We thought it might be a good idea to retrieve Enki's van," Dee told him tartly. "Why?"

"Because you can get directly to Eddy's backyard, off the branch you're about to leave," Ratatosk told her.

"We can?" Jael asked. "I thought all of Hattamesett was cut off from the Tree for the duration."

"It was," Ratatosk agreed, "until the sapling was moved. Do you still want to return that van?"

"It's more important we get Eddy safely home," Dee replied. "We'll have someone else retrieve the van."

"If someone hasn't already stolen or stripped it out there in the desert," the squirrel told her. "Come on, I'll show you the way."

They took a fork in the branch just before the way to Enki's war room and Jael worried, "Oh, I thought we'd be able to tell Enki we weren't picking up his van."

"I'll tell him," Ratatosk chuckled as though planning the nastiest possible wording.

"Be nice, Ratty," Rona warned him from Jael's mouth, "or I'll have Marcus serve you nothing but fruits and nuts from now on."

Ratatosk stopped and turned to stare at Jael who glared back at him. The squirrel held the eye-to-eye contact for only two seconds before he wilted a bit and muttered, “Yes, ma’am.”

Five minutes later they were near the end of a branch and Ratatosk told them, “There you go.”

“Ratatosk,” Dee asked, “how long has this branch led to Eddy’s back yard?”

“I’m not sure,” the squirrel replied. “I didn’t become aware of it until a few years ago.”

“How many years?” Dee pressed. “Fifteen perhaps?”

“Maybe,” Ratatosk admitted uncertainly. “Yggdrasil is growing new limbs all the time and goes almost everywhere. I never thought much about it.”

“Is this important, Ninhursag?” Ina asked.

“It’s been millennia since you called me that,” Dee noted. “Even on the ball field you call me Demeter, Ceres or Nature.”

“I seem to be coming ever closer to my roots,” Ina shrugged. “Inanna and Ishtar were always my most powerful and important aspects, so...”

“Yes,” Dee recalled, “You were Queen of Heaven for a while there and the bringer of civilization to many tribes.”

“After stealing *themes* from Enki, as the stories go,” Jael noted.

“Get him drunk and he’s a pussycat,” Ina remarked smugly. “So?” she demanded of Dee.

“It might be important, yes,” Dee replied at last. “It would mean the Tree has been planning this since the end of the last cycle. She knew we would choose Eddy to raise her daughter.”

“How could the tree know that?” Ina asked. “It’s intelligent, but precognitive?”

“Why not?” Dee asked. “Of course trying to get a prophecy out of the Tree is probably the most useless thing you can try. If she doesn’t want to tell you, she won’t. And there is no one in all creation with more patience than the Tree.”

“Are you going to stand here nattering all cycle?” Ratatosk asked nastily.

“No,” Dee told him calmly, “I think it’s time we had a nice cup of tea,” and she took two further steps and faded from view.

“It’s good to be back,” Ina remarked when they were all back in Eddy’s garden. “This is almost like home now.”

“It is home for me,” Eddy told her with a chuckle. They entered the greenhouse and started toward the kitchen.

“Well, yes,” Ina agreed, “but I don’t usually feel so comfortable in someone else’s home. I haven’t felt this comfortable even in any of my homes, except the one in Dilmun, in centuries.”

“You have had a lot of homes, Ina,” Dee told her as they entered the kitchen and Dee put the kettle on. Jael shot Eddy an appraising glance and then started making a half pot of coffee.

“Oh go ahead, you can say it straight out,” Ina returned. “I’ve had more husbands and lovers than Liz Taylor, Zha Zha Gabor and Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel combined.”

“You’re the goddess of love,” Dee reminded her. “It was expected of you.”

“Expected, yes,” Ina muttered. “And I sure gave the people what they wanted, didn’t I?”

No one said anything to that outburst at first until Jael reached out and said, “Ina?” Ina looked up, there were tears in her eyes, but she was obviously determined not to cry. “If you don’t like that part of you, you can change you know.”

“Can I?” Ina asked challengingly.

“Of course you can,” Jael told her. “You’re a goddess. You’ve already changed many times. Each new aspect has been a bit different. And it’s not like you have an active cult in the modern world.”

“Actually I do,” Ina replied with a hint of distaste. “It’s not much of one and while they revere me, they seem to want me as I was in the Roman days, only slightly sluttier. I’m ready to grow up, I think and they just want me to stay as every teenaged boy’s wet dream!”

“Then tell them you’re not that kind of goddess anymore,” Rona suggested. Unlike her last few manifestations, this time Jael completely disappeared and was replaced by a slightly taller honey blonde with grey eyes.

“What?” Ina asked. “I can’t do that!”

“Why not?” Rona asked. “Is there some sort of divine law to that effect. The Lord knows I never heard of one and if there was, I’d have heard it by now. You and the other gods and goddesses used to appear to mortals all the time.”

“I guess,” Ina replied hesitantly, then made up her mind. “You know, that could be fun. It’s been literally ages since I last appeared before a worshipper. It will probably scare the willies out of them.”

“And that’s bad?” Rona asked. “Sounds like they could use the shock. Might make men out of them.”

“Actually, most of them are women,” Ina remarked. “Still, you’re right. Anyone mind if I step out for a few minutes?”

“We’re covered here,” Dee told her indulgently, “Go ahead.” Ina left by the back door. Through the windows Eddy could see her disappear as she returned to Yggdrasil. “Might be interesting to see what, if anything is going to come of this in a decade or so,” Dee chuckled.

“Just remember, Rona,” Jael warned her. “It’s your fault if some new Venus cult starts spreading all over the world.”

“A religion devoted to Love,” Rona returned. “I can think of a lot worse.”

“So can I,” Jael countered. “Unfortunately a lot of those alternatives are directly related to a religion based on Love. Rona, you’re human. You ought to know how your kind can pervert something basically good into something else entirely. And it’s not just platonic love we’re talking about here. The sort of people who would keep a cult to Inanna going are looking for empowerment and sex. That can be healthy, but also really easy to take too far.”

“You two really need to stop talking to yourselves,” Eddy commented.

“It looks weird,” Jael laughed, “but it’s amazing how we can do that on a busy sidewalk of almost any big city without anyone even noticing.”

“Oh, I think they notice,” Dee replied. “They just ignore you.”

“So what do we do now?” Eddy asked.

“We wait,” both Dee and Jael told him. “Any good movies?” Jael added.

Twelve

Eddy and his guardians were kept in the seclusion of his Hattamesett home for over a week. Jael and Dee made phone calls repeatedly to keep up on what was going on, but to Eddy it sounded as though very little was happening. “It’s not even reflecting on the mortal plane,” he pointed out.

“That’s probably a good thing,” Jael told him between sips of coffee. “Actually, I guarantee analogous activity is happening on this plane, but it’s happening covertly. All the activity is being carefully hidden, just as our allies are attempting to surround our enemies covertly. I’m more concerned with what Ina is up to.”

“Oh, just having some extended conversations with would-be worshippers,” Ina said from the doorway. “Can you believe very few of them actually believed I was real?”

“It’s not everyday a goddess stops in at the local temple to say, ‘Hi!’ you know,” Jael told her. “They probably thought you were just another interested potential convert.”

“Oh, come on!” Ina replied. “This should have been a giveaway, don’t you think.” Eddy wasn’t certain exactly what She did, but a powerful change came over Ina. Her very presence was a potent announcement that the Goddess of Love was in the house. Then she returned to her usual mortal guise and Eddy realized exactly what Ina had done.

“With an entrance like that,” he told her, “I’m surprised anyone doubted you. Mind, I’m surprised your worshippers didn’t just throw themselves at each other in an impromptu orgy.” He caught the stricken look on Ina’s face. “Oh.”

“Did you at least give them a lecture on safe sex?” Dee asked.

“I tried,” Ina replied. “I also tried to emphasize love over sex. Most of them got the message, I think. The rest are out proselytizing right now. Remind me to sponsor research into curing sexually transmitted diseases. At least that way I won’t have to feel responsible for the spread of AIDS.”

“Any other news from the outside world?” Eddy asked.

“I have a new high priestess,” Ina remarked, “but I don’t suppose that’s what you had in mind. Sorry, I’ve been as cut off as you have, maybe more so. I did try stopping by Olympus but, while everyone smiled and acted friendly, I got the idea they were keeping something from me.”

“I’ve been getting that same feeling from the answers I get over the phone,” Dee replied. “We get lots of answers, but a lot of them boil down to, “Just wait and don’t worry your pretty little head. We’ll let you know when to move.”

“Enki said that to you?” Ina asked incredulously.

“I haven’t spoken to Enki,” Dee told her flatly.

“Nin-ti would never...”

“Nor her either. I keep getting someone named Votan,” Dee replied.

“Who?” Ina asked. “Isn’t that another aspect of Odin?”

“A Mayan god,” Jael corrected her. “Votan is a god of warfare and death, a handy sort of fellow to have when you’re planning strategy. He’s a very old god with black skin, white hair and no teeth. He’s also the patron of drums, though I don’t think that applies.”

“Why is he answering Enki’s phone?” Ina asked.

“Nin-ti’s actually,” Dee replied. “She’s been handling all his calls or was until this Votan took over. Enki’s phone’s been turned off. I left some voicemail messages, but that’s about it.”

“I still can’t get over gods and goddesses using cell phones,” Eddy told her.

“Why not?” Dee shrugged. “They’re convenient.”

“But why do they work on the divine plane?” Eddy asked.

“They don’t,” Jael told him. “That’s why we needed messengers while on Yggdrasil.”

“So maybe Enki is on the divine plane,” Eddy suggested.

“Possibly,” Dee agreed, “but if that’s the case then we are the only members of the Springtime Seed Company on the mortal plane. Well, that would not be all that surprising, I suppose. We are trying to coordinate a battle. Someone will be in touch soon.”

“Next time let me talk to this Votan,” Ina told her forcefully.

“Ooh! Look who’s feeling Her oats,” Dee laughed gently. “Mighty Inanna has entered the building!”

“Well, it did boost my self-esteem a little,” Ina admitted. “Too bad most of them need a little more reality in their lives.”

“I thought that was what you were giving them,” Jael remarked.

Ina scowled at the comment for a moment, then decided Jael was not being nasty and replied, "I suppose I was. I just hope I managed to convince them I've changed."

"If not, you can always go back and give them a second lecture," Eddy told her. "From what you said, they'd probably enjoy it."

"Now there's a lesson I learned the first time around," Ina laughed. "Too much pleasure and the lesson is lost. Unfortunately, if you grant a lot of pleasure you also have to have a temperamental dark side. Face it, the other half of my persona is a real..."

"Female dog?" Jael suggested.

"I was going to say 'witch,'" Ina retorted, "but both descriptions are true. I've decided I don't want to be that nasty if I can help it. Look what I did to Dumuzi."

"What did you do?" Eddy asked.

"I killed him," she replied. "You don't really want to hear the details."

"He was cheating on you," Dee pointed out.

"And I was cheating on him or trying to," Ina replied. "Gilgamesh would have none of me and didn't I mistreat him too? I cheated on Hephaistos as easily as breathing."

"That was a forced marriage and you resented it," Jael pointed out. "And he was no prize either."

"And a lousy shot," Dee added. "He accidentally impregnated my Gaia aspect while attempting to rape Athena. I'm surprised she didn't kill him on the spot. However, in that phase you treated most of your lovers better than you did early on."

"I was no longer a war goddess," Inanna replied. "I was just a bimbo. Look, this dwelling on the past is getting me down. We need to get more involved with the siege, I think."

"Well, now that you're back," Jael commented, "Maybe I should check in with the office."

"You mean Hell," Eddy clarified. "You can say it, you know."

"I've noticed that most folks who know my true nature would prefer not to have me throw it in their faces," Jael told him.

"While you're out, see if you can find Enki," Dee suggested, "or at least someone from that pantheon. I don't trust that Votan. He's a bit too condescending in tone to suit me. I try to get along with my allies, but he isn't even trying to meet me halfway."

"I'll do what I can. I'm fairly sure I can find Ratatosk or one of the other Tree guardians. They're all on the side of Order and for good reason," Jael noted. "I'll be back in time for dinner. In fact, I'll bring something in. Chinese or Thai tonight?"

Jael returned a few hours later with large bag full of Lahb Gai, Pad Thai, Goong Gah Tiem and Chicken Panang Curry along with spring rolls and a tub of hot soup. "Sorry I couldn't bring in the green tea ice

cream,” she told them as she put the bag down on the kitchen table.

“We have some ginger ice cream in the freezer, if you want” Eddy told her.

“You keep ginger ice cream in the house?” she asked.

“I had Ina pick some up down the street while you were out,” he replied. “This is New England. We’ve had ginger in our ice cream shops for generations. We also have frozen pudding in the ice box, but I doubt that would go as well.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Jael admitted. “I wish I had some. It turns out Chaos has been playing us for fools. I finally found Ratatosk and he tells me our forces have been in place for days. They’ve been waiting for us to confirm our own readiness.”

“Then what has Votan been playing at?” Dee demanded.

“Votan isn’t one of ours,” Jael reported. “Turns out, one of them figured out how to intercept your cell phone. They’ve been keeping us pinned down by telling us to wait. Meanwhile they’ve been blocking all incoming calls as well.”

“How did you find that out?” Ina asked.

“We tracked down Votan and threw him into the next cycle,” Jael replied. “But we can’t use the cell phones anymore. The good news, of course, is that so far the forces of Chaos want the sapling alive. Not only have they not destroyed it, but they have stopped coming after you Eddy. Actually, I think they stopped about the time the seed actually sprouted. Once that happened, killing you would have killed the tree. However, our forces will be moving in tonight and there’s no telling what Chaos might try next. Enki will be sending more guardians to patrol the streets outside tonight and also a party to block any attackers attempting to get here via Yggdrasil.

“Tomorrow morning we ride to Yarmouthport so we can be there when the sapling is recovered,” Jael concluded.

“If they don’t find a way of eluding us,” Eddy told her.

They were up early the next morning, but Dee insisted on Eddy having a calm and relaxed breakfast. “Then let’s eat out,” he countered. “There’s a diner in Buzzards Bay I like and it’s on our way to Yarmouthport.”

“I like it,” Jael approved. “It gets us going in the right direction and no cleaning up afterward.”

Eddy would have settled for just a cheese roll and a cup of black coffee, but Dee insisted he have the “Kountry Breakfast” on the grounds that, “You’ll need your energy.”

“With a breakfast that big, I’ll need a nap,” he argued.

“Eat what you can,” Dee insisted.

He thought it particularly unfair when she only had coffee and a cheese roll and Jael contented herself with tea and toast. He would have changed his order back again had Ina not decided to eat the same large breakfast Dee was forcing on him. That action gave him pause to think. Was Ina ordering the

“Kountry Breakfast” so he wouldn’t be the only one eating that much or was she just hungry. Even a week earlier he would have assumed she was hungry, but since her return from what she called “an extended chat with my new priestess” Ina seemed like a deeper, more thoughtful individual.

Dee and Jael had chuckled over what a latter day Inanna cult might turn into, but as Eddy thought about it, he realized that if Ina remained as thoughtful and intelligent as she was behaving currently, there were a lot worse ways a new religion might go. He smiled at his own thoughts just then. Last winter he would never have even speculated about new religions and how they might be shaped. Now it was something he considered without so much as flinching at the blasphemy it represented to his own upbringing. He knew Dee had eschewed direct worship in the modern world for encouraging ecological awareness, but he wondered idly what sort of religion Jael and Rona might spawn together. Then he quickly drew back from that concept. Nice as she was, Jael was still a demoness. Perhaps it was best if no cults formed around her.

After breakfast, they crossed the Cape Cod Canal and got on the Mid-Cape Highway. It wasn’t a long drive from where they had started, and Eddy still couldn’t shake the feeling of unreality he was getting. Traffic was moderately heavy even this early in the morning, but that was to be expected in July. It was Sunday, however, and in a few hours the major flow of traffic would be in the other direction with summer people all trying to leave the Cape to go back to Boston, New York or wherever else they had come from. Even now traffic heading off-Cape was slightly heavier. However, everything looked normal, and yet here they were, headed into a war.

They arrived at what appeared to be a State Police road block across a back road not too far from the Yarmouthport exit. However, Jael instantly recognized several of the people manning it and got an update on the situation inside the perimeter.

“It’s getting pretty gory in there,” a supposed cop who turned out to be one of Jael’s fellow demons told them. “A lot of our big hitters have been badly wounded and over one hundred are out for the cycle.” Eddy knew now that was a euphemism for dead, or as dead as a deity could get in most circumstances, anyway. Dee had explained that it was possible for a god to die permanently, but it was rare.

“How about on their side?” Jael asked.

“Oh, I think we’re giving at least as good as we’re getting,” the demon replied, “at least I hope so. It’s hard to tell, but I know once we get back to Hell, there’s going to be a lot of promotions as most of us move up a rung or two.”

“I’m already up as high as I care to be,” Jael growled.

“Well, you may not have a choice,” the demon pointed out, “but then Lucifer is still claiming neutrality on this one, so you’re one of the few upper-level executives here.”

“I’m not an upper-level exec,” Jael denied.

“You are compared to most of us,” came the reply. “Anyway, Enki left word to have you passed through automatically. I’m not sure how close to the front he wants you, though. You’ll just have to go from checkpoint to checkpoint.”

“How many are there?” Jael asked.

“About half a dozen, I think. Out here and for the next two or three, we’re not doing anything more than

checking cars coming in or out to make sure they aren't carrying any of the opposition. So far none of them have come out this way, so it's very boring duty."

"Don't complain," Ina advised him as they all got back into Eddy's car. "You don't want this post to be exciting."

They were passed through the next three checkpoints as well, but held up at the fifth which was at the end of the long driveway heading up to the isolated house in which the sapling was being held.

"About time you got here," Enki told them as they got out of the car.

"We didn't take that long over breakfast," Dee snapped acidly.

"I wanted you here two days ago," Enki told her.

"Then you should have told us that yourself," Dee told him with an impatient edge to her voice.

"I was needed here," Enki explained. "I couldn't very well pop over to Hattamesett. There's no getting out of here by the usual shortcuts, remember?"

"Of course, I remember, and when you couldn't get through on the cell phone, didn't it occur to you something might be wrong?"

"Well what about you?" Enki shot back.

"I was getting through, or thought I was. I had several long conversations with some bloke who calls himself Votan. How was I to know he wasn't one of ours? This has been your show from the start, Enki. I agreed to that and I stuck to my part of the bargain. I've done everything you asked and did not try to upstage you. But after all this time you should have known me better. Did you really think I was a cell phone addict? Who the heck would I call anyway?"

"Well," Enki backed down under her onslaught, "I suppose I should have sent a messenger, but everyone was needed here."

"You could have sent Hermes," Dee suggested. "He's fast on any plane. Or Ratatosk for that matter, I doubt he's doing more than playing lookout. Or any of the surviving Anunaki for that matter. There are plenty of gods and goddesses you could have chosen from."

"You're right," he admitted, "but we could have moved in much sooner and they've been calling in reinforcements."

"You let them in?" Dee asked incredulously.

"Of course not," Enki replied, "but we did have to fight." He smiled grimly. "That Norse land of the giants, whatever its name is, is likely to be a ghost town for the rest of the cycle."

"Well that's good news, at least," Dee remarked, "What about our side?"

Eddy edged closer to Jael and Ina, "I notice neither of you are getting involved in telling Enki off."

“What?” Ina asked. “And get caught in the crossfire? I have a budding new cult to nurture and Jael is just too intelligent to even consider getting between those two.”

“Good point,” Eddy agreed. “You’ll notice I’m hanging back here with you two.”

“Age and experience,” Jael told him, “beats youthful vigor nine times out of ten.”

“In which case I’m at a distinct disadvantage in this crowd,” Eddy remarked.

“That’s what I meant,” Jael smiled at him.

“Well, you’re all here now,” Enki concluded. “The main assault on the house is underway right now so we should probably move up to the next check point. “We’ll be able to see the action from there.”

They were halfway up the long driveway before the sounds of battle reached them. “We’ve been doing our best to dampen the sounds coming out of here,” Enki told them as they walked. “Don’t want to disturb the neighbors.”

“Don’t want them calling the cops,” Jael added.

“That too,” Enki nodded. “The last thing we need here right now are the mortal authorities. We’re right on a flight path for Barnstable Municipal Airport . The longer we’re here, the more likely it’s going to be that someone is going to look down here and see what’s happening.”

“Then just finish up already,” Dee told him.

“Yeah?” Enki asked. “Funny.”

Thirteen

The last check point was just a few feet back from where the forest of pine trees ended and a wide lawn encircled the house. The house itself was a typical cottage so far as Eddy could see. The second floor would consist of two bedrooms and a bath. The first floor would have a kitchen and a living room, with a hall and stairway between them. The basement, he recalled from his view from Yggdrasil, was all one room with the open stairway in the center. He did not think much of the landscaping. There were no garden beds in sight, just a few shrubs, mostly boxwoods and privets that had to have been planted by someone with absolutely no artistic sense. The state of the garden, however, was the least of anyone’s concerns.

All around the house creatures from out of mythology were fighting with flaming swords, glowing spears, tremendous stone clubs, sparkling tridents and other odd weapons that probably would have been banned by the United Nations had anyone there ever seen one. The fighters were not just using those weapons to stab, slash, cut or crush their opponents. They were also using them to throw odd beams, cones and spirals of energy at each other. Some of the fighters were not armed at all but were casting spells at those of the other side. Eddy could not see how any of the fighters were parrying the mystical attacks, but evidently they were. However, every so often someone would score a hit and there would be a brilliant burst of light after which his or her victim would disappear.

“We’re winning,” Enki told the others.

“Are we?” Eddy asked. “Good... I think. I was expecting a somewhat gorier scene.”

“That’s not how we fight if we can help it,” Dee replied. “Spilling the blood of a god on the Earth is a good way to raise an army of enemies right on the spot. I don’t even want to tell you how many times I’ve found myself pregnant because some deity’s bodily fluids seeped into the ground.”

“Does that still happen very often?” Eddy asked.

“No, I put a moratorium on that sort of thing at the start of the Common Era two thousand years ago. If I’m going to have children it’s going to be because I choose to do so,” she told him.”

“So the ones who disappear,” Eddy asked, “are they dead?”

“For this cycle at least,” Dee nodded sadly.

“Are we taking prisoners?” Eddy asked.

“We’ve offered terms,” Enki told him. “No one has taken us up on them. Of course most of the beings out here aren’t the brightest in their army. They may not have noticed they’re beaten yet. Unfortunately the brain trust of their operation is inside that house. That lot we intend to punish and they know it, so they aren’t likely to give up. I just hope we can rush them before they try to destroy the tree when they realize they’ve finally lost.”

“I’ll feel it if they damage the sapling, won’t I?” Eddy asked.

“Probably,” Enki nodded. “You’ll let me know if you feel anything?”

“Of course,” Eddy told him.

“Good.”

“How long has this been going on?” Eddy asked.

“Since yesterday,” Enki told him. “We actually could have been done already if we weren’t worried about you and the tree. We’re keeping half of our force in reserve. You see, had we all gone in at once, Loki and whoever else is in league with him would probably have destroyed the tree or at least threatened to right away. This way, we’ve whittled down their main force without giving away just how outnumbered they are. We sent in just enough of our fighters to be assured of being able to win.”

“You’re going to have to rush the house soon, you know,” Eddy pointed out.

“How do you figure that?” Enki asked.

“Right now you have a chance of getting the bulk of our force to the door before those inside are aware of their predicament,” Eddy replied. “If you wait until you’ve killed all the giants, demons and whatever else is out there, it’s going to be pretty obvious. If I were you, I would be calling out the rest of my army about now.”

Enki thought about that and, after a few seconds, started giving orders. It took another half an hour to

get everyone into position, but once they were, it was less than a minute before the forces of Order were breaking down both front and back doors of the house.

Dee and Jael held Eddy back from going inside first. He had not realized how anxious he was about the sapling, but that concern was translating itself into reckless fearlessness and he kept trying to push himself to the front. Later he realized that was one of the more stupid things he did that day.

By the time he got inside the house, the first floor had been cleared and while there was still something going on upstairs, Eddy was more concerned with the basement where he knew the sapling was being kept.

There was fighting in the basement too, but that stopped before Eddy could scramble down the stairs where he saw something that chilled him to the core. Two man-like people were standing near the sapling one with a long, gleaming sword while the other wielded a double-bitted axe. The one with the sword, Eddy noted, had what might have been sun-darkened skin and blue-black hair. He was dressed in jeans and a brown work shirt, and Eddy might have ignored him if they had passed on the street except for the two long horns that sprouted from his head.

Jael, in her natural form had horns too, but they were shorter and less threatening. On her they seemed to say, "Okay, yeah, I'm a demoness. So what?" but on this guy, they were lethal weapons in their own right.

The axe wielder had light brown or maybe dirty blond hair that fell, shoulder-length, from beneath a Viking-style helmet with short dark gray wings on its sides. Eddy realized this was Loki and he was the one doing all the talking.

"Stay back!" Loki warned them, "or I kill the tree. I'll do it. You know that."

"Loki, put the axe down," Dee told him in calm, but ringing tones. From the god-like sound of her voice, Eddy realized this was the first time he had been in the presence of Mother Nature when She was completely out of mortal guise. The few flashes he had glimpsed earlier were far short of the real thing. "If anything happens to that tree, you're going to answer to Me for the rest of Eternity."

"Bah!" Loki spat at Her. "Words! Just words. I'm a master of words. You can't fool me."

"Just words?" Nature responded menacingly. The room darkened and there was a rumble from every direction a once.

"Go ahead," Loki jeered. "Then you'll be the one to kill the tree." Dee relented. The earth stopped shaking and the room brightened back to its previous dimness. "Hah! I knew you couldn't do it," Loki crowed.

"And neither can you," Enki told him. "If you wanted to kill the tree you would have just done it already."

"Oh, I can, old man, and I will," Loki responded. "Yeah, I had plans for this tree, but at least this way I'll get out alive."

"Whatever gave you that idea," Jael asked, with the odd rocket-launcherlike device on her shoulder.

"You can't shoot that in here, little girl," Loki told her nervously. "You'll hit the tree."

“Yes, I’ll hit the tree,” Jael replied, “but at least I’ll rid the Universe of you.”

“Then go ahead,” Loki invited her. “Pull the trigger. You don’t dare, do you? Yeah, yeah, just like the rest of them. You talk a good game, but you just aren’t ruthless enough.”

Jael lowered the weapon although it stayed on her shoulder. “Be thankful you didn’t know me last cycle,” she growled.

“There,” Loki murmured. “Now you lot are going to leave this place and let us go. Sorry about all the deaths, but they are on your heads, now aren’t they?”

“You really don’t understand yet, do you, Loki,” Mother Nature told him. “You have no way out. Give us the tree and submit to justice or I will make sure you suffer in ways Odin could never imagine. You too, Iblis,” she said to the one with the sword. “We’ve clashed before. I’m sure you remember the last time.”

“Allah was tougher,” Iblis told Her.

“I’m sure He was,” Dee nodded. “I don’t claim to be an Infinite, but I’m the next best thing and you know it. Now give it up and we’ll even give you two a running start before coming after you.”

“Give them their damned twig and let’s just get out of here,” Iblis told Loki.

“No!” Loki screamed. “Not when we’ve come this far You can give up, but not me!” He raised his axe in preparation to strike the sapling.

“No!” Jael and Dee both shouted. “Why are you doing this?” Jael continued desperately.

“Why?” Loki echoed. “You ask me why?”

“Is the power really worth all that?” Jael demanded.

“Of course it is!” Loki screamed at her. “I’ll be the supreme deity of the new universe!”

“We were supposed to be splitting that power,” Iblis reminded him.

“I thought you wanted to give up?” Loki countered. “Oh don’t give me that incredulous look. You planned to grab the lot at the last minute just like I was. We both know there can only be one Supreme God.” Iblis shrugged his agreement and Loki went on. “Yes, at last I could pay Odin back for all the indignities he heaped on me Cycle after Cycle.

“I’ll destroy him utterly,” Loki crowed. “I’ll make him never to have been! And best of all I’ll break the damned Cycles.”

Deetold him, “Earth needs the Cycles. They bring necessary renewal. You’ll destroy the Earth if you break the Cycles.”

“Good!” Loki shouted. “Good! I am sick to death of your bloody Cycles! Every single time! First we have three years of *fimbulwinter*. I hate snow. I hate cold. I’m not even particularly fond of the color white. And then what? I have to go unleash Fenris the wolf. Okay, yeah, he’s my son and all, but

dammit! I'm allergic to his fur! Do any of you have any idea what I have to go through to preserve your precious Cycles?"

"Can't say I honestly thought you had anything to do with it," Enki replied.

"A fat lot you know then," Loki told him. "If I don't go through all that every single time, the world comes to an end."

"The world comes to an end anyway," Dee informed him coolly, then caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye that nearly stopped her immortal heart. Quietly, while nobody was paying attention to him, Eddy had found a large wooden club that appeared to be glowing slightly and was casually making his way, a few steps at a time. It took all her self control not to scream at him at that moment and she wondered if anyone else had noticed yet. She decided she would have to keep Loki talking. Fortunately that turned out to be the easy part.

"Sure it does," Loki agreed. "That's because I do my part; not that anyone thanks me."

"Oh, will you stop whining?" Iblis asked him irritably. He turned to Enki and Dee, "I give up. I really do. Take me and throw me back into the Pit. The eternal tortures of the deepest Hell will be a vacation compared to two months of listening to this jerk."

"Me whining?" Loki screamed back at him. "Listen to you. Everything has to be a deception. 'Fool the keeper into giving us the tree,' you said. 'Send a few maidens his way and he'll give us anything we want.' He's an old man; probably hasn't been interested in women in decades. Look at him... Hey, where did he go?"

"Iblis is right," Eddie muttered from behind Loki, "you whine too much. You want out of this Cycle? You got it!" So saying, Eddy swung the club with all his might at Loki's head. Loki managed to turn around just in time to see it coming and lashed out with his axe just as the club made contact. Then both he and Eddy dropped to the ground and neither of them was aware of anything for a very long time.

Pole

One

A week passed before Eddy was aware of anything at all. When he woke up, he found himself in his own bed. Dee was sitting beside him on his left side and Oriel was busily doing something that appeared mystical, but for all he could tell she might simply have been taking his pulse. "Good morning," Dee greeted him.

"Is it?" Eddy asked hoarsely.

"Well, no," Dee shook her head. "Not really. Late afternoon actually."

"Is your hair..." Eddy tried to ask and gave up. He must be delirious. It couldn't be that color.

"Green?" Dee asked. "Well, yes. It's my natural color in my modern aspect. Do you mind?"

“It’s your hair,” Eddy shrugged. “Wear it anyway you like.”

“How are you feeling, Mister Salem?” Oriel asked.

“Pretty rocky,” Eddy admitted. “I have a terrible headache clear down to my fingers and toes. Am I being restrained?”

“You were thrashing about very badly yesterday,” Oriel informed him. “I was afraid you might hurt yourself.”

“Feels like I did,” Eddy remarked.

“No, that’s the aftereffect of what Loki did,” Oriel informed him.

“Loki?” Eddy asked, unable to place the name at first. Then the memories of the house in Yarmouthport came back to him. “Oh him,” he commented sourly. “I guess that was pretty stupid of me, wasn’t it?”

“Not your wisest course of action,” Dee confirmed, “but it turned out well enough.”

“You mean I survived,” Eddy translated. “What about Loki? Did he get away?”

“Only in a metaphysical sense,” Dee replied. “You killed him and just as you predicted, he’s out for the rest of this Cycle at least. Maybe permanently. We won’t know for certain until next Cycle.”

“He said he was necessary to the Cycles,” Eddy recalled. “Did I break the Cycles?”

“Loki was no more necessary to the Cycles than a random pebble,” Dee told him. “I don’t know how he managed to convince himself that he was, but he was wrong. There were Cycles before he was born and there have been cycles in which none of the prerequisites for Ragnarok occurred. The last cycle was one such. Short term memory, I suppose. He never had to release Fenris. Some cycles wouldn’t even have included his pantheon had he simply behaved himself. But then as clever as he was, I suppose he had a few creative blind spots.”

“Or massive delusions,” Eddy added.

“A distinct possibility,” Dee agreed. “Maybe both. In any case Loki won’t be back for a very long time. Odin is of two minds on that count. On the one hand, He won’t have to worry about Loki at the end of this current Cycle, but on the other, Loki was his best pitcher. The Celestial League will probably be extinct by the next Cycle. We may be immortal, but nothing holds our attention forever.”

“Someone else could rebel against Odin this time around,” Eddy commented.

“Or else no one will,” she told him. “If I had to bet on it, my money would be on Skuld.”

“The valkyr?” Eddy asked. “Why?”

“She got away, or at least we think so,” Dee replied. “She suddenly disappeared when the battle outside that house started going sour.”

“I thought we had the place blockaded,” Eddy noted.

“Not at the end,” Dee explained. “Enki called in almost everyone from the perimeter for the final assault so it’s possible she was able to slip away in the confusion.”

“That means we’ll have to be looking out over our shoulders for the next few months,” Eddy told her.

“Oh we’re watching,” Dee replied grimly, “We’re not taking anything for granted. Loki and Iblis are out, but there’s still a lot of power to be gained by taking possession of the tree. Almost any of us might get greedy.”

“Why don’t you want it?” Eddy asked, starting to feel tired again.

“What makes you think I don’t?” Dee countered. “Eddy, there isn’t a god or goddess who would turn down the chance to gain power and worshipers. In a sense they’re the same thing when you get right down to it. But there are right and wrong ways of gaining such power. Also, keep in mind just who I am. I have a better grasp of ecological balance than anyone, except the omniscient ones, of course. I know how badly the balance will be affected if we were to suddenly change supreme deities. I also know how badly it was affected the last few times we had a viable seed. No, the best thing for all is for us to maintain the status quo. Eddy?” she asked, seeing he was no longer paying attention.

“He’s asleep,” Oriel told her. “It’s going to take a while. That axe of Loki’s came close to sucking all the life out of him.”

“The nature of that weapon,” Dee sighed.

“How ever did he kill Loki, though?” Oriel asked. “He’s still only mortal, isn’t he?”

“Ah,” Dee smiled. “That was the nature of the weapon Eddy used. Normally the best he might have hoped for was to give Loki a headache, but that club was as enchanted as Loki’s axe or Iblis’ sword. I don’t know whose club it was, but it was powerful enough to kill almost anyone. It may even have been made from the wood of Yggdrasil or one of its aspects.”

“What happened to it, by the way?” Oriel asked.

“Enki and I destroyed it,” Dee answered. “Wherever it came from, it was too powerful to leave lying around. How long before he recovers, dear?”

“He’ll get gradually better over the new few weeks,” Oriel replied matter-of-factly. “Why?”

“He needs to plant the tree in the ground,” Dee replied. “He should have done it already in fact.”

“Can’t you do it, Mother?”

“If I have to, but so far everything has been done by Eddy. The others will be happier if I don’t have an active hand in raising the tree. If I do have to transplant it, however, I’d better have Jael and Inanna help out so no one will say I’m trying to get the tree aligned to me. I’d rather Eddy handled it though.”

“Maybe in a few days,” Oriel told her, “he’ll be able to stay awake long enough to supervise. Would that be good enough?”

“It may have to be,” Dee replied thoughtfully.

Oriel went back to caring for Eddy, but after a few minutes she asked, “You love him, don’t you, mother?”

Deethought about that for a while. She knew how she felt, but found it difficult to put into words. “Yes, I do,” she admitted at last. “I think I’ve loved him since we first met. Isn’t that silly?”

“I think it’s wonderful,” Oriel replied. “I wish I could find someone to fall in love with.”

“You’re only fifteen, dear. You’ll find someone. I’m sure,” Dee assured her.

Two

Although another three weeks passed before Eddy was fully recovered, Oriel’s prediction was correct and he was able to supervise, and even ease the sapling into its new home in the earth of his backyard only a few days later.

By now Eddy was used to the tree having a sudden and visible growth spurt immediately after being transplanted, but this time the change took them all by surprise. As soon as Jael and Dee had finished filling in the hole and tamping down the earth the six-foot tall sapling began to glow with a pure white light. It stayed like that for a full minute and then began to grow taller and fuller. In five minutes it had tripled in size and changed from a maple to a pine, to an oak and then finally back to a maple. Eddy was used to that by now too although he wondered what his neighbors might think when they noticed the tree’s daily changes. Now that it was tall enough to be seen over his back fence it was only a matter of time. He tried thinking of various excuses, but they all boiled down to the same thing Dee had told him months earlier, “That sort of thing is normal for this species, especially when it’s so young.”

When he was fully recovered Jael caught Eddy digging a wide hole near the base of the tree one morning. “What are you doing?” The tree had grown another seven feet taller since the day they had planted it in the ground. And its roots had spread so much that the contours of the garden around it had changed a little.

“Building a small water garden,” Eddy told her as he took a break from shoveling. “The ways the roots are pushing up the ground here gave me the idea. A pond would look very nice here.”

“Might be interesting to see if it translates out into the new world,” Jael remarked. “Want me to dig while you take a break.”

“Be my guest,” Eddy told her. “What did you mean, it ‘might be interesting to see if it translates?’”

“Well, last time we had a new tree get even this far was before I came into existence, but the way I understand it, the environment the Tree grows up in is almost always reflected in the world it represents. Hey, this is fun! I’ve never helped build a world before.”

“There’s no saying whether this will have any effect on the new world,” Dee told them from the greenhouse door. She and Ina entered the garden. The Tree will choose what she wants to take with her and the manner in which it is translated. This pond - a nice idea, by the way, I love the sound of trickling water – may turn into a lake beside which the Tree grows. Or it may become an underground grotto, or the oasis in a desert. Or the Tree may choose not to take it along at all. The Tree will be what she wants

to be and sculpt the world around herself accordingly.

“But you are right, Jael,” Dee added. “It will be interesting to see if it does translate into the next world.”

As the weeks dragged on the tree grew steadily until late September when it stood over eighty feet tall. It turned out that in spite of the tree’s prodigious height, it could not be seen from outside. “She’s starting to mature,” Dee explained over tea one afternoon. They had taken to sitting in the garden as often as possible. Eddy had spent nearly a month on the water garden. While digging, he kept changing his plans and eventually made two ponds with a brief stream between them. The upper pond emptied as a waterfall over a rocky ledge into the stream, which ran fifteen feet along an “S” shaped course before entering the lower pond.

Eddy had left the upper pond as a clear pool with only a few marginal plants along the edges. The lower pond was host however to blue lotuses and papyrus plants. Those plants had been donated by Amun-Ra in commemoration of Osiris’ sacrifice to preserve the new tree and had been specially enchanted by Dee so they would be hardy enough to survive a New England winter without having to be removed from the pond for the winter. Eddy had also released a dozen goldfish into the pond along with an equal number of snails. The three frogs they could hear in the late afternoon and early evening, had moved in on their own.

“Part of the maturity will be to create a new world,” Dee continued. “She hasn’t done that yet, but this is how it begins as she starts to envelope reality around her. And a good thing too otherwise we’d have to find a way to hide her from your local authorities. I don’t imagine they’d be all that pleased at the sudden appearance of a tree twice as tall as any other in the neighborhood.”

“One that changes species every few days would be sure to catch their attention,” Eddy remarked. “She’s got a long way to go yet, though, and that worries me.”

“What makes you say that?” Dee asked.

“Two reasons,” Eddy replied. “First of all, until she does mature she’ll still be part of this world, but I’ve seen her parent. Eventually she’s going to be a hazard to the local air traffic regardless of whether or not the pilots can see her. And second, we still have over six months to go until she reaches maturity, or so you tell me. Somehow I doubt we’ve seen the last of the forces of Chaos.”

“You won’t need to worry about that first matter,” Dee told him. “She’s almost done growing for the season. She’ll be dormant in a month or so and that will last until next spring. Just like with her normal counterparts, she will not grow while dormant and her growth has already slowed way down in the last few days. She’s preparing for her winter sleep.

“Chaos is another matter,” Dee continued. “I wish I could tell you we’re done with them, but I cannot. Loki and the frost giants are out of the picture as are Iblis and his particular brand of demons, but we know Skuld is probably still on the loose and there were other allies who got away in Yarmouthport.”

“Not to mention the fact that the Tree represents the infinite power of an entirely new universe,” Eddy put in. “That sort of temptation is likely to affect our friends as well as our enemies. Whichever god is in possession of the Tree at the moment it transcends this world for the next gets the prize, right?”

“That is the way it works,” Dee confirmed.

“Then we’ll have to protect her from our friends as much as from our enemies,” Eddy concluded. “Everyone wants the Tree.”

“Not everyone,” Dee reminded him.

“Still,” Eddy remarked, “it’s us against the world, isn’t it?”

“With the help of our friends,” Dee smiled. “This isn’t over yet and while I fear there may be many changes of loyalty and far too much of giving in to temptation, I think we’ll also be amazed at who our true friends will turn out to be.”

“Prophecy again?” Eddy asked.

Deeshook her head. Eddy watched fondly as her deep green tresses waved back and forth with the movement. “Just a gut feeling,” she laughed.

This story will continue in The Tree.

About this Title

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