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A Plethora of Deities:
Book Four

The Tree

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

Author's Foreword

I've never really been satisfied with the first book of this series, *Downhill All the Way* . For starters, I never liked the title but couldn't find one I liked better. And there were things I tried to say about the nature of Divinity and Infinity that I really was not comfortable with. Perhaps the problem was that I wrote that story too soon.

Whatever the reason when I wrote *In the Sky With Diamonds* I kept the connections between the two books somewhat tenuous. Yes, these were the same gods who had appeared in *Downhill* , but aside from cameo appearances by Marcus and Jael from the first book, I left a lot of explanations for the differences in the worlds of the two books to myself. I was trying to move on from the flaws of the first book. It was successful in that I liked the second story much more than the first.

When I came up with the idea for Book Three, *The Seed* , I had to admit "A Plethora of Deities" was a series and I finally explained what had happened at the end of the first book and why Hawk Wilton's world was so different from the one Marcus Steele had lived in. This time I liked the way I handled matters that made me uncomfortable in the first book and there was another difference. The first two books were not really about the gods. *Downhill* was about Marcus although Jael became a major character as the story progressed. *Sky* was really about Hawk and how he whipped the gods into a viable team, but in *The Seed* , while Eddie was definitely the main character, several of the gods and Jael became equally important characters. I had a pretty good ensemble cast going, so when I realized I had only told half the story, I was more than willing to continue on with the ensemble.

So here you go, the other half of the story I started in *The Seed* . Of course, I liked this one so much, I'd like to write still more stories in this series. However, I'll have to wait until inspiration strikes. For some strange reason, I've never been able to force these particular characters to do anything...

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.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport ,Massachusetts
August 24, 2006
The Tree

Prologue

Skuld walked alone. The *Valkyr* had become used to being on her own of late, but not normally under these circumstances. Her footsteps reverberated as she progressed down the long dark corridor. She hated this place, so unlike the halls of Asgard where she had spent most of her life.

Skuld, who was just as often called Necessity, had never truly appreciated Asgard until she came here for the first time. Asgard had certain grim responsibilities, but it was a friendly and cheerful place in all. The realm Skuld now progressed through was designed only for punishment and repression. There was no Valhalla here. This corridor, for all its paint and polish, was utterly black and lit only with occasional torches, which served more to blind than illuminate.

Skuld strode with long, purposeful steps, but somehow she failed to make any progress. That was a feature of this place, she knew, but understanding didn't make it any easier to bear. It had never been this long to her before. She was being punished. Idly, Skuld wondered if she would ever be allowed to reach the room at the end of the corridor. Then, just as she started to despair a harsh female voice growled, "Oh hurry up already!"

In three swift steps, Skuld reached the tall black doors and pushed them open to reveal a cavernous room beyond. Most of the rooms in this realm had been modernized and, in fact, looked very much like any office building in a large city, but this room was half volcanic caldera and half medieval torture chamber.

Skuld kept her eyes from lingering on the intimidating devices that lined the room. These days they were supposedly just for show, but they had all been used at one time or another and each, she had discovered, had absorbed the torment of those on whom they had been used. The result was that anyone, with even a whisper of empathy in his or her soul, could feel the pain when looking at the racks, thumbscrews, iron maidens, water-boards and all the rest. Skuld knew she was tough, a *Valkyr* had to be, but even she could not bear to dwell on the devices in this room.

There was a throne at the far end of the room. It was not a tall chair with a high back but one of a medieval design, that a man wearing a sword might sit on in the same manner he would ride a horse and on which a woman would sit "side-saddle." The female figure on this throne, however, was seated in the masculine style as she glared at Skuld.

The woman on the throne could not be seen clearly in this room. Instead she had intentionally cloaked herself in shadow so that all anyone could see were a pair of glowing orange eyes. It was not her natural appearance, Skuld knew, but it was the guise in which she held court. Skuld reached a familiar spot approximately nine feet in front of the throne, kneeled and waited.

"You failed me, Skuld," the woman on the throne observed an eternity later.

"I did my part!" Skuld replied defiantly. She had never let Odin or the other gods of Asgard know they intimidated her and she refused to show her fears here either. "I got the Tree. It's not my fault Loki and Iblis wouldn't listen to a woman."

Her outburst was met by another long silence. Finally the reply came. "There is that. Never trust a man to get anything right on the first attempt. They won't read the instructions and they refuse to stop for directions." She paused again, while Skuld waited respectfully. "We'll do things differently this time."

"Our forces are scattered, Mistress," Skuld informed her. "Most of our allies are dead, maybe

permanently.”

“We’ll need new allies, then,” the woman on the throne snapped at Skuld, “Don’t worry. I have that well in hand, and we’ll stop relying on men.”

“Good idea, Mistress,” Skuld agreed instantly “The others are relying almost entirely on women, Nature, that harlot Venus, and the demoness Jael.”

“Jael!” the mysterious woman snarled. Her eyes became twin flames of hate for a minute before she calmed down enough to continue. “That one has a lot to answer for.”

“I can fix her,” Skuld replied confidently. “She was entirely too smug for my taste when we met. It would be my pleasure to give you her head as a gift.”

“No!” the other woman stopped Skuld. “That one is mine. I’m going to deal with her personally. I owe her so very much.”

Pole

One

Eddy Salem took the kettle off the stove and poured the steaming water into the teapot. He really preferred coffee, but sipping tea with the goddess known to the world as Mother Nature, or as he knew her, Dee, had become a normal afternoon ritual and one, to his surprise, that he looked forward to almost every day.

He had chosen today’s blend carefully, using a base of Ceylon black tea he had mixed with some Imperial Gunpowder and Jasmine teas. The result looked a bit like what one might sweep up off the floor of a tea shop after a long and hectic day, but which had a fine and balanced flavor with a pleasant floral hint that accented, rather than dominated, the aroma. He paused to savor the scented steam, before putting the lid on the French press pot.

“Anything I can do to help?” a female voice asked cheerfully from the kitchen door.

“The pastries, perhaps, Ina,” Eddy suggested and pointed toward a tray of small cream puffs sitting on the kitchen table. “Did you just get back?”

“I didn’t go very far,” Ina replied cheerfully. She had, in fact, been much more relaxed and cheerful in the last two weeks than she had been when Eddy first met her. A change had certainly affected her for the best. Ina was better known to most folks by other names; Innana, Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite and Venus, just to name a few, but in Hattamesett, on the Southcoast of Massachusetts, the local shopkeepers had come to know her as Ina Loveall. “I just thought I’d try walking a few miles for exercise.”

“You need exercise?” Eddy asked disbelievingly.

“Even a goddess needs to keep her weight down,” Ina replied primly.

“You look great just the way you are,” Eddy assured her.

“You’re sweet,” Ina smiled, “but I don’t want to out-grow all my clothes.”

Eddy kept his thoughts to himself as he lifted a second tray with tea cups and the pot on it. He was convinced that Ina simply created whatever outfits she chose to wear on the spot. He was correct about one thing, however. Ina was gorgeous, but when Dee was in the room, she was his only interest.

Dee was sitting in the greenhouse room that overlooked Eddy’s backyard, reading a paperback book intently. When Eddy had first met her, her hair had been an intense sort of brown in which almost every imaginable shade from dark blond to near black had been carefully mixed strand by strand. Lately, however, when in the privacy of Eddy’s home, she allowed her natural green shade of hair to manifest. Like the brown, the green hair was actually a mixture of many different shades. Her green eyes, which had seemed harsh on first meeting had somehow softened over the months, especially when they met Eddy’s rather ordinary brown ones. She put down her book and told them, “You should have called me. I would have helped.”

“No need,” Ina told her, smiling. “There were only two trays after all and Eddy did most of the preparation. Where’s Jael?”

“Right here!” Jael responded from the far end of the garden. “I’ve been weeding around the peppers. The weeds got away from us while we were busy in Yarmouthport.”

“Weeds do that sort of thing,” Eddy chuckled. “But the garden is my hobby. You don’t have to work on it.”

“I don’t mind,” Jael replied in two voices at once, one soprano, the other her more usual contralto. She abruptly grew a few inches taller, her face lengthened a bit and her hair lightened to honey blonde. “We’ve been thinking of buying a house with Marcus and this is good practice. You never know if you’re going to like garden work until you get down and try it.”

The higher-voice blonde was actually not Jael at all, but a woman named Rona. Eddy had still not heard the entire story of how it had happened, but some fourteen or fifteen years previously, Jael had become possessed by Rona’s spirit, or something like that. They had evidently had a few rocky years together after that, but had eventually come to terms with their predicament and, in fact, made a very good team together if one could ignore their occasional squabbles.

Jael, the demoness, however was the default personality, so whenever they relaxed it was her form they assumed. So while it was Rona who had just spoken, it was Jael who stepped around the large tree that was the centerpiece of Eddy’s backyard and came to join them for tea.

“So, do you like gardening?” Eddy asked as he poured for Jael.

“Very much so,” Jael agreed enthusiastically. “I’d never actually tried it until we built the water garden.” She looked toward the tree; there were a pair of small ponds with a waterfall running between them at the base of the tree. The top pond had been left clear, but the lower pond was filled with blue lotuses and dwarf papyrus that had been specially enchanted to be hardy to the New England winter. There were also a few fish in the lower pond and a trio of frogs had moved in on their own, although they occasionally

visited the upper pond as well. "But I suppose I should have realized I would take to it naturally, given what I normally do for a living."

Jael's normal responsibilities included punishing unrepentant polluters in Hell. It was not a job she loved. She much preferred when souls got the point of why they were being punished sooner rather than later, but it was a job from which both she and Rona got a certain amount of satisfaction.

Afternoon tea had gradually become a welcome quiet time for them all and a time during which they could contemplate the tree. It was that tree that brought them all together. Seven months earlier, Eddy had come home from grocery shopping one afternoon to discover he had "won" the grand prize in the Springtime Seed Company's contest. It was a contest he had only vaguely been aware of. Never having won anything in a contest or a lottery, it was not something he had expected to ever affect him in the slightest.

The grand prize had been a single seed. He didn't learn until much later that it had come from what he thought of as the Tree of Life but which the three goddesses who had become as close to him as family usually referred to as Yggdrasil, or the World Tree.

He also learned that what he thought of as history was divided up into long cycles and that in a very literal way each cycle ended with the destruction of the world only to be replaced by something new, but which bore a strong resemblance to what had come before it, complete with the remembered history of those past cycles, although each cycle was different and unique.

Eddy would never have believed it had he not come to grips with the fact that Dee and Ina were goddesses and that Jael was a possessed demoness, but according to them, magic had been real during the previous cycle. Given all he had witnessed in the last few months, however, he was not entirely certain there was no magic in the world he knew now.

Once each cycle, the World Tree produced a single viable seed. That seed, if it managed to sprout and then grow to maturity, would create an entirely new universe. That seed had also grown into the eighty foot tall tree in Eddy's back yard.

For the gods, that Tree represented the ultimate power. Whoever was in possession of the Tree at the moment of transcendence, that single instant in which the new universe came into being, would become the supreme being of that new universe. It was a temptation few deities could resist.

So far they had defended the Tree from a multitude of attacks, although as a seedling it had been stolen by the *Valkyr* Skuld and delivered up into the hands of the Norse god Loki and Iblis, the Islamic aspect of Satan. The Seedling had been retrieved safely but at the cost of many divine lives on both sides. The special lotuses and papyrus in the pond had been gifts to commemorate the sacrifice of the Egyptian god Osiris although he had been in good company before the tree was safely back in Hattamesett.

Most of the gods would come back to life at the beginning of the next cycle, but Eddy too had nearly been killed when he single-handedly fought Loki. Eddy survived, but Loki had not been quite as fortunate, although had he survived he would have had to face Odin's wrath. So maybe Loki had gotten off easy after all.

Eddy had taken weeks to completely recuperate even with the assistance of Dee's daughter Oriel, a healing goddess of great ability. Even before he was fully back to health, he had transplanted the sapling to its current location and it had grown with miraculous speed until reaching its current height. It had only been a few days since he and Jael had built the water garden, but it already seemed as though it had

always been there.

“Are you sure the Tree won’t interfere with air traffic?” Eddy asked Dee, taking another sip of tea.

“She’s only eighty feet tall,” Dee assured him. “Planes are supposed to fly much higher than that.”

“Supposed to yes,” Eddy agreed, “I think they’re supposed to cruise at one thousand feet or higher but there’s one idiot around here who gets a kick out of flying just over the tree tops. I know the tree can’t be seen from the front of the yard, but wouldn’t that make it all the more dangerous?”

“I doubt it,” Dee replied after a few moments of thought. “The Tree is already starting to encyst herself in her own reality. Think of her as a sort of caterpillar, if you like. She is forming a cocoon in which she will spend the winter. Except instead of a cocoon of silk, she’s spinning it out of time and space. Then, in the spring, she will burst forth in her full glory much like a butterfly.”

“Unless she’s a moth,” Ina cut in. Dee glared at her. “Well, it’s hard to tell when they’re still caterpillars, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never had any trouble telling the difference,” Dee replied flatly.

“Well, I wouldn’t expect you to make that sort of mistake, no,” Ina admitted, “but the rest of us aren’t so gifted, not with bugs anyway. Now trees are something else altogether.”

“Trees, Ina?” Jael asked. “I didn’t realize you had any special affinity with trees. Was it as Innana?”

“All of my aspects have been associated with gardens and vegetation, to one extent or another actually,” Ina admitted. “Well, all the ones I’ve conjoined with in my current form anyway. Did you realize Athena is one of my aspects?”

“Never heard that,” Jael admitted.

“I have,” Rona cut in, taking over Jael’s body in the process. “But you haven’t merged with her, have you?”

“No, we don’t always merge with all our aspects,” Ina replied.

“But I still don’t see it,” Jael admitted, flashing back to her natural form, complete with the cute little horns and tail. “How is Athena one of your aspects?”

“Even though you think of me as Inanna, you’ve forgotten what I was like as her,” Ina replied. “As Inanna, I was very much a goddess of war. So too were Ishtar and Astarte. The Athena aspect diverged from Astarte. By the time the Roman pantheon had started to wane we no longer had all that much in common and we never merged.”

“So if Astarte was a goddess of war,” Eddy asked, “how did you become Aphrodite?”

“Interesting question,” Ina admitted. “That started during the Canaanite period when I diverged into three goddesses, or maybe it was two goddesses, one with a pair of closely related aspects. There was always a bit of confusion on that matter especially when the Israelites put their own spin on my nature. In that period I was literally two or three completely different goddesses, depending on how you count and exactly when you’re talking about. I was Astarte, the wife of Ba’al, but as Astarte my other aspect was

Anat, a hunter and warrior. In that period I was once more the Queen of Heaven, but there was another, older queen who was the wife of El. Her name was Asherah and she reigned with El even as I reigned with Ba'al. They were the older, somewhat tired,

couple. Ba'al and I were the young up and comers, at least according to the Canaanites. Among the Israelites it was a different story. El Shaddai and his consort Asherah were mature but vital deities. Anyway," Ina continued, "Asherah was also one of my aspects."

"You were a goddess to the Jews?" Eddy asked incredulously.

"No," Ina shook her head, "to the Israelites. Judaism, as the monotheism you think of it, did not really start to develop until some centuries after David and Solomon, toward the end of the Monarchy or maybe during the Babylonian Exile."

"Don't you know?" Eddy asked.

"I wasn't there at the time," Ina shrugged. "We're getting off the subject, however. Asherah was closely associated with trees and the sea, associations that Aphrodite and Venus had as well."

"So what became of Asherah?" Rona asked. "Did you merge with her too?"

Ina looked puzzled for long moment. "I don't know. Isn't that strange? I suppose I must have merged with the Canaanite version of Asherah, too many of her associations became connected to my later aspects, but I honestly don't have any recollection of having done so."

"What about the Israelite Asherah?" Jael asked.

"Can't say," Ina shrugged. "She was always so close with Asherah of Canaan that they often merged with and diverged from each other. I don't have very many clear memories of the end of the Israelite period, though, I was a bit scattered at the time, being both Tanit to the Phoenicians and Aphrodite to the Greeks and a host of other goddesses as well. That's odd, Tanit was as close an aspect of Asherah, maybe closer, as she was of mine, but I recall merging with her. Well, I didn't coalesce back into my current form until the Roman period. Still, I remember merging with my various other aspects, maybe Asherah went somewhere else?"

"I wasn't watching at the time," Dee commented. "Some ancient writers equated her with my Gaia aspect, which is one of the closest ones to my modern Mother Nature aspect, but I never merged with her either. Interesting, isn't it? You and I, Ina, could have merged as one at one point or another, but never did. We're too distant to do so now, but... I've read that many modern scholars believe most of her associations and aspects were absorbed by Yahweh when he became an Infinite. I suppose we could ask."

"It would involve leaving Hattamesett for a longer amount of time than we ought to," Ina pointed out. "Maybe I'll take the time to look into it when this is over though. Until then I'll use my few spare moments to nurture that new cult of mine."

"I really would have loved to see the expressions on the faces of your followers when you actually showed up in person," Jael laughed.

"Now that I've had time to get over it myself," Ina smiled, "it was fairly amusing."

“Have you gotten around to telling them you’re not that kind of girl anymore?” Jael inquired carefully.

Ina sighed, “Repeatedly. Some of them have even listened. Naturally, the one who listened most closely was the one I chose as my new high priestess. That helped a lot, though there’s no cause so good and pure that it won’t attract some fools anyway and my old reputation seems to have attracted some fairly shallow and immature people. I haven’t culled them out of the cult, but I have been encouraging them to grow up. Most of them are improving.”

“Eddy,” Rona asked, “do you mind if I pick some of your veggies for the salad tonight?”

“Not at all,” Eddy told her. “That’s why I grow them, after all. I picked some tomatoes earlier, but you’ll find some nice cucumbers still on their vines, though the fall crop of peas won’t produce for another two or three weeks. And there are some nice ripe peppers now too.”

“There’s still some summer lettuce left, isn’t there?” Rona asked. When Eddy nodded, she continued, “Good. I noticed there are none in the fridge.”

“It’s been very quiet around here lately, hasn’t it?” Ina noted.

“We came out of Yarmouthport in better shape than we might have expected,” Jael pointed out. “Anyone thinking of making a move on the Tree has to be having second thoughts. There have been a few comparatively minor incidents lately, but I think they’ve mostly involved tail ends of Loki’s and Iblis’ army. I haven’t seen a frost giant in weeks.”

“Jotunheim is likely looking like a ghost town about now,” Dee speculated. “We could still face attacks from that quarter, but I think we have the survivors cowed for the duration. We’re not home free yet, though. We still have half a year before the Tree transcends and I sense some stirrings in the ether.”

“What do you mean?” Eddy asked.

“Not really sure,” Dee admitted, “but our situation is different now. And there’s something different on the wind as well. I just can’t figure out what it might be. Keep in mind the Tree is no longer a sapling. A lumberman might call her a pole.”

“A pole?” Jael asked.

“A tree goes through four stages of development as defined in the lumber industry,” Dee explained. “Seedlings are generally young trees whose trunks are less than half an inch in diameter. They can range from six inches to six feet tall as well. Saplings are half an inch thick to four inches in diameter and may be as tall as twenty feet. They generally have all living branches and a vigorous growth habit. In the third growth stage it is called a pole. A pole is greater than four inches in diameter but less than eight. The height of a pole depends on the species. Most normal species of poles do not exceed thirty feet, although this Tree is a very special one. Then, finally we reach the tree stage. Lumbermen will often refer to this stage as sawtimber as it is at this stage that a tree is finally large enough in diameter to cut into valuable timber. However, we won’t be harvesting this tree, so I think we should dispense with that term.”

“And if we were,” Ina pointed out, “he’s already thick and tall enough to be considered sawtimber, but he’ll get much larger yet.”

“Indeed,” Dee agreed. “Anyway, now that she has been planted in the ground, she won’t be able to be moved. That means no one is going to be able to pick her up and carry her off like Loki and Iblis did, but

it also means that now more than ever we need to adopt a siege mentality in protecting the Tree. She can't be stolen, but she can still be attacked. The threats are different now."

"Hmm," Ina considered. "We are under siege, aren't we? That's not my usual forte in any guise. I've always been prone to direct action. I don't like to just sit and wait."

"I'm with you there," Jael agreed, but continued as Rona, "but that's our situation whether we like it or not. For myself, I think I'm more comfortable when we're shoring up our defenses, even if Jael would prefer to take the attack back to our enemies, Mother Nature, how do you feel on this?"

"I've been known for my patience," Dee replied, "but I've also been known to lose that patience. Tactically, I'd prefer to wipe out threats before they manifest, but at the moment none of us know where those threats, if any, may be. We'll have to just sit and wait to see how all this develops."

"In a sense," Jael added, "we've always been under siege, you know."

"Well, yes," Ina allowed, "but anyone after the Tree is not going to be able to transplant him. If we are forced into another battle it will be right here in Hattamesett."

"Now that bothers me," Eddy told them. "We were able to isolate the battle in Yarmouthport from the rest of the town, but any fighting here is certain to be noticed. Not only noticed, but likely to kill quite a few of my neighbors and possibly the authorities who come blundering in to investigate."

"Possibly not," Dee replied. "The Tree has already started to warp space and reality around herself. Any fighting nearby will probably be on the divine plane, sort of."

"Sort of?" Eddy pressed.

"This is a very special case, Eddy," Dee explained. "You remember how we traveled to Yggdrasil?"

"In Mister Waters' tricked out van," Eddy replied, "yes."

"That too," Dee smiled, "but do you recall what the world outside the van looked like? Remember how we told you we were traveling between the mortal and divine planes of existence?"

"Some of it," Eddy admitted. "It sounded like a fairly mystical explanation at the time, until Jael started bring in modern physics. Then it just got weird."

"Well, in a sense, the Tree is doing the same sort of thing, except she isn't moving," Dee told him. "Your backyard is not entirely in the mortal world, nor is it in the divine one. It's not yet part of the new universe the Tree will create either, but it's the seed from which that universe will grow. So, in another sense, this space is part of all three worlds. This warping of reality by the Tree is a defense mechanism and hopefully one we can exploit."

"The area around the new Tree," Dee continued, "is a unique nexus of the world you think of as your own and the new one about to be born and for now their divine planes are conjoined here as well. You know, I think this is the furthest we have brought a new tree to term in the last six or seven cycles. It's been so long, in fact, I'm not sure what other surprises may be in store for us."

"Such as?" Ina asked.

“Well, it seems to me,” Dee replied, “there may be a new back way here now that did not exist before.”

“If that’s the case,” Jael replied decisively, “we need to find it quickly and protect ourselves from attack along that route. But how are we going to find it?”

“We need an expert,” Dee told her.

Two

“The place seems quieter now,” Ratatosk remarked from one of the branches of the Tree. Ratatosk was a giant squirrel, roughly the size of a full grown German Shepard. His normal job was to carry strife and rumor up and down the trunk of Yggdrasil, but he was also one of the guardians of the great World Tree and so was also interested in the development of the new Tree.

“It would,” Eddy told him. “Not only are we not currently under attack, but the summer people have gone home.” Eddy was cooking burgers on the grill.

“I still see a lot of boats in the harbor,” Ratatosk observed.

“Well, most of them come back for the weekends and will, at least through Columbus Day and quite a few will keep visiting right through Thanksgiving. Also the weather will have its little ups and downs but there are usually some nice sailing days through October and sometimes even in November. So while some owners have put their boats in storage already, most will wait until after Columbus Day and a few will tempt the fates by putting off that chore until Thanksgiving. That’s often too long, of course, and there are always one or two who fail to get their boats out before it becomes too inclement to do so. With a bit of luck, though, the boats will survive and only need minor repairs.”

“And if they don’t have a bit of luck?” Ratatosk asked.

“Their boats will have to be scooped up off the bottom of the harbor,” Eddy shrugged. He looked down at the grill he was working at. “Are you sure you want this burger rare?”

“Why?” Ratatosk asked. “Is there anything wrong with the meat?”

“I wouldn’t be serving it, if there was,” Eddy replied, slightly offended.

“Then rare will be just fine,” Ratatosk replied. “You’re one of the few guys who actually feeds me something other than nuts and fruit, you know?”

“So you tell me,” Eddy shrugged. “Deesays it’s not really good for you.”

“Yeah, so she says,” Ratatosk laughed, “but let’s see her survive on nothing but fruit and nuts for a millennium or two and see how vegetarian she is at the end of it all. So, where are the babes?”

“In the kitchen, I think,” Eddy replied, “although Jael went out to pick up some dill relish.”

“Not on my account, I hope,” Ratatosk commented. “Too sour. I prefer the sweet stuff.”

“No, it’s for me,” Eddy laughed. “So hasDee told you why we asked you here today?”

“Oh yeah,” Ratatosk nodded. “You’re afraid that some sort of backdoor way into Hattamesett may have opened up when you plopped the Tree into the ground here. He has gotten big, hasn’t he. You know I don’t recall that Yggdrasil was quite this tall before it transcended.”

“You remember the world before Yggdrasil?” Eddy asked interestedly.

“Not really,” Ratatosk admitted. “I was just an ordinary squirrel that happened take up residence on the adolescent Yggdrasil before it transcended. If I hadn’t actually been on the branches at the right moment, my job would probably have been held by an errant ant or something.”

“I think I prefer you as a squirrel,” Eddy chuckled.

“A giant rat with a fluffy tail?” Ratatosk shot back. “Well, I guess it’s better than being a reject from a B-grade movie. I think you’re burning those burgers.”

“Am not,” Eddy denied. “You ordered yours rare, not raw.”

“What’s the difference?” Ratatosk asked.

“About fifty-five degrees in this weather,” Eddy replied easily. “So what do you think? Is there a back way in here like Dee thinks?”

“I don’t know,” Ratatosk replied. “I seriously doubt there’s a back way into Hattamesett at the moment. I’d be surprised if there was a back way into the neighboring towns for that matter.”

“I think you’re wrong, Ratty,” Dee told him from the doorway as she brought a large bowl of salad out to the table.

“The whole area is cut-off from Yggdrasil, Toots,” Ratatosk snapped at her. “I ought to know.”

“The Tree isn’t the only way we travel, Furby,” Dee retorted nastily. “I need you to make sure there are no new paths along the divine plane.”

“If there were, wouldn’t we have been using them to get to Yggdrasil?” Ratatosk countered.

“Only if we had known where they were,” Jael chimed in as she carried a large pitcher of ice tea outside.

“Also,” Dee added, “even if one exists now it may not have back at Midsummer. We did well in Harwichport and came out of it strong enough that no one is likely to try a head-on attack any time soon. We also gained valuable allies in the aftermath so that would most likely be a desperation move, but if there’s a secret way in, then we’re vulnerable to a sneak attack.

“Well, I’ll look for a way in, Toots, but I don’t promise results this time,” Ratatosk warned her. “Even if it does exist I may not be able to find it. There are only a few universes that have been born from the seeds of Yggdrasil and each one only has one way in from this one. The only reason I’m agreeing to look is that if there is a way it’s probably the beginning of the one path into the new world. Otherwise I’d say you’re just being paranoid.”

“It’s not being paranoid if the whole world really is against you,” Rona remarked, abruptly appearing in Jael’s place.

“It can be,” Jael disagreed, reappearing for just a moment before being replaced by Rona again.

“But probably isn’t,” Rona told her.

“Will you two stop that?” Ratatosk complained. “You’re making me dizzy.”

“What is?” Ina asked as she entered the garden with a bag of groceries. “Did I miss anything?”

“Nothing you haven’t seen or heard a dozen times or more,” Eddy told her tiredly.

“Are you okay, Eddy?” Ina asked. “You sound tired.”

“I’m fine,” Eddy assured her. “It’s been a long day, is all. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“You’re not as old as you used to be either,” Jael reminded him, “thanks to that berry I fed you,”

“Perhaps,” Dee considered, “but you only knocked a decade or so off his life, dear. That puts him back to somewhere in his seventies. Eddy, maybe you ought to try taking it a little easier in the garden. After all, we’re here to help you, not make you work even harder.”

“I have to put the garden to bed this month,” Eddy protested.

“There’s plenty of time for that, dear,” Dee assured him. “We won’t have a frost for another four weeks. In fact, I ought to find something new to do with all the tomatoes. Really, though, you don’t have to push yourself so hard.”

“Eddy,” Ina added, “I know what it is. You actually feel younger than you did a few months ago and your body is fooling you into thinking you’re younger still. As you grew older, you learned to pace yourself, but now, because you wake up with a bit more vigor than you had before, you think you can step up that pace. But you know, being seventy again doesn’t make you a young man. Just try working back at the same pace you used to.”

“Easier said than done,” Eddy remarked.

“I know,” Ina nodded sympathetically, “but you’ll do it for us, right?”

“Oh, man,” Ratatosk chortled. “They have you by the nose ring!”

“Let’s see,” Eddy retorted, “You wanted that burger well done, right?”

“Whoa, mate! Sorry!” Ratatosk reversed himself. “I’ll be good!” Eddy smiled and served the squirrel a rare burger.

“That’ll be a first!” Jael laughed.

“Eddy,” Ina insisted, ignoring the byplay between Jael and Ratatosk, “I want you to promise me you’ll let Jael and me do the harvesting for you tonight.”

“Tonight?” Eddy asked. “Why would you be picking anything tonight?”

“Haven’t you been watching the weather?” Ina asked. “Hurricane Oscar is headed this way.”

“Hurricane Oscar?” Jael asked. “When did that one spin up?”

“Just this morning,” Dee informed her, “but it was expected to go out to sea.”

“That was ten hours ago,” Ina shook her head. “I don’t think Oscar bothered to watch the Weather Channel, so he decided to come visit the Southcoast. You think he wants to meet the new tree as well?” Her tone indicated she was amused, but Dee did not share her sentiment.

“That’s a distinct possibility,” she told them grimly. “I’d better check on that.”

“Can’t you do it from here?” Eddy asked.

“Not for the duration, dear,” she told him. “The Tree is blocking my abilities along those lines. May I borrow your car to get beyond the effect?”

“Of course,” Eddy replied instantly. “But aren’t you going to eat first?”

“This is too important, dear,” Dee replied. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon. Oh, I’d better call Enki or Nin-ti first, just in case we need to be on alert.”

“No need,” Jael told her, cell phone in hand. “I have Nin-ti on the line right now. Yes,” she continued to Nin-ti, “I think we need to pull our perimeter defenders closer in to the house tonight and put additional forces where they’ve been. Oh, yeah, definitely! Tell them to bring food in with them. Eddy? You don’t have a generator, do you?”

“No, I usually just tough out the occasional power outage,” Eddy informed her.

“Better bring one of those in too and enough gasoline to get us through a week,” Jael continued to Nin-ti. “Why of course you can come too! Yes! Eddy! We’re going to have a hurricane party!”

Three

“I didn’t realize we had so many guards around the house,” Eddy remarked, by the time everyone had come inside the house. Most of the guardian gods were sitting in the garden, where the evening weather remained warm and the winds continued to stay calm for now, but some had quietly made themselves at home in the kitchen and living room. “We may feel a bit crowded after the storm strikes.”

“There are only a couple dozen of us here, Eddy,” Jael reminded him. “Mmm, do you mind if I grab another burger?”

“Go right ahead,” Eddy laughed. He had given up his place at the grill to Gilgamesh thirty minutes earlier, but had remained outside in the warm evening air. “I don’t know how you can eat so much.”

“Hey!” Jael protested, “I’m eating for two you know.”

“You make it sound like we’re pregnant,” Rona observed.

“It could happen,” Jael retorted off-handedly.

“Not if we don’t start sleeping with Marcus a bit more often,” Rona retorted.

“There’s no big hurry, Rona, you know that,” Jael explained around a bite of the burger. “We’re immortal and so is Marcus. We can wait millennia to have children if we want.”

“Are you sure?” Rona asked seriously. “A lot of good people have died defending this tree so far.”

“Well, it wouldn’t no how be permanent,” Jael replied, paraphrasing an old comic strip.

“You don’t know that,” Rona accused. “You’ve never died, have you?”

“True enough,” Jael admitted. “Are you saying you want out of guarding the Tree?”

“Of course not!” Rona exclaimed, “I just want to point out that even immortals don’t always know the future.”

“Well, the odds are we would live again in the next cycle,” Jael assured her. “The worst thing that might happen is that after being out of circulation for so long, we’d probably have to start at the bottom in Hell again. I don’t particularly like working in Legal, but at least they have air conditioning.”

Eddy watched them talking back and forth and decided Ratatosk had been right, watching them really could make you dizzy. The squirrel had left with Dee when she went out to investigate the approaching storm although he intended to return to Yggdrasil to begin his search for a back way into Hattamesett.

Dee had been gone for an hour now and Eddy privately worried about what might be keeping her. She had told Eddy she was just going to take a quick look, but he also knew Nature was a lady of action and it was not impossible that on finding a problem she would instantly try to solve it.

He looked around and saw the various gods and goddesses chatting as though they were at the after-hours cocktail party of a professional conference. In a sense, he reminded himself, maybe they were. He wondered how many times they got to meet like this outside their pantheons and just talk for no particular purpose other than to pass the time. He listened to a few of the conversations and was surprised to discover that the gods seemed to make the same sort of small talk humans did. It was particularly amusing to hear Hercules describing to Ina what he thought of the mocha-maple latte he’d had recently at Starbucks.

Finally Dee returned to the house. She sought out Eddy in the garden, but waited until she had eaten something and everyone had gathered around before she reported her findings.

“It’s a natural storm,” she told them. “No one is directing it or sending it our way, but if it holds to its current heading we’re looking at sustained winds of category 2 or 3 force for several hours just after dawn.”

“Couldn’t you redirect it?” Eddy asked.

“I suppose I could,” Dee admitted, “but as I said, it’s a natural storm and I’m the goddess of nature. No one knows better than I what would happen when you start tampering with natural forces. Anything I could think of on the broad scale would only make the situation worse.”

“Not even steering the storm away from us?” Eddy asked.

“I don’t have the power to push it directly away, not this soon before land fall,” Dee explained. “So I would be merely pushing it closer toward Rhode Island or Cape Cod and those areas are less well prepared than we are, since the forecasts there only predict tropical storm conditions. Well, the Cape is under an actual hurricane warning, so maybe they are ready, but Providence is not. Oscar is a very small, but intense storm, but it is a natural one and merely changing the strike zone is not the only effect I might have.

“The weather of New England is not a closed system,” Dee continued. “It is just part of the greater system that covers the entire Earth. If I make a change here and now it could mean increased snow in the Alps next year and a major drought in Texas, for that matter. My point is, you can’t change one part of it without changing all of it. Yes, I have had to interfere with weather systems in the past, but only when correcting problems caused by others and it has always involved years of work on my part to get the Earth back to normal. It took nearly half a millennium to correct the imbalances of the Little Ice Age.”

“I thought that was a natural occurrence,” Jael commented.

“Not hardly,” Dee replied tightly, but gave Jael a warning wave that she accurately interpreted as a request to drop the subject. Some of those involved were in Eddy’s yard at the moment and it would do no good to start a fight among their own allies. “Anyway, the storm is just a storm for all its unusually rapid development. We’re just going to have to wait it out. I’ll tell you this much, though, I doubt we’re going to experience a direct strike. From what I could see, it is going to make landfall somewhere around Buzzards Bay and at low tide, which is a special blessing, if you ask me. That puts us on what is generally one of the weaker sides of the storm, and I may be able to safely divert the worst of the wind on a very local scale – just this yard, in fact, without affecting much on the global scale.”

“Are you sure, Ceres?” Hercules asked from near Eddy’s greenhouse. “The forecast I just saw puts the likely track over New Bedford to our west.”

“I’d like to think I understand weather patterns a little better than the National Weather Service, Herc,” she replied with a mixture of humor and irritation.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Enki replied as he entered the garden. Enki had set himself up as the president and CEO of the fictitious Springtime Seed Company when it first turned out that Yggdrasil was producing a viable seed. Being a stickler for details, he had set up an actual corporation, based in South Carolina, although the only catalog they had mailed off had been to one “Mr. Edward Salem.” Enki was the nominal leader of the project to bring the new World Tree to term, although as of late he had been deferring to Dee’s judgment more often than not.

“Waters,” Eddy greeted him by the name Enki used as a mortal guise, “when did you get here?”

“Just now,” Enki replied with a grin. “Wouldn’t want to miss a good party, now would I? Seriously, I felt my place would be here defending the Tree in case of attack. Just because this is a natural storm approaching, it doesn’t mean our enemies might not use it as a cover, right?”

“Who are our enemies now?” Eddy asked. “I thought we pretty much wiped out that army in Yarmouthport.”

“We did,” Enki replied, “but Loki and Iblis aren’t the only ones who would love to get their hands on the Tree.”

“So who are we up against now?” Eddy reworded the question.

“Maybe no one,” Enki shrugged.

“Then why are we all so worried?”

“One part of our situation, Eddy, has not changed,” Enki replied. “We are still sitting on the greatest power source available in any universe. Whoever controls it becomes one of the Infinites, like Allah or Yahweh. That’s a temptation for anyone except an Infinite.”

“Surely not you,” Eddy remarked, “Or Dee or Ina or even Jael.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Ina replied very seriously. “Dee, Enki and I are tempted, yes, but we’ve been around long enough to have the wisdom and maturity to resist that temptation. Also each of us has been the supreme deity in our times. We know what that’s like. Even if none of us were Infinites, we do know what it is like to be the most powerful. Heh! Dee still is in her aspect as Mother Nature.”

“Not quite,” Dee disagreed.

“You’re as powerful as a goddess can get without becoming Infinite,” Ina countered.

“I notice you left me out of your list of mature elder gods,” Jael remarked. “It’s true I am relatively young.”

Ina laughed and reached out her arm to hold Jael’s hand in her own. “Yes, you are young, but you’re young enough to still be idealistic about such matters. Also unlike a lot of your kind, you have a conscience.”

“A conscience named Rona,” Jael smiled.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Jael,” Rona told her from Jael’s mouth, not bothering to change outer aspect this time. “I’ve never had to push you into doing the right thing.”

“Ah!” Jael sighed, “but you didn’t really know me before. The only reason I first helped Marcus when we met was that there was a political advantage for me in it.”

“Maybe so,” Rona argued, “but you had already fallen in love with him before we joined.”

“Eddy, ask any of our allies here tonight if you like. There’s not a one of us who doesn’t feel at least some temptation to want to possess the Tree next April when it transcends.”

Eddy looked around and saw a lot of sober nodding of divine heads. He also decided that was too somber a thought to let the evening proceed on. “Hey!” he told everyone. “What’s with all the long faces? I thought this was supposed to be a party. I’m out of burgers, but I saw those slabs of ribs that came in an hour ago. Anyone still hungry? I know I am!”

The truth was Eddy was pleasantly full, but his suggestion had lifted the mood and soon Gilgamesh was barbecuing the ribs while Dee and Ina prepared more salad.

“Here, Eddy,” Jael offered him a glass. “I know you aren’t hungry, but you looked like you could use a

drink.” She kissed his cheek as he took the glass, then glided off to help Dee and Ina. She abruptly stopped and returned to Eddy’s side a moment later, however. “You know? Ratty’s going to be sorry he missed this!”

Four

Hurricane Oscar struck SouthcoastMassachusetts more or less as predicted, lashing the coast with storm force winds just before dawn the next morning. The party in Eddy’s yard was still going on when the winds began to blow, although Eddy himself had gone to sleep two hours earlier. Ina and Jael organized the attending gods and goddesses into a clean-up party and together they moved anything that could be moved either into the garden shed or into the greenhouse room that attached to Eddy’s house.

“At least nothing will blow away,” Jael commented as she closed the glass door against the rising gale, “but how will all this glass fare under hurricane winds?”

“I can reinforce them, I think,” Ina remarked.

“Reinforce them?” Jael asked. “How?”

“Magic, of course,” Ina laughed. “I may be a bit out of practice, mind you. In the latter days of most pantheons we gods were expected to work entirely by our innate divine powers and we pretty much adapted to that viewpoint, but originally we used magical spells as easily as we breathed. I have no natural talent with glass, but I do know spells of strength. I need merely lend strength to the glass and it should withstand anything Oscar cares to throw at us.”

“Literally,” Jael chuckled. “Mind if I watch?”

“I couldn’t stop you,” Ina admitted. “I’ll even show you how it’s done, assuming a modern demon girl wants to learn how to do things Old School.”

“It could come in handy some time,” Jael admitted.

The process was a simple one. Ina muttered an incantation in a language now only known to a few select scholars capable of reading the hen tracks known as cuneiform. When she was done the glass had a different luster to it and Jael could see countless fine waves of energy flowing through it back and forth as though each pane was a wave tank.

“Nice job, Inanna,” Enki praised her.

“Thanks, granddad!” Ina responded, “I learned it from you. Too bad we can’t use that trick to protect the Tree.”

“We might,” Enki replied speculatively, looking toward the Tree.

“No!” Jael told him softly, but emphatically.

“But,” he protested.

“You have not the slightest idea of what such a spell would do to the Tree,” Jael told him firmly, “and I am not going to let you try to find out.”

Enki laughed. Jael was talented and self-assured, for certain, but she was a minor demon and Enki had been a major deity in his time. A contest of power between them would be very much like pitting a marmoset against a leopard. The marmoset might get in a few good shots by throwing pebbles or pieces of fruit, but in the end, it was going to be a late night snack for the cat. His eyes sparkled and, with obviously innocent curiosity, he asked, "How?"

"I'll tell Dee what you're thinking of doing," Jael told him calmly. Enki stared at her. "Well what did you think? That I would use my zap gun on you?" Throughout the defense of the new Tree, Jael had frequently used an odd weapon that bore a strong resemblance to a rocket launcher, except that it had a glass lens where the muzzle was and when she pulled the trigger a burst of what looked like what anti-light might look like, if it existed, flashed toward whoever she aimed it at. Said target died instantly leaving only a faint wisp of smoke in their wake. "Enki, I like you too much to kill you."

"Thank you for that mercy," he breathed, having been reminded of just what she could do.

"Dee would be much nastier," Jael continued, "and if you did do anything to harm the tree, I think death would be too good for you. Don't you agree?" she asked sweetly.

"We may have to do something to protect the Tree," Enki noted. "Where is Ninhursag?"

"She's with Eddy," Nin-ti told him as she entered the greenhouse..

"Eddy's asleep," Enki noted. "She doesn't have to sleep."

"Dee likes spending sometime with Eddy while he sleeps," Jael told him. "I think it's sweet."

"He's asleep," Enki repeated. "He wouldn't know she isn't there."

"She would," Ina told him.

"You too?" Enki asked. "I must be wrong if you're all ganging up on me."

"Ah," Jael laughed. "So you really are the god of wisdom!"

"Well, I think I got to be the god of wisdom by learning everything the hard way," Enki shrugged.

"At least you learned," Jael pointed out. "I think we've all known those who never could. Oh, here's Dee now."

"About time," Enki grumbled.

"Oh hush," Dee told him calmly. "I've been keeping a weather eye on the situation all night and that includes the periods in which you were eating the ribs and burgers and drinking all of Eddy's beer."

"He has good taste in beer," Enki noted. "And I ought to know, having invented the stuff."

"Yes, he does," Dee nodded, "and I expect you to replace it with interest, Mister Inventor."

"I can do that," Enki agreed. "I thought Eddy liked being a good host, though."

“He does,” Dee replied, “so I expect you to be a good guest as well.”

“Point taken,” Enki told her. He paused a moment then announced, “All right, I’ve replaced it. Now we need to discuss how to protect the tree against these winds. They’re starting to get pretty fierce out there.”

“They are,” Dee agreed, “but I have the situation in hand.”

“Oh?” Enki asked. “What are you up to?”

“It’s very simple,” Dee remarked, “I’m just encouraging the stronger winds to blow slightly to one side or the other. The poor dear may lose a few leaves or even branchlets, but nothing major.”

“We don’t know what those branchlets might have led to in the new world,” Enki warned her.

“I’m not worried,” Dee told him. “Anything that blows off likely wouldn’t have survived long in the new world anyway. Think of this as natural selection.”

“I think it is on several levels,” Enki replied. “Okay, we play it your way this time.”

“Who do we have out there in the storm?” Dee asked.

“Thor is in command out there with a host of weather and storm deities of various sorts,” Enki informed her. “I figured they could take the wind and rain better than some of the rest of us. Now how about telling me why you think there’s a secret way into Hattamesett?”

“It seems like a possibility,” Dee replied. “Of the other universes we are aware of there is only one entrance to each of those universes. They formed in association with them. However we are not certain exactly when those entrance points actually formed. They may have only formed at the moment of transcendence, or they may have developed from a direct connection between their world trees and Yggdrasil. While the new tree was a seedling and then a sapling we never really tried to detect such a connection, but I believe that it was there nonetheless. Now as the tree has reached her current state she has encysted herself in a pocket of reality that includes this house and back yard. That semi-detached pocket of reality is the seed of the potential new universe so if stands to follow that there should be the seed of the one path into the new universe. If that path exists, it’s essential for us to find it first. The reason I had you reposition the guards was that if it does exist and someone else already knows about it, then this storm would be an excellent time for them to attack.”

“I’m hearing the word ‘if’ a lot in there,” Enki remarked, “but I don’t disagree with your reasoning. I’ve been watching the weather reports all night and it looks like this storm is going to go a little further to the east than they originally thought.”

“I know,” Dee nodded.

“Deepredicted that hours ago,” Ina chimed in.

“I’m not surprised,” Enki replied. “So how close is the center of the storm coming?”

“It has a small eye,” Dee reported, “so even though the center of circulation is passing within twenty miles of us, it still won’t pass over us, but it will be close enough that we’ll experience sustained winds of ninety knots for over an hour later this morning.”

“Any idea of when we’ll lose power and for how long?” Enki asked.

“I’m not precogniscent,” Dee pointed out. “I can predict the weather because I’m Mother Nature, but I’m not seeing the future, just reading the conditions and I can do it better than most. I can be wrong too, but not very often on a short term forecast.”

Just then the lights flickered. “If you don’t want to make a prediction,” Jael remarked, “I think I could try an educated guess. Should we set up the generator now?”

“No,” Rona chimed in, abruptly replacing Jael again. “We can’t run it inside the house and the nice thing about a tropical storm is that it’s warm. It won’t matter if the furnace isn’t running, we just won’t have hot water for long is all.”

“Might be nice to have a hot breakfast,” Ina remarked.

“Hello!” Rona remarked acidly, “I’m surrounded by gods and existing in the body of demoness. Are you seriously telling me there’s no one here who could prepare a hot meal without the benefit of electricity to run the kitchen?”

“What about the food in the fridge and freezer?” Enki asked.

“You guys really don’t know how mortal technology works, do you?” Rona observed, although this remark was not made insultingly. “Food will keep for a few days in the freezer if we don’t open the doors. It doesn’t last as long in the fridge but a few hours without power won’t do any harm. We can wait until the worst of the storm is over before turning the generator on. Besides, it seems to me that with all the talent we have here, someone can probably keep the modern conveniences going even if NStar’s lines go down.”

Everyone in the vicinity turned to look at Rona closely. “What did we ever do without you?” Enki wondered.

“You didn’t,” Rona laughed. “I’ve been part of Springtime Seed as long as Jael has.”

Hurricane Oscar didn’t manage to turn out the lights in Hattamesett until almost eleven in the morning. By that time everyone had had enough breakfast and even midmorning coffee to keep them happy for a while.

“We’ll need the generator if we want water,” Eddy pointed out over the howling wind, “or even to use the bathrooms more than once each. There is no town water in Hattamesett. I rely on a deep well, so if the pump isn’t running the pressure tank will only give us running water for so long.”

“The worst of the storm will be past in another two hours,” Dee predicted. “Oscar’s moving fairly rapidly and he is accelerating to the northeast. All we need to do is wait it out.”

Five

The generator got a lot of use over the next four days. “When things calm down,” Eddy decided, “I’ll arrange to have it installed with an automatic switch for when the power goes out and a cut-off for when

it comes back on. We sometimes lose power during winter storms too and we'll really want the furnace working if that happens."

"What have you done in the past?" Dee asked him.

"I usually just wait it out," Eddy replied. "The last time we had any extended outage was in the wake of Hurricane Bob in 1991. We were lucky then. The house is far enough from the water and just high enough up that the storm surge didn't reach us even though the storm struck at high tide. Other areas weren't so fortunate, but even here it was five days before we had power. I would have bought a generator at the time, but by the time I realized I needed one it was too late. Fortunately, we had a friend on the other side of town who brought a small generator over once a day so we could run the pump. Also we filled the bathtub with water which helped get us through as well."

"You drank that?" Rona asked with a hint of disgust.

"No," Eddy replied. "We could have, though. We cleaned the tub very carefully, but we bought sufficient bottled water for drinking, so the water in the tub got used for washing only, and for running the toilets. We used buckets to fill the tank. Anyway, having our own generator is a better solution, if you ask me." Eddy looked out his front window and noticed that the wind seemed to be blowing much harder in the front than the back. "Dee? Are you doing that?"

"I'm protecting the Tree," she responded. "I'm fairly certain she could survive this storm on her own, but why take chances?"

Eddy nodded. "Pretty nasty out there. It's going to take weeks to clean up all the fallen branches and the Hemmings' house across the way looks like it's going to need a new roof. Half the shingles have blown off. How are we doing?"

"We're fine," Ina informed him. "After I reinforced the glass in the greenhouse, Enki decided to show off and reinforce the entire house. We'll have to remove that enchantment when it's over though, or the neighbors will talk."

"It shows?" Eddy asked.

"It sort of looks like the entire house was covered with a thin layer of oil," Ina explained. "I doubt anyone will notice that in the middle of the storm. We still have a few cheese rolls in the kitchen, by the way. Would you like one?"

"Do we have any coffee in the thermos?" Eddy asked.

"As much as anyone could drink," Ina laughed. "Deeput a cornucopia spell on your thermos. It will never run out of hot coffee now."

"I didn't make it perpetual," Dee corrected her. "It will wear off in a week or so. Even with the best coffee, I figure we would get tired of drinking the same pot after a while."

"Could have done the same thing with the refrigerator," Eddy noted. "Makes me wonder if we needed the generator at all."

"Technically? Probably not," Jael told him, "but after the storm it will look less strange if the house still has power while your neighbors are dark."

“I ought to invite them in after the storm too,” Eddy remarked, “at least if they don’t have generators, although I think most of them do. Will we have room for anyone else?” he looked pointedly around at the lounging deities. As though for the first time he noticed Hercules, Gilgamesh, Isis and Athena playing Bridge at the kitchen table. They were still wearing their ersatz security uniforms.

“We’ll be redeploying the guards to their regular beats in another hour,” Enki informed him, “and soon after that Nin-ti and I will return to the Springtime Seed offices. We need to be there in case anyone shows up on legitimate business.”

“I thought Springtime Seed was just a front,” Eddy remarked.

“That was our intention,” Enki admitted, “but I was maybe too much of a perfectionist when I set us up. I formed an actual corporation based in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina and of course we put up the web site, because nearly every business these days has one, and we didn’t know how our order from you might come in, so, even though you got the only paper catalog we sent out several hundred other garden enthusiasts somehow found us and ordered seeds from the company’s on-line catalog. Of course, we filled all the orders as it would attract less attention to us if we weren’t inundated with customer complaints. Our seeds are slightly more viable than most and quite a few of our customers have already placed orders for next year.”

“You could always just close the company,” Eddy pointed out.

“I could,” Enki agreed, “but I find it’s nice to have a paper trail. The money we spent at the beginning was simply created by us, but now we’re using money earned by selling seeds. We still need to supplement that a bit, but we’ll pay our taxes and keep earning real cash so when we need to buy something on credit, we’ll have money in the bank to pay for it. There’s only so many times you can plunk a sack of gold down to buy something without making trouble for yourself. Naturally, we don’t need a lot of money, but every so often it makes things easier, like when we step out for a pizza.”

“I can see that,” Eddy nodded. “Is it getting quieter outside?”

“The sustained winds are down to fifty-five knots, dear,” Dee reported. “We probably have a few good gusts to weather yet, but the storm is pulling away. It won’t be long now. Hmm, I should have made a thermos of tea too.”

“You can always create one,” Ina suggested.

“I could but I really like the blend Eddy has,” Dee admitted.

“Then create a pot of hot water and brew some,” Rona suggested.

Dee gave her the same strange look Enki had the night before. “Why didn’t I think of that?” Dee mused.

An hour later the winds had dropped to a more normal five to ten knots and the sun was threatening to come out. The guardian gods returned to their usual posts while Eddy and the others went out to inspect the damage.

“Not too bad,” Eddy noted. “There are a lot of leaves and small branches down but I think most of these branches are off the other trees in the neighborhood.”

“I should hope so,” Dee laughed. “I really was directing the damaging winds away from the Tree.”

“Something smells wrong though,” Jael noted.

“You’re right,” Ina agreed. “There’s a certain odd scent on the air. It’s not unpleasant, but...”

Just then a large drop of water fell from one of the branches of the Tree and hit Eddy directly in the face. A bit of it got in his mouth and tasted, “Salty?” he wondered. “Uh oh! Dee, you directed the wind, but not the rain from the tree, didn’t you?”

“Well a lot of rain missed the tree since it was wind-driven,” Dee explained, “but I wasn’t worried about rain water. Why?”

“Did you forget?” Eddy asked. “Land-falling hurricanes often bring salt water rain.”

“Well, yes,” Dee nodded calmly, “The fierce winds whip the water right off the surface of the ocean and drop it for miles inland. You can usually see its effects when it kills the leaves and needles of trees in its path, and sometimes it kills the trees completely... Oh! I see what you mean. The Tree should survive that, but it won’t be good for her. We need to get the salt water off.”

“Let’s fire up the generator, then,” Jael suggested. “We’ll still need to do a little magical jiggy pokery to get a strong enough stream to wash off the entire tree, but at least the generator will make us look vaguely natural.”

“The Tree can’t be seen from out front,” Eddy reminded her.

“It can’t?” she asked. “I hadn’t noticed. Well we should still use the generator for while we’re hosing the house off as well. The neighbors will see that. Will the salt water that seeped into the ground do any harm?”

“There’s a lot of ground water here,” Dee replied. “It’s diluted enough down there that the trees can tolerate it. I wonder if we could encourage the Tree to experiment with species that are salt tolerant, like a mangrove?”

“Better not,” Ina advised. “We still need to show we’re taking a hands-off policy with the raising of this Tree, that sort of encouragement could affect him.”

“I doubt that,” Dee countered.

“For myself, I would bow to your greater knowledge and experience,” Eddy replied, “but some of our allies might not see it that way, and as you said, it likely isn’t necessary. Let’s just clean off the leaves so they’ll last their normal lifespan, which is what? Another three or four weeks?”

“Closer to three than four, I would say,” Dee considered, “unless...”

“Yes?” Eddy prompted.

“She could be shocked into a second growth cycle,” Dee remarked, “although I don’t think that will happen. Often after a large storm like this, woody plants will come into flower for a very short season. It’s a survival mechanism for their species. The storm can damage and kill the young seedlings that were formed in the spring, so this is an attempt to create more seedlings before the growing season ends.

However, it happens more often when a hurricane hits after a relatively dry summer, which we didn't have this year. Still we'll have to just wait and see."

"What's with the hose?" Enki asked Eddy a short time later. Don't you think everything got watered enough?"

"I thought you were supposed to be an expert," Eddy laughed. "It was the wrong sort of water. We need to wash the salt residue off the tree before it starts killing the leaves."

"They'll be falling off soon enough anyway," Enki commented. "Why worry?"

"Because Dee says it's too soon and the salt could damage the Tree," Eddy replied. "Problem is I don't know how we're going to get water all the way to the top. Even half this height I'd have trouble reaching the top leaves."

"My reach is a bit better," Enki chuckled. "Just open the faucet and I'll handle the rest."

Under Enki's guidance, the stream from the hose became a fountain that soon washed all the salt off. Dee, however, wouldn't let them stop until she had inspected the tree personally. Finally, as the sun poked out of the clouds in time to end the day with a blazing red sunset, she decided they had done all they could.

Six

Jael found Eddy in the garden a few mornings later looking up at the Tree. Following his gaze she looked up as well to spot several wispy white shapes covering leaves and branch tips. Dee was out of the house. She never really took a day off, but sometimes her responsibilities forced her to see to matters in other parts of the world. Jael and Ina did have a day or evening off every once in a while, however. For Jael it was a chance for her and Rona to see their husband and Ina had recently started cultivating a latter day Venus cult in an attempt to get the members to know her as she was in the modern world instead of the idealistic dream of adolescents they had previously cast her in.

"So," Jael spoke after a long hard look at the webs in the tree, "Gypsy moths, do you think? Or tent caterpillars?"

"Neither," Eddy replied, deeply worried. "Those pests only attack in the spring and they aren't the only insects that spin web tents and eat the leaves of trees. I need to figure out just what we have up there. This could be worse than the salt."

"I'll get a sample branch for you," Jael replied and started climbing the tree.

"No, wait!" Eddy stopped her. "Wouldn't that harm the tree and the world that is to come?"

"I don't see why," Jael replied. "I wouldn't be pruning that world, just the tree. Yggdrasil has many broken branches. That just means there are parts of the world you need to take a different path to."

"I thought the condition of this Tree would affect the shape of the new world," Eddy pointed out.

"I think an infestation of parasites will have a greater effect than a single missing branch," Jael countered. "We need to find out what they are, don't we? Don't worry, dear, I'll be gentle," she concluded in her

normal flirtatious manner.

Eddy had half expected for Jael to float up to one of the branches but the graceful way in which she climbed the trunk was the next closest thing. He marveled as she made her way up over thirty feet and then way out on a branch. "Careful!" he warned her as she inched out on a perilously thin branch. "I don't know if that thin branch can take your weight."

"Are you saying I'm fat, Eddy?" Jael asked pointedly, not taking her eyes off the tent web she was headed toward.

"No, I'm calling that branch thin," he called back. "I can't imagine why it hasn't even bent yet."

"Relax, Eddy!" Jael laughed, "I'm cheating. I could sprout wings, but demon wings are really just for show. They're almost never really large enough to lift the demon they're attached to. About all they do is push us along as we float. I don't need wings for this, but I can float. Besides," she added as she finally reached the nearest web tent, "if I sprouted wings right now I'd ruin a perfectly good t-shirt."

She carefully detached a section of the webbing along with some of the leaves, but left the branch intact, then she floated herself back down to ground level. "I've handled worse than this," she remarked, "but I wasn't happy about it then either, I should have brought a bag and worn gloves."

"I'll get a plastic bag," Eddy offered quickly and rushed back into the house to get one. He returned a minute later with a gallon-sized plastic bag that could be zipped shut. Jael put the sticky, wiggling mass into the bag and Eddy quickly closed it. "Why don't you wash up while I try figuring out just what sort of tent worm we have here," he suggested.

He was still searching the World Wide Web when Jael returned. "Any luck?" she asked.

"Not yet," he admitted. "I still haven't got the hang of using the search engine, I guess."

"Here," she offered. "Let me give it a try," although as she sat down she gradually transformed until Rona's tall and blonde form replaced Jael's. "The trick in any web search is learning to use the right phrase."

She spent the next half hour looking up various pests known to infest trees and finally identified these as Fall Webworm. "They aren't a serious problem," Rona told Eddy. "At least they're no threat to the tree, but they will eat a lot of leaves and make them look pretty bad."

"I'm more concerned on how they might translate out into the new world," Jael replied, returning into sight. "I know the tree will pick and choose what it will take into the new world, but I don't think much good would come from having webworms to choose from. Now the question is, what will be the best way to handle this?"

"I think infected branches are generally cut off and burned," Eddy commented.

"It hasn't actually happened yet," Jael pointed out, "but it is said that the end of the world will come with the burning of Yggdrasil. Now I'm of the opinion that all that means is that when the world comes to an end it will be in fire. Since our current knowledge of stellar physics supports that notion, I figure I can wait a few billion years for the Sun to go nova. However, Yggdrasil and her children are very special trees with quite a few divine attributes. I really don't know what would happen if we burned the wood of this tree, even as a cure for this infestation."

“What then?” Eddy asked. “Do you propose we hand pick every caterpillar off the tree?”

“Good idea!” Jael commended him. “I’ll be right back.” She ran into the next room. “Ina, keep an eye on things,” Eddy heard her say. “I have some calls to make. Thanks.”

“What’s going on?” Ina asked Eddy a few minutes later. He brought her outside and explained. “You say it’s not a serious threat?”

“Not really,” Eddy admitted, “but they would disfigure the Tree’s leaves and possibly stunt the growth in the branches where they are.”

“So what does Jael have in mind?” she asked. Eddy just shrugged.

They didn’t have too long to wait, however. An hour later, Jael returned with the two dryads Eddy had met before, Mina and Nina. They cooed and ahhed over the Tree, not having seen it since it was only fifteen feet tall. Then once Jael explained the problem they scampered eagerly up into the branches with garbage bags and went to work removing every web and webworm from the branches of the Tree. It took them all afternoon and then the next morning as well, but when they were done Dee congratulated them on an excellent job.

“We found another problem,” Mina reported and held her hand out to reveal another sort of bug.

“What have we here?” Dee asked, taking the small bug Mina held out. “Twolined Chestnut Borer? This is a lot more serious than the Fall Webworm. Are there many of these on the tree?”

“I only found the one,” Mina reported, “but I recognized it immediately. It’s one of the worst pests that attack our oaks.”

“Hmm,” Dee considered the matter.

“This Tree has been an oak quite often,” Jael remarked, “although he seems to prefer appearing as a maple over all his other aspects.”

“That might be saving her just now,” Dee replied. Eddy, listening on, was privately amused that each of them had chosen their own personal pronoun for the Tree. In truth, it was hermaphroditic, being both male and female and the choice of “he,” “she,” or “it” was a convenience only. Even at this young age, the tree was above mere gender concerns.

“I’m no expert on pests that infect trees,” Eddy admitted. “How do we rid the Tree of the borers?”

“There are some chemical controls that can be used,” Dee explained, “although the borer inevitably leaves a permanent mark of its visit, first destroying the crown of the tree and, if left unchecked, it eventually kills the entire tree. In this case the Tree would transcend already infected and damaged.”

“Then we’ll have to use chemical insecticides,” Eddy concluded.

“You will not!” Nina told him fiercely.

“Wood nymphs are very much allergic to such treatments,” Dee explained patiently. “In this case, however, I tend to agree with them. We need a more natural solution. The problem is, the natural solution

is to cut down infected trees to leave the rest in a stand to grow with vigor.”

“But this isn’t a stand of trees,” Ina pointed out. “He’s a single Tree.”

“True enough,” Dee agreed, “and we need to get inside the tree and hand remove all the parasites as soon as possible.”

“Inside the tree?” Ina asked. “I can’t do that, can you?”

“Not easily, but dryads can,” Dee remarked looking at the twin sisters.

“We’ll do it!” Mina told her enthusiastically.

“I think I should get you some help, however,” Dee considered. “You have other sisters nearby, I know. I’ll gather up another seven of them to help you.”

“Ooh!” Nina cooed excitedly. “Three threes of us! We can accomplish almost anything with that number.”

“That’s what I had in mind,” Dee confirmed. She left immediately while Nina and Mina went to work.

“There’s something that bothers me,” Rona remarked from the computer in the greenhouse room.

“Only one thing?” Jael countered.

“You two really need to stop talking to yourself so often,” Ina remarked sourly. “Normally when one talks to herself she is at least guaranteed a sympathetic listener, but you...” she trailed off as Jael laughed.

“Having someone to talk to who always agrees with you would be boring!” she told Ina. “Anyway, what’s bothering Rona is that Twolined Chestnut Borers normally only attack distressed trees. Our Tree is very healthy and should not be subject to such an attack.”

“Now you’re an expert on Chestnut Borers?” Ina asked skeptically.

“No,” Jael shook her head, “but the author of this article is. As soon as Dee identified the pest we started looking it up. Read it for yourself.”

Ina sat down in front of the monitor and read the article Jael had found. “Maybe the Fall Webworm distressed the Tree sufficiently to give the Borers access to it?” she speculated.

“Fall Webworm isn’t listed as one of the associated pests,” Jael pointed out, “but you may be right. If someone planted those pests intentionally, they might have chosen the Webworm as a diversion as well since we might not expect a double attack, especially by non-related insects.”

“We’ll have to point this out to Dee,” Ina remarked.

“Do you think she doesn’t know?” Jael asked.

“She didn’t mention it,” Ina replied. “None of us are omniscient - it might not have occurred to her.”

“Good point,” Jael agreed.

“You know,” Ina continued, “I think I’ve been overlooking this computer technology. I never realized how useful it could be on a day-to-day basis. Could you show me how to work this thing?”

Jael spent the next hour showing Ina how to do basic web-surfing and e-mailing. “Why aren’t we using instant messaging?” Ina asked when Jael got to that side of the Internet.

“It’s not as instant as its users claim,” Jael explained. “Oh, it’s fine, I suppose, for chatting with a dozen friends at once, but if you need to have a long or intense discussion, nothing beats actually talking to one another. We did consider it when setting up Springtime Seed, that was before Enki got you involved, but decided we were all too verbose a lot to be comfortable with typing out all our communications. That’s why we use the cell phones instead. We call. We talk, and then we get on with what needs to be done.”

“Couldn’t we use IM on the cell phones?” Ina asked.

“Have you ever tried that?” Jael asked. “You’re either stuck punching out everything in long form or using inane, code-like shortcuts like CU L8R for ‘See you later.’”

“What about those Blackberry things I keep hearing about?” Ina asked.

“Status symbols for executives who don’t know any better,” Jael laughed. “Maybe in another decade they’ll be truly useable, but the ones I saw, at least, didn’t have a touch screen and worked by something called a clickwheel making the whole rig as counterintuitive as possible. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear one of my colleagues in Hell invented them. The silly little keyboard is moderately better than the virtual jobs in some hand-held computers like the Palm or Windows Mobile devices, but only if you never learned to touchtype. It’s hunt-and-peck all over again except most users tend to use their thumbs.

“I have another gripe against them as well,” Jael continued. “With the addition of a fleet of Blackberries, corporate employees are expected to be on demand all day and night every day of the year. Unlike even a few short years ago, now there is no real escape from work even when on vacation. Mark my words, if anything signals the end of civilization, it’s the handheld computer!”

“They sound like fun to me,” Ina opined.

“Ah,” Jael laughed. “You’re being lured in by the seductive bait in the technological trap. Sure, a good PDA - that stands for ‘personal digital assistant’ by the way – can hold hundreds of pieces of music, a library full of books, and even a host of games and sure, it’s fun to sit back with a good book while listening to a Beethoven symphony and then quickly switch over to solving a Sudoku puzzle and then back again and have that all in the palm of your hand, but somewhere in there, you suddenly find you’ve grown dependant on the address and phone list you’ve built up in the device and can’t bear to live without being able to send mail out from your favorite coffee shop. Trust me, Ina, there is very little true relaxation to be gained from such things and mortals, at least, need to be able to kick back every once in a while, without still being tethered to their desks by a metaphorical solid gold chain.”

“You preach nicely, Jael,” Ina observed. “I’m not sure I agree with all of that, but you do make a convincing case. I’m surprised you haven’t been put on temptation duty. You do have the equipment, both physically and mentally.”

“I’m not a succubus, Ina,” Jael replied primly. “Besides, contrary to what your average televangelist might say, we don’t need to tempt sinners to Hell. Most of us would be perfectly happy if they remained virtuous and went straight to heaven in fact. The sad truth is, though, they tempt themselves and sin of

their own free will. We're just there to teach them the errors of their ways if they haven't managed to do so while still alive."

She was saved from having to go on in that vein when Dee returned with additional wood nymphs. Together, Dee, Ina and Jael gave the dryads their instructions and let them get to work. The nymphs all giggled, looking back and forth between the Tree and Eddy, but a stern look from Dee sobered them up and they climbed into the tree in search of borers and possible other parasites.

They found only a dozen of the borers in the first hour then, two in the hour after that. Dee kept them looking and after a further two hours of intense searching they found one more. "We need to keep looking," Mina reported seriously to Dee around sunset. "I know it has been a while since we found any pests, but I'm afraid we still might miss something."

"You've been most thorough, Mina," Dee told her, "but if you think you need to stay a while to be certain, you are certainly welcome."

"Mother Nature, we will, but you know we all have our own trees. We want to help the new World Tree, but we can't give him the constant attention he deserves," Mina told her.

"I believe I understand what you're getting at, and it's a good idea," Dee nodded, "but let me talk to Enki first. He's been in charge of this from the first. It's his call."

"I understand," Mina agreed. "We can't start until the full moon rises anyway."

"That's two days from now," Dee noted, "I should be able to let you know by morning."

Two evenings later the back yard was filled with laughing, giggling nymphs, all dancing in a ring around the Tree. Eddy and Dee were cuddled together on the couch watching a movie and Ina was in the kitchen making a fresh batch of popcorn.

"Just what is going on out there?" Eddy asked as he got up to put a new disk in the machine.

"Don't worry, dear," Dee assured him, a note of exhaustion in her voice, "It is just the nymphs doing what nymphs do."

"But what...?" Eddy began.

"You don't really want to know, dear," she told him. "Really."

Seven

It was raining gently the next morning when Eddy woke up. Dee had made a habit of sleeping with him, but she was inevitably out of the bedroom each morning before he woke up. He wandered over to the window, saw the weather and was sorely tempted to just go back to sleep again, but somewhere in the house he could make out the sounds of animated chatting and his curiosity got the better of him.

He showered and shaved, brushed his teeth and hair and finally wandered out to the kitchen where Dee, Ina and Jael were talking to a dryad Eddy was fairly certain he had not yet met. "Eddy!" Jael greeted him. "Good morning."

“Morning,” Eddy replied with a nod of his head that he hoped would be correctly interpreted as a request for an introduction.

Deecaught the cue and did the honors. “Eddy, this is Tanise. She’ll be with us from now on.” Tanise was dressed in a traditional dryad dress of leaves, although it was an unusual one in that the leaves were maple, rather than oak. Also they were not the normal leaf green color of dryad dresses, but in the autumnal colors of maple leaves.

“Welcome to the family,” Eddy replied dryly.

“Thank you, Mister Salem,” Tanise replied politely.

“Call me Eddy,” he told her. “Everyone else does.”

“Tanise is a new-born dryad, Eddy,” Jael explained. “She’s the dryad of the Tree.”

“I thought dryads were only born in association with oaks,” Eddy remarked.

“Tanise is a very special dryad, dear,” Dee told him. “This is what all the commotion was about last night.”

“They were making a baby dryad?” Eddy asked.

“That’s not particularly accurate,” Dee commented, “but yes. That’s pretty much it.”

“That would explain the dress,” Eddy remarked, “or would it?”

“It does, Eddy,” Tanise explained. “A dryad dress is made from the leaves of her own tree. It will last as long as she and her tree does.”

“I always thought they were supposed to be green,” Eddy told her.

“Normally,” Dee explained. “The manufacture of the dress is part of the ritual to create a new dryad, you see, and most dryads are born in the spring. Also yes, they are normally made of oak leaves and while the Tree has sometimes appeared as an oak, It has also been an ash, a pine, a spruce, a willow, a palm, several varieties of fruit tree and still more. However, its favorite through its short life has always been various species of maple and so it was last night as well. Sugar maple it appears, so Tanise has a very colorful dress.”

Eddy waited until he was alone with Dee to ask what was really on his mind. “Won’t this make Tanise the supreme deity in the new universe?”

“No,” Dee assured him. “A dryad is actually a part of her tree. Tanise is the Tree’s first guardian, like Vethrfolnir on Yggdrasil or even a bit like Ratatosk.”

“Not much like Ratatosk,” Eddy observed.

“True,” Dee laughed. “For one thing she smells much better. But you know Ratatosk was originally an ordinary squirrel who happened to be on the young Yggdrasil as it transcended?”

“So he told me,” Eddy nodded.

“Well, the same is true of the other creatures on the World Tree,” Dee told him.

“The birds I have no problem with, but what about the deer and the goat?” Eddy asked. “They don’t normally live in trees.”

“I wasn’t there, but I imagine they were grazing near the base of the Tree, although they might have come along soon after transcendence. All that happened before my time, you see, and they don’t remember since they were just normal animals at the time.”

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter,” Eddy decided. “It all happened in a different universe, right?”

“Well, yes,” Dee admitted, “but there is a connection or we think there is. The problem is either that universe doesn’t exist anymore or for some reason we cannot get there.”

“Maybe you just don’t know how?” Eddy suggested. “Ratty said that there’s only one way into another universe. Perhaps you just haven’t found it.”

“If so, it has been hidden from the Infinities too,” Dee replied. “If that’s the case, it is the only instance I can think of in which that has happened. You cannot be omniscient if you know everything except one thing. Omniscience is an all-or-nothing proposition, dear.”

“Maybe it is just omniscience within this universe?”

“And every one we know about,” Dee replied. “I don’t think so.”

“Then maybe there is something special about our universe,” Eddy told her. “Maybe ours was first.”

“Then where did Yggdrasil come from?” Dee countered.

“Which came first?” Eddy asked, “the chicken or the egg? Are the people and gods of the child universes aware of this one?”

“Interesting question,” Dee admitted. “I don’t know. Actually I’ve never been to one of them. My concerns are here in this one.”

“This house is getting crowded,” Eddy remarked. “Where is Tanise going to sleep? Not the couch, I hope.”

“She won’t need sleep for another week or two,” Dee replied.

“The basement is unfinished,” Eddy considered. “I think it could be turned into two or three rooms. One for the laundry, since the washing machine and dryer are already in there, and the others could be guest rooms.”

“And Springtime Seed will pay for it,” Dee told him.

“What? That’s not necessary,” Eddy replied instantly.

“Yes, it is,” Dee argued. “It’s our fault the house is so full, the least we can do is pick up the tab for the

expansion. We'll have workers on it in the morning."

"Excuse me?" Tanise interrupted them. "Jael says I have to go to someplace called school. What is that?"

"School?" Dee asked. "Whatever for? Come on, let's go see what Jael has in mind now."

"It's simple," Jael told them a few minutes later. "Tanise is a new-born dryad. She knows everything a dryad instinctively knows, yes, but she has no experience. She's sweet, but... Uh," she looked at Tanise and tried to compose a non-hurtful way of calling her shallow. "She's the dryad of a very special Tree. She needs to be a very special dryad."

"We can't send her to public school, though," Dee argued. "She may look like a typical teenager, but she can't even read yet. I'm not sure why you think she has to."

"I'll teach her how to read," Jael maintained.

"And while doing that," Dee retorted, "how do you intend to instill eleven or twelve years of education into her before her first day of school?"

Eddy looked at Tanise. She was looking frightened. Dryads, he had come to learn, were normally gentle creatures, more given to fun and harmony. The few he had met since the birth of the Tree had become mature through experience so while still somewhat vapid, both Mina and Nina knew there were times they had to be brave. Tanise had never encountered two people arguing before. Dee and Jael were not arguing particularly fiercely. They were, in fact, being quite polite about it, but Tanise was still scared by the lack of harmony and she instinctively sought protection in Eddy's arms. Ina was there in the room as well, but was wisely staying out of the line of fire.

"Ladies," Eddy interrupted Dee and Jael, while giving the trembling dryad a reassuring hug. He used a calming voice so Tanise would not think he was joining the fight. "Perhaps a compromise is in order. We cannot send Tanise to school. Her apparent age would place her in the junior or senior year of high school, but she is not at all prepared for that level of classes. For that matter, we don't have a birth certificate or proof of having entered the country legally for her."

"We can fake that if need be," Jael shrugged.

"It won't be necessary," Eddy told her. "Jael, you had a good idea with teaching Tanise to read. Let's take that a bit further, shall we? We'll have to consider this a form of home schooling. You don't really have a lot of time, but also keep in mind that there is such a thing as informational overload."

"I know that, Eddy," Jael agreed. "We'll take it at whatever speed Tanise finds comfortable."

"Tanise?" Eddy asked. "How do you feel about this?"

"Do I have to?" she asked timidly.

"It will be good for you and your Tree," Eddy reassured her.

"Well, if you say so," Tanise nodded reluctantly, "I'll try."

A few minutes later, Eddy stopped Jael as she was about to leave to buy textbooks and other learning

materials. "Are you sure this is necessary?" he asked.

"I don't want the new Tree protected by a dumb bimbo," she whispered back to him.

"But just what are you planning?" Eddy asked. "A crash course in nuclear physics?"

"We'll see," Jael laughed. "Hey! If she's really hopeless, I can always train her in marketing."

"How would that be of use?" Eddy asked.

"How would nuclear physics?" she countered. "It's all experience that will enrich her. We don't want a two-dimensional character as the guardian of an entire new universe."

"Not unless it's entirely populated by adolescent boys," Eddy agreed.

The next two weeks passed quietly. On her first day of life, Tanise found five more Twoline Chestnut Borers in the Tree, but after that she was confident the infestation had been removed.

"Are you sure?" Eddy asked.

"I'm a part of the Tree," she replied. "I can feel every part of him, every leaf, every branch, every drop of sap. I feel the earthworms tickling his roots and the feet of every bird who comes to rest in his branches. There are no more parasites left."

"That's a relief," Eddy sighed.

When Jael returned with Tanise's school books, she also brought an assortment of clothing for her. At first Tanise didn't see any reason for them. "I have my leaf dress," she explained, "and if it's warm enough I don't even need that."

"Not every one who visits here," Ina told her, "is a god or goddess. We do occasionally have mortals among us. They wouldn't understand. Just wear the clothes, okay?"

The remaining leaves turned gold and red as the autumn weather began to turn cold and then finally they started falling. "Shouldn't Tanise be getting ready to hibernate with the Tree?" Ina asked Dee one morning.

"Not this year," Dee replied. "Dryads are usually born in the spring and instantly adapt to the natural cycle of the year, but you could say Tanise was born out of season. I think it is fair to say she'll be more or less awake all winter and won't actually hibernate until the first autumn after transcendence."

"What do you mean by 'more or less awake?'" Ina asked.

"Well, I doubt she'll be able to stay up all night like we can," Dee conjectured. "Most likely she'll sleep at night and even take cat naps during the day sometimes all through the winter, but for the most part she'll be awake all year. Just as well since she's going to have a lot of responsibilities come next spring and she'll need the winter to prepare."

"Then you're in favor of Jael's plan to teach her stuff modern school children are expected to know?" Ina asked.

"I am, yes," Dee nodded. "The idea surprised me at first, but Jael is correct. Tanise has to be more than just a dryad. I think we all will have to take her in hand and teach her what we know best."

"What would I teach her?" Ina asked.

"Morals," Dee told her seriously.

"Morals? Me?" Ina laughed. "Not exactly what I'm known best for."

"Maybe not, but isn't that what you're trying to teach that new cult of yours?" Dee countered. "Look. You eventually grew up. Unfortunately, Tanise is not going to have the luxury of a millennium-long childhood. Also I think you're up to teaching her basic math, discussing literature and the like, aren't you?"

"I suppose," Ina nodded.

Eight

"What are you doing, Eddy?" Tanise asked late on the afternoon about two weeks after she was born. The new bedrooms in the basement were finished just in time for her to pick one before she started feeling the need to sleep at night.

"Harvesting the last of the tomatoes and peppers, dear," he replied. "There's supposed to be a frost tonight and while the garden is sheltered I'm fairly certain it is going to get cold enough to kill the plants. Want to help?"

"Okay!" she agreed instantly. "What do I do?"

"Just pick all the fruits and put them in the basket," Eddy instructed.

"Even the ones that aren't ripe yet?" Tanise asked.

"Even them," Eddy confirmed. "Some of the tomatoes will ripen inside and the rest we'll pickle just like we did with some of the cucumbers last weekend. The peppers we can eat green anyway."

"Then why didn't you pick them sooner?" she asked.

"I like them fully ripe when I can get them that way," Eddy replied. "Even the hot ones are sweeter that way."

"What about these root plants?" Tanise asked as she started picking tomatoes.

"We'll leave them for now," Eddy told her. "I picked the potatoes weeks ago, before you were born, and the carrots and parsnips won't reach their peak of sweetness until after the frost. I usually leave some parsnips in the ground to use in the spring anyway. You know I don't think I've ever had so many vegetables come out of this garden before. It's been a remarkable year on a number of counts."

"I think Dee must have had something to do with that," Tanise opined.

“Could be,” Eddy nodded. “If so, we’ll have to make sure she does her share of cooking and pickling the excess. I know we have more here than we all can eat comfortably before they start to go bad. On the other hand, it might have been the Tree too, you know. Your Tree is a force of life and affects everything around it.”

“Maybe,” Tanise nodded. “I’ll ask Jael about it or Ina.”

“Why not ask Dee herself?” Eddy inquired.

Tanise leaned close to Eddy and whispered, “She scares me.”

“Dee?” Eddy asked, surprised. “Oh she can be a bit forbidding at times, but she’s also a nurturing, loving sort of person. You shouldn’t be frightened of her.”

“But she’s so powerful!” Tanise worried. “She could kill me with the blink of an eye.”

“But she won’t, dear,” Eddy assured her. “Ina and Jael are powerful too, you know.”

“But they don’t scare me,” Tanise admitted. “I just can’t get close to Dee.”

Eddy chuckled. “I shouldn’t laugh,” he told her. “I think the reason you can’t get close to Dee is that you are, as you’ve told me several times now, part of the Tree. She doesn’t want to be accused of trying to align the Tree to her. If our allies thought she was doing that, they might break the alliance and then the ones who do want to capture the Tree would have an easier time of it.” He didn’t want to frighten the young dryad, but in truth he worried that their enemies really wanted to destroy the Tree. He need not have worried about her feelings.

“I think our enemies want to kill the Tree,” Tanise confided. “Why else would they have planted borers on him?”

“Maybe they had a cure in mind and were attempting to blackmail us?” Eddy suggested. Then he had to explain that concept. Tanise wasn’t convinced, but she went back to picking tomatoes and soon they had a large basket full of them.

“What are we going to do with all those?” Jael asked when they eventually brought the baskets filled with tomatoes and peppers into the kitchen.

“We can cook some of them into soup and sauce and put it in the freezer,” Rona suggested practically. “We’ll need some herbs, though. Is there any basil left in the yard?”

“Quite a bit,” Eddy admitted. “I was planning to go back for that next.”

“Good,” Rona replied. “It will go well with the stewed tomatoes and we’ll use the rest to make pesto. Do you have any pine nuts and parmesan cheese?”

“I doubt it,” Eddy admitted. “I’m not much of a cook, remember.”

“Then why do you grow all this?” Jael asked.

“I can make a decent salad,” Eddy replied, “but really it’s mostly because it got to be a habit.”

“Well, if I might borrow the car, I’ll do some shopping and be back in an hour or so,” Rona replied. Jael added, “Just let me tell Dee and Ina I’m going out.”

Eddy and Tanise went back outside and cut down the basil, then for good measure pulled up a few green onions. “These are nice and mild,” Eddy commented to Tanise, “so they can be used in a salad or in whatever Rona and Jael have in mind for cooking.”

“What are these?” Tanise asked, pointing at a row of berry vines filled with purplish-red berries.

“It’s a late-season raspberry,” Eddy replied. “Thanks for pointing it out. I hadn’t realized there were so many ripe berries. They’re good for baking with or just eating straight off the vine. Try one, but be careful of the thorns.”

Tanise reach out gingerly and selected a single berry and put it carefully in her mouth. Eddy was amused by the care which she exhibited, but decided it was better she be cautious than boldly experimental. “I like it!” she told him happily.

“Good,” he replied as she reached for more berries. “Why don’t you go into the kitchen and get a basket to put them in. If you can’t find one, ask Dee or Ina.”

“You want to pick all of them?” Tanise asked, popping three in her mouth at once.

“They’ll only rot on the vine if we don’t eat them, unless you plan to eat them all right now,” he told her. She started reaching for more and he added, “If you do that, there won’t be any more for you later.”

“Right,” she nodded, taking only one more berry before racing into the house. Eddy chuckled and went back to looking through the garden.

He was surprised to find two summer squashes that had hidden behind the raspberries. They had gotten rather large, but he picked them anyway, then, on pulling on what he thought was another onion, he discovered it was a bud of garlic. He was tempted to separate the cloves and replant them for the spring, but remembered he had already done so with another bud a couple of weeks earlier. So he tossed the garlic into the harvest basket then helped Tanise pick the rest of the berries.

Jael and Rona had returned by the time they were done and Eddy was feeling tired, so they brought it all into the kitchen and let them go to work. Tanise was fascinated with the whole process of cooking and she stayed to help, while Eddy wandered into the living room where Ina was watching the television.

“Where’s Dee?” Eddy asked.

“She had to go out,” Ina replied. “Something about an earthquake in Asia somewhere.”

“Without waiting for Jael to get back?” Eddy asked.

“No, you just missed her is all,” she replied. “I’ve protected you by myself before, though. What’s the problem?”

“Nothing,” Eddy assured her. “I’ve noticed that since we got back from Yarmouthport you almost never leave me with less than two of you in the house. That’s all. I thought it was a new plan or something.”

“We have been keeping a closer guard on you and the Tree since then,” Ina admitted. “Dee’s very

nervous. I can tell she doesn't want to say it out loud, but she is fairly certain the insect attacks were not natural in origin."

"Loki and Iblis were more direct than that," Eddy noted.

"They were," Ina agreed. "That's what bothers Dee. If our new enemies are using pests like the Fall Webworms and borers, it means they think differently than Loki and Iblis. They have a different way of getting what they want. That makes all of us nervous. We have a good defense against attacks like that by Iblis and Loki. They wouldn't even have stood a chance had we not all gone to Yggdrasil in June."

"Why did we all go?" Eddy asked. "The Great Tree only wanted to meet me."

"You need protection every bit as much as the Tree does," Ina replied. "We traveled with you because it was decided we were primarily your guardians. So we left the Tree in the care of what we thought was our second string."

"The plan would have worked had Skuld not already been working for Loki," Eddy pointed out.

"Was she really working for Loki?" Ina asked.

"What do you mean?" Eddy asked.

"That never sounded right to me," Ina explained. "None of the *Valkyries* are likely to have been taking orders from Loki. They respect worthy warriors, but the only man they are likely to take orders from is Odin."

"So was she working on her own?" Eddy asked.

"Maybe," Ina shrugged. "Or maybe she was working for or with one of the Norse goddesses. Some of them are pretty blood-thirsty, although I wouldn't have thought this of them either. It could be we'll never really know, you realize, but it's something we all have to consider."

"Why haven't any of you mentioned this to me before?" Eddy asked.

"We didn't want to bother you unduly, Eddy," Ina told him. "We have no proof there's anyone out there conspiring to take the Tree."

"Funny," Eddy remarked, "but it's been sounding to me like it's not a matter of who, but of how many."

"Well, that's what we think," Ina admitted, "but so far there's been no verifiable signs of an opposition, except, maybe for those bugs."

"Well, I think we have any sort of parasite or disease handled with Tanise," Eddy remarked. "She's better in tune with the Tree than the rest of us combined."

"I should hope so!" Ina laughed. "That's the whole point of her being a dryad."

"She seems like quite an intelligent young lady as well," Eddy added. "I wouldn't have expected that in a nymph."

"It is a surprise," Ina agreed. "However, why shouldn't a nymph be intelligent? They tend to be naïve

because they live sheltered lives in general and I don't know that anyone has ever actually tried to teach one more than how to tend to their trees and that would be an exercise in futility if I ever saw one, since they know everything on that count from the moment they open their eyes.

"You know," Ina continued, "come to think of that, I don't think nymphs have been treated fairly in all the old stories. They're portrayed as beautiful, eternally young, incredibly naïve and ripe for any god who happens their way. However, nymphs are often under-rated. They are deities; minor ones to be sure, but deities nonetheless. The thing is you don't hear the stories about the ones who told Zeus where he could take his goods or who gave Apollo his walking papers."

"Neither of those two were known for their ability to take rejection well," Eddy noted, remembering his mythology.

"Hera and Artemis had a hand in keeping them in line in those circumstances," Ina laughed. "There are a few stories about how Hera treated the ones Zeus seduced, but you don't hear about the ones she protected and Artemis took her brother out behind the woodshed, so to speak, more often than I can count."

"I'm surprised that was never mentioned," Eddy remarked.

"You don't see the *paparazzi* reporting on celebrities who behave themselves either," Ina pointed out. "The same sort of people who wrote spicy cautionary tales in the ancient world are taking lewd pictures and writing spicy stories about celebrities today."

"I had wondered about the evolution of that particular subspecies," Eddy laughed. "So you think Tanise is pretty sharp too?"

"She seems to be," Ina agreed. "Of course, I don't know what her attention span is like yet. If she doesn't stick to her lessons all the intelligence in the world won't help. On the other hand, I'm not as worried about that as much as Jael is. That does remind me, though. I'm supposed to be working with her on arithmetic this afternoon. Is she doing anything important?"

"She's helping Rona by preparing the veggies we just harvested," Eddy reported.

"Schoolwork first," Ina decided. "Now who would have ever thought of me as a schoolmarm?" she fired off as she left the room.

"I know I'd have paid more attention in junior high had you been my teacher," Eddy noted to himself.

Nine

"Eddy, I recognize the signs," Dee told him a week later. "You're getting cabin fever."

"It's not so bad," Eddy denied.

"The heck it isn't!" Dee retorted. "Eddy, you haven't left the house since we got you back from Yarmouthport in July. That's three and a half months."

"My, how time flies when you're having fun," Eddy replied stubbornly. "and I have left the house. I've

walked into the center of town at least once a week to buy groceries.

“Eddy!” Dee exclaimed exasperatedly. “You haven’t gone more than three blocks away. That doesn’t count.”

“You’ve told me repeatedly that the Tree is only safe in my presence,” Eddy reminded her. “Now you want me to leave her vulnerable?”

“I never meant to shackle you to the house permanently, dear,” she told him. “And I’m not suggesting an extended vacation. I just thought we could go into New York for dinner and a play.”

“That would mean staying overnight,” Eddy pointed out.

“Not really,” Dee countered. “We do have certain shortcuts available to us.”

“Those shortcuts must include the ticket office if you can arrange seats on Broadway on a moment’s notice,” Eddy replied.

“We have our sources,” Dee admitted. “Actually, I called Enki this morning and he asked around. Bacchus has tickets to *Spamalot* tonight which he’s willing to let us have if we want them.”

“Isn’t Bacchus the god of wine?” Eddy asked.

“And the Theater,” Dee replied. “He takes in one or two plays every night. Not always in New York, but often enough that there’s usually a good chance he’ll have tickets to one show or another.”

“Tell him to keep them,” Eddy decided. “I never really got *Monty Python*, but I’ll meet you half way. How about dinner in Providence? It’s not New York, but the food is just as good and we’ll be closer to home should anything go wrong.”

“Tonight?” Dee suggested.

“Why not?” he shrugged.

Eddy had thought to take Dee to an Italian restaurant on Federal Hill, but instead they ended up enjoying Cajun-Thai fusion cuisine downtown followed by taking in the final Waterfire display of the season while listening to a public Jazz concert by the New England Jazz Allstars.

Dee betrayed her nervousness by calling Jael and Ina back at the house for status reports, but after the third such instance, Eddy confiscated her cell phone and they enjoyed the rest of the evening without interruption.

“There, you see?” Eddy told her as he turned the car on to the entrance ramp of I-195. “You didn’t even need the phone tonight.” He had tempted the Fates once too often by that remark because it rang as soon as he said it.

“Hello?” Dee answered. “Jael? What’s wrong? No, we’re fine. Is it the Tree? Then what?” She was silent for two minutes, then told Jael, “Okay, we’re on our way. We’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“What’s wrong?” Eddy asked.

“Eddy,” Dee told him, “just keep driving straight and don’t be startled by anything you see. We’re going to take a shortcut.” As soon as she said it, lights all around them flickered out and the road began glowing deep red.

“Cute,” Eddy muttered. “Can you talk while shredding reality?”

“Jael and Ina are beside themselves,” Dee remarked. “There has been another string of terrorist attacks all throughout the Middle East this evening.”

“Tomorrow morning there,” Eddy remarked.

“Whatever,” Dee told him as the terrain suddenly twisted and the road bent into a vertical loop. “Don’t panic. You don’t need to accelerate. Anyway, they got worried that since nothing had happened in Hattamesett, maybe something had happened to us. You know how activity on the mortal plane is usually reflected on the divine plane. Oh what am I thinking? I should be calling Enki.”

“Your phone won’t work here,” Eddy remarked.

“How did you know that?” Dee asked.

“How many months have we been together?” Eddy asked. “I’ve managed to pick up one or two things along the way. One of them is that cell phones don’t work on the divine plane and this place, if it is a place, is half divine and half mortal.”

“You have been listening, haven’t you?” Dee noted. “Well, in thirty seconds we’ll be at the Hattamesett exit. I’ll be able to call Enki then.”

“This is like the time Ina, Jael and I went out to buy that pot,” Eddy noted. “There was a whole bunch of activity in the Middle East, but it turned out to be a false alarm.”

“I hope you’re right,” Dee told him. “A false alarm is what I’m hoping for, but if you remember correctly, that last time it probably wasn’t a false alarm. It was a sign that Loki and Iblis were starting to act on their plans to kidnap the sapling.”

“But they didn’t do it that afternoon,” Eddy replied. “If this is more covert action we aren’t likely to know what it means until later.” Abruptly the road turned black again and the lights near the exit appeared. Eddy took the exit and headed toward US Route 6.

Dee made her phone call and then told Eddy, “Maybe it is like last time. None of our side can see anything happening, not even from Yggdrasil.”

“Well, we know that neither Loki nor Iblis is involved this time around,” Eddy pointed out. “It’s always possible that what happened over there has nothing to do with us.” They reached Route 6 and Eddy turned left.

“Possible? Oh yes, very much so, but in my experience when you have all the information it usually turns out that almost everything is connected one way or the other,” Dee responded. “If two events appear to be unrelated, it’s probable that you just don’t know enough about what is happening.”

“Okay,” Eddy nodded as he took the turn off of Route 6 that would lead them directly in to Hattamesett Center, “but if that connection is esoteric enough then maybe we don’t need to consider it.”

They continued the debate right into Eddy's driveway where Jael and Ina were waiting anxiously. "We do have one problem," Jael reported.

"What?" Dee asked tensely.

"Tanise got scared and bolted," Jael replied. "She's hiding in the Tree and won't come out."

"That's not a bad reaction," Eddy replied. "That's where she is at her strongest, isn't it?"

"It is," Jael confirmed, "but we need her to be a bit less timid and flighty than the average nymph."

"Give her a chance, Jael," Eddy requested. "She's just barely over three weeks old. Everything is still so new to her."

"Normally it wouldn't matter, Eddy," Jael told him, "but she only has a few months to grow up."

"I know, but if you push her too hard you won't accomplish anything," Eddy told her as reasonably as he could.

"I have to agree with Eddy on this," Dee remarked. "Tanise needs to be eased into her responsibilities. The challenge isn't on her to grow up between now and April but on us to get her ready. Dear," she turned to Eddy, "why don't you try and talk to her,"

"Me?" Eddy rebelled. "Shouldn't you talk to her? You're Mother Nature after all."

"And you're the closest one she has to a parent," Dee replied. "You're the guardian of the Tree and she is part of the Tree. Besides you know I frighten her."

"I'll give it my best shot," Eddy shrugged and walked into the house and then out into the back yard. The evening in Providence had been unseasonably warm, but the temperature had dropped since they had left the city and now it was starting to get chilly. He stepped close to the tree and called out softly, "Tanise? Are you in there?"

"Eddy?" She asked softly, her voice muffled by the wood of the Tree.

"Right here," he replied sitting down next to the lower pond. He made a mental note to put nets over the pond to keep it from filling up with leaves. "Are you alright?"

Tanise stepped out of the Tree. She was wearing her dress of leaves for the first time since Ina and Jael had convinced her to wear human clothing. "I'm not harmed in any way," she told him.

"I hear you got scared tonight," Eddy remarked.

"I'm better now that you're back," she replied.

"What happened?" Eddy asked.

"I got scared when Jael and Ina started acting all worried," she explained.

"That's it?" Eddy asked.

“Well, I thought that if they were scared then I should be too. And the pictures on the teevee were frightening,” she added with a shiver. “I was afraid they might do that here.”

“I see. Tanise,” Eddy put his arm around her comfortingly, “just because others are worried is no reason to become frightened yourself. I know you can’t help being scared when people you know who are generally quite brave like Jael and Ina start getting worried, and fear is not really anything to be ashamed of. But we all need to learn how to deal with our fears. Running is not always the answer. More often than not you need to stand up to your fears.”

“Well,” she replied hesitantly, “maybe it wasn’t only the teevee.”

“Then what really sent you back to the Tree, dear?” Eddy asked softly.

Tanise was silent for a long time before suddenly blurting out, “Why do I have to learn all that stupid stuff Jael and Ina keep trying to teach me?”

“What are they teaching you?” Eddy asked.

“History, reading and writing, something called mathematics,” Tanise replied. “It’s all so stupid! I don’t need to know those things.”

“Need to?” Eddy echoed. “Well, I don’t know how necessary it is, but we all think you’re a very special person and we want you to have a special education to go with it. You are going to be the partner and guardian of the new World Tree.”

“I thought you were the guardian,” Tanise replied.

“I am for now, but nothing lasts forever,” Eddy told her. “Soon it will be your turn to protect her,”

“Him,” Tanise corrected him automatically.

“All right, him,” Eddy nodded. “And it’s a very important job, you know, and Jael and Ina just want you to be properly prepared for it.”

“But why mathematics?” Tanise asked. “I know each and every leaf on the Tree. I don’t have to count them. I don’t need to study human literature either. I can just watch the movies.”

“Movies are fine for what they are, dear,” Eddy told her, “but the stories they tell are simple and shallow compared to the ones you’ll read in books. A movie has to be made in a certain amount of time. It doesn’t really have the time to delve into all the details a book does. But more importantly, knowledge is power, and we want you to be as powerful as possible. Knowledge is also habit-forming and you never know what datum will turn out to be important.”

“Really?” Tanise asked, wanting to believe.

“All information is potentially useful, dear,” he told her, “even if you can’t see the use of it now. You will probably need to know many things beyond the immediate Tree himself. Besides, he will be fully asleep soon. This will give you something to occupy your mind. If you don’t like the subjects they’re pushing you toward, suggest something that does interest you.”

“Like what?” Tanise asked.

“Botony, perhaps,” Eddy suggested, “the study of plants, or ecology, the study of how natural systems interact. I imagine you would be interested in all sort of life sciences really, although there are certain basics you’ll need to know to go far in any of them. Jael and Ina will still want you to learn math and all the rest, but at least this way you’ll have things you want to learn as well. And you may be surprised at just how often the ability to do your sums is necessary in all of them.”

“Oh, all right,” Tanise sighed. “I’ll try a bit harder.”

“Good girl,” Eddy commended her, “and I’ll talk to Jael and Ina so they realize you need to be able to study subjects that interest you as well.”

The next week and a half was one of transition. As the final leaves fell and the Tree slipped into its first annual hibernation, Tanise became more serious about her studies and, to Jael’s surprise started absorbing knowledge at a rapid rate. “She’s a right little data sponge at the moment, Eddy,” she told him. “What did you say to her the other night?”

“Not much,” Eddy shrugged. “Just that learning was good for her.”

“That must have done the trick then,” Jael remarked, “because now it’s hard to get her to take time away from her studies. I’ve never known a wood nymph to apply herself so thoroughly to matters that don’t directly concern her tree in fact.”

“Maybe that’s because the Tree is asleep for the winter,” Eddy conjectured. “I believe you were the one who pointed out that when the dryads visited Yggdrasil they had trouble keeping their minds on the reason we brought them there, at least at first.”

“Hmm, that could be,” Jael agreed. “Without the Tree to distract her, she’s more like a normal, intelligent and highly inquisitive human girl. Dee said we should expect her to be drowsy all winter though.”

“Deemay have been mistaken,” Eddy shrugged. “It happens from time to time. Just ask her.”

“Could be,” Jael considered. “You know, I may end up teaching her nuclear physics after all. She seems to have the brains for it.”

“Only if she’s interested,” Eddy warned her. “If you haven’t discussed the basic structure of the atom, then by all means add that into the curriculum, but let her choose which advanced subjects she wants.”

“Oh, we haven’t gotten that far yet,” Jael laughed. “So far everything is at the basic level, but I think we may have her up to grade six by now. And you ought to see her on the computer! Is that the doorbell?” she asked suddenly.

“The back doorbell,” Eddy replied. “I’m not even sure why I have one there. For that matter, who got to the back door without setting off any of the alarms? Isn’t the perimeter armed at all times?”

“It’s supposed to be,” Jael remarked.

They rushed to the greenhouse room to find Ratatosk verbally fencing with Dee and Ina while Tanise watched from the computer terminal. “Hey!” Ratatosk commented delightedly, “Who’s the new girl in town? Cute!”

“Keep your eyes to yourself, Ratty,” Ina told him sternly.

“Or I could train them on you, sweet stuff,” Ratatosk chuckled. In the corner, Tanise blushed furiously.

“Only if you want to lose them, rodent,” Ina told him.

“You wound me, Venus,” the squirrel told her insincerely. “You stab directly to my heart.”

“That can be arranged,” Ina snapped.

“So what brings you here today, Ratty?” Eddy cut in at last.

“Just making a regular report to Mama Nature here,” Ratatosk replied.

“Regular?” Dee asked. “We haven’t seen you in over a month.”

“I’ve been hard at work for you, babe” Ratatosk informed her, “but I still haven’t found any back way here from anywhere at all.”

“Keep looking,” Dee ordered. “The space around the Tree is changing again as she goes dormant. Even if there wasn’t a way in before, there may be now.”

“I’ll keep looking,” Ratatosk sighed, then he sidled up to Tanise and suggested, “Hey cutey, wanna go play in your Tree?” Tanise blushed even deeper than before, but Ina picked up a baseball bat and threatened the squirrel with it. “Okay! I was just kidding around, you know.”

“Do it elsewhere,” Ina snarled.

“Where did the baseball bat come from?” Eddy asked after Ratatosk had left again.

“It’s mine,” Ina admitted. “I brought it back from Dilmun yesterday.”

“You missed the Celestial League this year, didn’t you?” Dee asked.

“Baseball is fun,” Ina admitted. “Knocking the ball down the throat of any jerk stupid enough to razz me is even more fun though.”

“What’s baseball?” Tanise asked.

Ten

Eddy and Jael were out shopping in Fairhaven on the third Thursday of November when he noticed a sign in the window of a package store. “Hey look at that,” Eddy pointed as they were about to enter a supermarket.

“What’s a package store?” Jael asked, seeing the sign.

“They sell wines and spirits,” Eddy explained.

“Not packages?”

“Not as such,” Eddy laughed. It had been some years since he had to explain this to anyone. “State law requires that no alcoholic beverages be carried in public without being covered.”

“That part is fairly common,” Rona remarked. “It was a typically silly political solution to keep the people of the temperance movement happy after the repeal of Prohibition. Supposedly it was to curb public drunkenness and was roughly as successful as Prohibition itself, but the laws persist. In some states the laws prohibit the carrying of open containers, in others the law only mandates that the label not be seen, hence the caricature of a drunk drinking out of a brown paper bag.”

“In New England and a few other places in the States,” Eddy continued, “the stores alcoholic beverages are sold in are called ‘package stores’ or sometimes ‘packies.’ That wasn’t what I was pointing at though. It was the sign in the window.”

“*Le Nouveau Beaujolais Est Arrive !*” Jael read. “Oh it is that time of year, isn’t it?”

“What time?” Rona asked.

“Each year on the third Thursday of November,” Eddy explained, “the new Beaujolais wine is released. Most of it comes by ship, but that won’t be here for a week or two. However, some is sent by jet so stores like this one have it in on the same day.”

“In some of the large cities, restaurants have races to see which can get the bottles in to their place first,” Jael chuckled. “As wines go, you can’t take Beaujolais too seriously. It’s very young at this point and while some years it’s worth keeping a while, most of the time it isn’t.”

“At its best,” Eddy added, “drinking it is fun and it was always something Julie and I looked forward to each fall. Like you said, Jael, the nouveau isn’t a serious wine, but it is usually a nice light red with crisp fruity flavors and just enough acid to make it go well with a Thanksgiving turkey. That’s right! Next week is Thanksgiving. We should do something about that. We had to cancel the Fourth of July barbecue and the thing we did on Labor Day weekend was just an impromptu affair. I wonder if it’s too late to order a large bird.”

“Not if the signs in the market window are true,” Jael pointed out. “Who are you planning to invite?”

“I figured everyone from Springtime Seed,” Eddy replied, “along with their partners. You know I still haven’t met this Marcus of yours. Seems to me that you two haven’t spent much time with him lately. The least I can do is give you an entire weekend together without forcing you to stay away from Hattamesett. I haven’t done a real Thanksgiving in years either. After Julie died and with Maggie out in Alaska, there didn’t seem to be much point, but now with you guys around I sort of have family nearby again. Do you think I ought to buy two turkeys?”

“At least,” Jael chuckled. “That crowd could polish off a whole stuffed moa if they weren’t already extinct. Are you sure you can afford this?”

“It’s only money, Jael,” Eddy replied.

“Yeah, but there’s no need to waste it,” she told him, “especially since Dee can simply create whatever food we need.”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” Eddy replied. “I can’t go declare a party and then let Dee provide all the food. Don’t worry, I have more than enough for the occasional party and I haven’t thrown any in years, not until you folks came along.”

“Dee may have to do most of the cooking,” Jael noted. “You only have one oven. How did you plan to roast two or three birds?”

“Hmm, how about you?” Eddy suggested. “I mean you’re a demoness and fire ought to be a natural for you...”

“Only if you want it tasting like you cooked it over a bituminous coal fire,” Jael told him, with a twinkle in her eye. “Bituminous coal with extra sulfur, I should say. Although, actually, maybe I could.”

“Not if they’re going to have your special brimstone sauce,” Eddy laughed.

“No!” Jael laughed as well. “Ina’s been teaching me magic lately. I’ll bet we could roast the rest using sympathetic magic.”

“Figure that one out and we’ll consider this a warm-up for New Year’s Eve,” Eddy laughed. “Maybe I can arrange for a whole roast ostrich by then.”

“Been done,” Jael teased him, “but I never get tired of it!”

They left the market with only a few bags of groceries, but left a very large order to be filled the following Tuesday. Then, before heading back to Hattamesett, they stopped into the package store and bought just over a case of the new Beaujolais .

“What’s this?” Dee asked as they brought the groceries and the wine in. “You don’t normally buy this much wine.”

“Special occasion,” Eddy explained. “It’s Beaujolais Day.”

“Oh, is that what it is called?” Dee countered, amused. “A good choice, I think. This year’s crop was especially fine. For once the little blurb on the label about being *aprimieur* wine is not hype, but a whole case?”

“Plus an extra bottle,” Eddy told her, raising the thirteenth. “We’ll drink the first this evening and the rest we’ll serve to our company next week.”

“Next week?” Dee asked.

“Eddy’s decided to invite all of Springtime Seed in for dinner,” Jael informed her. “It should be an even bigger blowout than the one last May. Hmm, I ought to see about getting the word out.”

“Just call Nin-ti,” Dee suggested. “She’ll see about spreading the word. But where will they all sit?” They started opening the grocery bags and putting the food away.

“We could serve in shifts, I suppose,” Jael considered, “or you could arrange for unseasonably warm weather and we could put some tables in the backyard.”

“We’re having enough problems with global warming lately,” Dee told her, “but I don’t think it would do any harm to warm up just the back yard for a few hours. That’s how we’ll do it. Now how are we going to cook enough food for roughly fifty in this kitchen.”

“I have an idea,” Jael told her and explained.

“Sympathetic magic?” Dee considered, “Yes, that would do it, we can cook one bird in the oven while the rest cook simultaneously on the counter. We could probably do the same for all the rest of the food. When did you learn that old trick? Have you been taking anthropology classes?”

“I did some years back,” Jael confessed, “but that didn’t teach me how to do it. Ina’s been showing me some of the old ways lately. I’m surprised we still don’t use them more frequently.”

“We don’t need to as much anymore,” Dee replied. “It’s a different world and even the gods are using modern technology for most of what we do beyond those natural abilities related to our attributes, Magic isn’t really a shortcut you know. You may find it a refreshing novelty, but after a while the rituals and incantations can become just as mundane as flipping a light switch. However, you have hit on a case in which modern technology is not going to help us unless we care to buy a couple of extra ovens.”

“Where would we put them?” Jael countered. “Where’s Ina?”

“Off with her new cult,” Dee replied. “She trailed you and Eddy while you were out, you know.”

“I thought I spotted her a couple times,” Jael remarked. “She’s not all that subtle.”

“She’s never had to be, dear,” Dee replied. “Anyway, when you started heading back, she called in to say she would like the evening off. It seemed safe enough. Ratty still hasn’t found the back way in I’m worried about and we still have the perimeter guards wandering the streets of the town. She did offer to come back and give Tanise a chance to see something beyond the house, but Tanise wasn’t interested.”

“That’s starting to worry me,” Jael commented. “Shouldn’t she be more curious about the world. It’s almost as though it frightens her.”

“Young dryads are usually a bit agoraphobic,” Dee replied. “They prefer to stay near their trees for the first few years. It’s a survival trait really and she’s becoming a bit more adventuresome, you know. She’s gone for walks into Hattamesett center with Eddy several times now.”

“Not much of an adventure if you ask me,” Jael opined.

“It is for a young wood nymph just under two months old,” Dee told her. “You know, Eddy might be right that we’re pushing her too hard. Once the Tree transcends she isn’t going to have many immediate enemies, not until they develop in the new world. There will be nothing to be gained by anyone from this one. We don’t even know for certain that there will be intelligent life in the new world.”

“Has that ever happened?” Jael asked.

“Not yet, that I’m aware of,” Dee replied, “but keep in mind that most World Trees never came to term. Still, I suspect that there will be intelligent life and that means after an idyllic span of a few years to a few centuries, Tanise will be up to her neck in responsibilities as she protects the Tree and, by extension, the entire universe. I suppose we’ll be able to continue her training for a while after transcendence, but keep in mind she will probably hibernate with the Tree during the winters.”

“I thought that was a given,” Jael remarked.

“Nothing is certain when it comes to a World Tree, Jael,” Dee told her. “We’re already doing many things differently from last time we had a successful Tree and everything we do could influence the shape of the new universe. Tanise may be as sleepless as we are.”

“Or she may continue the same sleeping habits she’s developing now,” Jael added as she put the last of the food away. “Where did Eddy go?”

Deelaughed, “You’re missing all sorts of details this afternoon. He left a few minutes ago to see how Tanise is doing.”

“Good,” Jael decided. “He’s treats her so much like a daughter you’d think they really were related.”

“He is the only father figure she’ll ever have,” Dee pointed out, “and in a divine and esoteric sense, maybe she is his daughter. She’s as closely related to him as Oriel is to Marcus.”

“There is that,” Jael remarked. “With his real daughter in Alaska, they almost never see each other. Do you think we should... uh...” she paused trying to find the right words.

“We shouldn’t interfere, dear,” Dee smiled. “Think of all those ancient myths. Generally, when gods interfere in mortal lives, things go wrong. Those myths aren’t just cautionary tales for mortals, but for us as well. But your heart’s in the right place.”

“A strange thing to say to a demoness,” Jael remarked.

“Well, you’re a very strange demoness, dear, if you really want to know the truth,” Dee told her gently. “Besides, there aren’t really any differences between demons and gods. Many of your older colleagues were considered gods in parts of the ancient world, in fact. As Poor Richard might have said, ‘One is never a demon in the first person. This is our god, not our demon. It is only in the third person – their demon – and so forth.’”

“I don’t think Franklin actually ever said the quote you just paraphrased,” Jael remarked. “I’m pretty sure that was just from the play *1776*.”

“Well, it’s something he probably should have said,” Dee shrugged, “And the point is, in the ancient world you would never have thought of yourself as a demoness. You would have been a goddess.”

“A minor one at best,” Jael admitted modestly.

“You’re not a major demon either,” Dee pointed out. “Still, I’ll bet you would have been fairly popular as a household protective or tutelary goddess. Keep in mind there were never more than a few major gods in any religion, but there were often thousands of minor ones and they were usually more respected and loved than those of us who made the headlines, so to speak.”

“Nice to know I could have cut it in the ancient world,” Jael remarked, “but it’s just as well I’m who I am here and now. I’m a very modern girl, you know.”

“I know, dear,” Dee nodded.

Thanksgiving dinner was an amazingly cramped affair even though tables stretched out of the greenhouse room and all around the back yard. There was no need to serve in shifts as they feared, but with almost fifty present, the cooler air of the backyard was a relief.

Even with three large turkeys, Jael's prediction was correct, they needed more food, but Dee had met the challenge by creating an old-fashioned cornucopia, a horn-shaped basket filled with fresh fruit that could never be emptied. Tanise was thrilled to meet so many people at once, which allayed Jael's worries that the young nymph might be too shy to protect the Tree when the time came. Instead, Tanise showed no fear at all as she introduced herself to guests she didn't know yet, although she did her best to avoid Ratatosk, whose rude remarks embarrassed her. There were a few minor misunderstandings, such as when Ina went to hug Gilgamesh as he prepared to leave for his shift on guard duty. Inanna had treated Gilgamesh badly in the ancient days when he had spurned her affections and he thought she was trying to set him up once more.

"No, silly," Ina told him. "I'm not that kind of goddess anymore. You should find yourself someone, though. I think most of the dryads were watching you all day." Eddy was surprised to see the ancient warrior blush at that.

However, none of the misunderstandings turned into arguments and all in all it was a chance for the gods who had been working to protect the new Tree to just relax and be themselves for a few hours.

They started serving around two in the afternoon so that by seven even the gods best known for their ability to pack food away prodigiously were satisfyingly filled. Everyone pitched in to clean up and then in ones and twos, they said goodnight until only those who had been present when the seed had sprouted and their partners were left. Jael/Rona and Marcus retired to the guest bedroom early, but Eddy and Dee, Ina, Tanise, Enki, Nin-ti and Hawk settled into the living room for a late night movie.

Just before the movie started there was a mild earth tremor. "What was that?" Eddy worried.

"Probably nothing to worry about," Dee assured him. "Probably the Tree just finally going completely to sleep."

"Are you sure?" Tanise asked, not entirely certain that was the case.

"Fairly," Dee replied. "Or maybe she's wishing us a happy Thanksgiving too."

"I still think we ought to be watching *It's a Wonderful Life*," Hawk muttered, "not *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*."

"Oh hush, dear," Nin-ti told him affectionately as she cuddled into the crook of his arm. "Don't ruin the mood."

Sawtimber

One

Eddy was awakened a few days later by a deep rumbling and scraping sound coming from outside the

front of the house. Getting out of bed he discovered it was snowing and that several inches had already accumulated from the early season storm.

“Are we expecting much snow?” he asked Dee a few minutes later when he entered the greenhouse, with a mug of coffee in his hand.

“Five or six inches, dear,” Dee replied. “Not much at all. In fact it should stop snowing in the next half hour or so.”

“I should probably get ready to start shoveling, then,” Eddy decided.

“That’s dangerous at your age, dear,” she warned him. “We don’t need to take such chances. Besides, Jael and Tanise are already using both shovels.”

“That’s not right,” Eddy insisted.

“Do you really enjoy shoveling snow so much?” Dee asked pointedly.

“I hate it,” Eddy admitted.

“Then why do you want to go out there and do it?”

“Well,” Eddy began lamely.

“Ah,” Dee remarked knowingly. “You’re the man of the house, is that it?”

“Yeah, no,” Eddy began, then tried starting over, “But you’re company... Well, I should hope you’re all more than company by now.”

“By now I think we’re family,” Dee told him, “And as family, we all pitch in and do our share.”

“You’re right,” Eddy admitted, silently reminding himself that Julie had always won every argument too. “I admit that it will be nice not to have to shovel snow for a change.”

“Good, now why don’t you sit down and enjoy that coffee. I think I’ll see about making hot cocoa for the girls.”

Eddy’s sidewalk was not very large so Jael and Tanise made quick work of the snow. “Eddy!” Tanise shouted gleefully as they came inside. “It snowed last night!”

“I noticed,” Eddy replied dryly.

“Why didn’t you tell me snow was so much fun?” she asked.

Eddy chuckled, “We’ll see how much fun you think it is in a few months. However, if you like, have your cocoa and I’ll show you how to make a snowman.”

“You can make a man out of snow?” Tanise asked.

“More like a crude statue,” Eddy laughed.

“I’ll bet Dee could bring it to life,” Jael smirked.

“I’ll bet I wouldn’t even try,” Dee countered.

“You’re no fun,” Jael laughed.

“Let’s just say I’d prefer the back yard not look like a scene from a really bad monster movie,” Dee countered, confusing Tanise badly.

“It’s a sort of tomato?” she asked remembering the movie of a few evenings before.

Jael tried not to laugh and nearly choked on her cocoa. “No,” she sputtered at last. “That wasn’t a real monster movie, just a spoof on one. If you like, though, we can rent *King Kong* or *Godzilla* tonight.”

“Okay,” Tanise replied.

“We’ll make it a double feature with *Return of the Killer Tomatoes*,” Jael added blandly.

“Hey! It snowed last night,” Ina observed as she came in the front door.

“We can’t put anything past you, can we?” Jael shot off.

“What’s wrong?” Ina asked, looking hurt.

“Sorry,” Jael apologized instantly. “It just slipped out.”

“I think you pulled a muscle in your back, Jael,” Rona told her, quickly regaining her natural form in Jael’s place.

“You should feel it from my side,” Jael remarked, allowing Rona’s form to remain manifested. It was a sign of the pain her natural form was in.

“I can,” Rona told her. “I’m calling Oriel.” She reached into her purse for her cell phone.

“Ladies,” Ina remarked, “you’re confusing Tanise again. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help shovel, but I am back two hours earlier than promised. It wasn’t snowing in Little Rock.”

“Little Rock?” both Jael and Rona echoed with a double take. “Your cult is in Little Rock?”

“What of it?” Ina asked. “It’s a big city, you know.”

“Little Rock,” Jael repeated. “You know I always just assumed they were in California or Cleveland, maybe. Even Memphis would have been easier to believe. So you’ve been taking the odd evening out in Arkansas.”

“And you’ve been spending all your spare time in Cleveland,” Ina pointed out.

“Our husband lives and works in Cleveland,” Rona shot back. “If he was teaching at Princeton, we’d be spending that time in New Jersey. It’s not a matter of where the place is, it’s where Marcus is. I suspect it’s the same with you and your new cult.”

“Some of the members are moving to Memphis for new jobs,” Ina said a minute later to fill the silence.

“And so the new religion begins to grow,” Jael remarked, but in a gentle tone.

“If you’re really in pain, you’d better call Oriel,” Ina told her.

“Maybe I should have been out there shoveling after all,” Eddy remarked.

“No, Eddy,” Jael told him. “You could have been hurt a lot more than I was. I’ll bounce back, maybe even without Oriel’s help, but if your heart gave out while shoveling, I doubt Oriel could get here fast enough.” It was only a few days later that Eddy realized that if he suddenly died both the Tree and Tanise would as well.

When a tall, dark-haired woman arrived an hour after Rona called she was briefly introduced to Tanise before being allowed to look at Jael’s injury. “Who is Oriel?” Tanise asked.

“My daughter,” Dee informed her, “and also the daughter of Marcus Steele.”

“So you and Jael’s husband...” Tanise trailed off.

“Not the way you’re thinking, no,” Dee chuckled. “Don’t worry, older gods than you have been confused by that. Actually she’s not all that much older than you. She was born fifteen years ago.”

“She seems to be fairly confident in her knowledge,” Tanise noted.

“Just as you are when we ask about the Tree,” Dee pointed out, “although now that I come to think back I believe we accelerated her education with fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.”

“The Tree of Knowledge?” Tanise asked.

“An aspect of Yggdrasil,” Dee told her. “I’ll call Enki and ask him to have Ratatosk bring you some of the fruit.”

“Not that squirrel,” Tanise protested. “He’s horrid.”

“He only teases you, because he knows he can get away with it and because you react to it. Ignore him and he’ll stop soon enough,” Dee advised. Then she stiffened slightly and her eyes focused on something that wasn’t there.

“Dee?” Tanise asked worriedly.

“Something is wrong,” Dee told her. “Be a dear and turn on the Weather Channel, would you? I’ll be in the living room in a moment.”

Tanise rushed into the living room where Eddy and Ina were watching the evening news. “Dee asked me to turn on the Weather Channel,” she told them hesitantly.

“Okay,” Eddy agreed. “The news is just depressing me anyway. Five hundred and thirty-seven men and women between the White House and Congress and not a whole brain between them.” He picked up the remote control and changed the channel.

"I don't think the weather report is going to cheer any of us up, dear," Dee told him as she entered the room. "It's hard to tell from within the shadow of the Tree, but I believe that a really deep cold front is headed down from Canada."

"That's not unusual after a snowstorm," Eddy remarked.

"Worse than normal," Dee clarified. "Let's see what the forecast says." They watched for a few minutes, while Dee became increasingly agitated.

"That's too cold!" Tanise cried as soon as she heard the projected low temperature. "It's too soon in the season, He could be damaged by this!"

"That's not a natural cold front," Dee told them while Eddy tried to comfort Tanise. "I'd better call Enki or Nin-ti on this one."

Tanise was crying uncontrollably while Dee made the call. "Nin-ti?" Dee asked over the phone, "It's been quiet far too long."

"When you say it that way, Mother, I get the feeling quiet time is over," Nin-ti remarked.

"Probably," Dee replied. "Have you been monitoring the weather?"

"That's more up your alley than mine," Nin-ti replied, "but I understand it's suppose to get fairly cold tonight."

"Too cold," Dee told her. "I don't think this is natural."

"Well, you ought to know," Nin-ti agreed.

"That's the problem, Nin-ti," Dee explained. "I'm too close to the Tree right now and can't see out beyond the area of effect as well as I normally could. I need some of our allies out there to check into this quickly."

"You got it," Nin-ti agreed. "Do you want to talk to Enki?"

"Not if you're handling it," Dee replied. "I mean don't keep him out of the loop. He is the team leader, but I don't want to delay action on this. The tree could be in danger in just a few hours."

"All right," Nin-ti agreed. "I'll get right on it and call you back as soon as I have something to tell you. Is that crying I hear?"

"Tanise is a bit overwrought," Dee explained.

"Tell her we're on the case," Nin-ti signed off.

Two

Tanise was still drying a few stray tears when the doorbell rang. Eddy got up to answer the door, but was stopped by Ina. "Let me get that, Eddy," she told him. He stepped back from the door. A few

months earlier he might have protested her protectiveness, but a few hard-learned lessons had taught him to defer to all three of his guardians.

Ina opened the door with Dee not too far behind her. “Well, are you going to let me in, or do I have to pitch my *du-pa-cha* on the front lawn?” a small dark woman with snow white hair asked dryly.

“What’s *adu-pa-cha*?” Ina asked, confused.

“A temporary house,” the strange woman replied irascibly, “like a *wickiup* or a tepee.”

“You brought a tepee with you?” Ina was taken aback.

“Oy, no,” the strange woman replied. “Enki sent me. Didn’t anyone call ahead?”

“You are Nuvak’chin’Mana?” Dee asked.

“I’m not Britney Spears,” she retorted and Ina stepped out of her way. “I am also known as Horo Wuhti, Cold-bring Woman and Snow Maiden, and in spite of all those frigid titles, I can still appreciate the marvels of a modern home heating system.”

“Welcome, Nuvak’chin’Mana,” Dee told her and introduced all the others. Just then Jael and Oriel appeared. Dee introduced them to Cold-bring Woman and then asked, “How are you feeling, Jael?”

“Better than ever,” Jael replied, “my step-daughter here is definitely one of the best healers ever.”

“Actually we should have come down sooner,” Oriel admitted, “but Jael, Rona and I have been catching up with each other.”

“So, if I’m not mistaken, you’re a Hopi kachina?” Jael asked Cold-bring Woman.

“That’s right,” Cold-bring Woman replied, “and you’re a demoness from Hell, right?”

“It’s a living,” Jael shrugged. “I’ve been out of touch the last couple hours. What brings you here?”

“You have powerful enemies,” Cold-bring Woman replied. “Two of them are bringing this terrible arctic cold. Already the temperature has dropped twenty degrees below freezing and will go another twenty if we don’t stop them.”

“Who’s doing this?” Tanise demanded.

“Their names are Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach, child,” Cold-bring Woman replied.

“Cailleach is an ancient Celtic goddess of the weather, also of the seasons,” Dee remarked. “Her other attributes associate her with the Earth, Sky, Moon and Sun. She could be considered a distant aspect of mine, and I knew her in the past. She fought on the side of Order at the end of the last cycle. Why is she on the side of Chaos this time around?”

“She is also a bringer of cold, snow and death, but not everyone on the other side is evil, Nature,” Cold-bring Woman replied. “Some are just being seduced by the chance to gain power greater than they have ever had.”

Deenodded and continued, "I am not familiar with the other one, though."

"Tibetan," Jael informed her. "She generally appears as an all white snowdemon."

"A colleague of yours?" Ina teased Jael.

"Not at the moment," Jael replied, "but we have met in the past. I was not particularly impressed, but then it takes more than a color scheme and the cold shoulder to impress me. We didn't get along, but I was just another low-level messenger at the time so I guess she felt no reason to be courteous. Or maybe she's just that way naturally."

"She's a bit of a show-off," Cold-bring Woman commented. "I can appear as a giant kuchina doll if I so desire and will while working because I am stronger in that form, but I don't see any need to walk around in that guise all the time. Anyway, this cold wave that is dropping in from the north is being caused by those two," she told Dee. "You had that right. Enki sent me here to see if I can moderate its effects."

"But if you also bring cold," Tanise asked, "why would you stop it?"

"I bring the necessary cold and snow needed to replenish the Earth, child, but this does not replenish, it punishes and tortures. We must all work to banish this threat. Enki believes my abilities added to your own will be more than sufficient to stem the threat by Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach. You are Mother Nature," she continued turning toward Dee, "I suspect you could stop them single handedly if you knew exactly how. I think I know how so together we should be able to prevail."

"I'm fighting them too!" Tanise told her with more courage and force than Eddy had yet seen her display. "This is my Tree they're attacking and I'm his guardian."

"One of them," Jael corrected her. "I'm in too. My job when not here is related to ecological balance."

"Each of us has something to offer," Cold-bring Woman nodded, "And you, goddess of love?"

"I am also a protector of gardens," Ina replied, "and have been Queen of Heaven in the past."

"Then welcome, Your Majesty," Cold-bring Woman replied dryly. "We have wasted too much time already. We must get to the Tree." Dee led the way into the backyard and together the goddesses linked hands in a ring. As Eddy watched, they all changed in appearance. Dee's hair became green once more. It was the only part of her natural appearance that she normally disguised, but evidently it still required power to maintain and now was no time for such frills. Ina's change was more subtle, but she grew an inch or two taller and seemed to become harder, at least that was how Eddy thought of it. Tanise didn't actually change her appearance, but seemed to lose all her shyness and timidity. Jael also stopped bothering to maintain her mortal guise. Her skin became a little darker, her hair seemed to become still fuller and she grew two small horns from her temples and a tail.

Cold-bring Woman changed most visibly, however. As she had mentioned earlier she could look like a giant Hopi kachina doll and this was, indeed, how she appeared. Her hair remained white but she was suddenly wearing colorful clothing covered with geometric shapes that Eddy assumed had some symbolic significance. As soon as she had made this change the five women were enveloped within a dome of pale white light.

Not knowing what else to do with himself, Eddy went into the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee. "I think it's going to be a long night," he commented to himself. As he watched the women, after returning

to the greenhouse room, he thought he detected minor changes to the dome of light around them and realized they were fighting a fierce and subtle battle.

There wasn't anything he could do to help, however, so he tried to sit still. Unable to do that, he tried turning on the television, but soon turned it off again. He tried reading a book, with similar results.

"It's hard to just stand by and do nothing, isn't it?" he heard a female voice ask from the kitchen door.

He looked up, startled, "Oriel! I didn't realize you were still here."

"I wouldn't up and leave just because my friends are having trouble, Mister Salem," she replied. "Besides, I may be needed again before the night is out, though I hope not."

"How long is this going to last?" Eddy asked.

"I don't know," Oriel replied. "It might sound strange to you, but by now you probably have more experience with this sort of thing than I do. In essence, I'm just a doctor. I'm a very good one, of course, but I was born to be a healer and that is what I am. I'm only fifteen years old, though, so maybe someday I'll be much more. Or not," she added. "I like being a doctor. It's not just a job for me, you know. It's who I am."

"And I'm just a retired advertising man," Eddy remarked.

"No," Oriel laughed. "You're more than that. Anyone can see that."

The silent battle in the backyard continued for hours until sometime after two in the morning when there was suddenly a howling, frigid gale and a blinding flash of light. As Eddy and Oriel blinked the glare away, they saw two figures had suddenly appeared in the backyard. One was an all white crone with fangs and long straggly hair. Even her eyes and claw-like fingernails were white and Eddy correctly concluded this was Gangs-dkar-sha-med. The other, obviously Cailleach, was a short, broad woman, also with white hair and a dress-like garment of off-white linen that wrapped around her twice.

"Not much of a color scheme," Eddy muttered to himself, but Oriel heard him.

"How can you make jokes at a time like this?" she asked.

"It helps to keep me from going screaming into the night," he replied.

Outside the battle had suddenly become much less subtle. Tanise's resolve had evaporated and she shrunk back against the Tree's trunk as Jael, Dee, Ina and Cold-bring Woman faced the other two. Neither of the attackers were armed with an obvious weapon, but Cailleach was casting fierce spells of lightning and cold, while Gangs-dkar-sha-med, summoned howling, ice-filled winds.

For their own part, Dee and the others were having difficulty standing up to the sudden attack. The appearance of their attackers had thrown them off balance and in that moment they were vulnerable. Cold-bring Woman was knocked to the ground and hit her head against a rock at the side of the watergarden. Stunned, she attempted to get up, but fell back down again. Dee was disoriented for a moment, but Jael rejoined hands with her and together they fought to reestablish some form of defense. Ina was picked up on the frigid blast from the Tibetan goddess and thrown hard against the tool shed. From there, Eddy was unable to follow the action, nor did he try. Instead he rushed out to Ina's aid. Dimly, he thought, he probably ought to see to Cold-bring Woman as well, but his path to her was

currently blocked by Cailleach.

“Get back inside, Eddy,” Ina groaned at him.

“Don’t think so,” Eddy refused. “You need help.”

“I’m just winded,” Ina told him. “Oh, I really don’t want to do this, but...” she suddenly transformed into the warrior bird figure Eddy had seen only once before and shot up into the sky. Then with a hawk-like shriek, she attacked Cailleach from above.

Cailleach managed to duck away and lashed back with an icy sword that suddenly materialized in her hand and Ina fell to the earth hard enough for Eddy to feel it shake. He looked at her to see she had fallen unconscious and was bleeding, but already Oriel was racing to her aid.

Meanwhile Cold-bring Woman had gotten back to her feet but a vicious gust from Gangs-dkar-sha-med, blew her back off them and also knocked Dee and Jael over as well. Cailleach capitalized on that attack and attacked Jael immediately. Jael was able to roll away from the initial attack and get back to her feet to engage in a one-on-one fight with the Celtic goddess.

Dee was stunned and Gangs-dkar-sha-med attacked Cold-bring Woman once more, knocking her out completely. Meanwhile Eddy made it to the tree and dragged Tanise away back toward the shed.

“No!” Tanise cried. “I need to protect him!”

“That’s my job,” Eddy told her. “For now just protect yourself. He entered the shed, grabbed a couple of short, stick-like objects and headed for the Tree.

Dee tried once more to get back up, but the Tibetan snow goddess hit her with the hardest blow yet. Dee fell back to the ground and this time didn’t move. At the same time, Cailleach got the better of Jael and flung her away, back into the house, shattering several panes of the greenhouse wall as she did.

Both cold goddesses then turned toward the Tree to find Eddy blocking their path. He was holding a pair of lit road flares, each burning with a bright red strontium-induced light. Gangs-dkar-sha-med fell back in fear, but Cailleach growled and jumped at Eddy, who stuck one of the flares in her face. She screamed and attempted to attack him once more but was suddenly gripped by a large wooden hand.

Eddy looked to see where it had come from and was surprised to see the arm it was attached to was sticking out of the wound in the unconscious Ina’s chest. Cailleach struggled in the grip of that hand even as a tall goddess stepped forth from Ina’s body. The new goddess looked at Cailleach closely and finally said, “I do not know you, but you will not hurt me or anyone else again,” and flung the hapless Cailleach up and into the sky where she soon disappeared as she shot through the clouds. There was a brief flash of light somewhere above those clouds and then it was dark again, but the new goddess was already turning her attention toward Gangs-dkar-sha-med, cowering from the light of Eddy’s flare several yards away.

“I don’t know you either,” the goddess decided as a loud crack could be heard from above and a branch suddenly fell off the Tree, knocking the Tibetan goddess out. “but then I don’t think I know most of you. What is happening here?”

“Who are you?” Eddy asked, still holding on to the flares defensively.

"I could ask the same of you," the goddess replied. "You won't need those fire sticks anymore." She wiggled a finger and the normally unquenchable flames died abruptly.

Deesat up slowly and looked at the goddess. "Asherah?" she asked.

Three

"Yes, that is my name," Asherah agreed. Asherah was a tall, dark-haired goddess, once her woody appearance faded. Her hair reminded Eddy of the bouffant hairstyles of the 1960's, although he kept averting his eyes, not wanting to stare impolitely, that was difficult as besides a few necklaces and bangles, she wore nothing whatsoever. "and you are... You've changed, haven't you?"

"Quite a few times," Dee confirmed wryly.

"I'm surprised I recognized you," Asherah admitted in tones of wonder. "How long has it been, Gaia?"

"Since we last crossed paths?" Dee asked. "Several cycles, I think. It's been at least twenty-three hundred years, probably more. Where have you been?"

"I..." she began. "I don't know."

"Well, you came out of Ina's chest," Eddy informed her. "Dee, who is this?"

"This is Asherah, Eddy," Dee introduced. "She shares many of my attributes, but she's more closely related to Ina in this form. Asherah, this is Eddy Salem, the keeper and guardian of the current child of the Tree of Life."

"A great honor, Eddy Salem," Asherah replied.

"For me as well," Eddy replied politely.

Asherah smiled slightly. "That is what I meant. It is a great honor, and an incredible burden you have been saddled with." She paused to think about that, then added, "It is also an honor to meet you. Who are all these people... uh... we had much in common at one time, but I am uncertain what to call you. Nimmah? Artemis? By what name are you known in this time and place?"

"In this time, I am Mother Nature," Dee replied.

"Fitting," Asherah nodded.

"But in this place I am usually just called Dee," she finished.

"Dee?" Asherah asked, trying to figure out if she liked the sound of that.

"It's a long story and it gets longer in the telling," Dee replied. "The short form is that it is derived from another aspect of mine, Demeter. The long form, well, I'll explain it all to you as soon as we clean up from this recent battle. Oriel, dear, how is Ina?"

"Healing, mother," Oriel replied. "I need to see the Cold-bring Woman and Jael."

“I can wait,” Jael informed her, stepping back out of the house. “I have a few minor glass cuts, but nothing deep or very painful. In fact I can probably heal myself, but I think we need to see to healing the windows. It is cold out here. Uh... who are you?” she asked Asherah, “and isn’t it a bit cold for streaking?”

“What is streaking?” Asherah asked, confused.

“Running around in public naked,” Jael replied informatively, “more often done by immature males. You are emphatically not male.”

Eddy came out of the house just then with a long winter coat and draped it over Asherah’s shoulders. “Thank you,” she replied simply, wrapping it a bit tighter around her. “It’s cold here. Where are we?”

“Hattamesett, Massachusetts,” Tanise offered unhelpfully.

“Where?” Asherah asked again.

“Why don’t we all go inside,” Dee suggested. “It’s warmer and much more comfortable.” Behind her, Oriel was helping Cold-bring Woman to her feet and Ina was sitting up on the cold ground of Eddy’s garden.

“Watch out for all the glass,” Eddy warned them.

“I’ll handle that, dear,” Dee promised as she guided the others inside.

Eddy went to Ina and asked, “How are you?”

“I feel very much lighter,” Ina replied dazedly.

“I’m not surprised,” Eddy remarked, “carrying a whole other goddess around inside you for the last few thousand years.”

“I did what?” Ina asked, startled.

“Let’s get you inside too,” Eddy suggested. “The few who know enough to explain are all there already anyway.”

“How long have you been inside of me?” Ina asked Asherah once the situation had been explained. “When did we merge?”

“I don’t think we did,” Asherah replied. “Not in the usual way. I’m not even sure how it happened. Let me think a bit.”

“I still don’t completely understand,” Eddy admitted while Asherah thought. “Who is Asherah?”

“At first she was a Canaanite goddess,” Ina explained, “Just as I was Astarte or Astarot or a whole host of other names. Many of Dee’s attributes were mixed with ours, but then I always thought the Canaanites tended to mix and match goddesses as suited their mood. I’ve already explained how there were several of us. We tended to get lumped together, especially as time went on. Dee, you weren’t actually part of that pantheon, were you?”

“Parts of me were, although they were all distant aspects, “I was still more active in Mesopotamia until the Hellenistic period, But Asherah was as much an aspect of me as she was of you, although you were closer, I think.”

“But this is not the Canaanite Asherah,” Ina decided. “Oh she was the Canaanite Asherah at one time, but like most of us she moved on to the later aspect. This is Mother Asherah of the Israelites.”

“So she is the aspect of you who diverged?” Eddy asked. Ina nodded. “So how did she end up inside of you again?”

“You got me,” Ina shrugged. “Asherah, what’s the last thing you remember before coming to life again here?”

“It was the end of the monarchy of Judah,” Asherah recalled. “I had long been the loving wife of El, or as he was later called, Yahweh. He was worshipped in the great Temple of Jerusalem, but I was venerated in the homes and in the High Places. Then the kingdom of Israel was conquered by the King of Nineveh and all the people of Israel were forced into exile. They didn’t take me with them. They did not believe a god could be moved from one territory to another, but I was still in the hearts and homes of the people of Judah. Even then, there were zealots who sought to bring an end to my worship. However, the people still loved and worshipped me until after the armies of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and drove the people of Judah into exile.

“The latter day prophets, Jeremiah and Nehemiah, despised me and railed against those who worshipped me even though I was the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of *El Shaddai*.” Asherah continued. “Like their Israeli cousins, the people of Judah became convinced that they could not take me with them and so I was left behind. When they returned sometime later, I had very few adherents left and the returning people, the early Jews, no longer remembered me as their goddess. My attributes had been incorporated into their beliefs about my husband and so I was driven out of the land.”

“So how did you end up with Ina?” Jael asked.

“I do not remember.” Asherah admitted. “I only remember fleeing for my life. I can only surmise that I somehow sought to merge once more with Anat and Astarte.”

“Interesting,” Ina remarked, “And yet you were still being worshipped as Tanit and I always thought the Roman sea goddess Tethys was an aspect of yours.”

“I never merged with those aspects,” Asherah replied. “I’m not sure if I was aware of them at the time.”

“I’m sure they were, although I don’t know if they merged with each other either,” Ina told her.

“I don’t think you were completely forgotten by the Jews, even if they no longer worshipped you,” Jael opined. “In Jewish ritual, it is still the women who light the *Shabbat* candles and there are songs sung to the *Sabbath Queen*. The modern teachings, as I understand them, barely recall your existence, but there are still traces of old beliefs and rituals left over even now. Then there’s a representation of the great menorah that was taken from the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans when they sacked it in the first century of the Common Era. It was carved into the Arch of Titus in Rome to commemorate the Roman victory over the Jewish Rebellion. Anyway, on that carving of the menorah there is a depiction of a goddess of the sea. The art is in the contemporary Roman style and most modern scholars believe it is supposed to be Tethys and that her being there indicated a certain amount of Latinization in religious

practices in the Temple, but it seems to me that the goddess there is more likely to be you, without the bouffant hairdo, of course, but depicted in the style of the times.”

“Without what hairdo?” Asherah asked.

“The way you wear your hair is similar to a fashion that was last popular about forty-some odd years ago,” Jael replied.

“What? This?” Asherah asked, reaching up and pulling a large, puffed up wig off her head. “Just one of my attributes. I think a lot of religious folk used to confuse me with Hathor from Egypt because of it.” She shook her head and her real hair fell down to her shoulders. It was the same color as the wig, but straighter and not as full-bodied. “It’s really uncomfortable after a while.”

“You should try having to work in kachina form!” Cold-bring Woman told her.

She briefly flashed into the large, stiff looking doll-like form in which she was most powerful and then back again. “Humans expect some silly things of us, don’t they?” Asherah laughed.

“I thought you were associated with trees,” Eddy noted, “Are you also associated with the sea?”

“Oh yes,” Asherah nodded. “Also with motherhood, healing, family and a host of other associations. I was an all-purpose goddess, but then so were Astarte and Anat and our other aspects. There were some differences, though. I was the wife of El and Yahweh, whereas Astarte was Ba’al’s consort. Anat was primarily the warrior aspect.”

“She eventually merged with Athena,” Ina told her.

“I don’t know that name either,” Asherah reminded her, “but it appears I have some catching up to do. This is an interesting house. Where is the fire that heats it against that awful cold?”

Four

They stayed up all night talking to Asherah and bringing her gradually up to date, although Eddy started snoring just before dawn and Tanise helped him into his bedroom. Instead of rejoining the others, she sat in a chair next to his bed and asked, “Eddy? Why did you use those fire sticks against Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach?”

“They’re called flares,” he explained tiredly, “and I thought that if we were fighting against people who fought with cold, then maybe fire would be effective. Pretty stupid, I guess. Sorry if I scared you.”

“I thought you were wonderful,” Tanise told him warmly, and while they didn’t bother Cailleach much, Gangs-dkar-sha-med seemed genuinely frightened of them. Should I have been afraid of them too?”

“They do burn with a very hot flame,” Eddy remarked, “and fire can harm the tree, I suppose, but I wasn’t about to stick them too close to the Tree. Many things can be both dangerous and useful, but so long as you are careful and handle them with respect, you’ll be in no danger.”

“I wasn’t scared when you used them,” Tanise told him. “I know you would never harm us.”

“Good,” Eddy sighed. “Sorry to conk out on you, but I’m very tired. We’ll talk later if you like.”

“Okay,” Tanise agreed, but she remained in the chair until Dee came in to join Eddy two hours later.

Eddy woke up to find Dee next to him for the first time in a long while and he got up quietly so as not to disturb her. *Last night was enough to exhaust even a goddess* he thought to himself. Hercules, Gilgamesh and several others were cheerfully replacing the broken glass on the greenhouse room when he came down stairs to find Jael and Asherah sitting around in dressing robes and chatting like old friends in the kitchen.

“Morning, Eddy,” Jael greeted him cheerfully. “Late night, huh? I’m trying to convince Asherah to join us, but she doesn’t think she’s welcome.”

“I didn’t say that,” Asherah denied. “I only thought we might not be completely comfortable with each other until I can catch up with the last two and a half millennia.”

“Well, I can understand your discomfort,” Eddy replied, “but you are more than welcome to stay here while doing your catch-up work. I seriously, doubt any of us will be uncomfortable with you and if you think you have a lot to learn, just consider Tanise. She’s not quite two months old yet and still learning a lot of basic stuff.”

“Sure,” Jael added enthusiastically, “you can learn along with Tanise and also help teach her.”

“Fruit of the Tree of knowledge might help as well,” Eddy added.

“Good idea, Eddy,” Jael commended him. “Ratty’s supposed to be coming with some today. I’ll just make a call and have him bring a double load.”

“I can just hear him complaining now,” Eddy laughed, “‘What am I? Some supernatural fruit monger?’” Jael laughed and then had to explain Ratatosk to Asherah.

“See, that’s the point,” Asherah told them, “You’re constantly having to stop and explain your jokes to me. It’s like you are all family.”

“We are,” Eddy agreed, “and we’re willing to adopt you, if you like. The modern world must seem a bit intimidating, especially if one of the last things you recall is the destruction of Judah. This home can be a haven to you while you learn about the world outside.”

“That does make sense,” Asherah agreed. “I shall consider it.”

“Good,” Eddy replied. “And feel free to take as long as you like to make a decision. My home is your home. Where are Ina, Tanise and Cold-bring Woman this morning?” he asked Jael.

“Tanise is sleeping downstairs,” Jael informed him. “She was up late. Typical teenager,” she laughed. Tanise, Eddy had to admit to himself, did look like a teenager in spite of her young age and she was beginning to act like one as well. “Ina is helping Oriel take Cold-bring Woman home. She’s okay, but more than a bit shaken from the encounter last night. Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach were more than she expected and I think she was a bit embarrassed by how quickly they took her out of action. We tried to explain that could have been any of us and Ina was wounded worse than she was, but Cold-bring is one proud goddess. I think that’s why Ina went with her. They share more than a few attributes, pride being among them and Ina’s hoping to show her that it’s no shame to be beaten so long as you do your

best.”

“Ina’s been showing more depth lately than when I first met her,” Eddy observed.

“Yeah,” Jael smirked. “It’s about time she grew up!” She turned to Asherah and added, “You missed her bimbo phase.”

“Not really,” Asherah replied. “She already had a trace of that when we were co-aspects of each other. You see she and Ba’al were the young, virile, sexually active couple to the Canaanites. El and I were the older, more mature couple. At some points we were the senile couple for that matter, so it was quite a relief when we were the only divine couple to the Israelites and we were ageless to them.”

“Sounds like the Israelites moved back to religious fundamentals,” Eddy observed.

“In a sense,” Jael replied, “although most modern scholars see the priests of the Yahweh side of the religion as the fundamentalists.”

“Oh, Astarte was quietly, and not so quietly, worshipped there too, but even then our attributes were being combined. It just was that she was the younger, stronger Queen of Heaven of the Canaanites. I filled that function to the Children of Israel. The Yahweh-only prophets, however, painted the worship of me and the minor household gods with a rather evil brush, and they confused me with Astarte and Anat and the others, intentionally, I think. There was never a completely clear dividing line, but they obscured it still more and decried our worship as evil and disgusting. Hardly fair considering most household ceremonies to me involved the sacrifice of incense and bits of food, oh and flowers. I liked the flowers. The large altars built and consecrated to me in the High places were often built next to or beneath trees although I was also often represented by one or more poles erected next to the altars.”

“There were quite a few pictorial representations of you,” Jael told her, “carvings and clay statues.”

“Not carvings,” Asherah corrected her. “Carved or graven images were forbidden, especially when worked in wood. That’s why I was more often depicted with clay figurines or in metal plaques. I was associated with trees, remember, and it was considered quite sacrilegious to attempt to carve an image of me in wood.”

“That got taken to extremes later,” Jael remarked, “when no images of God were allowed at all. Jews still do not attempt to make images of their God these days.”

“I can see the logical progression of that,” Asherah admitted, “although it must make worship all the harder.”

“Humans are pretty adaptable,” Jael remarked.

“Is Rona still in there,” Eddy asked suddenly.

“I’m still here, Mister Salem,” Rona replied. “Why would you doubt it?”

“I haven’t heard from you since last evening sometime,” Eddy told her.

“I fell asleep after everyone came inside,” Rona admitted. “Jael may not need to sleep, but I still do, although not anywhere near as much as I used to.”

"I keep telling you," Jael cut in, "it's just a habit you haven't grown out of yet."

"That's easy for you to say," Rona laughed. "You weren't the one doing all the yawning."

"The heck I wasn't," Jael told her. "You just thought you were tired, but my mouth is the one that kept opening uncontrollably."

"Dear, your mouth is open most of the time whether we're yawning or not," Rona retorted.

They were suddenly interrupted by Asherah's laughter. "Are they always like that?" she asked Eddy.

"No, sometimes they fight," Eddy replied. "So, is there anything left in the fridge for breakfast?"

"I'll second that," Dee agreed from the doorway. "Eddy what were you thinking with those flares last night." He gave her the same explanation he had given to Tanise. "You nearly made my heart stop. Don't you realize that if they had killed you, the Tree would have died as well?"

"Sure and if they killed the Tree I'd die too," Eddy replied calmly. "It seemed to me it would be better to go down fighting."

"Oh you!" she breathed and hugged him fiercely. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Darned if I know," Eddy retorted, "but let me know if you ever figure that out."

"Hey," Jael called from the refrigerator, "we seem to have a lot of eggs, and a large chunk of cheese. How about omelets?"

"Let's have pancakes instead," Dee suggested. "The boys are nearly done repairing the greenhouse room and it will be less work to feed them pancakes, I think."

"Sounds good," Jael agreed and went to work.

"What ever happened to Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach last night?" Eddy asked, finally helping himself to a cup of coffee.

"Cailleach is out for the cycle," Jael reported. "Asherah here took care of that."

"I was not quite myself," Asherah admitted. "All I knew was that someone was attacking a tree and I took a personal affront to it. I should have had better control of myself."

"So, you tend to wake up a bit cranky," Jael told her. "We'll all keep that in mind. The fact of the matter is that whether you were aware of it or not at the time, you did the right thing,"

"At least as far as you are concerned," Asherah countered.

"Situational ethics?" Jael asked. "Maybe, but knowing the significance of the tree now, would you act any differently?"

"I probably wouldn't have been as patient with the attackers," Asherah admitted.

"Good enough for me," Jael told her. "And Gangs-dkar-sha-med was picked up and dragged out of

here a few minutes after you went to bed, Eddy. Not that she was in great shape either. Getting knocked on the head by a branch of a World Tree is enough to set anyone's clock back. I doubt she'll be recovering soon. I meant to ask," she told Asherah, "why did you do that? Wouldn't it damage the young Tree?"

"I didn't do anything to her," Asherah replied.

"No," Tanise added as she entered the kitchen a bit sleepily, "the Tree did that himself."

"Really?" Jael asked. "I thought he was asleep for the winter."

"He was and is again," Tanise remarked, "but he is not yet very deep into his slumber, and the attack woke him up."

"I guess he wakes up as cranky as Asherah does," Jael laughed. "It's nice to know he can defend himself, though. Has that ever happened before, Dee?"

"There are stories of a Tree in another universe who defended herself, by throwing rotten fruit at an attacker," Dee replied, "but I've never heard of one deliberately sacrificing a limb."

"It may not be that big a deal," Jael countered. "Yggdrasil drops some of his smaller branches all that time."

"This was not that small a branch," Dee told her, "not given the relative size of the Tree at this point."

"Trees are capable of regenerating," Eddy pointed out. "I know whatever branch replaces that one won't be quite the same, but I think it is better to lose the branch than the whole Tree, don't you?"

"Absolutely," Jael agreed and the others nodded. "but what are we going to do with the fallen branch? Disposing of wood from Yggdrasil is always tricky. I mean you can't burn it, because the fire will never go out."

"There are ways," Dee told her, "and we will look into them after breakfast. How are those pancakes coming along?"

"First batch is just coming up," Jael remarked. "Tanise, why don't you tell the boys in the greenhouse that breakfast is ready?"

"Breakfast?" a high squeaky voice asked from the doorway. They all turned to see Ratatosk carrying a basket of fruit. "I'm good with that. So where do you want this?" he asked, indicating the basket.

"I'll take that," Dee told him. She brought it to the kitchen counter and selected a pair of oranges and sliced them into eight pieces each. She put those on a plate and served them to Tanise and Asherah. "Have these along with breakfast," she instructed. "They should help both of you. Ratty, we'll need another basketful, but it can wait a week. Too much knowledge too soon is never a good thing."

Asherah took a bite of orange and sighed. "It's been a while since I had the fruit of this Tree, but then it's been a while since I did anything at all. Yes, this is starting to help."

"Hotcha!" Ratatosk exclaimed, noticing Asherah for the first time. "What a babe! Who are you, beautiful?" Asherah spared him an annoyed glare before continuing to eat the orange. "Whatcha doing at

the Solstice?”

“And what makes you think a mangy squirrel like you is worthy of doing anything with me at the Solstice?” Asherah asked disdainfully.

“Aw, come on, babe!” Ratatosk insisted. “Some chicks like ‘em furry.”

“Come to think of it,” Asherah told him, “maybe I could use you.”

“Yeah, they all come around in the end!” Ratatosk crowed.

“I could use a good squirrel fur coat for the winter,” Asherah concluded, giving Ratatosk a predatory look.

“Ah...” Ratatosk backed off a step, “maybe another time, Babe. I’m still using this one. Isn’t anyone going to ask how I got here so quickly?”

“Don’t tell me,” Eddy remarked, “let me guess. You finally found the back way in that Dee has been so worried about, right?”

“Yeah,” Ratatosk nodded, “Good guess.”

“No guessing involved,” Eddy remarked. “And I’ll also bet you found it totally unguarded?”

“Well, of course, since I was the first to find it,” Ratatosk replied.

“Not the first,” Eddy told him, “not by a long shot. We had a couple visitors stop in last night.” He explained what had happened the night before.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Ratatosk replied, sounding genuinely contrite. “I really did just find it this morning. Maybe I should have been eating that fruit too.”

Five

The weather remained cold for the next week, but it was a chill well within the usual seasonal range of temperature. Tanise reported that the Tree, after waking up during the attack, had finally slipped off into a much deeper hibernation.

The fruit from the Tree of Knowledge helped both the dryad and Asherah over the course of the next few days. “At least now I can understand half of what I see on the television,” Asherah remarked, “although I don’t think I’ll ever understand the so-called reality shows.”

“Don’t let that bother you,” Ina commiserated “I’ve been around this whole time and I still don’t see the attraction. I guess someone does, but then none of us are part of the core demographic. You know, it’s really nice to have you with us again. Seems like old times.”

“We were often a contentious lot in the old times,” Asherah reminded her.

“We haven’t changed all that much,” Ina laughed. “The other night should be proof of that, but I’d like to

think that some of us are no longer as petty-minded as we once were.”

“Hard to believe after what you say about how everyone wants the new Tree,” Asherah remarked.

“The Tree is a bit of an exception, I think,” Ina told her. “There’s too much to gain, so a lot of us are back-sliding a bit, but the fact that some of us are actually trying to protect it without possessing it is new.”

“Why are you doing that?” Asherah asked. “I know why I am, it just seems like the right thing to do, but...”

“That’s why we’re doing it too,” Ina nodded.

The weather moderated during the second week following the cold attack on the Tree. It warmed up into the low seventies the day before a large Nor’easter swept up the coast, dumping rain all across Southcoast Massachusetts and Cape Cod and snow to the north and west of Boston. Eddy stepped into the greenhouse room with his morning cup of coffee and nearly dropped the mug when he spotted Tanise dancing naked in the rain beneath the Tree.

Eddy, torn between wanting to avert his eyes politely and attempting to be a firm, but kindly authority figure, stood frozen inside the greenhouse room, uncertain how to deal with it. Finally, however, he realized he would have to brazen this out. Tanise was now two months old and while she might look like a teenager, been born with a lot of innate knowledge and gained still more from the fruit Ratatosk had delivered, she was still very much an innocent.

Eddy walked back into the house and grabbed an umbrella. “Going out?” Jael asked as he passed back through the living room where she and Ina were busy reading the newspaper.

“Just into the backyard,” he replied. “Tanise is dancing in the rain.”

“She is?” Jael laughed. “That’s adorable.”

“In the buff,” Eddy clarified.

“No shame in that,” Jael insisted. “She really is still just a child, you know. And it’s not like she can be seen from the street.”

“Yeah,” Eddy agreed conditionally, “but she might decide to do that in the front yard next.”

“I doubt it,” Jael laughed. “She’s probably just communing with the Tree. She can’t do that from the front yard. Haven’t you noticed she never leaves the house or backyard alone.”

“I thought she had gotten over her agoraphobia,” Eddy remarked.

“I don’t think it’s an unreasoning fear of anything in particular, Eddy,” Ina corrected him, “Tanise is not really a part of this world, not completely. Her true world is the one yet to come. I doubt she feels completely comfortable in this one. I doubt she ever will, but she’s already facing the source of her discomfort bravely.”

“And brazenly,” Eddy added, glancing over his shoulder.

“Want one of us to talk to her?” Jael asked.

“No,” Eddy shook his head. “I’ll give it a shot. She listens to me, I’ve noticed.”

“She loves you, Eddy,” Ina pointed out. “You’re the only father figure she’s ever going to have.”

“What about the Tree?” Eddy asked. “She does keep referring to it as ‘he?’”

“The tree is closer in nature to a husband,” Ina replied. “He’s her other half.”

“So she’ll never marry?” Eddy asked.

“She might,” Ina replied, “but it will have to be someone who truly understands he will always be second in her heart to the Tree.”

“Well,” Eddy sighed. “Let me go see if I can get her to come in from out of the rain.”

He walked back to the greenhouse with the umbrella and spotted Tanise’ leaf dress draped over the back of the computer chair. He decided she must have been using the computer when she chose to experience the rain. He grabbed the dress, folding it carefully over his arm. When he did he discovered more conventional clothing underneath it. He wasn’t sure what to make of that, so he just took the leaf dress with him.

It was warm and steamy outside, not entirely unusual for the middle of December in Southeastern Massachusetts . Eddy reflected that most years there was a day or two in December during which the temperatures rose well above the norm. *Summer’s last gasp*, he thought to himself.

Tanise had stopped spinning around the garden and was now standing under the leafless branches of the Tree, with her back to the house and her arms outstretched, as though inviting the rain to wash over her,

“Tanise,” Eddy began. It was almost a whisper, but it startled her anyway.

“Oh! Eddy!” she gasped, spinning around to face him. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“Sorry,” he muttered, determined to keep his eyes glued to her face. “You shouldn’t be out here undressed. The neighbors might see you like this.”

“So what?” she asked. “Clothing is unnatural!”

“I suppose that’s so, dear,” he replied. “None of us are born with it, but wearing it is something we all do in polite society.”

“Then I don’t want to be in polite society,” she told him rebelliously. “I don’t like clothing!”

“Not even this?” he asked holding out the dress of colorful maple leaves.

“That’s different,” she told him quietly. “It’s mine. It’s me.”

“Then please put it on,” Eddy requested.

She took the dress from him and slipped it over her head. Immediately it changed from a stiff garment

that felt almost like leaf-encrusted cardboard into something that flowed around her and shaped itself to her body. It was certainly no longer stiff in the least.

“That’s better,” Eddy told her, relaxing a bit, “Now let’s go inside. You’ll catch your death out here.”

“Nonsense,” she scoffed. “Rain will do me no harm.”

“So you say,” Eddy retorted weakly. “However, I would rather you didn’t parade about naked like that. Next spring after the tree matures and you have an entire new universe to live in, you may do as you choose, but for now I would really appreciate it if you were to remain decently attired.”

“But I don’t like any of the clothes I have to wear,” she complained. Eddy suspected they had reached her real objection to clothing. It wasn’t the covering of her body that she objected to so much as what she had been given to do it with.

“Who chose your clothing? Jael?” Eddy asked.

“She brought them,” Tanise told him, “but I think it was Rona who chose them. She’s not as much fun as Jael.”

“Meaning her tastes are more conservative,” Eddy understood. “Well, I can’t very well ask Jael take you shopping without Rona, although given their obvious differences, I’m surprised she deferred to Rona’s tastes.”

“Jael acts like she’s always in charge,” Tanise observed, “but I think Rona wins most of their arguments.”

“You may be right,” Eddy nodded. “The quiet ones like Rona often do. I could ask Dee to go with you.”

“Mother Nature wears even more boring clothing than Rona chose for me,” Tanise objected. “Why can’t you take me.”

“Any time I leave the house, Enki starts shifting our guardians around like a general planning the next World War,” Eddy explained. “He also has to see about keeping you and the tree safe. I imagine he must get cold shivers every time we go for a walk around town. If I take you off to the Galleria, or better still, up to Boston, he’d have a seizure. He must have been scared witless the night Dee and I went out to eat,” he chuckled. Tanise laughed too.

“How about Ina?” Tanise suggested. “She’ll let me buy things I like, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay,” Eddy agreed, “but I want you to promise me that if she disagrees with your choices, you’ll bow to her decision. Ina has exquisite tastes in fashion so if you choose something she doesn’t like, there will probably be a very good reason for it.”

“I’ll be good,” Tanise agreed happily. “When can we leave?”

“We’ll let Ina make the arrangements,” Eddy told her, “but my guess is you’ll be able to go later today.”

Tanise was happy with the result and finally agreed to come back inside. Ina was delighted at the chance to go shopping with the young dryad and left after making a single call. They were gone for several hours and when they returned, Tanise was wearing a bright t-shirt and jeans and had quite a few boxes filled

with other clothing designed to appeal to seventeen year old girls. Most of them were brightly colored even though Eddy was fairly certain the less bold colors were currently in. He smiled and reminded himself that Tanise's leaf dress was bright so it probably should not be surprising that she would prefer human clothing in similar colors.

Six

With Asherah now part of the home team as Ina and Jael started calling everyone who actually stayed in Eddy's house, Ina found she had more time to spend cultivating her followers in Little Rock. Winter Solstice, she decided, should be a special time.

"I don't recall you ever being associated with the Winter Solstice," Dee remarked as Ina rushed about the house, trying to get ready to leave.

"You used to be a springtime goddess," Asherah added. "April was your month, was it not?"

"Well, yes," Ina agreed, "but even the cult of a springtime goddess should have an observance at the solstice."

"Are you making this up as you go along?" Eddy asked, from the couch where he had been watching the news.

"Of course not!" Ina replied instantly.

"It's just that it seems to me that a springtime goddess cult would consider the winter a rather somber time," Eddy remarked.

"Eddy has a good point," Asherah told her. "Winter for your followers should probably be a time of mourning. Just when was it you were banished to the Underworld?"

"This lot knows me better as Venus or Aphrodite," Ina pointed out. "neither of those aspects were sent to Hell. Forcibly married to Hephaestus, yes, and that was hell enough! But you do have a point; so far I've been there for all joy and celebration. 'Happy, happy' is fun, but you can't very well appreciate it fully without some sorrow to balance it. I think this should be a serious occasion. Maybe a bit of Innana's descent into Hell should be part of it. Eddy, you're right I have been winging this and a religion based entirely on joy may sound good at first, but it won't help anyone deal with the bad times that are unfortunately inevitable."

"Well, I wouldn't recommend going too far along those lines," Eddy told her.

"No," Ina shook her head. "The Roman dramatist Terrence coined the phrase 'Moderation in all things' in one of his plays, although he was far from the only ancient to advocate such. It's a principle I've been trying to encourage."

Jael came in through the greenhouse door just then. "I'm back. Sorry I took longer than expected."

"No harm done," Ina told her, "I'm not ready to leave just yet."

“You know, it might be better to let them party on their own,” Jael suggested.

“Last time I did that, they used me as an excuse for an orgy,” Ina replied sourly. “I’m all for loving, but as we were just discussing when you came in, there is a proper time and place. I’m no longer giving the customers everything they want, especially if all they want is to get laid. They don’t need me for that. No, this time I’m guiding my followers toward a sensible and mature religion.”

“Starring the Queen of Love?” Jael asked skeptically. “More power to you if you can manage it. Um... is that why you’re doing it? Power?”

“No!” Ina almost shouted in reply. “No,” she repeated in softer tones. “Well, maybe... I didn’t think I was. Now I don’t know. I’ll have to think about that.”

“It should help you keep the evening serious, at least,” Asherah told her.

Ina smiled slightly. “I guess it will,” she replied quietly.

“Jael, I’ve been thinking,” Dee told her as Ina rushed out of the room once more. “With Asherah among us now, you and Rona should spend more time with Marcus. Tonight, for example.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Jael replied. “We saw him just...”

“That was over two weeks ago,” Rona cut in.

“Was it?” Jael asked. “Can’t have been.”

“Jael,” Dee admonished her, “your workaholic tendencies are coming out again. Go home for the night. It’s the Winter Solstice, a time to spend with family.”

“You all are family too,” Jael countered.

“That’s sweet, Jael,” Asherah told her, “and I appreciate the sentiment more than you know, but you should never neglect your husband either.”

“Marcus understands,” Jael maintained.

“Does he?” Asherah asked. “He must be quite remarkable then, but there’s no reason to not be with him tonight. Go. I’ll hold down the fort for you.”

“I don’t know,” Jael replied uncertainty. The temptation was obvious, but as a demoness, she understood the dangers of temptation.

“You don’t think I have the ability?” Asherah asked pointedly.

“Great Mother, no!” Jael exclaimed.

“It’s been a long time since anyone called me that,” Asherah laughed. “I’m also a goddess of family, though, and I really encourage you to maintain your own.”

“Please, Jael?” Rona asked.

“Oh, very well, I suppose I could use a night off,” Jael finally agreed, “and thanks. But we’re not going to make a habit of this!”

“Of course not, dear,” Asherah told her in an unconscious imitation of how Dee spoke.

“We’re off then,” Jael decided. “I don’t need to pack a bag or a toothbrush. Hey, Ina? Going our way?”

“Oh? Are you going out tonight too?” Ina asked. “Maybe I should stay in.”

“No need,” Dee assured her. “Asherah and I can handle anything that comes up. We’ve always tried to keep two of us on station at a time before and even with both of you gone there will still be two of us. Go.”

“You’re sure?” Ina asked.

“I’m always sure,” Dee replied and waved them both off. She watched as they stepped into the backyard and vanished through the new mystic passage to the divine plane before adding, “I’m not always right, but I’m almost never in doubt.”

“Did someone just leave?” Tanise asked, coming up from her bedroom in the basement. Eddy explained what she had just missed. “Good,” Tanise decided. “Jael and Rona should spend more time with their husband, I think. Too bad he lives so far away. Ina was telling me tonight is special?”

“To some people it is,” Dee replied. “To others it’s just the day on which the sun reaches its lowest level in the sky and winter officially begins. It only has whatever significance you care to give it.”

“Why do some give it more than others?” Tanise asked.

“It’s a religious thing for them,” Dee explained. “They venerate the natural cycles of the year and this is a clearly defined point of change. From this point on, until Midsummer, the days will get a little longer each day.”

“For us, however,” Eddy added, “It means a quiet evening at home again.”

“I like that,” Tanise decided. “I’m going to miss this place when my Tree transcends.”

“You can always come to visit,” Eddy told her.

“Can I?” she asked. “I mean will I be able to cross back over?”

“I’m not sure about the rest of this world, dear,” Dee told her, “but this house will always be accessible from both worlds.”

“And it will always be your home,” Eddy assured her. “Now I was thinking of calling out for Chinese food tonight.”

“If you don’t mind,” Asherah replied. “I would really like to cook tonight. “Would you like to help me, Tanise?”

“I don’t know how to cook,” Tanise admitted.

“Then I’ll have to teach you,” Asherah replied practically. “You know how to use a knife, I know. I’ve seen you chopping vegetables.”

“Well, cutting meat and vegetables, sure,” Tanise nodded. “That’s not cooking.”

“It’s a big part of it,” Asherah replied. “Come on. Let’s see if we can come up with something better than sweet and pungent phoenix tails.”

“We don’t have any phoenix tails in the pantry, do we?” Eddy asked Dee as Asherah and Tanise went into the kitchen.

“I think she’s referring to a certain way to prepare shrimp,” Dee replied, “although you never know. And I don’t think Asherah would let the actual contents of your food cupboard stop her for a moment if she did really want to serve real phoenix tails.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, Dee,” Eddy began. “Has it really been as quiet as it seemed since the night Asherah joined us?”

“Well, I haven’t wanted to worry you,” Dee admitted, “but yes it has. There have been a few small skirmishes, mostly around the back way in, but no really large assaults on the Tree.”

“Why would that worry me?” Eddy asked.

“It suggests two possibilities,” Dee replied. “Either our enemies are stepping back to marshal their forces for something really big or else they’ve come up with an entirely new strategy and the little actions near the back door are either diversions or a few independent deities, trying to grab the Tree’s power.”

“It could also mean we’re out of really big enemies,” Eddy remarked.

“It could,” Dee agreed, “but I doubt it. There’s too much to be gained and the *Valkyr* Skuld is still out there somewhere. We still have enemies, but they’ve changed. Our defenses will need to change similarly, but first we need to know what’s happening. That’s part of why I’ve been out of the house so much these last two weeks. Enki and I have been working on new surveillance techniques, but so far nothing we have done has revealed any new threats. It’s rather discouraging.”

“Well,” Eddy sighed, “tomorrow’s another day. For this evening we can settle in and watch some of the new movies Jael brought in.”

“Are you sure,” Dee laughed. “Jael has a strange tendency to pick tear-jerkers and what are called ‘chick-flicks.’ Not normally to your taste, I’ve noticed.”

“Every once in a while they make for a change,” Eddy replied. “Besides I’m living with several women, so it’s only natural to assume that I’ll have to watch the occasional chick-flick. Although it would be strange for Jael to choose them, I think. Sounds more like Rona, if you ask me.”

“No,” Dee shook her head. “Rona prefers action and comedy. It’s fairly easy to tell when she’s gotten a chance to make the decisions. Jael just has a lot of hidden depths to her. I wouldn’t be surprised, though, if most of them have manifested since the two of them joined. Her fellow demons live in a very competitive society and I think Jael confuses them by refusing to compete or even notice the competition.”

“She tells me she used to,” Eddy remarked, “but that after she met and subsequently married Marcus, her standing in Hell’s ranking system stopped meaning as much to her.”

“She’s been offered promotions several times since then,” Dee noted, “but she is really quite happy with her current responsibilities there. The only promotion she accepted has been as one of Hell’s liaisons to the rest of the divine plane. My daughter, Persephone, tells me she wishes Jael would take a step up, though. She needs a new chief administrator, but Jael is unwilling to take any more time away from Marcus. The project with the Tree, in fact, has been the only exception and only because she believes so deeply about it. Still, I don’t think Jael has realized that she has won every social competition Hell contains, merely by opting out of them. If her fellow demons ever caught on, Hell would be very different place, but I doubt that will happen. Most people never change that drastically.”

Asherah and Tanise produced a Chinese-style meal that was both delicious and pleasing to look at and in less than a half hour. Complete with soup, three entrees and dessert. After the talk of phoenix tails, however, when Eddy found scraps of meat he couldn’t readily identify, he decided not to ask what they were, just in case they had substituted something really odd, like sautéed parrot loins.

Watching movies in the evenings had become a regular occurrence in Eddy’s house since he had bought the DVD player. They all regularly bought or rented favorites to share with each other and the ones they chose were of less interest to Eddy than just being with these strange people who had become a new family for him. They were most of the way through the second feature when Eddy’s phone rang.

More often than not lately, Tanise had run to answer it for the chance to chat with Nin-ti or Enki or one of the other gods who called in from time to time. In spite of her refusal to leave the house without someone to accompany her, she was a very gregarious soul and seemed to love talking to anyone who called. This time, however, she was so engrossed by *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, a movie that bored Eddy silly, she stayed glued to her seat, leaning comfortably against Asherah.

“I’ll get it,” he told Dee easily and went into the kitchen to grab the phone before it could ring a fourth time. “Hello?”

“Daddy?” a woman asked from the far end of the line. She sounded like she was just a heartbeat away from tears.

“Maggie?” he responded to his daughter. “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Daddy, Peter and I are through,” she managed to get out between sniffles, “I’m coming home.”

Seven

“Well, I couldn’t very well tell her, ‘No, you can’t come home,’” Eddy explained a week later, privately thinking he should have printed the sentence on a flashcard. They were driving north into Boston to pick up Maggie and her daughter Amelia at Logan International Airport.

“Nor would I have forgiven you if you had, dear,” Dee replied. “None of us ever questioned that they would stay with us in Hattamesett. Why are you getting so defensive about it?”

“How am I supposed to introduce you?” Eddy asked. “Hi, Maggie! It’s been ages, dear. Welcome

home! Oh, by the way, this is the woman I'm shackled up with, but don't worry, She's really Mother Nature so it's okay."

"We've been through that, Eddy," Dee reminded him. "We're not going to mention gods and goddesses, we all have modern-sounding human names to use. Jael Steele, Ina Loveall, Delores Meter. Asherah will call herself Ash ErahIsrael, or just Ash for short. The only challenge we may have is Tanise's insistence on using your surname."

"She didn't like any of our other suggestions," Eddy recalled.

"And she really does think of herself as your daughter," Dee added. "So I had Nin-ti cobble up papers supposedly documenting changing her name from Yggdrasil to Salem."

"Yggdrasil isn't a pleasant sounding name to modern ears," Eddy observed. "I can't blame her for wanting to change it. Most women do that through marriage though. Maybe I should have formally adopted her."

"We're holding that in reserve," Dee told him. "If we need to, Father Enlil has promised to pretend to be a mortal judge and he'll make it look official for Maggie and Amelia."

"And what do we do next time Ratatosk pops in to tease Tanise or ogle one of the rest of you?" Eddy asked.

"We've warned him off," Dee replied. "He may be a troublemaker, but he won't do anything that might endanger the new Tree. Also no one will be allowed to come in the back way for the duration, but you know you won't be able to keep this from them forever, no matter how careful we are."

"Well, if we can keep this quiet until the Tree transcends, they won't think old Grandad needs to be sent to a home. After that, they'll be able to see for themselves that there's something truly unique going on here. That's a big change from over the summer. Back then the tree changed appearance almost every day and it grew like a shot every time we transplanted it. It wouldn't have been hard to prove the crazy stories. Now the Tree is just a very tall maple and the only remarkable thing is that you can't see it from the front of the house."

"Or anywhere off your property," Dee added. "As miracles go, that's not particularly impressive, is it?"

"Maggie wouldn't even bother to confirm it for herself," Eddy admitted. "Can't say as I'd blame her. If I hadn't lived through the last year, I doubt I would either. Also Maggie is pretty level-headed and down to earth."

"Ah," Dee sighed. "Boring and mundane."

"Sadly," Eddy agreed, "but then so was I until you came into my life. I just didn't realize it at the time."

"I found you interesting from the first time we met," Dee assured him, "Are you sure this is the right exit?"

"Yep," Eddy replied. "We want the Ted Williams tunnel at this time of the evening. It'll mean a clean shot right into Logan. You didn't find me particularly fascinating on first sight though, did you?"

"Nothing wrong with your memory," Dee laughed. "I'll admit it. I was none too pleased to cross your path especially just at that moment."

“Why that moment?” Eddy asked.

Deechuckled. “Enki didn’t let me know the full details of the prophecy until we were on the way to your house.”

“What do you mean?” Eddy asked.

“Well, you’ve already heard about how we found you?” Dee asked.

“Mister Waters told me that he was able to divine the best person to raise the tree,” Eddy replied.

“More accurately,” Dee corrected him, “we were able to divine the most likely means by which to bring the Tree to maturity and you were part of that way.”

“Right,” Eddy agreed as they passed into the tunnel, “I was the person most likely to be able to raise the Tree.”

“That’s right,” Dee nodded. “Enki has always been a bit too clever for his own good. In the old days he was the god of fresh water and wisdom, of inventors and of magic. In Scandinavia there was Loki. In the American Southwest the people both feared and venerated Coyote. In Greece, wing-footed Hermes was not only the messenger of Zeus, but the god of thieves. The Chinese had Sun Wukong, the Monkey King and the Lakota knew Ictinike as the god of deceit. Amaguq is the wolf god of the Inuit, Susanoo is a Japanese god of the sea and storms, and in Polynesia the Kupua are thought of as heroic tricksters. The ancient Sumerians had Enki. That ought to say it all. He wasn’t the first trickster the world ever knew, but he was the one who was first immortalized in writing. I sometimes think it went to his head.”

“You used to be married to him,” Eddy pointed out.

“Hmm, yes. Are you sure that no longer bothers you?” Dee asked.

“I figure he’s your ex because you two no longer feel that way about each other,” Eddy replied.

“We’ve both moved on,” Dee agreed, “I don’t know if Enki has come as far as I have, but it’s been too long to ever go back. You really are okay with that, aren’t you?” she observed.

“I really am,” Eddy confirmed.

“You’re quite a remarkable man, dear,” she told him fondly.

“I doubt that,” Eddy replied, “but tell me about how Enki was being too clever.”

“Oh yes.” She paused, “That. Well, I really had planned to raise the Tree myself. I wasn’t out for the power, I was fairly certain I could disassociate from her before the moment of transcendence. There was a young tree that made it to maturity round about the time Carthage was at her peak of influence. Even more amazingly no deity was in possession of it when it transcended, so none of us gained control of the new universe. It emerged without a supreme deity.”

“What’s it like?” Eddy asked.

“Unlike any other,” Dee told him as they came out at the far side of the Ted Williams tunnel. “There’s life

there of a sort, but it seems to be electrical in nature, as far as we can tell in any case. We're not sure if any of it is sapient. None of us have been able to communicate and the Infinities refuse to answer our questions. They won't even say why."

"Maybe They don't think you should get involved there," Eddy remarked, "or else They know that for some reason they shouldn't."

"Well, They certainly know they should not tell us," Dee admitted. "Anyway the point is that a universe can be formed without a supreme deity, at least without one from this universe."

"I still haven't heard what Enki did," Eddy remarked.

"Instead of telling me that you would be raising the young tree, he said we were sending the seed to you because it would be safest in your hands until planting time came. It may not have been a direct lie," Dee admitted, "but it was not the whole truth either, was it?"

"Not at all," Eddy agreed.

"Well, he didn't bother to correct that until a few minutes before we arrived on your doorstep. Naturally I was upset and resented both that he had tricked me and that you, not I, would be the keeper of the seedling."

"No wonder you acted so coldly toward me," Eddy remarked as he headed for Terminal B where US Airways Flight 6370 was due to arrive.

"I was quite angry," Dee remarked.

"Mmm, yes," Eddy chuckled. "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature."

"How true," she laughed. "Was that one of your ads?"

"No," Eddy denied. "ConAgra Foods was never a client and I never even tried their margarine."

"I did," Dee remarked. "Once. The ad intrigued me. I've certainly had worse. Are we early?" Eddy swung into the multi-floor parking lot across from Terminal B and looked for a space.

"No, probably right on time, unless Maggie's plane is delayed," Eddy replied as he swung the car on up the ramp and to the next floor. "Much later and I might as well have driven up to the loading zone." He found a fortuitous space on the embarkation level of the terminal.

Terminal B was a large, wide building that housed nearly half the airlines that flew into Boston's only major airport. Entering, they immediately sought out one of the video screens announcing arrivals and saw that Flight 6370 was now arriving at its assigned gate.

"We'll never be allowed past the security point on that concourse," Eddy remarked. "Only people with tickets are allowed these days."

"I can get us through unquestioned," Dee informed him.

"I suppose you could at that," he replied, "but it's not necessary. Besides they ought to be here in a few minutes. If we went on down to the gate, we could easily lose them in the crowd of passengers."

“So do you want to wait down by the baggage claim area?” Dee suggested.

“I’m not that patient,” Eddy laughed. “This is my daughter and granddaughter after all and I haven’t seen them face-to-face in years. That little camera Jael set up on the computer helped, but for some reason Maggie could never drag Amelia in front of it to meet me. Last time I saw her, she was still wearing diapers.”

“Then it’s a good chance she isn’t any longer,” Dee remarked. “She must look about the same age as Tanise. That’s good, actually. Tanise needs a friend about her own age, or at least her seeming age. I’m glad Jael insisted on teaching her now, though. She would have seemed very strange looking the way she does and knowing so much about trees, but almost nothing about anything else.”

“She’s still going to seem a bit on the innocent side,” Eddy pointed out.

“There is that,” Dee agreed, “but I’ve met adults who were just as naïve and more so. We’ll just have to hope Tanise can maintain the story we coached her with.”

“She doesn’t like to lie,” Eddy observed.

“Normally I would applaud that honesty,” Dee told him. “Oh well, as long as she doesn’t volunteer any information about herself, she can probably pull it off.”

“There’s Maggie,” Eddy pointed at a middle-aged woman in a long brown winter coat strolling around the security point. “I just realized, you look at least a decade younger than she does.”

“So, the old man is robbing the cradle,” Dee laughed. “It’s too late to change my appearance now, and to tell the truth I do still have a touch of vanity in my personality.”

“That’s okay, dear,” he replied while waving at his daughter, “I still love you. Maggie! Over here!”

“Dad!” Maggie called back, rushing over to hug Eddy and kiss his cheek. “I’m a terrible daughter. I should have visited more often. Really I should have.”

“You were too far away to do that on any sort of regular basis,” Eddy told her. “I’ve always understood. It’s good to have you home now though.”

A strange look on Maggie’s face came and went as though she was trying to decide whether she really had come home at last. Then with tears, rolling down her cheeks, she hugged Eddy again and told him, “Thanks, Dad. I love you.” They hugged a bit longer until an impatient cough from behind Maggie broke them up. “Oh!” Maggie continued, “And this is your granddaughter, Amelia.”

“Mom!” Amelia complained. “You know I prefer Amy!”

“Hi, Amy,” Eddy greeted her. “Do you have a hug for your granddad or should we just wave from a distance?”

Amy gave him a perfunctory hug. “Nice to meet you,” she added unenthusiastically.

“Amelia didn’t want to leave Alaska,” Maggie explained.

“Can’t say as I blame you, Amy,” Eddy spoke directly to the teenager. He had found that the best way to handle Tanise was with the same respect he would give any adult so it was natural to try the same with Amy. “All your friends are there, aren’t they?”

“Yeah!” Amy agreed sullenly. “I could have stayed with Dad, you know.” Behind her, Eddy could see Maggie mouthing the words, “No she couldn’t,” but he decided to get that story later.

“Where are my manners?” he remarked, “This is Delores Meter. I told you I’ve had a number of house guests recently. Dee is one of them...” he trailed off. On the far side of the lobby, he thought he spied Jael standing just inside a bookshop and on the far side from Jael was Ina sipping a latte at the cafe. Idly he wondered if Asherah was here too or if they had decided she would be needed in Hattamesett with Tanise. Fortunately Dee picked up the conversation at that point.

“It’s nice to meet you, Maggie,” Dee told her warmly. “Eddy mentions you all the time.

Maggie examined Dee as though with x-ray eyes and her eyebrows compressed subtly so Dee realized Eddy’s daughter didn’t like what she saw. “Yes, Ms. Meter,” she replied after a moment. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Dee sighed almost imperceptibly and turned toward Amy, holding out her right hand. “Hello, Amy.”

Amy barely touched hands with her, but Dee naturally sensed that Amy would have responded to almost anyone that way at the moment. She was tired and a little angry. Dee wondered if her mother had even noticed how tough the divorce had been on Amy. “Hi,” Amy responded monosyllabically.

Dee knew enough not to attempt to draw Amy out immediately. The young woman was angry and feeling bereft and while giving her a target to lash out at might help eventually, Dee decided it was both too soon and would be counterproductive to do it here in public. She also realized she would not be the right one to start the process, especially with Maggie glaring at her for what appeared to be the crime of speaking to Amy. Better to make peace right now with Maggie.

“So how was the flight?” she asked Maggie as they started toward the baggage claim area.

“Flights,” Maggie corrected her. “We had to change planes three times through seven cities.”

“Really?” Dee asked. “I’m sure Alaska Airlines flies to several cities from where you could have flown here directly.”

“Bad timing,” Maggie replied with hostility.

“Sorry to hear that,” Dee told her, mustering all the sympathy and sincerity she could. “You must be exhausted. Did you at least have a good meal?”

“Not really,” Maggie responded, “but I’m too tired to eat now. I just want to go home and sleep this off.”

“How about you, Amy?” Eddy asked. “Hungry?”

“Uh uh,” Amy replied. He wasn’t able to tell if the response was sleepy, sullen or a combination of the two. Like Dee he decided not to push.

“Well, we’ll just pick up the luggage and be on own way,” Eddy decided.

“Why don’t I get the car and bring it around to the gate?” Dee suggested, mostly because she suspected her own presence was causing problems, but also because she too had spotted Jael and Inanna in the lobby.

“Good idea,” Eddy remarked, handing her the keys. She took them and started toward the car, but stopped once they had descended out of sight on the escalator. Then she did an about-face and headed directly for the bookshop Jael was rushing out of.

“What are you two doing here?” Dee demanded of Jael.

“Uh, hi,” Jael responded lamely. “Um, Enki thought it might be best if I kept an eye on you and Eddy from a distance?” In her discomfort, she made it sound like a question.

“You aren’t sure?” Dee asked archly.

“Oh, okay, I slipped out of the house on my own. Don’t worry, Ash and Ina are still there,” Jael assured Dee .

“Ash may be,” Dee retorted, “but Ina’s been drinking overpriced coffee over at that kiosk.” She pointed in the general direction.

“Don’t see her now,” Jael noted.

“She probably moved out before you did. Why did you stop to actually buy a book?” Dee asked.

“The shopkeeper was glaring at me,” Jael protested. “I had to buy something in order to look normal. You all just moved on before I could finish paying.”

“Hope it’s a good read,” Dee remarked.

“A Boston streetmap?” Jael countered.

“I suppose not,” Dee sighed. “It’s too late to stop Ina, but you had better get back to Hattamesett. You should have stayed there.”

“Don’t worry, I have Ratatosk filling in for me,” Jael told her.

“Did I hear you right?” Dee asked her in dangerous tones.

“I know you two don’t get along,” Jael admitted, “but he’s as good a protector as any of us in his own way.”

“Oh, just go home and get him and whoever Ina chose to fill in for her. If Pan were still alive this cycle she’d probably have called him in,” Dee remarked irritably.

“He was a woodlands god,” Jael pointed out.

“But leaving him in reach of a cute young nymph like Tanise would have been disastrous,” Dee told her.

“Not with Asherah on the job,” Jael smirked.

Deesmiled for the first time in the encounter, “There is that. Now get home, will you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jael responded.

By the time Dee reached the car she realized she had taken too long talking to Jael to get the car back in a timely fashion, so she decided to take a shortcut. Starting the car up, she backed out of the space and then started forward, but instead of heading to the garage exit, she took a detour through the Twilight Zone of that area between the divine and mortal planes where the gods often traveled. She felt bad about skipping out on paying for parking, but now she was in too much of a hurry to worry about such trivialities. As it was Eddy, Maggie and Amy were standing by the curbside when she finally showed up.

“What took so long?” Eddy asked curiously.

“I, uh, took a shortcut,” Dee responded. It was normally universal code for “I got lost,” but in this case was the literal truth.

“Well, no matter,” Eddy smiled. “You’re here now. Could you pop the trunk open, please?”

They loaded two bags each from Maggie and Amy into the luggage compartment in the car. “That’s all you brought?” Dee asked Maggie.

“There was one other, but it seems to be taking a vacation to Hawaii without us,” Maggie replied sourly. Behind her, Eddy shrugged. “This will be enough to hold us until it catches up to us and the rest arrives by van.”

Both Dee and Eddy tried striking up conversations with Maggie and Amy on the way home, but both women replied with only terse statements and eventually they all stopped talking and spent the trip home as though each of them were traveling alone.

Eight

“Dad,” Maggie asked after being introduced to Ash, Ina, Jael and Tanise, “who are all these women?”

“My friends,” Eddy told her simply. “They’ve been staying with me. It’s nice not to have to live in an empty house, don’t you think?”

“But they’re all...” she paused looking for the words she wanted. Eddy let the silence stretch rather than trying to finish the thought for her. “...so young,” she finally concluded.

“Don’t be fooled,” Eddy chuckled, “They’re older than they look.”

“There must be one heck of a good beauty shop in town then,” Maggie shot back. “Tanise looks about Amelia’s age.”

“Ah,” Eddy responded, “Tanise is the exception that makes the rule. “She’s a bit younger than Amy.”

“Dad, I prefer that she be called Amelia,” she admonished him.

“But she prefers to be called Amy, dear,” Eddy replied gently. “You don’t hear me insisting you be called Margaret, do you?”

“But...” Maggie began, “I suppose you’re right, but I only think of her as Amelia. She didn’t insist on being Amy until Peter and I separated.”

“She’s looking for her identity,” Eddy pointed out. “You know the divorce had to have torn her in two. She loves her father, doesn’t she?”

“She does, but I’ll be damned if I can figure out why,” Maggie replied. “He doesn’t feel the same way about either of us. He certainly didn’t want her.”

“Are you sure?” Eddy pressed. “Maybe he just didn’t want to hurt her by making her choose. Not a wise choice on Peter’s part, but none of us is a genius when it comes to love, I think, except maybe Ina. You might try talking to her; she has some pretty deep insights on the subject.”

“Where did you meet her?” Maggie demanded. “Where did you meet any of them, for that matter?”

“Through a mutual friend,” Eddy replied. “Have I mentioned my friend, Mister Waters?”

“Once or twice,” Maggie admitted. “I got the impression you didn’t see him very often.”

“He’ll be here in a couple days for the party,” Eddy told her.

“Party?” Maggie asked.

“New Year’s Eve,” Eddy replied. “Too bad you weren’t here for Thanksgiving. We had a bit of a blast that day. I think this will be a bit quieter. Only a couple dozen or so will be here and a lot of them will only be putting in an appearance before moving off to other parties.”

“This is so strange, Dad,” Maggie told him. Eddy detected a note of worry in her voice. “Not like you at all. Last time I was home, you had very few friends.”

“That was just after your Mom died,” Eddy recalled. “Well I’ve decided I don’t like living alone. You and Amy were off, seemingly forever, in Alaska. Dee and the others became family for me. They can be the same for you. And, hey! There will be some nice young men at the party too.”

“Oh no!” Maggie told him, sounding now much more like the daughter he remembered. “You are not setting me up! Even if I were ready for it, which I’m not!”

“Okay,” Eddy nodded. “I didn’t invite them here for that anyway. They were coming even before I knew you’d be here. So what happened?”

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked.

“With Peter?” Eddy amplified, “and your job in Anchorage?”

“Oh, Dad,” Maggie sighed. “The company lost its government grant and had to make cutbacks. They decided to can my entire department and sold the assets off to some company out of Japan. It was just about then Peter and I started fighting.”

“The stress of being out of work can do that, I hear,” Eddy remarked.

“If only it had been that simple,” Maggie replied. “It turned out he was seeing someone else for the last two years and finally decided to leave us.”

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” Eddy told her. “Really, I am.”

“Yeah, well that’s over,” Maggie told him. “I saw no reason to stay in Anchorage. I’m an oceanographer, and this is as good a place to get a job as anywhere. I applied for and landed a new job with Deep Water, Inc. in Marion.”

“That’s wonderful, darling,” Eddy told her. “What about Amelia, though?”

“She’s seventeen and she’s already been accepted at Brown starting next fall, and she’s a straight-A student. She’ll sail through her last semester at Old Rochester Regional High School,” Maggie replied.

“She doesn’t seem all that happy to be here,” Eddy observed.

“She’s angry with the world right now,” Maggie replied. “She’ll get over it.”

“Did she have a boyfriend in Anchorage?” Eddy asked.

“What? I seriously doubt it,” Maggie replied, shaking her head at the idea.

“Why?” Eddy asked. “Is she gay?”

“Oh, of course not!” Maggie shook her head again. “She’s a normal teenaged girl.”

“Well, from what I hear these days there’s a fair argument that has nothing to do with normality, but have it your way,” Eddy told her. “The point is, she’s seventeen. I’d find it less normal if she didn’t have a boyfriend, or whatever. I suspect you may have inadvertently destroyed a case of young love. Or maybe she’s just resenting the fact that you dragged her away from everything and everyone she knows.”

“She’ll get over it,” Maggie told him again. “She’ll make new friends. In a week she’ll forget all about Anchorage.”

“I doubt that it will be that easy,” Eddy told her. “I really do. Your grandparents made me move twice growing up. It took me over a year to get used to it both times. Moving is hard on kids. Divorce is hard on them too. You’ve handed Amy a double whammy. I wouldn’t be surprised if it takes her a while to forgive you or me.”

“She’s just being overly dramatic, I tell you,” Maggie maintained.

“Of course she is,” Eddy chuckled. “She’s a teenager.”

“You don’t even know her,” Maggie told him heatedly.

“That’s true,” he admitted readily, “but I know her mother.”

“Do you?” she asked skeptically.

“Most people don’t change all that much,” Eddy pointed out, “not after they reach adulthood. I think I know you fairly well. It’s only been fifteen years you know. Hmm, that’s odd.”

“What’s odd?” Maggie asked.

“Oh nothing,” Eddy laughed. “A friend told me recently that the world came to an end fifteen years ago but that nobody noticed.” It was a gross simplification of what he’d actually been told, but it was the most he figured he could actually say on that subject.

“Funny,” Maggie noted, “for me, I thought a new world was starting about then.”

“That too,” Eddy replied. “Whenever the world ends a new one replaces it evidently. That’s why no one notices.”

“Sounds like a convenient circularity, but, Dad, I’ve never noticed you being so interested in philosophy.”

“It’s just something I picked up over the last eighty-four years,” he told her. “Look it’s getting late. Maybe you need to get some sleep?”

“It’s still not quite eleven in Anchorage, Dad,” Maggie replied, “but I have to start adjusting to Eastern Time soon. For that matter you ought to get some sleep. Good night.”

Eddy looked around the house and discovered for the first time since the ladies of Springtime Seed had moved in, there wasn’t anyone awake at night in the living room. It had been the one feature he had adapted to most easily, in fact. When unable to sleep there had always been someone up and alert to talk to until he managed to relax enough to sleep again. He knew where everyone was, though. They were in their bedrooms, keeping the same schedules they had before, but now they had to keep them in their rooms at least until they had gotten to know Maggie and Amy well enough to be able to understand and predict their nighttime habits,

Eddy thought they were being a bit too cautious and that someone ought to be openly awake, just not all night, but he had deferred to Dee’s judgment. He found Dee sitting up in bed reading when he got to the room they shared.

“Are you sure you don’t mind having to feign sleep?” Eddy asked as he started getting undressed behind the closet door.

“Not at all, dear,” Dee responded. “It’s just the way we all have to work for a while is all. And I don’t even mind sleeping once in a while. It’s recreational. I am sorry your daughter hates me on sight, however.”

“I think we shocked her is all,” Eddy replied. “I mean to her eyes it looks like I’m shackled up with a woman young enough to be my daughter. It’s only natural that sort thing would creep her out. I think she’ll come around in a week or so. I’m more worried about Amy. I have a sneaky suspicion Maggie doesn’t spend enough time with her. How did she respond to Tanise?”

“They haven’t met yet,” Dee told him. “Tanise really was sleeping by the time we got home. So we just showed Amy to the room and cautioned her that Tanise was asleep.”

"I wish we had more rooms in the house," Eddy commented. "Amy was used to having her own room in Anchorage."

"A house this size with five bedrooms is unusual enough," Dee pointed out. "We gave Maggie the room she always used when she came to visit you and put Jael and Ina together in the old guest room. They're in and out of here often enough they won't get in each other's way. I suppose Asherah could have stayed in Tanise's room and still could if the girls don't get along, but it seemed better to move Amy in with Tanise and leave Ash in the final room. And who knows, maybe getting to know Tanise will help Amy work through her anger. Poor child. She really has been neglected by both of her parents. Not physically, never that, but Maggie and Peter were too involved in their own little fight to spend any time with their daughter."

"How do you know that?" Eddy asked, climbing into bed beside her.

"I'm not omniscient, but I do have some ability along those lines," Dee replied. "I don't normally pry, but this time it seemed appropriate."

"I'm glad you did," Eddy told her. "It confirms some of my own guesses. I think losing Julie was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but it would have been even worse if I lost her through a fight."

"It would have been," Dee agreed. "Would you like me to turn out the light, dear?"

"No, it's all right," Eddy replied and he stretched out and closed his eyes. A moment later Dee turned the light out anyway and put her arm comfortably around Eddy while he finally fell asleep.

Nine

"Hello," Tanise greeted Amy the next morning as she returned from brushing her teeth. "Are you Amelia? I'm Tanise. Sorry I slept through your arrival last night."

Amy groaned inarticulately, then added, "I'd rather be called Amy."

"Really?" Tanise asked. "Amelia is a lovely name. It's your name, though. Amy it is."

"It's an old-fashioned name," Amy replied, sitting up. "You really like it?"

"I said so," Tanise nodded, "but my opinion doesn't count."

"Sure it does," Amy argued.

"Not as far as what you want to be called goes," Tanise shook her head.

"Oh, yeah," Amy nodded reluctantly. Since her parents had started fighting she had rebelled as well. She found herself naturally saying things just to get them to react. It felt like losing when Tanise gave in so easily. Then she realized she was being silly. It was one thing to argue with her mother, but this girl might turn out to be a friend. Fighting for no good purpose on first acquaintance wasn't a smart move. "I suppose you're right," she admitted.

"Hey, it's your name," Tanise told her. "Use it any way you like or change it completely if that suits

you. Dee tells me she has a lot of different names.” Tanise mentally kicked herself for volunteering too much information.

“Dee” Amy asked. “You mean Ms. Meter?”

“Yes, that’s her,” Tanise agreed.

“Why does she have different names?” Amy wondered. “Is she a spy?” The notion intrigued her.

“I don’t think so,” Tanise replied, not entirely certain what a spy was nor why one would need a lot of different names. “You hungry?”

“Totally ravenous,” Amy admitted. Her mind did a double-take. How had this strange girl managed to draw her out so easily. Amy thought she had built her protective wall carefully enough, but Tanise had managed to get past the barriers as though they didn’t exist. Then Amy shrugged and decided to go along with it. She hadn’t really been liking herself much lately anyway.

“Well, there’s always something to eat in the kitchen and Ash makes the best pancakes,” Tanise told her.

“Cool. Let me clean up, though,” Amy begged off. “I must look a fright.”

“You look fine to me,” Tanise opined.

“You’re not a boy,”

“Does that make a difference?” Tanise asked innocently.

Amy looked at her strangely. Of course it made a difference. “I’ll be up in a minute,” she replied instead. Tanise nodded happily and bounced out of the room. “She’s a bit too perky if you ask me,” Amy noted sourly, then admonished herself for the criticism. It appeared they were going to be roommates for the next few months until college started. The least Amy could do was to try to get along.

The thought drew her back to her circle of friends in Alaska. Amy sighed, wondering if she would ever see them again. She could Instant Message them and write e-mails and the like, but in spite of all that, it wasn’t the same as spending the day at the mall or taking in a movie with them. Then she wondered just how good her grandfather’s Internet connection was. “Probably just dial-up,” she said aloud around her toothbrush. “Oh, God! Please don’t let him have blocks against AIM!”

“Good morning, Amy,” Ash greeted her as she came into the kitchen. “We have blueberry pancakes this morning. Would you like three or four?”

“They smell lovely,” Amy replied more cheerfully than she thought she could. What was it about these people? “Just two, please.” Ash handed her a plate with two pancakes, half an orange cut into wedges a dab of butter and a sprig of mint and also gave her a cup of cranberry juice. “Thank you,” she told Ash and took it to the table where Tanise and Ina were sitting.

“We’re going party shopping this morning, Amy,” Ina told her, indicating herself and Tanise. “Want to join us?”

“Where are you going?” Amy asked, determined to find an excuse not to.

“I have several party shops on the list Eddy gave me,” Ina told her conspiratorially, “but just between you and me, I think we want something better than the usual tin foil and cardboard New Years decorations, so it’s going to take some serious shopping. We may have to hit every mall from here to Providence and Boston .”

“Can we do that in one day?” Amy wondered and suddenly realized she had just agreed. What was it about these people?

“Well, if we really get stuck, we can try again tomorrow,” Ina shrugged. “but by tomorrow I expect to be busy decorating.”

“So we’re buying decorations?” Amy asked.

“And food,” Ina told her. “Mostly food. We’ll spend more time looking at decorations, though.”

“What about balloons?” Amy suggested. “Do you know how to make those large balloon constructions I’ve seen on TV?”

“I could probably figure it out,” Ina told her confidently. “You need to blow up a lot of balloons and tie them together or on to a frame, depending on what you plan to make. What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” Amy admitted. “I just thought of it.”

“How about the Tree?” Tanise suggested.

“What tree?” Amy asked.

“Uh, the big one in the back yard,” Tanise replied with only a slight verbal stumble. “Can we do that?”

Amy looked out the kitchen window. “That’s a big tree, isn’t it?”

“Yes he is,” Tanise replied proudly.

“I think that would be very appropriate,” Ina decided. “Should we do it in spring or fall colors?”

“Both,” Tanise decided, “and some branches should be bare for winter.”

“And I suppose some should be darker green for summer as well,” Amy opined.

“Well, that certainly changes our plans,” Ina noted. “We’ll need to pick up some chicken wire and a tank of helium, though we won’t need that for the tree, but I like balloons that float, don’t you? We do need some compressed air, because we’ll blow out our lungs trying to inflate that many balloons the old-fashioned way. Maybe I’ll just buy or rent a small compressor. We’ll also need a lot of string. Hmm, sounds like fun, but it won’t take long to buy all that stuff. Good! That means we have more time for food shopping. We’ll do that in Providence .”

“What’s going on in the backyard?” Amy asked.

Ina looked, “Oh, that’s the rotisserie we built yesterday for the ostrich roast. Eddy made a joke about that while shopping for Thanksgiving and we thought it might be fun to actually try it. Ash is supervising

the hearth, of course. How's it going, Ash?"

"Everything is right on schedule," Asherah told her, "although we couldn't do it with stuffing like Eddy wanted. It would have taken too long to roast over an open fire. As it is, we're talking about one hundred pounds of meat."

"Is that really an ostrich on the spit?" Amy asked.

"Oh yes," Asherah told her. "We found a farm growing Blackwing Ostriches about thirty miles away and bought one. Cleaning it was the hard part. They slaughtered it for us and gutted it, but we wanted the feathers and plumes so removing the feathers was on us. We did that last night while you were still flying in."

"Why did you want the feathers and plumes?" Amy asked, interested in spite of herself.

"Presentation," Ash told her. "You three aren't the only ones working on decorations."

"Will we have some left over for inside?" Ina asked.

"I was planning to use them all inside," Asherah replied. "Did you need any?"

"Not really, I just thought you were using them outside," Ina told her. "Never mind."

"I haven't yet completely decided how to arrange them," Asherah continued, "but maybe they will go well with the balloon tree."

"Sounds good," Ina replied. "I think we'll go shopping for fancy appetizers in Providence. I hear good things about the markets there. In fact I think we better get going if we want to get done by dinner."

"Where are you going?" Maggie asked, entering the kitchen.

"We're going shopping for Granddad's party, Mom," Amy replied challengingly. Perversely, it made her feel better that she could still be irritated by her Mom. All these others were making her feel bubbly and while it was a pleasant feeling, she didn't think she should be feeling that good.

Maggie looked like she wanted to forbid Amy from leaving the house, but could not find a valid excuse for it. "Pancakes?" Ash asked her.

"Thanks," Maggie replied, sufficiently distracted. "Is there any coffee?"

"See you later, Mom," Amy told her as she followed Ina and Tanise out of the room.

Maggie took two bites of the pancakes and Ash joined her at the table. "Who are all you people?" Maggie asked her bluntly.

"Eddy's friends," Ash told her simply. "One by one, he invited us to move in. That's all."

"And that Delores Meter?" Maggie asked. "What does she think she's doing with my father?"

"Cuddling mostly," Ash replied. "They're in love."

“Disgusting,” Maggie commented.

“Love is never disgusting, Margaret Terrula,” Ash told her sternly. “It is rare and beautiful and, in this case, none of your business.”

Maggie glared at Ash, but was unable to maintain her anger and eventually fell back to eating breakfast. She was just finishing up when Eddy and Dee walked into the room. “Dad?” she asked, pointedly ignoring Dee, “Mind if I borrow the car. I need to buy one now that I’m here and do a few other errands before reporting in for work next Tuesday.”

“You’re going to buy a car just before the New Year?” Eddy asked. “Good luck.” Asherah got up from the table and started preparing breakfast for Eddy and Dee.

“It made more sense than driving down from Alaska, especially at this time of year,” Maggie shot back. “There are places along the way where the roads stay closed for months.”

“Well, see Tom over at East-End Auto,” Eddy suggested. “He always helps me when I need a new car.”

“That’s a Chrysler dealership, isn’t it?” Maggie asked.

“They have a second building for Subarus these days,” Eddy added.

“I’ll take a look,” Maggie agreed. “Maybe one of the smaller Jeeps. I’ve been driving SUVs for so long now, I doubt I can kick the habit.”

“How about Amy?” Eddy asked. “Does she have her license?”

“Just barely,” Maggie replied. “I’ll worry about a car for her after she graduates. Then again she’s going to school in Providence, she won’t need a car there.”

“I hear parking on College Hill can be difficult, but residents usually have a spot,” Eddy remarked. “But I was actually thinking of an early graduation gift.”

“You shouldn’t try to buy her love, Dad,” Maggie snapped.

“That wasn’t my intention,” Eddy denied, “but it is customary for grandparents to dote on their grandchildren, isn’t it? I seem to be fifteen years in arrears on her account.” He chuckled as he said that, but stopped when Maggie glared at him.

“I won’t stop you from buying her a car, Dad,” Maggie told him. “I was wondering how I was going to budget it in anyway, but wait until May when she graduates.”

“June, dear,” Eddy corrected her gently. “Commencement ceremonies around here are in June.”

Maggie grabbed the keys to her father’s car and left the kitchen. “Hey, Maggie!” they heard Jael call to her. “Great morning, huh?” Then they heard the slam of the front door. “Wow,” Jael commented dryly as she entered the kitchen, “and I thought I woke up cranky.”

“You do wake up cranky,” Rona told her.

“Shh!” Jael admonished her. The plan had been for only Jael to be seen around the house.

“Relax,” Asherah told them. “Maggie’s out looking for a new car and Amy’s out on errands with Ina and Tanise. Would you like a second breakfast, dear? I’ve still a bit of batter left over after Dee’s and Eddy’s pancakes.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jael replied. “I think I would. I am eating for two, after all.”

“You’re going to wear that joke out,” Rona warned her.

“So I’ll come up with a new one,” Jael chuckled and sang “*Me and my shadow...*”

“Funny,” Rona replied flatly.

“What’s wrong?” Jael asked. “Marcus is flying in tonight and Ina will be in Little Rock. You should be over the Moon.”

“You certainly are,” Rona grumped. “Sorry, I shouldn’t, I know. It’s just that I got used to not having to hide all the time.”

“Oh yeah,” Jael agreed sympathetically, “That was nice for a bit. Tell you what. We’re having quite a crowd over tomorrow night. I think we can safely let you out off and on.” Rona was silent. “Mostly on,” Jael tempted her, “and you can have Marcus at midnight.”

“Oh, all right,” Rona agreed finally. “And it’s only for another three months, right?”

Ten

Eddy was amazed at the job of decorating the girls had done with Ina. The balloon tree they made featured a wide trunk in one corner of the living room, but with branches that hung down from and traveled along the ceiling out into the greenhouse room and up the stairs, and Asherah had used some more of the chicken wire to build a frame on which she attached the ostrich feathers so that it looked as though the bird was standing in the middle of the room.

He had deliberately underestimated the number of guests for Maggie’s sake, but the attending gods and goddesses knew they each had a scheduled time, arranged by Nin-ti, at which to show up. And when quite a few stayed a bit longer than planned, there was no problem since there was plenty of room in the back yard where the ostrich was being served. The evening was warm for the end of December and was still just over forty as midnight rapidly approached.

“Wow!” Amy breathed to Tanise, from the corner they had chosen to occupy, “Who are all these people?”

“Friends,” Tanise replied carefully.

“That guy Gil is well built, isn’t he?” Amy observed, looking over at Gilgamesh who was chatting comfortably with a tall dark-haired woman who looked nearly as well-built as he was. “And that Herkule? Cute and all Euro-looking!”

“He’s old enough to be your father,” Tanise pointed out. It was a line Jael had coached her at.

Amy sighed. “My Dad is definitely not that cute,” she grumped. “Who’s that blonde woman with Jael’s husband, though. They’re kissing! Jael will have her eyes out if she catches them.”

“No she won’t,” Tanise giggled. “That’s Rona. She’s Marcus’ other wife.”

“That’s bigamy!” Amy gasped. “It’s not legal anywhere in the United States, not even Utah.”

“I don’t think they care,” Tanise giggled again.

“I thought Jael was nice,” Amy remarked, “but... ew!”

“Jael is nice,” Tanise defended her. “This is love and love, as Ina tells me constantly, takes many forms. Their arrangement doesn’t concern us and if it makes them happy, I’m all for it.”

“Hmm,” Amy reevaluated her new friend. Tanise had seemed a bit shallow at first, and all too ready to agree with anyone just to be friends. The fact that she actually had a backbone was a revelation, and one Amy welcomed, even if she was on the receiving end this time. “I touched a sore spot, did I? I’m sorry. What’s the high school like?”

“I don’t know,” Tanise admitted. “I don’t attend it.”

“No?” Amy asked. “Why not?”

Dee was near enough to overhear them and she swung around and supplied, “Home schooling, dear. She’s been sitting her classes right here.”

“I want to do that!” Amy decided. “I only have one semester left and I could probably pass the exams right now. I’m going to go talk to my mother about it.”

“She seems to be busy with Thor at the moment,” Tanise noted, pointing at yet another muscular gentleman with blond hair. Thor was dressed in casual slacks and a sweater, but even so, he seemed quite statuesque.

“Then she won’t want to fight about it, will she?” Amy replied smugly and started out across the room.

“She’s a bit manipulative for my tastes,” Dee remarked to Tanise. “Don’t let her talk you into anything you don’t want to do.”

“She hasn’t so far,” Tanise replied.

“Well, maybe she’s only that way with her mother,” Dee considered. “Be careful though. I know you’ve let a few small things slip out.”

“I’m sorry,” Tanise replied contritely. “I don’t like lying.”

“That because you’re a nice girl, dear,” Dee assured her. “Besides there’s been no harm done, but Amy’s a smart one, I can tell. Maggie is too self-absorbed to really take a close look at us, but her daughter is both intelligent and curious. We need to be careful.”

“I will be,” Tanise promised. “She’s coming back.”

“She agreed,” Amy reported happily.

“Did she really?” Dee asked. “That was fast. Are you sure, she didn’t just say you would talk about it?”

“Well, it was more like, ‘Yes, dear. Whatever you want,’” Amy replied.

“If she doesn’t change her mind in the morning,” Dee instructed her, “speak to Jael tomorrow so she can make the arrangements with the school when it opens on Tuesday. Now if you don’t mind, I promised Ash to take a turn serving the bird. Have you two eaten yet?”

“We have,” Amy replied. “I’m stuffed.” Dee nodded and walked outside.

“I’d like a bit more of the carrot salad,” Tanise replied.

“Did you eat any of the meat?” Amy asked her.

“Just a taste,” Tanise replied. “I’m not really fond of red meat. I like fish though.”

“The ostrich was really good,” Amy remarked. “I didn’t know it tasted like beef. I always thought it would taste a bit like chicken. Isn’t that what they always say about exotic meats?”

“Do they?” Tanise asked innocently.

“Well in the cartoons and TV shows, anyway,” Amy replied. “Come on, let’s fatten you up.”

“Huh?”

“I mean get you some more of those carrots, unless you want ice cream instead,” Amy suggested.

“Is there any ginger left?” Tanise asked eagerly.

“Let’s find out!” Amy replied.

“I hear you’re doing a great job here, Eddy,” Hawk Wilton, Nin-ti’s partner, told him while the girls were investigating the pleasures of the dessert table.

“I haven’t done any of it by myself,” Eddy remarked. “It was a team effort.”

“It always is, Eddy,” Hawk, the ex-baseball player, replied. “It always is. But don’t understate what you have done. I understand you knocked old Loki out of the park last summer..”

“I took too great a chance,” Eddy laughed. “I think if I’d let him whine on for another minute or two Iblis would have killed him for me and I wouldn’t have had to spend most of the next month in bed.”

“You don’t really know that,” Hawk told him, “and Enki says that if it hadn’t been for you, Loki would have destroyed the Tree while it was still a sapling.”

“It wasn’t bravery,” Eddy denied. “It was unthinking stupidity. That and the fact that I was likely to be killed whether I did anything or not. I figured I might as well do something.”

“And that is what heroes are made of,” Hawk told him.

“Thanks, Hawk. Ah... Could you do me a favor?” Eddy asked.

“Name it,” Hawk responded. Eddy pulled a baseball out of his pocket and held it out to Hawk.

Hawk laughed. “It’s been a long time since anyone asked me to sign one of these. Hey, is this a Celestial League ball?”

“Ina got it for me,” Eddy admitted.

“She did?” Hawk asked as he fished through his pockets for a pen. “That was nice of her. Inanna has always been the most erratic player on the team. It took a month just to figure out she was a southpaw. She kept trying everything right-handed, just because I demonstrated everything that way.”

“Odd, I never noticed she was left-handed,” Eddy remarked. “Guess that sort of thing is off my radar.”

“Why would you need to be aware of that?” Hawk countered, finally finding a pen. “I manage a ball team - knowing how a player throws a ball and swings a bat is essential - but you used to be in advertising. Do I have that right?”

“You do,” Eddy nodded. “I spent better than forty years writing copy and designing ad campaigns. Hmm, I see what you mean, the only time handedness mattered was if the artwork got in the way of the copy.”

“Exactly,” Hawk nodded, signing the ball. “Still you should have been there the day I finally straightened Inanna out and made her bat lefty. She hit a homer straight out, though by then I think Isimud was throwing her grapefruits. She kissed every baseman along the way as she ran the bases too, except for Marduk there,” he pointed at a powerfully built man of medium height who had an ostrich rib in his hand. “He’d been needling her all afternoon. Besides he was still wearing his catcher’s mask.”

Amy and Tanise were near enough to overhear the conversation and Amy nearly dropped her dish of frozen pudding at the sound of the names Inanna and Marduk. Tanise noticed and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh nothing,” Amy told her. “I think my ears were playing tricks on me. This is strange ice cream. I don’t think I’ve ever had this flavor before.”

“Frozen pudding’s a New England specialty,” Jael explained from nearby where she and Marcus had been half dancing-half hugging. “It’s similar to what is called tutti-fruity and rum raisin elsewhere. Have you ever tried it, dear?” she asked Marcus.

“Can’t say that I have,” Marcus admitted, “but I’m too full to eat anymore.”

“Silly!” she admonished him. “You should always leave room for a little ice cream. Here, have a taste of mine.”

The front door opened just then and Enki entered with a dark-skinned goddess on his arm. “Who is that with Enki?” Marcus whispered to Jael. He kept his voice down, but it was just loud enough for Amy to hear as was Jael’s replied.

“Tefnut, from Egypt,” Jael told him, then noticed Amy was watching her and desisted from any further identification.

Enki made his way through the crowd, greeting everyone by name and eventually reached the table where Tanise and Amy were. “Tanise!” he held his hand out to grasp hers. “Nice to see you again, dear. Your tree is looking magnificent.” From seemingly out of nowhere he handed her a long-stemmed purple iris.

“Thank you, Mister Waters,” Tanise replied, remembering Enki’s mortal alias.

“Her tree?” Amy asked suspiciously, accepting a similar yellow iris from him.

“And yours as well,” Enki replied, pointing at the immense balloon structure. “I assume you are Amy, Eddy’s granddaughter? Pleased to meet you. Is your mother around this evening?”

“She went out about twenty minutes ago to spend some time at her new boss’ party,” Amy replied.

“I suppose that was a smart choice,” Enki decided. “Will she be back before midnight, do you think?”

“She said she would,” Amy replied.

“Good,” Enki nodded, “Oh have you two met Miss Tefnut?” He performed the introductions and then moved on to have a word with Cold-Bring Woman who was helping herself to coleslaw in the greenhouse room.

Amy turned to watch him, wondering where he was hiding the flowers he seemed to be handing out to all the women and then started looking closely to the others at the party as well. “There sure are a lot of powerful-looking people here tonight,” Amy remarked. “I didn’t know Granddad had taken up with so many bodybuilders.”

“Exercise is good for you,” Tanise told Amy, refusing to sound nervous even though Amy was seeing more than anyone hoped she would. She took a sniff at her flower to discover it was nearly scentless. “Now what?”

Amy was staring out into the backyard in frozen fascination. “Uh...” she began and stopped to rub her eyes before looking again. “My mind really is playing tricks on me tonight,” she laughed. “For a moment, I could have sworn I saw Dee feeding some of the ostrich meat to a giant squirrel.”

“Oh, that’s just R...” Tanise began, then mentally shifted gears faster than a NASCAR driver in the hope that Amy wouldn’t notice, “really weird!”

“Yeah, isn’t it?” Amy giggled. “I’d better not let anyone know or they’ll think I was sneaking drinks all night.”

“That’s okay,” Tanise told her, “I’ll tell them you weren’t.”

“Thanks,” Amy told her, “but they’d probably just say I was lying and you were swearing to it. Adults are like that, although as adults go, this bunch seems pretty cool. Wish my Mom could be that cool, in fact.”

“It’s almost Midnight,” Eddy told both of them sometime later. “Would you like some Champagne?”

“Granddad,” Amy objected against her private wishes, “we’re only seventeen.”

“Well, it is New Year’s Eve,” Eddy replied. “I think we can make a rare exception.”

“Mom would never approve,” Amy told him. She wasn’t sure why she was being such a goodie-goodie. It might have been Tanise’s influence. She didn’t seem to be disobedient or rebellious in any way. That was strange. It was stranger, Amy thought, that she liked the odd girl she’d just met. She’d always ignored that sort back in Anchorage. It might also have been because she didn’t want to see her new-found grandfather in trouble with Mom. She had barely had a chance to talk with him, but she felt they had established an instant bond. She had felt it at the airport in the moment they met, but managed to resist it until the next day. By now there was no denying that Eddy was freely offering her something she never knew she was missing; something she wanted. She was so deep in thought, considering those possibilities that she nearly missed Eddy’s reply.

“Your mother was drinking New Year’s Champagne when she was half your age.”

“She was?” Amy asked.

“By your age she was occasionally sipping from my beer glass for that matter, especially when she thought I didn’t notice,” Eddy continued.

“My Mom?” Amy asked. Eddy nodded. “Okay, I’ll have some.”

“Just half a glass,” Eddy told her.

“Aww,” she instantly started to object, then stopped herself. A moment earlier she had been trying not to have any. It was not that she had never tasted an alcoholic drink. Most of the kids had tried beer and wine back home, a few of them were already having control problems with it, she knew. But Amy was just not inclined to rebel against her mother along those lines, normally.

“You are underage,” Eddy reminded her, “as you were so quick to point out.”

A few minutes later they counted down the end of the year and sang the “Auld” song. Another half hour later guests started leaving, although Maggie didn’t return to the house until sometime after dawn.

Eleven

Jael and Asherah greeted Tanise and Amy two mornings later with a pile of text books. “You two really slept in,” Jael observed as the two stumbled into the kitchen. “New Year’s Eve was two days ago.”

“What’s all this?” Amy asked, looking at the books.

“Your new school books,” Jael replied. “Christmas break is over, time to go back to school. You may be home-schooling this semester, but you still have to pass the tests, and that includes the MCAS.”

“What’s the MCAS?” Amy asked.

“It’s the set of exams Massachusetts requires all students to pass in order to graduate,” Jael told her.

“Oh,” Amy replied. “We had those in Alaska, but they were called something else.”

“Yeah, I looked it up,” Jael admitted, “so I didn’t think the concept would particularly shock you. Now these are the text books the local school department expects you to use.”

“Aw geeze!” Amy commented as she looked through the stack. “Half of these I read in my junior year. The rest of them look like they’re older than you and Ash together.”

“Can’t be,” Jael shot back, “They’re not written on clay tablets.”

“Very funny,” Amy told her sourly, not noticing the shushing motion Ash gave Jael nor the grin Jael returned.

“But if you look closely, you might notice the dinosaur tracks on some of the covers,” Jael concluded.

“Can’t we at least have breakfast first?” Amy requested.

“Sure,” Jael shrugged. “You’re the one who asked what the books were for. Now while you’re eating I’ll do the good news-bad news joke. The good news is the local school department is willing to allow you to home-school on this exceedingly short notice. The bad news, you’ve figured out for yourself; they have a set curriculum they expect you to follow.

“Also,” Jael continued, “just because you’ll be learning from one of us, you still need to meet the men and women who would have been your teachers at Old Rochester Regional. The good news is that they have some equivalency tests and if you pass them and the interviews, we may be able to cut down the class work a bit.”

“You keep looking at me,” Amy commented. “What about Tanise?”

“Tanise has been home-schooling since last semester,” Jael informed her. “You’re the one we need to get approval for. Anyway, we have probationary permission to go ahead with this and so long as you’re a good girl when meeting people face-to-face, you get to finish up your diploma in the comfort and convenience of home.”

“You sound like a bad advertisement,” Amy grumped.

“So long as you sound like a good student,” Jael told her. “We have a lot to get through in the next few weeks. Your graduation MCAS takes place in the last week of March, that’s less than three months away.”

“You mean I’ll be done by the end of March?” Amy asked, delightedly.

“No one is that lucky, kid,” Jael told her. “That’s just the MCAS. It’s a major requirement for your sheepskin, but not the only one. You’ll also have to sit the exams the teachers at Old Rochester give you.”

“I have to take tests from teachers I never met?” Amy asked, choking on her breakfast.

“Hey, I never promised you an easy ride,” Jael retorted. “Besides, you’ll meet them several times before

the tests. It's one of the stipulations they insisted on. They'll be monitoring your progress and making sure Ash and Ina and I aren't letting you slide."

"Do I need to do a senior project?" Amy asked.

"No one mentioned that," Jael admitted.

"Good," Amy breathed.

"It's a good idea, though," Jael considered. "What were you working on in Anchorage?"

"Not fair!" Amy replied. "I had a partner there and she has all the notes we made."

"You have a partner here," Jael pointed out, nodding toward Tanise. "Could she forward copies of those notes?"

"We had a pile of photocopies a foot thick," Amy admitted.

"Well, I suggest coming up with some other project then," Jael told her firmly.

"How about trees?" Tanise suggested.

"What about them?" Jael prompted. "Pick something very specific and study it."

"What's with you and trees?" Amy asked Tanise.

"I like trees," Tanise replied.

"I've noticed," Amy remarked.

"Then you should also notice that Tanise is quite knowledgeable on the subject," Ash told her. "With her help, I don't think this would be too onerous an assignment."

"You really know a lot about trees?" Amy asked Tanise.

"Like she was born to them," Jael quipped as Tanise nodded shyly. Amy noticed Ash rolling her eyes at Jael's comment and assumed it was an old joke. It probably was if Tanise was really fascinated by trees, which made sense; she was the one, after all, who suggested the large balloon tree that still decorated the house two days after the party.

"That's called dendrology, isn't it?" Amy asked thoughtfully.

"There you go," Jael responded. "Actually, it is a study of all woody plants, but I think we can include all woody plants, at least for consideration for your project."

"What sort of project?" Amy wondered.

"That is for you to figure out," Ash replied.

"Why don't you two think about that this morning?" Jael suggested. "Ash and I will try to work out a study schedule for these texts."

“The project I was working on in Anchorage,” Amy told Tanise, “was all library-based. It was like a giant term paper.”

“How so?” Tanise asked interestedly.

“Lots of research and lots of writing,” Amy replied off-handedly, “and all of it while sitting on our butts.”

“That doesn’t sound like much fun,” Tanise told her. “Can’t we do something a bit more...” She faltered looking for the right word.

“Real?” Amy suggested. “Fun, maybe?”

“Both,” Tanise replied.

“We might,” Amy considered, “but the work involved is bound to vary in direct proportion of the amount of fun involved.”

“What?” Tanise asked.

“The more fun we have, the harder we’re going to have to work in order to justify it,” Amy explained. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Soil conditions have a lot to do with how any plant grows,” Tanise commented. “We could test soil conditions in various parts of town and compare those conditions to the trees nearby.”

“What are you planning to track?” Amy asked. “There are a lot of conditions, I imagine; Soil pH, organic matter, various trace nutrients... I don’t know what else, although I suspect I will by the time we finish.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Tanise admitted. “That could be a very large project, couldn’t it?”

“If we did it properly, it could take years,” Amy replied, “and a lot of money. We’d have to buy soil testers for the pH and organic content and probably buy lab time for the analysis of some of the other factors. We need to scale down or choose something else.”

“We could conduct a census of the trees in Hattamesett Center,” Tanise suggested.

“How big is Hattamesett Center? Ten blocks? Twenty?” Amy asked.

“About that,” Tanise.

“So how many trees is that do you think? One hundred? Two?” Amy asked pointedly.

“Over one hundred,” Tanise replied, “but not much more unless we go further out from the center.”

“One or two days worth of research then,” Amy considered. “I doubt they’d let us get away with that. I wonder how expensive soil pH testing kits are.”

“I thought you said that was too much work,” Tanise objected.

“Testing everything is too much work,” Amy replied, “but we can test and record the pH of the soil around representative trees, comparing maples against pines, oaks, ashes and whatever. We’ll do as many as we can afford to and see if there’s a correspondence between species and soil alkalinity or acidity.”

“One hundred soil tests,” Tanise nodded. “That’s going to take a lot of time, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Amy admitted. “Let’s run this past Jael and Ash and see what they think.”

Ash told them, “I like the idea, but I don’t know if the scope and cost is appropriate.”

“That’s not a problem,” Jael told her. “I can get these two corporate sponsorship from the Springtime Seed Company. Actually, we sell a pretty good pH tester for something under twenty dollars. I’ll give Nin-ti a call and ask her to send over some of them. I’ll want you two to work together however, but having two tests at each location will help validate all your work.”

“You should also map the locations of all trees and carefully record just where you got your samples,” Ina added, entering the kitchen. “I couldn’t help but overhear the plans for your project. I don’t think you need to worry about the scale either. Start with Hattamesett Center and if that goes too quickly we’ll chose some of the local developments, or maybe trees on personal property along Route 6.”

“Compare your results to the trees around the grounds of the high school,” Jael suggested, “or with trees in Marion, Mattapoisett or Rochester. I think you two have a good project and you can use the computer to sort through all your results, come up with charts and plots and all sorts of good stuff like that, although we should see what the teachers say this afternoon.”

Eleven

They need not have worried about Amy’s and Tanise’s project plans. The teachers they met with repeatedly informed them that no such project was required, although the Biology teacher admitted it would be a superlative science fair project if they had time to complete their study.”

“The ground is frozen right now,” he pointed out, “although it’s possible you will have a period of thaw during which to take your measurements. I must also commend you on the way you have stated the aims of your project. You have managed to propose an experiment in which you have not presupposed a result. That, of course, is the way it is supposed to be, but in my experience far too many students would assume certain results before taking their measurements. I am usually forced to send such proposals back to be reframed.”

The science fair was scheduled for late March and both girls felt they could complete the project in time so the teacher promised to get them entry forms. After the interview both of them threw themselves whole-heartedly into the proposed project, although they soon discovered that accurately placing each tree on their map of the town was more time-consuming than they had originally thought.

As the next two weeks progressed, however, as Amy and Tanise grew closer, Maggie became increasingly antagonistic toward Dee, Ina, Jael and Ash. “What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” Maggie demanded of Jael one morning.

“More than you have since you arrived,” Jael snapped back.

“Some of us work for a living,” Maggie told her nastily.

“And some of us work far harder than others,” Jael replied.

“What do you mean by that?” Maggie demanded.

“Nothing you want to hear,” Jael told her.

“What did you mean by that?” Maggie demanded again.

“Forget it,” Jael told her and walked away.

“Get back here!” Maggie screamed at her.

“Like you said, dear,” Jael told her as a parting shot, “Some of us do have to work for a living, and right now I have a job to attend to. Tell your Dad I should be back by Midnight.” She closed the front door behind her.

“What’s going on down there?” Eddy asked as he came down the stairs to investigate.

“That awful Jael woman,” Maggie told her father. “You should fire her.”

“She doesn’t work for me,” Eddy told her, “and I wouldn’t fire her if I could.”

“Just what does she do for you?” Maggie asked.

“She’s my friend,” Eddy told her. “That’s all she needs to be.”

“I thought Dee was your friend,” Maggie shouted at him.

“Dee is my friend too, and my love,” Eddy explained. “Jael is just a friend as are Ina, Ash and Tanise. Why does that bother you so much?”

“I don’t like the way they are using you,” Maggie told him, sounding like she was near tears, but something about her manner didn’t seem right. She was being overly dramatic and her body language was all wrong as well. She was holding herself in a position that suggested strength, not weakness or sadness. Her words didn’t match her posture and after a career of crafting advertisements, Eddy had a finely tuned instinct for what it took to look sincere.

“So far they’ve saved my life at least twice,” Eddy told her, “so if they are using me, it seems like a fair trade.”

Maggie stared at him in frustration before finally saying, “I have to go to work. I’ll be back late.”

Incidents like that happened on an almost daily basis, even Amy was not immune from Maggie’s temper. Any time Maggie caught her working with Tanise and sitting classes with one of the others, Maggie would drag her away from them and give her some useless chore to do instead. Several times she tried to talk Amy into giving up the home schooling and going to what she called “a proper classroom with teachers who actually knew something.” Inevitably Amy would refuse, standing up for the others and in general defying her mother.

When Amy had first arrived in Hattamesett, she had been angry at her mother, angry at her grandfather and his friends and angry with the world in general. However, in the few short weeks since her arrival, she had not only come to terms with the move, but had become quite enthusiastic about it. She was sending messages back and forth to her friends in Alaska, but also growing closer to Tanise than she had ever been with anyone. That her mother would attempt to ruin that after thrusting her into it in the first place rankled.

The entire matter reached its peak in the second week of January when Eddy finally lost his patience. Maggie had been telling all the goddesses to leave the house when she thought her father was not nearby, but increasingly they had begun to ignore her. Even Ina, quickest to anger of them all, refused to take any notice of Maggie's presence at all. "It's either that," Ina confided to Jael, "or turn her into a swan or a worm or something else that doesn't make any noise." Jael laughed, encouraging the ancient war and love goddess. "When she goes on like that you really have to wonder what any of us were doing when we warned Utnapishtim or Noah what was about to happen."

"I suppose it would have been a very lonely world without any life on it," Jael commented.

"Yes, well you could be right," Ina admitted. "I've been to the Moon. It's times like this I miss the peace and quiet."

"It won't last much longer," Jael told her. "Both Dee and Ash are getting ready to um, what's the phrase? Get biblical? ...all over her."

"What?" Ina asked. "And turn her into a pillar of salt? I don't think Eddy would forgive them. Still, the local deer might appreciate it."

It was only a minute later they heard Maggie shouting at Dee in the living room. "You heard me," she told Dee. "I want you and your skanky friends out of this house."

"In time we will leave," Dee told her patiently.

"And the time is now!" Maggie exclaimed. "I don't know what sort of spell you have over Father, but I will not see him controlled by the likes of you."

"We're doing nothing to your father except loving him is all," Dee replied tightly.

"If you really loved him," Maggie snapped at her, "you'd leave and take that little snip of a girl with you. She's a bad influence on Amy."

"Actually, she's been a very good influence on your daughter," Dee explained. "When you arrived, your daughter was all surly and withdrawn. It was Tanise who brought her out."

"No, you're going out!" Maggie returned to her original theme. "I'm calling the police."

"No, you are not!" Eddy told her from the stairway. "Maggie, dearest, I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but Dee and the others are my guests and this is my house and they will stay as long as they want to and I will not hear another word about it. I don't know how many times I've already told you this, but that is not going to change."

Maggie stared at her father for a long moment and looked like she was about to say something even

worse than she had already. Then suddenly she turned and ran up the stairs past Eddy. She stayed in her room for only a few minutes then came back down and headed for the front door.

“Where are you going?” Eddie asked her.

“A fat lot you care!” she shouted back and slammed the door behind her.

“I’m sorry, Eddy,” Dee apologized. “Maybe I should have been more patient.”

“No,” he told her. “You’ve been amazingly patient. I’ve been blind to what was really happening. I thought she was just chafing under the lack of personal space in the house at the moment and the shock that her old man had a new love interest. She has to learn that life is change, and that each of us has his own life to live. She’ll get over it in time, I’m sure. Maybe we’ve all been too patient?”

Dee shrugged noncommittally. A few hours later, however, Eddy convinced himself he was wrong.

Maggie stayed out of the house nearly all night, slipping back in just after Four a.m. and then only staying in her room for two hours before rushing off to work where she apparently stayed until nearly midnight. This turned out to be her pattern for the next two weeks; leaving early, coming home late and barely talking to anyone while in the house.

“This is typical Mom,” Amy admitted to Tanise and Ina one afternoon. “She always sinks herself into her work when she’s feeling stressed. Before she got laid off I barely saw her for two weeks because the rumors of cut-backs were already flying. Before that there were other times when I’d have to take care of myself for a week or so at a time, especially while she and Dad were separated.”

However another week later, Amy grew concerned when Maggie continued to withdraw from the rest of the household. “This isn’t like her,” she explained to Ash, Dee, and Jael. “Staying out at work is, yes, but she never changes tactics. She should still be yelling at the lot of you. Instead she’s barely answering questions and she never initiates a conversation. That’s all wrong. Normally when she gets all stressed she takes out a few minutes here and there to force me into quality time. That’s never comfortable, trust me, but at least it shows she cares. Now it’s like she’s an entirely different person.”

Jael decided to confront Maggie at her next opportunity, some two and a half weeks after Maggie had first stormed out of the house. “Maggie, you may be angry at us, but you’re taking it out on your daughter,” Jael tried gently with internal prompting from Rona.

“A fat lot you care, you little strumpet!” Maggie snapped at her.

“Strumpet?” Jael echoed. “Who even uses that word anymore?”

“Shut up, slut!” Maggie screamed. A strange transformation seemed to come over her. Blood rushed to her face, darkening her complexion and she bent her hands into claw-like shapes, as though about to attack Jael.

“Hey! Calm down, girl,” Jael told her, backing away slightly.

“Get out!” Maggie shouted repeatedly. “Get out! Get out! Get out!”

Jael withdrew that time and after the encounter, Maggie didn’t exhibit any further signs of incipient violence, although she remained hostile and withdrawn.

“There’s something very wrong, Eddy” Jael told him near the beginning of the second week of February. She, along with Dee, Ina and Asherah finally decided they had to talk to Eddy about his daughter. “It’s been four weeks since she started withdrawing. It’s not healthy for her to be like this.”

“It’s been a bit long,” Eddy agreed, “but I think we need to give her a bit more time. She’s been through a lot. The divorce was especially rough, Amy tells me, and even though it was her choice, so was the move back here. She’s had a lot happening to her this year.”

“Haven’t we all?” Ina replied. “Eddy, even Amy has noticed, or maybe I should say especially Amy. She knows Maggie better than any of us and she says this has been going on far longer than ever before.”

“She’s been better this past week, hasn’t she?” Eddy asked.

“She hasn’t threatened to claw anyone’s eyes out, if that’s what you mean,” Jael told him.

“Then let’s give her a little more time, shall we?” Eddy suggested. “We have less than two months before the Tree transcends. Good thing it’s been quiet on that front lately.”

“I hate to sound like a B-grade movie,” Jael remarked, “but it’s been too quiet. There’s something happening out there only we haven’t the foggiest of what it might be.”

“We’ll have to wait and see on that count as well,” Dee told them all. However, as they learned just a few days later, it was already too late.

Twelve

“Granddad,” Amy told him exactly one week after Jael’s encounter with Maggie, “Mom’s not right. I think she’s seriously out of it or something. She’s sick; I just know it.” Tanise had come with her for moral support. Amy was fully aware that Eddy didn’t want to admit there could be anything wrong with his daughter.

It had been a quiet Saturday so far. Ina left around noontime for a trip to her cult in Little Rock and Dee had slipped out to consult with Enki on defensive strategy. She had been doing that with increasing frequency over the previous few days. At the moment only Jael and Asherah were on guard duty and Asherah had just slipped down the street to pickup some pizza.

“Now, now,” Eddy tried to comfort her. “Your Mom’s going to be just fine.”

“Not the way she is,” Amy protested. “Look I know her better than anyone. She isn’t acting normal. She might have at first, but she never stays like this for more than a week or two. Never!”

“Well, she has been acting oddly of late,” Eddy considered, “and all of you keep telling me the same thing. Maybe it’s time I started really listening.”

A blood-curdling scream filled the house just then. “What was that?” Amy asked fearfully.

“I don’t know. Stay here,” Eddy told her and rushed into the living room and then upstairs where something heavy crashed to the floor, shaking the entire house. The noise was coming from Maggie’s

bedroom and when Eddy arrived, Maggie was lying on the floor while Jael and a strange woman were deep in battle using hands, feet and claws.

The strange woman may or may not have been wearing clothing, but was garbed in wispy clouds of blackness. She was several inches taller than Jael with the same raven-colored hair although instead of being long and wavy, hers was tightly curled. She had eyes the color of flame, skin the shade of soot and horns half again as large as Jael's protruding through her temples.

"Who's that?" Amy asked, from just behind Eddy.

"I told you to stay in the greenhouse," Eddy told her.

"Eddy!" Jael screamed. "Get them out of here!" She made a warding gesture just as the other demoness breathed a tongue of greasy, smoky flames at her. The fire split in two before hitting her and passed, leaving her untouched, but the room filled with the stench of brimstone.

"You've learned the old arts, snippet?" the other demoness snarled disbelievingly.

"I'm just full of surprises, Lilith," Jael called back defiantly.

"Not for long," Lilith replied as an indistinct cloud of darkness bloomed forth to envelop Jael. There was a grunt of pain from within the black cloud, but they could see nothing within.

Tanise shrieked and dragged Amy away with her, but Eddy rushed in to help his daughter. Maggie was stirring on the floor and Eddy started helping her to her feet. Seeing Eddy as if for the first time, Lilith leaped at him with claws where her hands had been a moment earlier.

Jael's arm stuck out of the black cloud and grasped Lilith's ankle, pulling her up short. The cloud dissolved instantly and Jael pressed her advantage, slamming Lilith against the far wall. "Eddy! Get everyone out of the house! I'll hold this one off."

Maggie gasped a brief scream and was suddenly more alert as Eddy finally dragged her out of the room and down the stairs. They had just barely reached the ground floor when the front door crashed open to reveal the tall blonde *Valkyr* Skuld, sword in hand, closely followed along with several other women, of whom Eddy only recognized many-armed Kali, who until that moment had been counted among those who were defending the Tree.

"Back door," he muttered to Maggie and together they ran toward the back of the house.

Skuld yelled a battle cry and took off after them, but Amy grabbed a pot from the bench in the greenhouse and threw it directly into Skuld's face. She blocked the flying crockery with her sword, shattering it into a hundred pieces, many of which continued on their trajectory, temporarily blinding her.

Eddy directed them all out into the back yard, and tried to get them out the side gate, but Tanise ran instead directly to the Tree and then disappeared into its wide trunk. "What?" Amy asked, pointing at where she had last seen Tanise.

"Later!" Eddy told her and forced them through the side gate and into the front yard. There was a crash of glass above them and Jael came flying backwards out of the window and fell at their feet. She was tougher than she looked, however, and rolled a few feet and then got back to her feet.

“Everyone here?” she asked, “Good! Run for it!”

“Tanise is inside the Tree,” Eddy told her as they ran.

“Bright girl!” Jael commented. There was a flash of light and a loud noise behind them, and Jael turned to face it. Several women were coming out of Eddy’s front door. And then just as she thought she might have to face them alone, Asherah was at her side. From the next block, Eddy couldn’t tell what they were doing, but the two of them forced their enemies back into the house.

Then Eddy’s car rolled out of the driveway, seemingly of its own volition and came to rest a few feet from Eddy. “Get in,” he told Maggie and Amy. Maggie jumped into the front seat and Amy into the rear. A moment later Jael and Asherah ran up and got in on either side of Amy.

“Well that pretty much bungs up my plans for the evening,” Jael commented through swollen lips. Then she paused to take a deep sniff and looked at Asherah. “You saved the pizza? How? Why?”

“We have a long journey,” Asherah explained, “and no time to stop for food. Besides, it is a sin to waste.”

“I ought to know that,” Jael commented. “You don’t have a cell phone, do you?”

“Until now I didn’t need one,” Asherah replied.

“I have mine,” Amy told them, reaching into her purse, “but you have to tell me what’s going on.”

“Girl Scout promise,” Jael told her.

“You were a Girl Scout?” Amy asked skeptically. “I’d have thought that would have bored a demon.”

“I prefer to be called a demoness,” Jael replied, “Just let me have the phone and I’ll tell all.” Amy held back a moment. “Geeze! You bargain harder than my boss!”

A moment later Rona materialized in Jael’s place and grabbed the phone out of Amy’s hand. “Who the hell are you?” Amy asked, startled.

“Your worst nightmare,” Rona told her smoothly and she started to punch the buttons.

“A social worker from Hell?” Amy asked.

Rona tapped her nose to signal that Amy had gotten it right on the first guess, then she snapped the phone shut and looked at the display. “No signal. I think it was damaged, by a stray bit of energy when you witnessed the fight.”

“Let me out, Rona,” Jael’s voice came from the blonde’s lips.

“You’re in too much pain,” Rona denied.

“I can handle it,” Jael insisted. “Besides, I’m the only one who knows where we’re going.” A moment later Jael was back and the street lights suddenly turned bright green and the road slanted upward into the sky.

“What happened back there?” Asherah asked. “I was just getting dinner, remember?”

“Maggie was possessed,” Jael reported, “by Lilith, one of the four queens of Hell.”

“Mom!” Amy gasped. “Mom?”

“She’s sleeping or passed out,” Eddy replied as he drove on.

Jale reached forward to examine Maggie. “Asleep. Possession takes a lot out of the victim. I suspect Lilith’s been behind a lot of our troubles since last summer, maybe before. You missed the best part of the gloating.”

“I can imagine. I’ve run into that one before,” Asherah replied sourly. “and her allies?”

“I recognized Skuld and Kali,” Eddy supplied.

“I wondered what happened to Skuld,” Jael commented. “Sure wish she’d stayed underground.”

“Kali?” Asherah asked. “I thought she was on our side.”

“Evidently not,” Jael replied. “I also picked out Morrigan and Skatha. I’m sure the others were of a similar ilk; warriors and destroyers.”

“And now they have the Tree?” Asherah asked. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“They won’t hurt the Tree,” Jael told her. “Not yet anyway. They have too much to gain by being in control at the moment of transcendence. The problem will be in figuring out how to keep them from killing the tree when we try to take her back.”

“You promised to tell me what was going on,” Amy reminded her.

“And you believed the word of a demoness?” Jael countered.

“Jael!” both Rona and Asherah admonished her.

“Oh, I’m just having fun,” Jael told them. “Might be the last time for quite a while. Amy, you’ve figured out part of it. You know I’m a demoness.”

“Two demonesses it looked like to me,” Amy replied.

“No, Rona is as human as you and Eddy are,” Jael told her. “The difference is, she’s dead.”

“I beg your pardon!” Rona objected, partially replacing Jael.

“I can’t pardon you,” Jael replied instantly. “You’ll have to speak to a priest. Well, she died, but I sort of joined with her soul before she could be consigned to either Heaven or Hell. It’s a long story, but we’ve been sharing life ever since.”

“That explains what Tanise meant when she said Marcus had two wives,” Amy reflected. “Tanise! She disappeared! What happened to her.”

“Relax,” Jael told her, “and have a slice of pizza. Tanise isn’t human and she’s safer than we are for the moment.”

“She’s a demoness too?” Amy asked.

“By the deepest Pit!” Jael laughed. “No! She’s a dryad, a wood nymph. She took refuge inside her tree.”

“A dryad?” Amy asked, “But I thought they were all bubble-headed bimbos.”

“They never had a good publicist, I fear,” Jael replied. “In general they are gentle souls and sometimes a bit flighty, but Tanise is very special. She’s smart and brave. It was very courageous of her to hide inside the Tree when Lilith and Skuld might have decided to chop it down. Of course she would have been killed in the process anyway, but as it stands she can take them with her if they try. She’s our hole card in this deal and I suspect they don’t really know she’s there.”

“She can do one other thing to help us,” Asherah added. “As long as she is inside the tree she can stop anyone from entering the yard from the back way in.”

“What back way in?” Amy asked. Jael quickly explained about the new World Tree, also explaining that Dee was really Mother Nature, known by a host of other names, and also explained just who Ina was as well.”

“And you?” Amy asked Ash.

“My name is Asherah,” Asherah replied. “I was the mother goddess of the Canaanites and the Israelites.”

“The ancient Jews had a goddess?” Amy asked, sparking yet another explanation.

Just then a terrible shriek could be heard outside the car. Amy looked out the window beyond Asherah and saw a large dragon with scales that looked like they had been made of stainless steel. There was smoke coming out of its mouth, but before Amy could discover whether there really was fire where there was smoke, Asherah rolled down her window and made a gesture with her right hand. A moment later the dragon smacked noisily into an invisible wall and fell to the ground. The sky turned bright violet and the road disappeared so that the car seemed to be driving on thin air delineated only by the white and yellow lines on either side of their path. Having been through this sort of thing before, Eddy continued to drive the car.

Jael and Asherah continued answering all of Amy’s questions. Finally, once Amy’s curiosity was satisfied for the time being, Jael told Eddy, “Don’t panic. We’re about to enter traffic again.” A moment later they were on a long straight four-lane highway surrounded by office buildings, shopping centers and housing developments.

“Where are we?” Eddy asked.

“South Carolina,” Jael responded, “near Charleston . Take your next left at the traffic light and then left again into the parking lot there. You’ll see the sign for Springtime Seed Company.”

“You actually have real offices?” Eddy asked.

“Of course,” Jael replied. “We knew from the start we would need a base of operations on the Mortal plane and when we decided how we were going to contact you, we decided the best way to go about it was to actually found a corporation to front for us. Didn’t Enki tell you that?”

“He did,” Eddy admitted, as he pulled into a parking spot in front of the tan building with a large white and green sign that said “Springtime Seed Company.” “I guess I just thought it was a paper corporation working out of a mailbox.”

“We could have, I suppose,” Jael admitted, “but even gods need to be somewhere and while most of the original crew were either ancient Mesopotamian gods or had analogues among that pantheon, not all of us did. I certainly did not. Also strange as this might sound, but commuting from Hell every day can get to be a bit of a drag. The trip to and from Dilmun is much longer.”

“Where’s Dilmun?” Amy asked.

“It’s the Sumerian version of Heaven,” Jael replied.

“How long is my Mom going to sleep?” Amy asked next.

“Hmm, let’s help her inside, we have a few cots and she’ll be able to sleep this off,” Rona replied. “Yes, Jael, I hear you complaining, but I also feel your pain, I’ll let you out when Oriel gets here. I promise. Let’s go, folks.”

Maggie woke up immediately, but was amazingly incurious about her location. Amy suspected someone was keeping her tranquilized. Together they all walked through the glass front door of the seed company and at the end of a small lobby encountered Nin-ti sitting behind a desk.

Nin-ti wasted no time and even before they had crossed the lobby, made a quick call to Enki over the office phone system. “Call Oriel too, please,” Rona asked her. “Jael needs her stat!”

Thirteen

“It’s not that bad,” Jael insisted, breaking through once again.

Nin-ti gasped. “Are you certain? You ought to take a look in a mirror.”

“I’m fine so long as I don’t have to think about it,” Jael maintained.

“Don’t believe her,” Rona pushed herself to the front once again. “She’s bleeding internally, has two broken ribs and bruises over most of her body.”

“I’ll call Oriel immediately,” Nin-ti replied, “but I can handle the ribs myself, remember.”

“So you can,” Rona nodded.

“Just keep her from manifesting,” Nin-ti told her.

“Hey!” Jael complained.

“Jael,” Nin-ti told her sternly, “I love you like a sister, but you are one of the worst patients I have ever encountered. Now stop trying to hurt yourself.”

“What’s happened?” Enki asked worriedly as he rushed into the lobby. They brought both him and Nin-ti up to date as they helped Maggie onto one of the cots in the “office cubicles” behind the lobby.

“I also let Inanna and Ninhursag know what’s happened,” Nin-ti reported, “so they won’t go walking into a trap. Ninhursag will be here in a few minutes.”

“I thought she was here,” Asherah commented as Nin-ti escorted Rona into another of the cubicles and Enki led the rest of them to the building’s elevator.

“She was,” Enki nodded, pushing the button for the second floor, “but she left a few minutes before you arrived. Have you eaten? I can call something in.”

“We had pizza in the car,” Amy told him. The elevator door opened on the second floor. “I could use some pop, though. Or tea if you don’t have any.” There was a large conference table in the room.

“You name it, we have it, Amy,” Enki told her.

“Cool. Is Tanise really safe?”

“As safe as she’s likely to be for the time being,” Enki replied. “We’ll try to contact her on Yggdrasil if she can get there.”

“Yggdrasil?” Amy asked.

“The great World Tree from whose branches hangs the universe,” Dee explained, materializing in the room just then. “Odin and his brothers slew the giant Ymir and the tree sprouted from his body which became the Earth. Just one of many creation myths. Aren’t kids taught ancient mythology in grade school anymore?”

“Blame the Christian Fundamentalists,” Amy replied. “When I was in the third or fourth grade, there was a big stink about that. They complained that if students couldn’t be taught about Jesus in public schools, then they shouldn’t learn about false gods either...” “She looked around at the people surrounding her and realized what she had just said. “Uh, sorry about that. Their words, not mine.”

“Hey, being a false god, isn’t so bad,” Enki laughed. “At least I can go to a public restaurant without turning the bread into fish or the water into wine, though that last trick might have come in handy at times. Of course, I invented beer, you know.”

“You did?” Amy asked.

“I was the god of inventors,” Enki explained. “I had a reputation to maintain, and it was something to do with surplus grain.”

“Well I do remember some of the ancient stories from before the school was forced to take them from the curriculum,” Amy recalled. “Mostly about how Apollo seemed to make a habit of seducing nymphs for lack of anything better to do, or how Zeus killed his father and slept with all his sisters.”

“Whether they wanted to or not,” Dee remarked darkly. “They really taught those myths in public

school?"

"Well, not in quite those words," Amy admitted, "but we figured it out. Kids are a lot smarter than adults give us credit for. Gee, now that I think of it, most of those stories came down to illicit sex, didn't they? Orion the hunter attempted to rape Artemis. Narcissus fell in love with himself. We already covered Zeus and Apollo."

"And don't get Ina started on Hephaestus," Eddy warned her.

"Is she really Aphrodite?" Amy asked.

"And many more besides," Dee told her. "These days she seems more comfortable when closer to her older aspects as Ishtar or Inanna. But they didn't teach you any of the Norse mythology?"

"Let's see," Amy closed her eyes to concentrate. "I remember a story in which Thor and Loki visited the giants and were tricked into contests in which they had to try to lift the entire earth, drink the oceans dry, race the wind and so forth. And comic books seem to delight in retelling the Ragnarok myth. But I don't recall hearing about any big trees."

"Ratty would be crushed," Eddy laughed.

"Who?" Amy asked.

"You know about the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden?" Dee brought her back to the subject.

"Well, sure," Amy shrugged. "We covered all that in Sunday School."

"It's the same Tree," Dee told her.

"What? Can't be."

"Why not?" Dee asked. "Beings and even objects on the Divine Plane can have many different aspects. So just as I am Ninhursag, Gaia, Demeter. Mother Nature and lot of other goddesses you probably haven't heard of, the World Tree has many aspects as well. It is Yggdrassil of the ancient Norse religion, the Tree of Life in Judeo-Christian-Islamic scripture, and the holy ficus mentioned in Hindu mythology. It is the Bo tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment and much more besides. Is any of this starting to sink in?"

"I'm not stupid, you know," Amy shot back defiantly, "just uneducated, evidently. So now what do we do?"

"Planning is going to be essential," Enki remarked, "and intelligence will be the key to planning. 'I'm calling in Ratatosk for a report and I know Zeus and Odin are going to want to know what's happened as are all our other allies.'"

"Is it safe for us to meet all in one place?" Dee wondered.

"That depends on where we meet," Enki replied. "This building should be safe enough. Our enemies have had plenty of opportunities to attack here, but haven't."

“There hasn’t been much reason to,” Dee argued, “not once Eddy had the seed. However, nearly everyone knows where this place is, so we can’t meet here.”

“There’s always Dilmun,” Nin-ti suggested as she came out of the elevator.

“I thought that was too far away,” Amy commented.

“For a daily commute, yes,” Dee replied, “but for a grand strategy session, it’s as secure a place as we’re likely to find. Odin will argue for Valhalla, of course and Zeus will want Olympus.”

“Osiris would want us in Egypt and Vishnu will invite us to Vaikuntha,” Enki remarked. “I hope we won’t have to visit that last. That big bird of his, Garuda, I think, took a distinct dislike to me the last time I was there. Most of those sites are as secluded and secure as Dilmun if we want them to be. I’ll throw the ball to Enlil and let him fight it out with the others. Nin-ti, how is Jael?”

“Full of, uh, vinegar,” Nin-ti replied. “Rona understated her injuries, There were four broken ribs, not two and her back, there is a cracked vertebra and two compressed disks. I honestly don’t know how she managed to move under her own power. I healed the ribs and started in on the back injuries, then Oriel arrived. She’ll have Jael fully healthy in no time.”

“That’s good,” Enki replied. “I was half afraid she might have suffered a permanent injury.”

“In almost anyone else, those injuries may have been permanent,” Nin-ti pointed out. “I don’t think I could have endured them.”

“Jael is tough,” Asherah commented. “She has impressed me many times since I returned. She’s wasted as middle management in Hell.”

“She’s turned down promotions several times,” Dee told her. “Eddy, you really ought to get whatever rest you can. Amy, that means you too. I’m going to go talk to Oriel and have her take a look at Maggie. I think she’s physically just fine, but she must have been possessed for the last few weeks. That can leave the sorts of scars that don’t show.”

“She seems very quiet,” Amy told her. “It’s not like Mom at all.”

“I’ve been keeping her tranquil,” Asherah told her. “She has been through quite a lot and unlike you, I don’t think she could really deal with the fact of who we all are.”

“She’s going to have to, isn’t she?” Amy asked.

“There’s no need for her to know everything,” Asherah replied. “We can modify her memory.”

“There are springs of Lethe,” Dee added, “outpourings from the River of Oblivion. Carefully administered, we will arrange that she forgets being possessed, and the trip here as well. I don’t imagine she’ll like any of us even after all that, but I guess you can’t be loved by everyone.”

“What about her job?” Amy asked.

“We’ll find a way to cover for her until this is over,” Enki assured her. “We can enchant a Nereid to look just like her.”

“A Nereid?” Amy asked.

“What are they teaching you in school these days?” Enki countered disbelievingly.

“We’ve already covered that,” Asherah told her. “A Nereid is a nymph of the sea, a daughter of Nereus. It is a good idea. A Nereid will know more about the sea than practically anyone else. Who else should fill in for an oceanographer?”

Eddy and Amy tried to get some sleep on guest cots downstairs, but Amy despaired of ever falling asleep although she realized she must have since it was dark outside a few objective minutes after she lay down. She heard soft snoring coming from the next cubicle where Eddy was and she got up and poked her head in through the open door and saw him sleeping soundly. Her mother was in the next cell beyond that and she, too, was sound asleep. Jael, however, was not where she had been when Amy went to bed.

Amy wandered over to the glass front doors and looked outside at the palmettos that had been planted in several places around the parking lot in order to pass for landscaping. She stared at what, in her limited experience, were strange-looking trees, longing to make them seem more real, by running outside to touch them. Being able to feel their bark under her hand would do the trick. However, when she tried to open the door, she discovered it was firmly locked and there was no way to open it without a key.

Unwilling to go back to sleep, she took the elevator upstairs to see what everyone else was up to and to see how Jael was. What she did not expect to see was a giant squirrel who sounded like the fourth and former member of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

“I keep telling ya,” the squirrel was saying. “No one has so much as approached the backdoor, never mind tried to break through our guards there. You can go talk to Marduk and Thor for yourselves.”

“Don’t worry, Ratatosk, we will,” Enki replied seriously.

“Hey who’s the new babe?” Ratatosk asked, spotting Amy still in the elevator.

“This is Amy Terrula, Eddy’s granddaughter,” Dee introduced, “so watch your tongue, rodent.”

“It’s not long enough to do that comfortably, Nature Babe!” Ratatosk snapped back at her. He turned to face Amy, “Hey, Toots,” come on in and join the party.”

“Party?” Amy echoed, finally entering the room. “Oh yeah, I saw you at the New Year’s party, didn’t I?”

“Could be,” Ratatosk replied cautiously, turning nervously toward the others.

“Yeah, I saw Dee serving you some of the ostrich,” Amy told him. “I thought I was seeing things that night and I kept overhearing all sorts of impossible stuff. I guess they weren’t so impossible after all, were they?”

“Depends on what you heard and saw,” Enki replied, “but you’re probably right there.”

“Given your outspokenness, I’m surprised you didn’t just start asking,” Ina remarked.

“Tanise kept convincing me I hadn’t really seen or heard anything strange,” Amy admitted. “She’s a

clever one, isn't she?"

"We're very proud of her," Dee remarked. "You too, actually."

"Jael," Amy greeted the demoness. She was seated with the rest of the gods and doing nothing to disguise her true nature. "You're looking much better. The horns suit you."

"I still have a few bruises where they don't show," Jael admitted, "but I'll be better within the day. Enki, when we go back to the house, I want you to leave Lilith to me."

"I can't promise you that, Jael," Enki told her. "Lilith is far too powerful for you to take alone. None of use can afford to lose you on any number of levels. I will promise you one thing, however. You can be in charge of the contingent that attacks Lilith directly."

"Aww!" Jael replied, comically batting her eyes at the ancient water god, "You're so good to a poor little demon from the wrong side of the tracks."

"Is there really a wrong side of the tracks, uh... a low rent district of sorts, in Hell?" Amy asked curiously.

"Ask some folks and they'll tell you all demons are from the wrong side of the tracks," Jael laughed.

"Anyway," Ratatosk continued, "as far as Marduk knows no one else even knows the back way is there."

"That can't be true," Amy told him. "Gangs-dkar-sha-med and Cailleach knew about it. That's how they got into my Granddad's backyard."

"Nah," Ratatosk shook his furry head, "Can't be, babe. They must have sneaked in over the fence like the Asuras did last spring."

"That fence is armed now," Enki told him. "I don't think even Ninhursag could get in without causing major damage both to the fence and herself. How did you know about that, Amy?"

"Tanise told me a couple days ago," Amy admitted. "I thought she was making it up. We were trying to tell each other scary stories, but now it all sort of fits. At the time I was amazed at her imagination, but now I guess she really isn't all that imaginative, is she?"

"To date Tanise has shown herself to be very intelligent and resourceful," Ina commented, "but when it comes to imagination, she's rather literal-minded, but remember, she's only a few months old. I've always said imagination might be a potential, but it takes experience to bring it out. She still hasn't much experience."

"Well, she's getting it by the truckload at the moment," Amy pointed out. "Oh my God! She's really stuck in that tree, isn't she? If she comes out, they'll get her."

"Stuck isn't quite the right word," Enki replied thoughtfully. "Forted up might be a closer approximation of her situation."

"But if they damage the tree, won't it hurt her?" Amy asked.

“That’s true,” Enki replied, “but she would be hurt regardless of whether she was in physical contact with the Tree. Right now, I’m very glad she is inside the Tree. That means we have a spy, but we need someone who can reach her without being seen.” He thought about that for a moment and then began to grin.

Another moment later, Ratatosk realized Enki was grinning at him. “I don’t like that look in your eyes, Wet One,” the squirrel told him nervously.

“Nonsense, you’re the perfect courier to go between here and there,” Dee noted.

“Oh yeah,” Ratatosk replied, shaking his head, “like that lot won’t notice a hundred pound squirrel scampering among the branches of the Tree.”

“We can fix that,” Ina told him. “It’s a simple bit of magic.”

“What the heck are you talking about?” Ratatosk asked, showing more fear than any of them had ever seen in him in the past.

“Don’t worry,” Enki assured him. “It won’t hurt a bit.”

“What won’t hurt?”

“Normally, I would just put a glamour on you so you would look normal-sized,” Enki explained, “but Lilith is likely to be able to see through any such glamour.”

“She’s a master of that sort of thing,” Jael admitted grudgingly. “She’d see through it in a nanosec.”

“Possibly,” Enki nodded, “although I am very good at them if I do have to say so myself. This time, however, we need a true transformation.”

“Whoa there, Waterboy!” Ratatosk stopped him. “Don’t go getting any fancy ideas!”

“Don’t worry, Ratty,” Enki laughed, “I’m just going to shrink you a bit.” The elevator door opened again at that moment and Eddy stepped into the room.

“Why not just turn someone else into a squirrel?” Ratatosk demanded. “Hey Eddy, how about a hand here? I’m being out numbered and bullied to boot!”

“None of us are squirrels by any sort of nature,” Enki explained, waving Eddy off. “Only you can move around that way naturally and without attracting attention.”

“He’ll need to be black too,” Eddy commented.

“What!” Ratatosk shouted. “You’re going to change the color of my fur? Are you mad?”

“What’s the matter, Ratty” Amy asked. “Are you prejudiced?”

“Of course not,” Ratatosk denied, “but a squirrel’s fur color is very important. It’s part of my identity. Why black, anyway?”

“Most of the squirrels in my part of town have black fur these days,” Eddy explained. “It started about

twenty-five years ago or so when one or two suddenly appeared in the next town over, and, well, they spread. Most folks think they hitched a ride from somewhere else on a truck or a moving van. They're thickest on the ground in Hattamesett, it seems, but they've been found all over Plymouth County and even part-way onto Cape Cod. They probably got transported in from Westfield or thereabouts, where they're even more common, although nobody knows that for certain. They must be a fairly aggressive breed, though. They're starting to spread to other parts of New England as well."

"Evolution in action," Dee remarked knowledgeably.

"Evolution?" Ina questioned. "Why would black fur be an advantage? Wouldn't it make the animal easier to spot by a predator?"

"Whoever said evolution was an intelligent process?" Dee countered.

"That school board in Kansas for one," Ina pointed out.

"Are you saying they know more than I do on the subject?" Dee asked archly, her hair turning back to its natural green shade.

"No. I wouldn't dare," Ina replied with a chuckle.

"As it happens, the black squirrels in Hattamesett really are a bit more aggressive than the common Eastern Grays that are indigenous to the region," Dee explained. "So they're crowding them out."

"Considering how aggressive squirrels tend to be in the first place, that must really be something," Eddy remarked.

"A little bit goes a long way in evolutionary terms," Dee told him. "And interbreeding helps as well. I haven't looked into it, but the gene that determines the black fur color must be dominant."

"Then why aren't all squirrels that color?" Amy asked.

"Just because a gene is dominant, doesn't mean it is common, not across a world-wide population," Dee told her. "If the original population of black squirrels, wherever it was, was isolated from the others originally, they wouldn't have spread. But now they've found new habitats and are spreading quite nicely, thank you. I'm sure they'll reach a natural limit eventually."

"But what if they replace the gray squirrels?" Amy asked. "Wouldn't that make the grays an endangered species?"

"If they interbreed," Dee explained, "then they are the same species, just different populations. Grays could eventually become rare in some places, but since they both fill the same ecological niche you won't see any natural imbalance because of it."

"As fun as this science lesson is," Ratatosk spoke up, "there is no way you are going to turn me into a puny black squirrel."

Dee rounded on Ratatosk, "Oh yes, I am. And you're going to go along with it partially because it's the right thing to do, but mostly because I'm not giving you a choice."

"Yeah?" Ratatosk blustered. "We'll see how you like it when I eat all the seed out of your birdfeeder!"

Fourteen

“The poor kid is nearly frightened beyond reason,” Ratatosk reported on his return to the branches of Yggdrasil. “She was actually happy to see me.” Rather than stay in South Carolina, they had decided to get Ratatosk’s report on the World Tree itself since it would be on the way to where the chief gods had decided to meet to plan strategy.

Eddy was amazed at how easily Amy had adapted to the divine plane. He had trouble accepting the notion of walking along the wide branches of an impossibly large tree from which he could summon any sort of fruit or nut that grew on a tree. For Amy it was just something that was, and while she was fascinated by the remarkability of it all, she did not seem to spend any time with phrases like “that’s impossible,” and “gotta be dreaming!”

“It would happen more often if you were a little nicer,” Amy told him.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Ratatosk replied, annoyed.

“So what’s happening down there?” Enki asked.

“Other than having a very scared dryad camped out inside a sleeping tree?” Ratatosk asked. “Well, Lilith wasted no time making herself at home. You already know she had her brute squad replace the guards you had patrolling the streets of Hattamesett.”

“Yes, Hercules and Gilgamesh are still recovering and we lost three others for the cycle,” Enki replied. “Too bad she took that leaf from our book. We could have just besieged the place and waited her out.”

“Don’t underestimate Lilith,” Jael warned him. “She’s as smart as she is treacherous. By now she’s probably spotted any holes we had in our defenses and plugged them up.”

“Except for the back way in,” Enki replied.

“No,” Ratatosk told him, “but that’s only because Tanise is blocking it for her.”

“Lilith probably doesn’t know that,” Jael argued. “If the path seems closed, she’ll assume it closed up on its own. That’s probably why no one tried to run Marduk’s blockade. They avoided it on the initial assault and when they tried it later, it didn’t seem to be there. It gives us a secret way back once we have a plan.”

“Could be, toots,” Ratatosk told her. “Anyway according to Tanise, Lilith is definitely the head honcho there, or is that head honcha? Skuld is her right hand and doing most of the order giving, but there are at least a dozen others there at any given moment, most of them are female. Don’t know if that means anything, but they’re some of the scariest women I’ve ever encountered. No wonder the kid is frightened.”

“Would it be possible for me to talk to her?” Amy asked. “You can turn me into a squirrel if you have to.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dee replied. “She can come here and could have at any time.”

“Doesn’t she have to be in the Tree to block the way here?” Amy asked.

“She does,” Dee confirmed, “but a brief visit won’t hurt and it might go a long way to calm her a little. Ratty...”

“No!” Ratatosk told her. “I won’t do it!”

“It can’t have been all that bad,” Ina remarked. “It’s all a matter of scale.”

“The worst part was the other dryads laughing at me,” Ratatosk replied.

“What other dryads?” Dee asked.

“Nina and Mina,” Ratatosk replied. “They’re camped out with Marduk and Thor.”

“It’s winter,” Dee remarked. “They ought to be sleeping.”

“Maybe nobody ever explained that to them,” retorted Ratatosk. “Why don’t you ask them about it yourself.”

“I will,” Dee replied.

They hurried up the branch to the trunk of the Tree and then started heading down and around to the far side. Eddy, having been there before, had learned to visualize the trunk as a long highway with many exits so apart from a momentary disorientation as the trunk seemed to twist around from vertical to horizontal, he proceeded right along. When he looked over at Amy, however, she seemed to be having trouble keeping her balance, walking with her arms spread wide as though on a tightrope.

“It helps if you think of the trunk as down,” he suggested.

She stopped moving for a moment and suddenly smiled widely and was able to walk normally from then on. “How does it do that?” she asked him.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, “but I think this place is as much a state of mind as it is a physical location. That’s why you can see it as a sort of road.”

“A road?” Amy asked. “It still looks like a tree to me, just on its side.”

“Whatever works for you,” Eddy told her.

“Will Mom be okay back in South Carolina?” Amy asked.

“Asherah’s staying with her,” Eddy reminded his granddaughter. “With a bit of luck when she wakes up she won’t know any of this happened, but will feel more well-rested than ever before.”

“Why am I here?” Amy asked after a few minutes of thought. “Shouldn’t I have been left behind too?”

“That would have been my choice,” Eddy admitted, “but I’ve come to realize our friends here sometimes know things without even realizing they know them.”

“It’s called intuition, Eddy,” Jael remarked, “and maybe the others have it, but I’ve never experienced the female sort of that beast. Amy, you’re here because you chose to be. Besides, how could any thinking person refuse to visit the divine plane given the opportunity? This place is the tourist attraction to end them all! All it’s missing are the tourists, which is probably a good thing. Imagine this place with thousands of cameras clicking and flashing every moment.

“Imagine this place with Ratty manning the souvenir shop,” Amy laughed.

“I heard that!” Ratatosk shouted from well ahead.

They hurried down the trunk of Yggdrasil for another fifteen minutes then started down one of the branches.

“Why aren’t there any leaves on this tree?” Amy asked as the trunk faded from view in the distance.

“What did you expect?” Ratatosk asked sarcastically. “It’s the middle of February and we’re near the Arctic Circle. Be thankful it’s still daylight, or are you playing tricks with the sun again?” he asked Dee harshly.

“That was a special occasion,” Dee told the squirrel. “I do not make a habit of playing with diurnal cycles.”

“Yeah,” Enki agreed. “That’s my job.”

“Gods!” Ratatosk grumbled, “Can’t live with them, and they won’t stay dead no matter how many times you kill them.”

A short time later, after several branches diverged along their path, they finally reached the location of the back way into Eddy’s yard from Yggdrasil. If it had not been for the hero gods, Thor and Marduk, standing and the nymph sisters, Mina and Nina, sitting on the edge of the wide branch, Amy thought she would have just walked on by and never noticed anything special about the spot, save that it was on the largest tree in Creation, just like every other point on the Tree. The only difference was a slight knob in the bark toward the side of the branch.

Dee sat down beside Mina and looked at the two of them. “Why are you two awake this winter?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Mina told her. “Maybe it’s global warming?”

“Interesting excuse,” Dee replied. “Everyone else seems to be using it these days. I wouldn’t have thought you had a lot of choice as to whether to sleep with your trees.”

“It was hard to stay awake at first,” Nina admitted, “but after our trees became fully dormant we were much better.”

“What ever possessed you to try?” Dee asked.

“The new Tree,” Mina told her. “We thought we might be needed.”

“I wish I had known earlier,” Dee admitted. “Never mind that for now though. I wouldn’t have transformed Ratatosk had I known you two were awake.”

“Aww,” Nina cooed, “but he was so cute!”

“I suppose,” Dee shrugged, “He was still a bit mouthy for my tastes. This isn’t some form of sleep walking, is it?”

“Sleep walking?” Mina asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dee told her. “Would one of you go down and ask Tanise to come here for a few minutes?”

“Can we do that?” Nina asked.

“In a way only you can,” Dee assured her. “The rest of us would have to materialize visibly in the yard. That’s why we sent Ratatosk looking like one of the local squirrels. We didn’t want Lilith and her allies to know he was there. You, however, can materialize inside the Tree and talk to Tanise without being seen.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Mina told her and promptly disappeared. A few minutes later she reappeared with Tanise.

“Tanise!” Amy shouted joyfully. They hugged for a long time before Dee finally broke them up.

“We can’t keep you here for long,” Dee remarked. “Only you can keep our enemies from using this way into the divine plane.”

“I know,” Tanise replied, “but it is nice to see you all.”

“Everyone is fine,” Dee told her, “but we wanted to know how you were.”

“I’m...” she began, “I was going to say fine, but...”

“You’re not fine,” Eddy joined them, taking Tanise into a comforting embrace. She began to sob. “You’re scared out of your wits, aren’t you?”

“Mm hmm,” Tanise mumbled affirmatively into his shoulder,

“That’s natural,” Eddy assured her. “I would be too in your position. I’m not sure I would have been brave enough to stay in the Tree though.”

“That wasn’t bravery,” Tanise denied. “The Tree is my private refuge. He’s my one safe place.” Then she started crying again, “But he isn’t safe anymore!”

“Oh, you’re safe for the time being,” Eddy told her. “Lilith wants the power of the Tree too badly to harm you now.”

“I won’t let her have him!” Tanise told him defiantly. “He’s not hers! He’s for you!”

“We don’t want her to have him either and we’re working toward getting him back, that’s why we need you there watching everything they do,” Ina joined in.

“Or at least as much as you can see from the back yard,” Jael added.

“I can see into most of the house,” Tanise admitted, “so long as the window shades are open in all the back windows, which they are.”

“They are?” Eddy asked. “We didn’t leave them that way.”

“I think they opened them all to be able to keep an eye on the Tree and the backyard from as many angles as possible,” Tanise opined. “They know there used to be a passage into the yard even if they don’t know why it doesn’t seem to be there any more.”

“Can any dryad do that?” Eddy asked Dee. “It would give Tanise a little time to recuperate and maybe relax a bit.”

“I can’t relax as long as that... that hag possesses my Tree,” Tanise told him.

“Hag?” Jael laughed, “Well she is old enough, but I doubt she would admit to the title. She’s rather vain.”

“Along with being greedy, arrogant and selfish,” Ina added. “Does it show that we’ve met?”

“I’d have never guessed,” Enki chuckled.

“She’s every bad thing I’ve ever been accused of,” Ina admitted. “I wonder if she’s a distant aspect, not that I would ever merge with her.”

“If you look at it in the right way, at least half the female deities are distant aspects of yours,” Dee reminded her.

“The other half are yours,” Ina commented.

“There are exceptions, and we do have overlaps, but yes,” Dee agreed. “Eddy, Tanise is the only one who can keep the passage closed. It’s her Tree after all. Tanise, I’m going to have to ask you to go back and keep watching the house.”

“I’ll do it,” she replied bravely, and with only a slight tremor in her voice.

“You won’t be alone from now on,” Mina told her. “Nina and I will stay with you and keep you company. Besides, that will be two more pairs of eyes watching the house.”

“Good idea,” Dee commended her. “I’ll have Hermes or Isimud or one of the other messenger gods stationed here with Marduk and Thor, so whenever you have something to report, we’ll know about it.”

“Where are you going?” Tanise asked.

“We’re going to meet with our allies,” Dee replied, “in a place called Hawaiki. I’ve never been there myself so I can’t tell you much about it. Anyone?”

None of the others had visited Hawaiki before either, but Jael explained to Tanise, “It’s the home of the gods of Polynesia, I think, or one of them. From what I was able to learn it is an important part of the old religion of the Maori, and many if not all of the other people of Polynesia, although Polynesia is a very wide region. I think there must have been other names for it. Anyway, no one on the mortal plane really

knows where it is, although most agree it is contiguous to some part of the Pacific basin. Even we don't know exactly where it is, but we do have directions to follow. It's sort of like the old logs ship pilots used to follow; go here, turn north, at the third island turn east and so forth, although we'll be traveling Yggdrasil to get there instead. That cuts through some of the difficulties."

"For you maybe," Ratatosk countered. "I'm still not sure exactly which branch they meant in the fourth paragraph of the directions Odin sent me. I could swear we'll be walking in a circle for an hour or so at one point."

"Maybe we will," Dee told him. "The branches of Yggdrasil go everywhere, but sometimes we need to cover the same ground several times to get to some places. Think of it as a combination lock in which you spin the dial back and forth in a preset manner in order to open it."

"Too subtle for my tastes," Ratatosk told her.

"I know," she sighed.
Fifteen

"Welcome to Hawaiki, the island that can never be charted," a long-faced god with over-sized teeth and slanted eyes greeted them. "I am Maui, although many of us have already met across the diamond at Celestial League games, haven't we? Enki! Good to see you again." He held out his hand toward Enki, who grasped it in his own. A moment later both gods gasped in shock and were flung back from each other to land on the ground behind them.

"Two of them!" Dee observed.

"What just happened?" Amy asked, worried even as Enki and Maui sat and started laughing.

"They essentially just joy-buzzed each other," Jael commented. "That's what you get when you put two trickster gods together."

"Serves them right," Ina added with a stifled giggle.

Eddy and Amy looked around them. They stood on the golden sand of a wide beach near a forest of palms, thick with tropical underbrush. "Warm here," Amy remarked, taking her jacket off.

"We're on the other side of the world," Ina reminded her, also removing the warm woolen coat she had worn while on Yggdrasil. "To tell the truth, I've been dreaming of a place like this all winter."

"Me too," Jael confided.

"Why didn't you just go on your days off?" Amy asked.

"Too many other responsibilities," Ina told her. "Our most important one is guarding the Tree and we sure screwed that one up, didn't we?"

"You couldn't have known what was going to happen," Amy replied. "There hadn't been any trouble since I arrived."

“Then we should have been doubly on our guard,” Rona told her, making a brief appearance then allowing Jael to return.

“Rona’s right,” Ina admitted angrily although the anger was directed at herself. “Dee and I should never have been out of the house at the same time. Dee had to consult with Enki and the others, but I did not have to be in Little Rock that day.”

“Don’t hurt yourself too badly on that account,” Eddy told her. “We all agreed that Jael and Asherah along with the security force on the streets would be sufficient to ward off an attack. Even Enki agreed.”

“It appears I have been wrong again,” Enki remarked. “I may have been the god of wisdom, but when I’m wrong I go all the way. A lot of the blame falls to me. I’m the one who divined the prophesy we’ve been guided by. It told us that the Tree was safe so long as it was in Eddy’s guardianship. We all assumed that meant so long as he was in the house, no one could take the tree from him, but it was even more literal than that. It was just an obvious statement of the truth. If he’s in possession then the tree will be unharmed. There was never anything about being able to hold onto the Tree merely by being there. It was just my faulty interpretation.”

“We all agreed with you,” Dee told him. “There’s enough blame to go around.”

Enki looked at her for a moment, then shook his head slightly, but finally replied, “Thank you, Ninmah.”

“What’s all this?” Maui demanded. “The Tree is not lost yet. So long as it stands safe there is hope. Besides, old boy,” he added to Enki “with the two of us working together who can stop us, eh? Lilith might be clever and devious, but so are we. Come on, let’s get you all settled in. The meeting you asked for will be starting soon.”

He led them into the forest of palms, heedless of the fact that there were no visible paths. A path just seemed to form just in front and then closed up behind them as they passed. A few minutes later, they reached the mouth of a large cave and Maui led the way inside.

“You live in a cave?” Enki asked, looking around at the rough basaltic walls.

“It’s expected of us,” Maui laughed. “Actually these are all spent lava tubes. Don’t worry, this one’s been extinct for years, although if you ever visit Pele in her home, make certain she’s in a good mood before you come to call.”

“I’ll bet,” Jael laughed.

“If it makes you feel any better, I also have beachfront property on Lana’i,” Maui continued.

“Not Maui?” Amy asked.

“I was trying to be subtle,” Maui admitted. “I have modern-style homes on Moorea and the North Island of New Zealand as well, and of course all the traditional haunts assigned to me. Still, there’s something to be said for running water. Well, here we are, I hope this suite will suit you,” he gestured toward an empty lava tube to the right.

Inside the tube there were various cavities and side tubes that were fitted with comfortable furniture and other amenities. There were vases filled with brilliant tropical flowers and for being deep inside an extinct volcano, Amy thought the air was amazingly fresh.

“Odds are they aired the place out for us,” Enki told her. “I know they did when we came for the ball games.”

“I thought you said you hadn’t been here before,” Amy remembered.

“Not here, not to this Hawaiki,” Enki replied.

“Okay, you’ve finally managed to give me brain sprain,” Amy admitted tartly.

“Well, Hawaiki is not just a single place,” Enki replied. “There’s Hawaiki nui – great Hawaiki, Hawaiki roa – extensive Hawaiki, Hawaiki pāmamao – far distant Hawaiki, Hawaiki tapu – sacred Hawaiki.”

“And which is this?” Amy asked.

“Hawaiki nui,” Dee replied. “Their baseball stadium was carved out of a caldera in Hawaiki pāmamao. Also you should realize this is a composite of the various aspects of Hawaiki nui.”

“Aspects?” Amy wondered.

“You already understand how gods tend to have various aspects,” Dee explained. “They’re fairly obvious when we use different names for them, so you know me as Mother Nature, but understand I’m also Demeter, Arruru and all the other names for me you’ve heard and more. Well, the places we live in on the divine plane have different aspects as well. The various Hawaikis have their aspects as seen by the Maori, the Tahitians, the Samoans and so forth. This is an odd amalgam of all those. We are using the Maori name for this realm, of course, but that is for our convenience. If we had time to explore or even to take the two dollar tour, we would, no doubt, learn to be able to discern the regional differences, but we’re hopefully not going to be here all that long.”

“I’m not sorry the members of this pantheon are on our side,” Amy began, “but why are they? I’d have expected them to be neutral. What’s the connection?”

“The connections are many and very deep, Amy,” Dee told her. “The *sacred fig* of India is also venerated in much of Polynesia and the symbolism of the palm tree is obvious. Remember what we’ve told you before. Yggdrasil is merely the name and aspect of the World Tree in Norse mythology. It is actually all trees including those held sacred in the Pacific basin. Also most of the gods here are just as ecologically concerned as we are. They were neutral when it first became known that the Tree had produced a viable seed, but it did not take them long to choose between sides.

“Not only that,” Dee continued, “but while most of our pantheons have those within them who would side with Chaos, all the heaviest hitters here are on the side of order this time around, regardless of where they have stood in the past. Even those who are often seen as destroyers, like Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of fire and volcanos, are in favor of bringing the new tree to term.”

“Why?” Amy asked.

“She hasn’t confided in me,” Dee admitted, “but you must remember that as destructive as a volcano can be, it is also very much a force of life. Pele has a temper, sure, and she’s been known to destroy anyone who angers her, but she also brings forth new land where life establishes itself quickly. She is both creator and destroyer. That is not unusual among gods and goddesses, you know. Look up my history sometime.”

The meeting was held in a large, open chamber deep in the heart of the mountain. All around them there was the sound of trickling water, which amazed both Eddy and Amy.

“Of course there’s water down here,” Jael whispered to them. “We’re underground. Even on a volcano water seeps into the ground. Actually this is one reason some volcanoes can explode so violently. The hot magma hits the water and turns it to steam and, well, you can imagine the rest, I’m sure. If not, try boiling the water in a kettle, but with all the holes plugged up sometime. Eventually the pressure within will get too great to be held by the kettle, or more likely whatever you used to plug it with, and boom!”

“That won’t happen here,” Amy replied uncertainly.

“Not any time soon,” Jael assured her. “First of all, this one really is extinct and also it’s a divine home. This volcano will only erupt if they allow it to.”

“We cannot afford to wait too long before taking back the Tree,” Odin declared near the beginning of the session.

“We have time to plan carefully, Lord Odin,” Enki replied. “Lilith holds the House and its grounds for the moment, but with Miss Tanise still on the premises we still hold the Tree.”

“That is not at all certain, Lord Enki,” Zeus commented. “That is only your interpretation. The situation is unprecedented. There has never been a World Tree with its own dryad before. We don’t really know what that means and the Infinites refuse to say.”

“The Infinites have Their own concerns, Lord Zeus,” Enki replied. “They know how this will play out but telling us would probably change the outcome. I, for one, am happy They not talking.”

“Why is that?” Zeus asked.

“I doubt They’d hesitate to comment if our failure was inevitable,” Enki replied. “That doesn’t mean our success is assured, but it does mean we still have a chance.”

“You’re reading too much into the actions of Those who are ineffable,” warned Yu-Huang-Shang-Ti, the Chinese Father of Heaven. “It could also mean that the interference by an Infinite could save the Tree and thereby doom our own universe.”

“I don’t see how,” Enki replied.

“Of course not,” Yu-Huang-Shang-Ti told him. “You are not omniscient. Still we are all dedicated to bringing the Tree to maturity and it makes no difference whether you are correct about the Infinites, we still have to act as we see fit.”

“Thank you,” Enki replied with a bow. “Now let’s review what has happened over the past year. You will recall it was just about a year ago that Mister Edward Salem received the Seed in the mail...” He went on to review everything that had happened since then and was still doing so, in fact, when Eddy and Amy were forced to leave the chamber and get some sleep.

“Don’t worry about missing anything,” Eddy told his granddaughter. “The same thing happened in Dilmun last summer. Now that was a world! From the top of Dee’s ziggurat you could actually see the edge of the world.”

“Really?” Amy asked. “It was a flat world? How does that work?”

“By magic, I suppose,” Eddy shrugged.

The debates in the council chamber raged on for the next several days. Everyone was agreed that the Tree had to be taken back from Lilith, but agreements dissolved beyond that point. Many of the gods present were in favor of a frontal assault similar to the direct action that allowed them to regain the Sapling from Loki and Iblis. Others pointed out, correctly, that they had been very lucky and might easily have lost the Tree and that it was possibly even more vulnerable now than it had been the summer before since now it could not be moved.

In order to help planning, Enki produced a scale model of Eddy’s house and the surrounding town. He populated it with model cars, human figurines and even scaled down animals that moved around the town, reflecting what was really happening there. It could also be set to show the results of various actions.

Jael, disgusted by all the wrangling, disappeared for three days and returned with reports that chilled the hearts of even the most hardened deities. “Lilith fully intends to own that Tree or take it with her,” she told the assembled gods. “According to Tanise and the other dryads, a ward has been placed around the base of the Tree.”

“What sort of ward?” Dee asked.

“She made eighteen amulets of blood and placed them around the trunk in three concentric circles,” Jael replied as though that should have said it all.

“Is that bad?” Odin asked.

Jael took a deep breath while Rona silently counseled her to patience. “I suppose it depends on how you feel about numerology, Lord Odin,” she told him. “In this case she’s casting a spell using three sixes, also called the number of the beast. It’s a value that carries a lot of power in Hell as it draws directly on the power of the Fallen Throne. Uh, that’s the throne of Hell, often confused with the former ranking in Heaven of some of Lucifer’s supporters. That’s the bad news. The good news is that while Lucifer was intent on remaining neutral in this conflict, Lilith has forced His hand. He’s not particularly happy about that and He still won’t take an active personal hand in the conflict, but He has recalled all demons back to Hell; anyone who doesn’t show up had better be very good at hiding for the next few cycles.”

“Is this your way of saying you’ll be leaving us, Jael?” Enki asked.

“No, I’m the exception that makes the rule,” Jael smiled. “You all are stuck with me for the duration. Lord Lucifer also gave me another bit of help that, no offense intended, I think it will be best to keep under my hat for a while longer. He does have one request though. If Lilith survives our tender ministrations, he intends to give her a few lessons in demonic precedence. Trust me, it won’t be pretty.”

“That couldn’t possibly have taken three days,” Maui observed. “What else have you been up to?”

“Scoping out the competition,” Jael replied smugly. “I’d have invited some of you along, but you seemed to be having such fun with the toy soldiers, I couldn’t bear to drag you away.”

Most of the gods scowled at her impertinence, but both Enki and Maui laughed. Dee just shook her head,

but Ina gave her a thumbs-up gesture. “All right, Jael,” Enki told her, still smiling broadly, “You’ve made your point. So aside from a powerful curse surrounding the tree, what else have you discovered?”

“I’ll get to that,” Jael promised. “Sorry, we got a bit distracted from the triple ward. I can’t know exactly what it is without seeing it for myself, but there are certain features of such constructs that we should keep in mind. First of all, the ward truly is triple in nature. It is a single construct, yes, but it is also three constructs melded together. Consequently, it may have more than one purpose. It could have as many as three different purposes, or it could have just one. It all depends on the demon who sets it up and what he or she wants to do. If you want it to really concentrate all its power on a single purpose, such as holding anyone from entering the yard from the Tree, it will be very powerful indeed.

“However, that might not be the only reason it’s there,” Jael continued. “It could also be there to kill the Tree if anything goes wrong for Lilith. It could just be an early warning should any of us attempt to get in that way, but given who we’re dealing with and the difficulty in setting up a triple six ward, I kind of doubt Lilith would have gone to all that trouble just to set a magical burglar alarm. This sort of thing is very old magic, folks, and I suspect you know what this sort of thing can do better than I. I didn’t even understand how all this worked until Inanna showed me some of the old ways of doing things. Um, Amy? Remember those discussions we had about how no knowledge is ever truly useless? This is a case in point.”

The assembled gods nodded at that, mildly amused.

“So much for our home schooling moment,” Jael chuckled. “Okay, that’s what’s blocking the back door. Now what really took a long time, besides my own lessons in magic of the Abyss...”

“Does that make it Abysmal magic?” Amy interrupted, to the amusement of the gods.

Jael chuckled too, “I believe the term is ‘Abyssal’ in this case. What really took most of the time I was gone was my recon job in Hattamesett. That collection of doll houses you’ve been playing with are all well and good, but I noticed right off what was missing. Not a single one of Lilith’s allies or minions, whatever they are, are in your model. That’s not a surprise since none of us, with the exception of Eddy and Amy, would show up on it as well.

“Anyway, for a devious old witch,” Jael continued, “Lilith is not demonstrating a whole lot of imagination. I always did have some doubts about some of the elders of Hell, but let’s leave my prejudices aside. Now Enki changed the patrol patterns of our perimeter guards every day, but Lilith, or whoever was in charge, I suspect she left it up to Skuld, set them up in the exact same pattern we were using the day they attacked us. That’s what took me so long. I wanted to watch them for several days and make sure of what I was seeing. Folks, I can tell you where each guard will be at any given moment.”

“That should come in handy,” Enki nodded. “Now all we need is a consensus as to how we’re going to do this.”

“Actually I have a plan along those lines as well,” Jael told him.

“You do?” Enki asked curiously.

“I am a total package,” Jael replied in her sexiest contralto.

“What kept you, Jael?” Dee asked a few days later on the branch of Yggdrasil from which they were preparing to retake Eddy’s home in Hattamesett. They had left Amy behind in South Carolina for safety with Nin-ti and her still sleeping mother, but on the branch with Dee and Jael were Eddy, Ina, Asherah, Marduk, Thor and the dryad sisters, Mina and Nina.

“I was out thinning the ranks of Lilith’s perimeter guard,” Jael told her. “You remember my little zap gun, don’t you? Not surprisingly it works just as well on gods and demons as it does on frost giants.”

“More like a little zap bazooka,” Eddy remarked. “It looks like a rocket launcher.”

“It’s not a friendly looking piece,” Jael admitted, “but a weapon that can take out a god doesn’t have to win beauty contests.”

“Where is it now?” Eddy asked. “Did you loan it to one of the others?”

“Oh no,” Jael laughed. “It’s too dangerous to trust in just anyone else’s hands. With the exception of Enki, everyone I’d entrust it to is right here. I wouldn’t want to use it in Eddy’s home except as a final resort anyway. It’s not an indoor toy. Don’t worry. I have it tucked away in a very safe place. Right now I have something to use that is far more powerful.” She drew a small folding knife out of the back pocket of her jeans and opened it up. The two and a half inch long blade was brighter than steel and, in fact, looked as if it had been made out of pure silver. “Good things come in small packages,” she remarked. “Mina? Or is it Nina.”

“What if I told you I was Tina,” the nymph responded playfully.

“I wouldn’t believe you,” Jael told her. “I doubt there are that many insomniac dryads in the world this winter.”

“I could have come from south of the equator,” she countered.

“You’re Mina,” Jael concluded.

“How can you tell?” Mina asked challengingly. Eddy was curious about that too, the two sisters looked absolutely identical.

“Nina’s eyelashes are just a bit longer,” Jael told her.

“They are?” Mina asked.

“Check for yourself when you get back,” Jael replied. “For now, please dive in and ask Tanise to join us.” Mina nodded and instantly disappeared.

“I’m curious,” Asherah admitted. “Were you really able to tell Mina from Nina just by their eyelashes?”

“Of course not,” Jael chuckled. “I took a wild guess. I had a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right.”

“In my experience,” Eddy told her, “fifty-fifty chances are a million to one against in getting them right.”

“Mine too,” Jael admitted, “but there is always that one time. Darn! I just wasted mine, didn’t I?”

“Looks like it,” Eddy remarked.

“Oh well, maybe next millennium,” Jael shrugged as Tanise appeared with Mina beside her. “Hi, kiddo. Today’s the day. All or nothing. Are you ready?”

“Do I have a choice?” Tanise asked nervously.

“None of us do, dear,” Eddy told her.

“Will you stay with me?” she asked Eddy nervously. “Just in case?”

“You bet,” Eddy told her, doing his best to force confidence into his voice. “You and I will be the Tree’s last line of defense.” He silently wished he still had the strangely glowing club with which he had killed Loki, but that had been destroyed by Dee and Enki at their earliest convenience following the Battle of Yarmouthport. Now they were entering into battle once more, but this time in Hattamesett – the one place they really did not want to be noticed. And the only physical weapon in sight was Jael’s silver pocket knife. “Just what good is that anyway?” Eddy asked Jael.

“You remember that gift from Lucifer I mentioned back in Hawaiki? This is it. I know it doesn’t look like much, but when cutting a mystical line, like Lilith’s ward, symbolism counts for more than blade length. The blade is of the purest silver so it would be terrible even for cutting string with.”

“It would work a few times,” Ina commented.

“But it would get dull quickly,” Jael replied. “However, for cutting through mystic energy, it is superb, especially with the enchantments on it. When the time comes, I’ll go first and dispel the ward. That will be in...” She checked her watch. “another seven minutes and some odd seconds. My, how time flies when you’re having fun. Oh, by the way, it’s only going to take a few seconds to deconstruct that ward, if that, so please don’t leave me hanging out to dry. This is supposed to be a coordinated surprise attack. It wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I have to come back and tell you I’m done.”

“I’ll handle that,” Tanise told her. “I’ll follow directly behind you, but I’ll stay inside the Tree. As soon as you’re done, I’ll flash back here and give the word.”

“That works for me, just don’t hesitate,” Jael warned her.

“Don’t worry,” Tanise replied. “I’ve felt the weight of that curse on me ever since it was set. I’ll know when you’re done.”

Jael nodded and checked her watch again. “Six minutes,” she noted. She verbally counted down the time as it passed every fifteen seconds, then counted down the last few. “...five, four, three, two, one.” They never knew if she actually said “zero,” as she was no longer in the Tree when the time came.

Tanise flashed out a moment later and was back almost as quickly, “Go!” she told them.

The order in which they did so had been worked out in advance. Dee and Ina were the next two to enter Eddy’s backyard, followed by Asherah, Marduk and Thor. Mina and Nina were not supposed to put themselves at risk, although they too disappeared from the branch on Yggdrasil. Then it was Eddy’s turn, but Tanise had an idea of her own.

She grabbed his hand and willed them both back to the Tree, but instead of arriving on the ground in front of the Tree, they were inside the Tree itself. "I wanted you to feel this just once," she told him in what he thought was a pure mind-to-mind communion. "Isn't he magnificent?"

Eddy could feel what she meant. From inside the Tree, he could feel every fiber of wood, the tip of every branch and the contents of each tight little bud. He could feel each layer in the bark of the tree as it wrapped comfortably around him. He could even feel the sap starting to move the sugar from deep within the tree to the surface and up into the buds, although in late February, the process was just beginning. He felt the tree just beginning to wake up! And in the branches, about thirty feet above the ground, Mina and Nina sat with their legs hanging over the edge.

He also felt Tanise with him in an intimate and embarrassing hug, but there was nothing but love in her at the moment. It was a perfect moment, in fact, but he knew it had to end. Beyond the Tree, he could see his friends deep in battle with Lilith's forces of chaos. The backyard was a tight melee of deities each using the abilities that most suited them.

Inanna had assumed her warrior-bird form. It was a form she had come to hate, Eddy knew, but she did not hesitate to use it now that it was needed most. Dee and Asherah had joined hands and were standing statue-like on the flagstones of the patio outside the greenhouse room. It did not look as though they were doing anything, except demons and minor gods who tried to attack them were falling to the ground in a heap all around them. Thor and Marduk were using vaguely similar weapons; Thor bore his trademark hammer, Mjolnir and Marduk was using a jewel-encrusted mace. Eddy wondered how it would hold up in battle conditions, but evidently the gemstones were more than mere decoration. Jael was not in sight, but there was a lot of noise coming from inside the house.

There were a lot more gods and demons in the house than Eddy had thought there would be, but he learned later that as Jael had started killing the perimeter guards, Skuld ordered everyone to make a stand in the house itself.

"How do we get out of here?" Eddy asked Tanise.

"Not yet," she told him, hugging him harder to keep him there. In that instant he understood leaving the Tree would be as simple as stepping through a door, but curious as he was about what was going on inside, he stayed in the Tree at her insistence. "You can see inside the house if you really concentrate," she added.

He did concentrate and saw Enki and a dozen others burst through the front door. They were demolishing his house from within, but there was no helping that for now. The Tree was all that was important.

Suddenly Eddy felt an intense pain in his feet and felt Tanise shriek soundlessly beside him. He was about to leave the Tree then, but Nina and Mina jumped down from their branch and shouted a warning to Dee and Ash. They came out of their statue-like trance and rushed into the house. Through a haze of pain, Eddy saw them rush into the basement, where a large team of demons had broken through one of the foundation walls and were chopping at the Tree's roots. Nina and Mina rushed to the side of the Tree and put their hands on the bark. The pain stopped immediately and both Eddy and Tanise breathed sighs of relief.

It was only after the pain had subsided that Eddy realized that all he had to have done to escape it was to leave the Tree. Somehow, at the time, that would have felt like cowardice. Once more he made an

attempt to leave the Tree and once more Tanise held him back. A moment later the wall that enclosed the master bedroom upstairs exploded outward, flinging Jael and Lilith into the backyard.

The two demonesses were locked in what looked like an old-fashioned wrestling match and fell to the ground as one, barely noticing the impact. They continued to fight with fists and spells until Lilith realized where she was. Lilith flung Jael away and through one of the few remaining greenhouse glass panels and then turned to attack the Tree itself.

“Now!” Tanise told Eddy and in an instant Lilith discovered them blocking her path. The demon queen snarled wordlessly and transformed into her most terrifying aspect, with claws a foot long, horns that could gore one’s spine out from the front as well as six inch fangs that dripped venom even as Eddy stood his ground, and a tongue of fire. Armed in that unnatural fashion, she jumped at Eddy and Tanise, only to be caught by the foot and dragged back by Inanna.

Inside the house, Skuld had a battle all her own. As the forces she had commanded in Lilith’s name dwindled, she rapidly found herself having to fight for her life. She managed to kill several minor gods on Eddy’s side, and wounded Marduk and Enki. Then she was fighting Thor who had several advantages over her, not the least of which was psychological.

In the backyard, Lilith attacked Inanna desperately, shoving her right hand claws deep into Inanna’s abdomen and then shoving her harshly back against the House. The wall caved in slightly where she struck and then slid to the ground unconscious.

Lilith turned once more to face Eddy and Tanise, only to be struck from behind by Jael once more. Jael, Eddy thought, was not looking good. Her face was bloodied and one horn was obviously cracked. It looked like she had a broken nose and she was limping badly. Lilith, on the other hand, was covered in blood as well, but her wounds were more superficial. She was slightly winded, but not at all as badly wounded as Jael was.

Skuld and Thor continued to battle, sword against hammer. Thor continuously pressed his advantage, driving Skuld ever backwards until they too had reached the back yard. Then Skuld, finally free to really swing the sword unrestrained by the walls and ceiling of the house delivered a full round-house swing toward Thor’s head. He blocked the blow just in time by driving Mjolnir against the sword blade, shattering it in several pieces.

As that was happening, Lilith scraped her claws viciously toward Jael, who ducked under the blow, only to be caught up in a spell Lilith had cast using her left hand. A cloud of greasy smoke issued from Lilith’s hand and enveloped the younger demoness. Eddy could hear Jael’s brief grunt of pain and then a thump as she fell to the ground.

Lilith laughed triumphantly and dispelled the greasy-looking cloud only to discover Rona standing in front of her, holding Jael’s “zap gun” confidently on her shoulder.

“Neat trick, huh?” Rona smirked, and then she pulled the trigger.

Lilith tried to dodge the blast of nothingness that spewed from the lensed muzzle of the weapon, but she never stood a chance. She never even had time to scream out. She was just there one moment and gone the next. “I guess Hell is going to have to get by with only three queens from now on,” Rona remarked smugly.

Skuld wasn’t completely down yet, however, and she used Lilith’s death as a distraction in which she

used her leg to trip Thor up and then knocked him out with the hilt of her shattered sword. She ran desperately for the house only to find her way blocked by a squad of *Valkyries* led by their chief Freja.

“We’re going to have a very long and protracted conversation when I get you home,” Freja told Skuld grimly. “I imagine your sisters will have a few choice words for you as well.” From the looks on their faces Eddy realized that words would only play a very minor role in Skuld’s fate.

The errant *Valkyr* stood there in seeming shock for a long moment before suddenly turning toward Eddy and in a single move drawing her knife and leaping at him where he stood, protecting the tree.

Surprised at the speed of the move, Eddy was unable to do more than start to twist away as Skuld’s dagger plunged deep into his shoulder, narrowly missing his heart. The force of the blow, however slammed him up against the tree even as the blade stuck out of his back.

Then to the surprise of everyone present, a bright ray of the purest white light burst from out of Eddy’s wound, dissolving the blade and continuing on to totally encase Skuld in a white version of the greasy black cloud Lilith had used on Jael, only when the light faded, Skuld was trapped permanently inside a large block of crystal.

Then, when the light from his wound winked completely out, Eddy fell face first to the ground and passed out.

Universe

One

Eddy did not open his eyes again for the next week and a half and when he did, he was only barely conscious.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Oriel worried as she sat with the others in the rebuilt greenhouse room. “I’ve done everything I know how to do and he still is not responding. Was there anything special about Skuld’s knife?”

“That’s hard to say,” Jael replied thoughtfully. “It no longer exists. I wasn’t around to see it happen either.” She still sported a few bruises, but the worst of them had faded and even her cracked horn had been magically repaired.

“I was,” Rona admitted, “but all I saw was this great burst of light and by the time my eyes cleared up Skuld was on ice almost literally. I thought it really was ice at first too.”

“Did anyone else witness it?” Oriel asked.

“Freja and her *valkyries* did,” Dee told her. “Ash and I were in the basement at the time. Enki and the others were moaning and groaning in the living room. Tanise, how about you?”

“I, uh... I had my eyes closed,” Tanise replied. “I’m sorry, but I was really scared.”

"I'm sure you'll grow out of that in time, dear," Dee told her.

"I was out for the count as well," Ina replied. "I didn't think Lilith was that strong. If she ever comes back in a future cycle, I'll have to make sure I don't underestimate her again."

"It will be a while," Jael remarked. "My boss fully intends to impress upon her the meaning of the phrase 'eternal damnation.'"

"That doesn't help," Oriel remarked. "Nina and Mina had their full attention on the Tree and neither Amy nor Maggie were here."

"Have you tried talking to Freja?" Ina asked.

"I did," Oriel replied, "but she wasn't able to help me either."

Amy came downstairs and sat dejectedly next to Tanise. "Mom's with him," she reported, "but she needs to go to work soon."

"It's time to check his pulse again," Oriel remarked. "I'll stay with him."

She got up and a few minutes later Maggie rushed downstairs, told Amy to "Be good and study hard. Your MCAS tests are next week."

"I know, Mom," Amy replied tiredly. "Have a good day." Maggie rushed out the door without acknowledging anyone else's presence and Amy added, "Like I really care about those tests right now."

"You should care," Jael told her. "Eddy wouldn't want your scores to suffer on his account."

"Why do people always say that sort of thing?" Amy shot back.

"Because it's true," Rona told her. "We never want a loved one to suffer on our account."

"I suppose," Amy replied, picking up a book on linear algebra. "You know, this was a lot more fun before I knew who you all were."

"Why should that make any difference?" Tanise asked.

"I don't know," Amy replied. "I suppose it should actually make it even more fun. I mean how many other girls get to know they were tutored by the gods and in Jael's case, if I get something wrong, I can always say the Devil made me do it."

"Uh uh!" Jale told her sternly. "You're actions are your own. The Devil won't make you do anything; we're busy enough with the souls who get into trouble without our help!"

"You're no fun," Amy groused, but smiled slightly after saying it to show she did not mean it. She stared out into the backyard, only recently completely cleaned up and repaired following the battle there and noticed a trail of moisture trailing down the trunk of the Tree. "What's that?" she asked Tanise.

"Hmm?" Tanise replied, turning to look in the same direction. "Oh, that's the spot where Skuld's dagger came out of Eddy's back and stuck briefly in the Tree."

“That white light was really the Tree itself striking back on Eddy’s and her own behalf,” Dee remarked. “It’s completely unprecedented, however. That’s why Oriel is so puzzled.”

“But what’s all that water coming out?” Amy asked. “It’s like the Tree is crying.”

“More accurately, he is bleeding,” Tanise told her, apparently untroubled. “That’s sap. The wound will close naturally in a few weeks, maybe even before the first of April.”

“Now that gives me an idea,” Ina remarked. “Can we collect that sap? I mean, it isn’t poisonous is it?”

“Not at all,” Dee replied. “The tree has been a sugar maple since Tanise was born, that’s just sugar maple sap. Collect enough of it and you could make syrup, I suppose.”

“But that’s also the Tree of Life, isn’t it?” Ina pressed, “or something like it?”

“More something like it,” Dee replied, “and I see where you’re going with this, but we’ll need a tap. She reached upward and pulled a small piece of bent metal out of the air. “Tanise, I think you’ll be the best one to insert this. We would need to use a drill, but you could insert it non-destructively, by just phasing it into place. Hmm, that makes sense too.”

“What does?” Jael asked.

“The Tree is starting to wake up. She won’t be entirely awake until the day of transcendence, but plants don’t awake as rapidly as animals do. I think that’s why Eddy is only partially awake himself. He and the Tree are bound together. We’ve known that since the day he planted the seed a year ago, but I don’t think we realized just how closely bound they are.”

“I did,” Tanise remarked.

“I suppose you did, dear,” Dee told her gently, “but you’re still learning yourself, so you wouldn’t have understood all the implications involved. Even I’m still learning those,” she added.

“I think the Tree is offering his sap to Eddy,” Tanise replied.

“And I think,” Dee replied, smiling, “you may be right. Go and insert the tap. Amy, you’ll find several plastic buckets in the tool shed. Pick one and clean it out thoroughly.”

By nightfall they had well over a pint of sap and Dee put some of it in a glass and carried it upstairs to Eddy. “Good morning, sweetheart,” she told him fondly when she found him with his eyes open.

“Is it morning?” he asked weakly.

“Almost sunset,” Dee chuckled. “I have something for you to drink.”

“Another of Oriel’s magic potions?” he asked.

“Oriel uses modern medicine, whether synthetic or natural, but yes, in a sense, I think this might be a bit magic,” she told him. “Taste it.”

“I’m going to hate it, aren’t I?” he asked.

"I doubt that," she chuckled. "It doesn't taste like very much at all."

She held the glass to his lips and he took an experimental sip. "Sugar water?" he asked. "If so, it needs more sugar."

"Maple sap, actually. Go ahead and finish it. Oriel says you need more fluids than you've been drinking anyway. If you don't start drinking she'll only hook you up to an IV," Dee warned.

Eddy finished the glass, and told her, "Thank you. I think that did help." Then he fell asleep again.

"His pulse is stronger," Oriel reported a few hours later, "but it's going to take more than a few ounces of tree sap."

"That's okay," Dee told her. "You keep doing your part. Ina and the girls had a brain storm this afternoon although it will take them a week or so to get ready."

They continued collecting sap from the tree and giving some of it to Eddy on a daily basis, but the rest they stored away in the refrigerator until they had nearly five gallons of it. Eddy did continue to improve slowly, but was still unable to get out of bed for more than an hour at a time. Then one morning a week after he first started to wake up he found Tanise and Amy tending a large pot on top of the stove. "What are you doing?" he asked weakly.

"Making syrup!" Amy told him happily, "though you're starting to look pretty good without it. Dee figures that by concentrating the sap this way you'll be good as new in no time."

"Have you been studying for your MCAS?" Eddy asked, sitting down at the table. "Your Mom tells me the testing starts tomorrow morning."

"She told you that yesterday, Granddad," Amy reminded him. "I have my first session this afternoon. Don't worry. Tanise and I have aced all the practice tests."

"But we haven't done anything on the science fair project in weeks," Tanise reminded her.

"Oh my God!" Amy exclaimed. "I forgot all about that. But we had most of our results finished before Lilith interrupted us. I think we can pull it together after the MCAS tests are over. We'll have a full week, after all."

Half an hour later, Jael drove Tanise and Amy to the school for their tests and Ina took over watching the pot boil. "Only slightly more exciting than watching grass grow," she remarked lightly to Eddy. "Hmm, level's starting to get low. Time to add more sap. Too bad it's only a ten quart pot. This would be faster if we could boil it all down at once." She added another gallon and a half of the sap and when it came back to a boil, started skimming off the froth that formed at the top. Eddy went back to bed while she was still skimming and when she next sat down to rest, Asherah had joined her,

"I think it's starting to caramelize," Asherah remarked.

"That's good," Ina told her. "Maple syrup ranges in color from a light golden to a dark brown and it's the caramelization that brings out all the flavor. Right now it's just barely starting to show some color. I wish we could rush the process along, but Tanise wouldn't forgive us if we did. She insists it has to be done the long and traditional way."

“Wouldn’t that be over a wood fire then?” Asherah asked.

“It would, but she’s a modern sort of wood nymph so a modern stove suits her purposes. Besides, when have you ever heard of a dryad intentionally burning wood if there was an alternative?” Ina asked pointedly. “Well, I think that’s it for the next hour or so. Want me to make a pot of coffee?”

“I’ll do that,” Asherah told her. “I still need practice with a coffee pot. No one even knew what coffee was last time I walked the Earth.”

“How did we do without it?” Ina laughed. “All we had was Enki’s beer and no coffee to help get over the aftereffects of it. No wonder civilizations developed so slowly until the Renaissance!”

Asherah was just skimming the froth off the boiling sap for the final time when Amy and Tanise returned. “Those tests were tough!” Amy remarked, “but I think I did okay. I think Tanise had an easier time of it than I did, but then I never liked the books they wanted me to read. Say what you want, but I don’t think *Ethan Frome* and *Silas Marner* should count as literature. No wonder most of the kids around here don’t like to read if they think all books are like those.”

“The exams are meant to test your limits,” Jael reminded her. “You have to expect some fiendishly difficult questions.”

“They weren’t that fiendish,” Amy replied easily. “There wasn’t a single question I had to guess at wildly, just some of the multiple choices I could only narrow down to one or two possible answers. One of them was just because I could never keep track of the generations in *Wuthering Heights*. Tomorrow will probably be the toughest test though. It’s a biology retest. They threw that at us because we never took it at the tenth grade level. I hope I remember enough from my sophomore year. Tanise should breeze through that, though.”

“Only the botany section,” Tanise remarked, “but we’ll get through it, I’m sure. How’s the syrup coming along?”

“This is what’s left of the original ten gallons of liquid,” Asherah informed them. “The boiling temperature is up four degrees above that of pure water, so we still have quite a way to go, but the article I read says the temperature will rise quickly as we get closer to the end.”

“We’ll want to use a smaller pot for the final process after filtering the liquid,” Ina remarked, “but it should be done some time after midnight, I think.”

Two

Amy and Tanise climbed the stairs an hour earlier than normal the next morning when they awoke to the smell of pancakes. Stepping into the kitchen they saw Ina and Jael chatting animatedly with Maggie while Asherah serenely made the pancakes.

“You all really should have told me who you really were earlier,” Maggie was saying to them. “Really, I thought Dad was getting foolish in his old age and you were all capitalizing on it.”

“We were,” Jael chuckled, “but not the way you thought. Your father was the best person to raise the new Tree so we recruited him to do it. If you really want to get technical, we tricked him into it, but I

know he's never regretted it for a moment."

"No, he wouldn't," Maggie agreed. "Dad has always loved plants. I'll admit that I have been worried about him since Mom died, especially since he kept growing all those plants she loved even though he personally had no use for them."

"We all do things to keep those we love close to mind, Maggie," Ina told her. "Now do you think you can stop arguing with Dee?"

"She really does love my Dad?" Maggie asked. Ina and Jael both nodded emphatically. "I suppose I'll have to make peace with her too."

"About time, Mom!" Amy remarked tartly, causing everyone to turn toward her and Tanise.

"Ladies," Asherah told the girls sternly. "I'm sure you're hungry but you really should get dressed first."

Amy looked at herself and Tanise; they were both wearing pajamas. "We're covered," she shrugged. "These aren't exactly sexy, you know. They're flannel."

"At least put on a robe, Amelia," Maggie told her.

"Aw!" Amy complained, but allowed Tanise to drag her back downstairs. Rather than donning the suggested robes, they actually got dressed in jeans and blouses before heading back for the kitchen. Eddy and Dee had just arrived when they returned and Ash was placing a plate of pancakes in front of Eddy.

"Not sure I can eat that much," Eddy remarked.

"I think you may be surprised," Dee assured him. "Try to eat it all." Then she dumped a generous helping of the syrup on the cakes.

Eddy began eating slowly while Asherah served everyone else. "Wow!" Amy enthused after her first bite. "This is great syrup! What a great way to start the day. Just let me at those MCAS exams, I don't think they can throw anything at me I can't answer!"

"Tree of Knowledge," Dee remarked amusedly. "If anyone believed where that syrup came from they'd say you were cheating."

"The point is to pass the tests," Jael remarked. "The source of her knowledge is irrelevant."

"What?" Amy asked. "Do you mean this really is making me smarter?"

"No," Jael replied, "just more knowledgeable. Think of it as a divine gift and you know what a double-edged sword that can be!"

"What about this extra energy?" Amy asked, "Is that just my imagination?"

"I doubt it," Ina remarked. "That syrup is mostly sugar, you know."

"Oh yeah," Amy nodded. "Well thanks!"

Eddy not only finished the stack of pancakes, but a second one as well, feeling increasingly better with each bite so that by the time Amy and Tanise were ready to leave for their exams he felt better than he had in years, including the time just after Jael had fed him a berry from the Sumerian aspect of the Tree of Life. Oriel arrived toward the end of the meal and after a brief examination declared Eddy to be fully recovered.

“Good news, Granddad!” Amy enthused. “Jael, will you give us a ride to the school this morning?”

“I’ll do that,” Maggie told her. “It’s on my way to the office. Jael can pick you up this afternoon.”

After they left, and while Eddy went upstairs to change into something other than pajamas, Ina looked at Jael and asked. “Don’t you think we should have told them?”

“What? And ruin the surprise?” Jael laughed.

“Besides,” Dee added, “immortality is something you need to grow into.”

“This little bit wasn’t enough for immortality, was it?” Asherah asked.

“Maybe,” Dee replied. “And then again, maybe not. Their lives will definitely be extended well beyond that of normal humans, especially if they eat more of that syrup.”

“It’s potent stuff,” Jael admitted, “It cured even the few remaining aches and pains I had. I suspect they’re in for something pretty close to immortality.”

“Perhaps,” Dee admitted, “but then nothing lasts forever, not even us.”

Amy and Tanise breezed through their exams that day and the next. “No wonder you weren’t having any trouble!” Amy remarked to Tanise after that first day.

“I’m less than a year old,” Tanise reminded her. “It was the only way I was likely to get a full education before April First. After that I won’t be able to visit this universe any more and it will be thousands of years at least before there’s a civilization like this one in the new world, if then.”

“Why can’t you return here?” Amy asked.

“I’m not human,” Tanise told her. “You know that. I’m a dryad and bound to my Tree. The Tree isn’t part of this universe and after transcendence the backyard won’t be in this universe anymore either.”

“And we’re wasting your final time in this world in getting ready for the science fair,” Amy noted.

“This is fun,” Tanise retorted. “What else should we be doing?”

“Shopping?” Amy suggested. “Hanging out at the mall? Giving each other makeovers? I don’t know.”

“I don’t need to go shopping and why should I want to hang out at the mall?” Tanise countered. “I don’t really need clothes. I have my leaf dress and frankly I’m not sure I’ll bother wearing clothing in the new world. More importantly, I like me the way I am and I like you the way you are, so why bother with a makeover? But if you want, we have another week after the science fair. I’ll spend it with you any way you like.”

“Yeah, okay,” Amy told her, shrugging off an incipient tear. “So what conclusions can we draw about the pH of the soil around maples, versus the soil around oaks, pines and spruces?”

The science fair was an exciting day for both of them. They arrived early on Friday afternoon and set up their display in the assigned booth, collecting a lot of stares from the other students. A few of the students approached and introduced themselves, but most seemed hostile toward two girls who had not actually attended their school and yet were competing in their fair. One young legal prodigy challenged their right to be there based on the published rules of the competition and eventually the judges were forced to inform Tanise and Amy that while they were welcome to exhibit their entry, they were barred from winning any of the prizes because the rules specifically stated they had to actually attend the high school.

The teacher who had invited them to enter was incensed by the ruling and went to bat for them. He had the support of a few of the parents, and the rather vocal protests by half the students there who had instantly started taking sides when the problem first came up, but the judges were adamant. Eventually, the teacher was forced, at last, to withdraw his protest. “I’m sorry, ladies,” he apologized to Amy and Tanise. “I would never have put you in this position nor have suggested you do all this work had I known this would happen.”

“We had fun doing it,” Tanise replied maturely with a shrug.

“And we learned a lot along the way,” Amy added. “I think that’s what this is supposed to be about, don’t you?”

“It is, but you don’t have to actually submit to judging now, you know,” he told them.

“I think we’d like to, if it isn’t too much additional work for the judges,” Amy told him.

“I wouldn’t take much pity on them,” the teacher laughed. “Besides I’m one of them as well, and one more exhibit to judge is hardly a problem, not out of this many.”

“Good,” Amy replied, “Because I’d really like to know if this project scores higher than the one I did in Anchorage last year.” After that more of the students came around to meet them and several insisted they come to the post-fair party the next evening.

The questions the judges asked amazed Amy. She had been expecting more in-depth inquiries into their work, but the questions seemed superficial, asking only about their methodology with very little apparent interest in their results. “Maybe they’ll judge our conclusions after reading our paper,” Tanise suggested.

The fair began in earnest the next afternoon when the display was open to the public although most attendees were the immediate family of the students. Jael and Ina quickly picked up a fan club among the high school boys, which amused Amy and Tanise no end. After that many of the boys could be found near Amy and Tanise’s exhibit in the hope that Jael or Ina would be there as well.

“Once upon a time,” Ina confided to the girls, “the attention would have thrilled me, but after a millennium or two you learn that life’s a lot more fun if it isn’t all about you.”

Finally the results were announced and Amy and Tanise walked off with an Honorable Mention because, according to the chief judge, even though they were not eligible to compete, their project still scored higher than any of the others and it would be criminal not to acknowledge their accomplishment.

Three

The final week before April First could be best described as quiet tension. Jael took to the streets of Hattamesett with her zap gun to help augment the perimeter guards' strength, but had to admit she was really doing it just to keep busy. Enki continued to urge them all to stay on guard, however. "There's a lot of tension all over the world and there are still more than a few gods who would love to get their hands on the Tree," he told them repeatedly.

"Have there been any attempts since we returned to the house?" Eddy asked on March Thirty-first as they sat together over coffee.

"Barely anything worth mentioning," Enki replied.

"Which means something has been happening?" Eddy pressed.

"Just a few independent thinkers, trying to sneak past us," Enki admitted. "None of them stand a chance, but they try nonetheless. The chance for ultimate power is tempting to almost anyone."

"And the length of time one holds the tree doesn't matter so much as who has it at the moment of transcendence," Eddy nodded.

"Not completely true," Enki told him. "The longer one holds the Tree before it transcends the deeper the bond between them will be. Someone grabbing it at the last moment won't have the control someone who has possessed it for months would have, at least at first. Later on it wouldn't make such a difference anyway. New gods would develop in the new universe eventually and all of them would be aspects of the original supreme deity. Of course he might not choose to merge with any of them, that's always a choice not a requirement."

"Who was the original supreme deity of this universe?" Eddy asked curiously.

"I haven't the slightest," Enki shrugged. "Only the Infinites know that, and it's just one of many things they won't discuss. I'm sure there's a reason for that, but I don't know that either."

Finally the day of transcendence arrived. Enki arrived at the house at first light along with Nin-ti. He also pulled the perimeter guards in to the house and confided to Eddy that he had sent half a dozen others to back up Marduk and Thor, both of whom had long since recovered from their injuries. Even Oriel was there, having delivered several dozen of Eddy's favorite cheese rolls. Tanise was wearing her leaf dress and spending all her time in the backyard with Amy, sitting by the water garden and sipping coffee.

Ratatosk had arrived as well and was gleefully swapping verbal jibes with Jael and Inanna. Asherah ignored the squirrel but found herself deep in conversation with Marduk as they chatted about the old days.

"To tell the truth," Enki told Dee and Eddy, "I'm really worried about a last ditch effort to take the tree. I hear Ares took a platoon of lesser gods off on a so-called bivouac last night and none of them have been seen since. I suppose he may have merely felt like stretching his legs on a camp-out, but the timing is suspicious."

"I'll kill him myself, if he dares to show up now," Dee growled. Just then, however, a strange shimmering sound could be heard coming from the backyard. "On second thought, he can try anything he likes now."

If he had any such intentions he's far too late for this dance."

"Looks like it," Enki laughed.

"What do you mean?" Eddy asked.

"Let's go into the backyard and see for ourselves," Enki suggested.

They found everyone crowding into the greenhouse room and even Amy and Tanise had taken shelter there. Outside, the light was getting much brighter the colors were becoming more intense and the shimmering sound was getting louder and louder. Soon the sound became a roar and then a cacophony too intense for any mere word to encompass. At the same time the yard filled with a bright white fog and everything within was obscured to their vision.

The roaring sound continued for over two more hours, while everyone had lunch and a mid-afternoon snack. Maggie eventually went upstairs and found a small package of ear plugs she had not used since leaving Anchorage and offered them to anyone who wanted them. There were not enough to go around, but they were all used.

The sound faded away after two and a half hours and the fog in the backyard finally cleared up to reveal an entirely new world. The Tree appeared to be many times its former height, although it still had the same number of branches. Everything had grown in proportion, however. The water garden was now a pair of large lakes with a tall waterfall between them with the tree situated by the shores of the upper lake. That upper lake was filled with clear blue water that almost seemed to glow of its own light, but the lower lake was filled with life. In it were immense goldfish and frogs and millions of blue lotuses.

But what held Eddy's attention was the Tree itself. It still had no leaves, it was too early in the season for that, but the buds were swelling and it would not be long before it was in flower.

Eddy's house, was also on the shore of the upper lake, not more than one hundred feet from the base of the tree. The others allowed him and Tanise to approach the Tree first and just as Amy had wanted to do with the palmettos in South Carolina, he touched his hand to the bark of the Tree. Touching it made it seem more real to him. Tanise had no such reservations and instantly phased into the trunk of the tree.

Eddy looked up and saw a scar in the bark, the mark of where Skuld's blade had touched it and also where Tanise had inserted and later removed the tap. High up in the tree he saw a pair of nesting robins and also a pair of cardinals, all of which were several times their natural size. Eddy wondered what else might have found a home in the Tree.

"Nice Tree!" Ratatosk commented.

"Thanks, Ratty," Eddy replied. "I guess we did a pretty good job after all."

"Not bad," Ratatosk remarked, then he spotted a black furry squirrel sitting on the lowest branch. "Hey, sweet thing!" he called to her, "Whatcha doing after work?"

"Ratty," Tanise warned him sternly, phasing back out of the tree. "You leave her alone until she's of age or you'll answer to me."

"Oh yeah, that's scary," Ratatosk crowed. "A forest nymph is threatening..." he trailed off suddenly when he got a look at her face. "Yes, ma'am," he told her, backing off. "I'll wait until she's old enough."

“Now that was impressive,” Amy told her. “For a moment you looked like one of the Furies.”

“For a moment,” Tanise admitted, “I felt like one of them.”

“And how do you feel, Eddy?” Dee asked softly.

“Pretty good for an old man,” was his automatic reply. “Actually, I feel great. I was feeling pretty good this morning, but now it’s like I’m in my twenties all over again.”

“Well,” Enki told him, “you know the old saying. You’re only as old as you feel? In your case that will be literally true from now on.”

“What do you mean?” Eddy asked.

“As the principal god of the new universe you can expect to live as long as it does,” Enki informed him.

“I’m a god?” Eddy asked disbelievingly.

“Not just a god, dear,” Dee informed him. “In this universe you’re the God with a capital ‘G’. The position of supreme deity goes to the one who possesses the tree at the moment of transcendence. You know that.”

“I thought you had to be a god in the first place,” Eddy admitted. “And obviously the job doesn’t come with omniscience, since I can think of all sorts of things I don’t know.”

“Maybe Infinity is something you have to grow into as well?” Jael suggested to Ina. They both laughed. “Eddy, I imagine there will be a certain breaking-in period, or maybe the rules of this universe are different and you don’t have to be all-knowing, all-seeing and all that. We’ll figure that out in time, I guess.”

“And Maggie and Amy are goddesses to one extent or another in this universe too,” Ina told him.

“I’m going to make a terrible goddess,” Maggie commented, sadly. “The way I’ve been behaving, I must be the new devil.”

“Not necessarily,” Ina told her. “You have a beginning in this universe but if I’ve learned anything this past year, it’s that a goddess can always change her ways.”

“Besides I wouldn’t call you a fallen goddess in this universe,” Jael added. “If anything, you’re a redemption figure. You were possessed by a demoness, but were freed from the curse and redeemed yourself in everyone’s eyes.”

“Besides,” Asherah told her, “this is a different universe. It may never have a devil figure. The rules are different here. How? We don’t know yet, but we have an eternity to learn them.”

“And I’m a goddess too?” Amy remarked. “Cool!”

“You’re still going to Brown next fall, young lady,” her mother told her.

“That’s right,” Jael laughed. “If I wouldn’t tolerate a dumb bimbo as the Tree’s guardian, I certainly

won't let one of the first deities be a drop-out."

"Good thing I want to go to school then," Amy remarked. "And given all the cautionary tales, it's probably a good idea if I don't let divinity go to my head, which will be easy since I'm not a goddess in that world, am I?" Strangely, no one answered or even looked her in the eyes. "You're kidding, right?" Amy demanded.

"You are who you are, dear" Dee told her, "no matter what world you are in. But you still have a lot to learn and while you'll naturally heal quickly and sometimes seem to know things you never thought you did, it will be a few centuries at least before you can do the things we are generally attributed with. Most likely you'll only be able to do them here, so the chance of that going to your head any time soon is slim. Still, you had the right idea. Just be yourself."

"I will," she promised.

"You knew all this would happen from the start, didn't you?" Eddy accused her.

"I knew it would happen so long as you were the one to bring the Tree to term," Dee admitted. "Are you angry?"

"No, just happily surprised," Eddy admitted. "So just how long will this new world last?"

"An eternity at least, I would think," Dee laughed.

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