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A Plethora of Deities V

Tempting the Fates

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Every book is a journey.

Every series is a history.

Some more than others, though. The stories of *A Plethora of Deities* with the exception of *Downhill All the Way* started out as light fantasies meant to give me a break between the more serious stories like *Gaenor's Quest* and the Maiyim series. Of course, I'm well aware that even my serious stories tend toward the light side, but this series involving the various gods of the ancient world were intended as humorous adventure. By the time I reached the third story, *The Seed*, I think the adventure part was more prevalent.

Well, that's okay really. I've had a lot of fun writing these stories and if they more light adventure, so be it. I think this story is a bit different from the others. It has the same supporting cast of gods, but this time Inanna is a main character. It's probably about time I gave her a bigger part too. Inanna and her various aspects was one of the most important goddesses in the ancient middle east. She deserves a story of her own even if she must share the story with a mortal.

This is the first of a trio of only loosely related stories giving more important roles to members of the previously supporting cast. The others will be *Teasing the Furies* and *Inspiring the Muses*. At least they will if I write them as planned. And there may be others as well but as of this writing none of them are planned. We'll see...

Jonathan Edward Feinstein
Westport, Massachusetts
December 28, 2007

Tempting the Fates

Prologue

"Mine!" a shrill voice claimed from Inanna's right. Almost instantly the blouse she was admiring was yanked out of her hand. "And this!" the other woman claimed reaching for a similar garment on the rack before Inanna could react. "And this!"

Inanna turned to see who the other one was and barely had time to recognize her before she disappeared with a swish of her long, curly black hair behind a dressing room door. "Clotho?" Inanna wondered out loud. "What's she doing in Boston of all places?"

Neither woman was what anyone would call normal. Inanna had been a major goddess in a host of pantheons in the ancient world, going by an equal number of names such as Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite and Venus. Clotho was the youngest member of a powerful trio of goddesses known as the Moirae or the Fates. Inanna had been spending much of her time in New England in the last two years as had a number of other ancient gods and goddesses, but this was the first indication that Clotho or her sisters

were more than vaguely aware of the area.

Well, Inanna thought to herself, If Clotho's here shopping, one or both of the other two must be nearby. She looked around and soon spotted a middle-aged woman in a no-nonsense pair of slacks and a sweater. She had just a hint of gray at her temples that dulled the look of her short hair style. "Lachesis!" Inanna called. "Funny meeting you here."

"I could say the same thing, Lovey," Lachesis replied. "Shopping for clothes in Boston? I'd normally expect to run into you in the trendier fashion centers like New York, Los Angeles, Milan, Paris..."

"Conservative fashions last longer," Inanna explained.

Lachesis studied Inanna intently for a long moment. "You've changed, Venus," she observed.

"I've been mostly going by the name Inanna these days," Inanna replied, "and, yeah, I guess I have. I learned a lot last year about myself and the universe in general when we brought the new Tree to term."

"Haven't seen it," Lachesis commented flatly.

"You should," Inanna replied with enthusiasm. "He's magnificent."

"One universe is more than enough responsibility for me, dear," Lachesis told her, causing Inanna to wonder if Lachesis was hiding something. Inanna made a mental note to ask Mother Nature the next time she saw her.

"Well, the New Ones are worth knowing too," Inanna continued. "They're good friends of mine, in fact."

"You have friends?" Lachesis blurted rudely, and then instantly backpedaled. "I mean, no offense, but as I recall you had rivals and those you could dominate. There weren't a lot of those you could just call friends in the old days."

"Some of us..." Inanna was interrupted by a squeal of delight from the other end of the boutique as Clotho grabbed several more articles of clothing off the rack before two other women could. "Some of us grow up," Inanna finally continued.

"You know why Clotho cannot," Lachesis told her.

"I know why you think she can't," Inanna replied. "These days I'm not so certain of that. Doesn't it ever bother you that she's so vacuous?"

"Sometimes," Lachesis shrugged, "but she's like the daughter I'll never have."

"Why not?" Inanna asked. "You're a bit older than most women are when they have children, but not impossibly old."

"If any of the Three changes," Lachesis told Inanna sternly, "the entire nature of Life could change."

"Women give birth all the time," Inanna replied. "I doubt that would be a great change, if any. Besides, I've changed, but neither the nature of Love nor War has changed because of it."

“No?” Lachesis asked. “Seems to me that warfare is very different these days.”

“It hasn’t changed much in the last year,” Inanna pointed out. “And who’s to say a change would be for the worse? So what are you two doing in Boston?”

“Same as you,” Lachesis shrugged. “Shopping. Clotho thought I ought to update my wardrobe.”

“Doesn’t look like she’s chosen much for you yet,” Inanna observed as Clotho sprinted toward the swimwear section.

“Well, I figured I could buy a nice pantsuit and some casual wear,” Lachesis sighed, “and in Boston she isn’t too likely to buy anything too extreme.”

“It’s not like any of us need to actually buy clothing,” Inanna pointed out, “although I must admit it is nice to have some things to wear I didn’t make myself.”

“In general, mortals are more creative than gods,” Lachesis noted.

“Are they?” Inanna asked. “I’ve never noticed much difference along those lines. In fact aside from the fact we’re immortal, there’s not a lot of difference between gods and mortals, except for the Infinites, of course.”

“I disagree,” Lachesis told her. “There is a certain quality of divine life that mortals cannot attain and couldn’t even if they were to live forever.”

“I think you’re wrong there,” Inanna shook her head. “The only real difference is that we have all the time in the world to gain wisdom. Mortals must do so within their shorter lifespans.”

“Mine!” they heard Clotho say from across the store.

“And some of us may never become wise,” Inanna sighed.

“Wisdom isn’t the difference,” Lachesis maintained. “It’s the spark of divine life, but neither of us is likely to convince the other over a few minutes of conversation. Why don’t we make a contest of sorts out of this?”

“I don’t play those kinds of games anymore,” Inanna declined.

“Hmm, maybe you really have grown up,” Lachesis murmured.

“I would be willing to meet you for lunch every so often,” Inanna suggested. “We could discuss the matter in greater depth, maybe compare our own experiences. Besides, I’ve never gotten to just chat with you. It might be fun to compare love lives and all.”

Lachesis thought about that and nodded. “Sure. It will be fun. Next Tuesday in Athens?”

“You’re on,” Inanna told her. She gathered up the few items she had selected and a few minutes later was out of the store.

Back inside, Lachesis sighed as Clotho showed off her own latest outfit. “Come along, dear,” Lachesis told her. “Now we’re going to have some real fun.”

“A vente black coffee, and a sticky bun, please,” Michael Fulden ordered. It was lunchtime at Geekers, his favorite local coffee shop, but he was not in the mood for one of the usual soups or sandwiches he might have ordered. He had two classes to teach this afternoon and felt the caffeine jolt of the extra large portion he had ordered would be just what he needed to keep him going until dinner time.

The girl behind the counter gave him a look that spoke volumes. With all the caffeinated specialties Geekers had to offer, all he wanted was a black coffee? However, she nodded and filled the order and soon Mike found his way over to the last open table in the place.

He took a quick sip of the “Drip of the Day” and decided they had blended some Kenyan coffee in with Colombian this time. Then he opened two thick books, his beat up notebook computer and a legal pad and lost awareness of the lunchtime activity all around him until sometime later a gorgeous woman with light brown hair appeared across the table from him.

“Do you mind if I share your table?” she asked.

Her voice was melodic. A mezzo-soprano, he decided in the back of his mind before wondering why he even tried to categorize her that way. “Sure,” he replied, looking around, “Doesn’t look like there’s anywhere else to sit. Let me put my stuff away.”

“No need to clear off that much space,” she smiled as she put her own coffee, a double shot of espresso and a Caesar salad down on the table.

“That’s okay,” Mike replied easily. “I doubt I can polish up these lecture notes much more anyway.”

“You’re a teacher?” she asked.

“Grad student,” Mike replied. “Going for my PhD in classics at Bristoe University. But I do teach one regular class on Intro. Mythology and I’m filling in for my advisor in another class this afternoon. Long day I guess. You?”

“I do lecture occasionally,” she admitted. “Busy here today. I’m Ina, by the way. Ina Loveall.”

“Mike Fulden,” he introduced himself. “This is a good coffee shop and you made a nice choice. I often have espresso, but today the standard drip seemed more to the point.”

“I like good coffee,” Ina remarked. “Froo-froo drinks with caffeine, not so much. Do you come here often.”

“Several times a week,” he admitted. “There’s generally a period in the mornings when I can get some good studying done and this way I don’t have to make my own coffee. I like good coffee too, but somehow it’s just never the same out of my home pot.”

“Maybe you need a new brewer,” Ina suggested. “There are a lot on the market these days and the quality of the brew does vary pretty widely.”

“Does it?” Mike asked. “I just drink the stuff. So what brand would you recommend?”

“Well, it all depends on how you like your coffee, really,” she told him and went on to discuss a number of brands and brewing methods.

“Hey, you’re quite an expert!” Mike exclaimed appreciatively.

“A year ago, I was just another coffee drinker, like you,” Ina told him. “But I decided to see why I liked some coffees more than others even if the blend was the same. It’s a fascinating subject, really, and I find that depending on my mood or time of day, my tastes change drastically. So for now it’s straight espresso. This evening I might want something Turkish style, or maybe a cappuccino, or just a black coffee like you’re having. I never really know.”

“Let’s find out,” Mike suggested.

“What?” she asked.

“Would you like to have dinner and maybe a movie tonight?” he clarified.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ina apologized. “I’d love to, but not tonight. I have a previous commitment this evening.”

“As long as it’s not with that neo-pagan cult that’s been growing up on campus lately,” Mike remarked with half a laugh, failing to notice how Ina’s smile slipped a bit at his words.

“Why?” Ina asked. “Are you born again?”

“Not hardly,” Mike shook his head, “but my last girlfriend got into that. Now she’s more married to her goddess than she’ll ever be to a mere man.”

“That’s not right,” Ina opined, shaking her head. “Fanaticism is never a good thing even when it is well-intentioned. I’ll tell you the truth, Mike. Yes, I am supposed to be, uh, lecturing to the local Venus cult, but from what you tell me, I suspect they won’t like what I’m going to tell them.”

“And what’s that?” Mike asked.

“Pretty much what I just told you,” she replied. “Religion is about life and the best way to practice any religion is to get a life. Maybe you’d like to come along and watch the results?”

“Could be interesting,” Mike admitted, “but no, thanks. I had enough of that lot and, honestly, Amy’s friends wouldn’t exactly welcome me there if I tried.”

“They obviously don’t get the goddess’ message then,” Ina decided. “We are supposed to be tolerant of all beliefs and I can assure you that Venus does not insist she be the one and only goddess in their hearts and minds.”

“That sort of thing would lead to divine jealousy and warfare if the myths are at all true,” Mike

remarked.

“They have a firm foundation in fact,” Ina sighed.

“I’m surprised you’re still talking to me,” Mike remarked.

“It’s like I said,” Ina reminded him. “The point of living is to have a life and maybe I’m not as fanatical as the local members are. If I insisted all my friends worship the goddess, I’d have a lot fewer friends. Tell you what, though, how about a late dinner on me?”

“That’s fine,” Mike shrugged. “I know a nice jazz club downtown that serves good barbecue until dawn.”

“Hey, it’s Memphis,” Ina laughed. “I’d be surprised if they didn’t do both well.”

“I know where your group meets,” Mike told her. “Pick you up after your lecture?”

“Sounds great,” Ina nodded. She finished her meal and told him. “See you later!”

After Ina left, Mike pulled out his notes for one last look through them, so was only vaguely aware of the dark-haired woman with the violet eyes sitting at the next table until she too got up and remarked, “Hey, a date with Inanna. Way to go, Sport!”

Mike looked up to see her smiling face, but as he did, dropped his notepad. By the time he had retrieved it, the dark-haired woman had disappeared, leaving behind an almost subliminal scent of lilacs. “A date with...” Mike muttered to himself as he packed his own things up and prepared to leave. “Too much mythology lately. I must have misheard her.”

2

Mike might have been too immersed in ancient mythology lately, but he was hardly done for the day. His first class after lunch was Intermediate Greek in which the class was reading the climactic scenes of the Iliad. That class was fairly easy since he only needed to lead the students in a discussion of the symbolism of the horse and its context in the story. Any students who made it to second-level Greek were serious-minded individuals who came well-prepared for such discussions, although Mike was amused by the fact they had overlooked the sexual overtones of that part of the story and wondered if that was his advisor’s fault. Could be, he told himself.

His second class was more of a challenge to teach since he had to actually lecture and many of the students were there looking for an easy grade in an elective class. Today’s lecture was on the Fates.

“Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos,” Mike listed them. “Does anyone know some of their other names and titles? Anyone?” Silence greeted him like an old friend. He sighed and continued. “Clotho, known to the Romans as Nona or the Ninth because it was she to whom expectant mothers prayed during the ninth month of pregnancy. She is the Spinner. It is her job to spin out the threads of Life.

“Lachesis or as the Romans called her, Decima, the Tenth. The Allotter. It is her job to measure the

threads of life with her rod. Spare the rod and spoil the child?" He waited to see if anyone would laugh at the joke. It wasn't much of a joke, so the apathetic silence didn't bother him too much. "Maybe not in this case," he concluded.

"Atropos, also called Aisa the Inexorable, the Inevitable or the Unturning. In Latin she is Mors or Death. She is the Cutter. Clotho spins, Lachesis measures, but it is Atropos who cuts the threads of life and when she cuts a thread someone on Earth dies.

"Together," he went on, "they are the Moirae, the Apportioners. The Romans called them the Parcae or Sparing Ones. Sometimes they called them the Fata or as we usually refer to them, the Fates. They were not confined to the Greco-Roman pantheon either. The Germanic and Norse people knew them as the Norns, who spun the tapestry of Destiny beneath the great World Tree, Yggdrasil. Or the Baltic Laima and her sisters, also spinning goddesses. They control the thread of life of every mortal and god and even Zeus feared their power, and as you may recall from some of the stories we've covered, he didn't fear much else, not even the wrath of Hera, his wife.

So who are these Weird Sisters?" he asked the class. Finally there was a reaction from some of the students. It was soft laughter. "Don't laugh," he warned them with a smile. "The English word weird comes from an older form, *wyrd*, which literally means 'Fate.' They have been depicted in any number of ways, but the most common is as a trio of maiden, mother and crone. Clotho is the young woman, Lachesis is the middle-aged mother, although I don't recall hearing who, if anyone, was her child and Atropos defines women in old age.

"Their origins are less well known. There were some writers in the ancient world who said they were daughters of Zeus by the titaness Themis. Others would have them as the daughters of Ananke or Chaos and still others paint them as the daughters of the Night, Nyx. Your choice, but remember them all. They may be on the test. Think of it as your own fate," he smiled thinly.

"However," Mike continued, "Try to forget anything you may have seen about them on television shows like 'Xena, Warrior Princess' or 'Sabrina the Teenaged Witch.' Similarly, I recommend not relying on comic books and so-called graphic novels, movies and, well, most popular forms of entertainment.

"The Moirae have appeared in medieval and modern fiction frequently and in many different forms. The three witches of 'MacBeth' for example. While they are not specifically portrayed as the Fates, they are three in number and prophesy in a most Moirae-like fashion. 'Xena' and 'Sabrina' as I mentioned had episodes featuring the Fates. Recent video game writers seem to delight in using them or their names. Authors from Stephen King to Davin Brin to Piers Anthony and Neil Gaiman have used them in one form or another, although as I warned, they are sometimes transformed beyond the recognition of a mere classicist. Instead of being a mixed lot of young, middle aged, and old, they might all be young or old. Authors will modify their purposes or their motives freely, but then why shouldn't they? The Ancients did the same thing.

"Homer talked only about the Klothos or 'Spinners' in his Odyssey, and yet in the Iliad he wrote about several Moirae. Later in the same work he made note of but a single Moira who encompassed all the aspects of the Fates. It's possible proof that Homer was actually several authors rather than a single blind poet. At Delphi only Clotho and Atropos were worshipped and in Athens there was version of Aphrodite who pre-dated the Olympic gods; Aphrodite Urania who was the eldest of the Fates and the goddess of Intellectual or Spiritual Love as opposed to her later form, the goddess of Physical Love. An entirely different creature, I assure you.

“Any questions?” he asked, concluding his lecture. No one raised his or her hand. “Very well. Read Chapters Twenty-two and Twenty-three. Keep in mind that Finals start in three weeks, so we’ll be reviewing the entire semester week after next.”

The students filed out as they usually did, but one young woman stayed behind. “Mister Fulden?” she asked.

“Yes, Margaret?” he responded.

“Maggie,” she corrected him. He nodded and she continued. “You said that Venus was one of the Fates?”

“Not quite,” Mike corrected her. “Aphrodite Urania was the eldest of the Fates.”

“But isn’t Venus the same as Aphrodite?” Maggie asked.

“Not exactly. Venus is the Roman goddess who was equated by the Romans with the Greek goddess Aphrodite. There were differences between them such as their attributes and how their cults venerated them. It’s more like the Romans reinvented her to fit their own concept for what a goddess of Love should be. That was common enough in the ancient world, you know. Before she was Aphrodite, many of her attributes and those things the stories say about her belonged to goddesses of still earlier cultures.”

“Really?” Maggie asked. “Who was she then?”

“Well, the derivation is hard to follow, but the Canaanite goddess Astarte was a goddess of both Love and War. As time went on, her warrior aspect, Anat, became identified with Athena. Her mother and fertility attributes were sort of mixed with those of another goddess, Asherah and those attributes became identified with some forms of Artemis and Tanit. Her Love goddess parts were equated with the Greek Aphrodite. Before that, however, Astarte was very similar to the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar and, still earlier, the Sumerian’s Inanna. I imagine there were even earlier versions of her, but they would predate writing, so it would be hard to prove. Each form of her was different from the others of course since each group of people who worshipped her saw her in a way unique to their own cultures, so many scholars prefer to treat each of these forms as completely different goddesses who just happen to be similar in nature.”

“So was she all these goddesses or not?” Maggie persisted.

“Your choice, I suppose,” Mike told her. “She’s hardly the only deity to go through all those changes. I think you have to keep in mind that the ancients saw their gods differently than we do. Most gods belonged to certain locations. It was quite unusual for a god or goddess to move with his or her worshippers and the minor deities never did move. But as people went from place to place and met other people they would sometimes talk about how they practiced religion. Conquerors would commonly consider the gods of the conquered. When they found a god or goddess similar to one of their own, they would claim that deity was the same, under a different name. The conquered people might continue to worship that god or goddess in much the same way, with some new practices as brought in by their new rulers. The old ways, however, were new to the conquerors and sometimes those ways spread backwards to their own homes. The Romans were big on that. And in the pre-Christian Empire they seem to have delighted in adopting foreign gods.

“The Assyrians made a practice of moving conquered peoples away from their homelands,” Mike

told her. “Those people, believing they had been taken from their gods, quickly adopted the gods of the places to which they were taken and others who moved into their former homes would worship the gods of those first people. Naturally there would be differences each time that sort of thing happened so I guess in some cases such gods changed gradually and in others it happened all of a sudden. Does it matter?”

“It might to Aphrodite,” Maggie replied.

“I suppose,” Mike told her, suddenly certain in his mind that this student would be listening to Ina in another hour and a half. “Well, if you don’t mind I need to get to the library before it closes.”

“Will you have office hours next week?” Maggie asked him.

“I will for the rest of the semester and during Finals as well,” he replied, “although my schedule will be different. I’ll post those hours as soon as I know myself,” he promised before hurrying off to the library.

3

Mike had a reserved carrel in the university’s library. It was a small cubical overlooking the campus where he could study, keep the books he checked out while working on his dissertation and even had a power outlet nearby into which he could plug his notebook computer.

He sat down in his carrel and turned on the small computer while fishing an Ethernet cable out of the case. He’d been part of a large group of students who, a year earlier, had lobbied for wireless access to the university network, but the request had been turned down by Information Services. The reason given was that a wireless network was too insecure and Mike had accepted that until talking to fellow students from the Computer Sciences Department. They told him there were data encryption methods that under current technology were unlikely to be cracked before the Earth died a fiery death, bathed in the outer atmosphere of Nova Sol some five billion years, give or take, in the future. Since then he decided the request had been turned down simply because it was easier for I.S. not to deploy a new facet of the network.

He also decided it did not really matter since his carrel was in one of the few places that had been wired into the network, so even though it might have been nice to take the notebook with him to use in other parts of the library, he usually only left the cubicle to find another book or periodical.

Mike’s intention that afternoon was to continue his dissertation research until it was time to meet Ina, but, thinking about his lecture and of Maggie’s after-class questions, he chose instead to look up further details on Aphrodite Urania and her role as one of the Fates.

Far from the story of the later Aphrodite, called Aphrodite Pandemos, Urania's birth was part of the very creation of the world as Heaven was divided from the Earth. Plato saw her as the daughter of Uranus, born of no mother. This incarnation of Aphrodite was called the Heavenly One and he reminded himself that Astarte and Ishtar were the Queens of Heaven. As he thought about it, it made the connection between them closer. But Urania was never associated with War. Aphrodite Pandemos was, however, he remembered. Not directly, but there were times she was definitely in love with Ares, an indirect association, perhaps, but one that still hinted at her origins.

Her connection to the Moirae was less clear but Mike finally decided that maybe it was because there had supposedly been a time in which sacred kings had been sacrificed to Urania. It was, he thought, a rough parallel to the story of Inanna and Dumuzi. In that story Inanna, on visiting the Netherworld, was killed by her sister Erishkigal. She was later rescued by Enki, the god of fresh water and wisdom, and was allowed to return to Life only on the condition that she find someone to take her place. On discovering her husband Dumuzi had greeted the news of her death by celebrating instead of mourning, she had him torn to shreds by a pack of demons and carried back to the Land of the Dead. Well, it was sort of a sacrifice of a sacred king, Mike noted.

Then the library's lights flashed and Mike realized he'd been working here longer than he had thought. Quickly packing his notebook back up, he shoved his hand-written notes into a pocket of the case and rushed out of the building without pausing to listen to the librarian's lecture about keeping her waiting. Racing across campus, he arrived, somewhat winded to find Ina standing just outside the Student Union, chatting with two women Mike recognized as members of the neo-Venus cult.

"Oh, hi!" Ina greeted him. "I was afraid you might have stood me up."

"Never!" Mike gasped between breaths.

"I guess not," Ina laughed. "You've obviously been holding your breath until we met again, right? Well take a moment to catch it and we'll be off." She turned to face the other two women who were looking somewhat surprised to see Mike was the one Ina had been waiting for. "Remember what I told you, ladies," she reminded them. "Life is to be lived. Live it with love and respect and tolerance and you won't go far wrong. Well, Mike, ready? I must admit I'm partial to barbecue and jazz." So saying, she slipped her arm in his and they walked off together.

"So how did your lecture go?" Mike asked as they made their way to his car.

"Well enough," Ina shrugged. "It got a better reception than I thought it might and I don't think I'll need to return. No need to, really, but I did give them all something to think about. So how was your day?"

"Mostly inspired by you," Mike told her.

"By me?" Ina laughed.

"In a way," Mike admitted. "I was lecturing about the Moirae, so it was only natural to mention that some of the ancients considered the Aphrodite Urania the elder of the two Aphrodites, but I suppose you would know that."

"More intimately than you might imagine," Ina replied, "but to tell the truth I haven't even thought of the Urania aspect in... well, it seems like centuries."

“Most folks have never even heard of her,” Mike remarked, “not outside a Classics Department, anyway.”

“Oh, I pretty much lived and breathed mythology growing up,” Ina told him. “I’ll bet I could tell you stories about the gods you never even imagined. But tell me more about your lecture.”

Mike went on to recap what he had told his students as Ina listened intently, occasionally interrupting with interesting questions, which kept him talking on the subject all the way to the jazz club. “So after Maggie’s question,” he finally told her sometime later as they each polished off a rack of ribs, “I found myself looking up more details about Aphrodite Urania.”

“Any new insights?” Ina asked.

“New?” Mike echoed. “Well, most of what I read was stuff I already knew, although I think the part about being one of the Fates might be in some way related to the myth concerning Inanna and Dumuzi.”

Ina frowned. “Interesting observation,” she admitted, “but how does that relate?”

“Well, I assume you know how many scholars see Inanna as an earlier personification of Aphrodite?” Mike asked in reply.

“An earlier aspect,” Ina corrected him. “Gods, especially the major ones, have different aspects in the various cultures within which they are worshipped. Some aspects are closer than others, of course, so Inanna is nearly indistinguishable from Ishtar, but somewhat more different from Astarte and Tanit and even more different from Aphrodite and Venus. Well, no wonder about those last. Only part of Astarte went into Aphrodite, either of them, although at times they were the same goddess and at others quite distinct. Other parts were incorporated into Athena and Artemis and those are just the well-known aspects. I’ll tell you about her counterparts among the Goths and other northerners some time.”

“Aspects?” Mike asked. “I don’t think I’ve heard the term, but it’s not a bad way to describe the differences, I suppose, at least if you think all those gods and goddesses truly exist. The world would be over-populated with deities if each and everyone was a different individual.”

“It would be pretty crowded on the divine plane,” Ina laughed. “That’s for sure.”

“I suppose it might be amusing to watch Zeus and Jove trying to upstage one another,” Mike chuckled. “They’d likely send Ares and Mars off to wage war on each other too.”

“More likely they’d work out a way to juggle lightning bolts,” Ina told him. “but amusing isn’t the word I’d use. Sure you’d have an amazing number of loving creator gods crowding the scene, but you’d also have tons of destroyers as well. Too many gods getting in each others’ way is a good way to destroy the world. It’s happened all too often, but with the number you’re talking about, I doubt it would ever have been created. Then again, that could explain the cycles...” Ina trailed off thoughtfully.

“Cycles?” Mike asked.

“Hmm?” Ina looked up. “Oh sorry, just thinking out loud. Don’t mind me; I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

“Problems?” Mike asked.

"A few," she smiled. "Nothing I need to burden you with. Mostly just the hassle and stress of traveling around. But hey, it's baseball season again, so I think it's worth it."

"You like baseball?" Mike asked.

"Love it!" Ina told him enthusiastically.

"Want to go to a game? We have a pro team right here in Memphis, you know," Mike replied.

"The Memphis Chicks, right?" Ina asked.

"They changed their name," Mike informed her. "They're the Redbirds now. They may only be minor league, but at least they're Triple A. Part of the Cardinals' organization. So want to catch a game some time?"

"Sounds great!" Ina agreed. "When?"

"Tomorrow night?" Mike suggested.

"Sure," Ina nodded.

After dinner they headed back toward the campus, but instead of getting out of the car Mike and Ina continued to talk another two hours until Mike noticed the time. "If we keep this up much longer the sun's going to come up," he joked.

"If that happens, breakfast is on me," Ina laughed and suggested that maybe a cup of coffee would be a good idea. They eventually decided to go back to Mike's apartment for the coffee.

For the next few weeks they saw each other frequently although not on a regular basis. Ina had to leave town "on business" for several days at a time, explaining, "I have things to do elsewhere," or "Just scooting up to New England. Should I bring back lobster?" However, when she was in Memphis, she stayed with Mike.

Finally, as the semester wound down, Mike sighed one night and told her, "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm not going all that far, dear," Ina assured him.

"I am," He countered. "I should have mentioned this before but I scheduled a trip to Italy and Greece this summer. You know, taking in the sights, both ancient and medieval, art museums and a cruise through the Aegean."

"That's not a problem," Ina chuckled. "I have business in several parts of Europe this summer. I'm sure I can find a way to get our schedules to mesh at least some of the time. Let's see your itinerary and we can work out where to meet and when."

"You really have business in Europe?" Mike asked.

"I have more contacts there than here as a matter of fact," Ina nodded.

"I never asked just what you do," Mike noted.

“Actually you asked several times,” Ina laughed. “I just haven’t given much of an answer. I’m a sort of consultant. People ask me questions and I give them advice. These days I can do a lot of that over the phone and by e-mail. I did consider opening a web-site, but I like to keep my service exclusive.”

“I would have thought your phone would ring more often than it has,” Mike shrugged.

“It’s been a quiet period, is all,” Ina told him. “Believe me; there are times I’d like to chuck the thing in the river!”

“I know that feeling,” Mike laughed. “There are days it’s a relief to go to class where I have to turn the thing off. And to think there are people who practically live on their phones.”

“That’s not life,” Ina shook her head. “Constant texting, listening to music or watching movies on a small piece of plastic and wires and stuff. Such devices are meant to enhance life, not take it over.”

“Well, happily my phone won’t work outside the country,” Mike told her, “or should I get international service so we can stay in touch?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ina told him. “We’ll meet the old-fashioned way... by agreeing in advance where to be and by being on time.”

“That works for me,” Mike agreed.

4

“I love New York,” Lachesis admitted to Inanna. “The crowds, the activity, the food; it’s really the perfect place to visit. Dionysis has offered me tickets to *Wicked* next week. Would you like to join me?”

“Sounds like fun,” Inanna agreed, “but I’ll be in Italy with Mike whenever I’m not needed for a ballgame with the Lamassu.”

“Oh? Who’s Mike?” Lachesis asked. Ina explained how they had been dating a few weeks now. “And how do you expect to travel with this man while also playing in the Celestial League? I imagine your manager wants you at all the practices, doesn’t he?”

“It’s a bit of a stretch, but I’ll work something out,” Inanna told her. “I have friends helping me make it work.”

“You have friends,” Lachesis commented dryly. “I still can’t get used to it.”

“Keep that up and you may not be one of them,” Inanna warned her.

“Sorry,” Lachesis apologized instantly. “I just keep thinking about the Venus I know.”

"The old me," Inanna told her. "Even a goddess can change, given enough time."

"I'm not sure I can," Lachesis admitted. "I mean I'm not just a goddess. I'm also the personification of one of the basic conditions of womanhood, you know."

"You can change if you want to," Inanna told her. "I'm a personification of Love and War and I've changed. Besides, look around you. In the modern world middle age isn't what it used to be and it comes a lot later in life too. So, how's your love life?"

"What love life?" Lachesis countered.

"I thought that was the point of this meeting," Inanna replied. "To catch up and compare notes on what we've been doing since that afternoon in Boston. I've told you about Mike. Now spill."

"Well, I haven't had a lot of luck that way," Lachesis admitted. "None of the gods are very comfortable around me, you know that, and I don't feel I have anything at all in common with mortal men. Young men may be pretty to look at and all, but I'm not Clotho. A little intellectual stimulation would be nice every now and then."

"You think mortal men can't be intellectual?" Inanna laughed. "More likely them than our fellow gods. Try seeing an older man if you find the younger ones too shallow. Nin-ti took up with Hawk Wilton when he was in his sixties, and Dee spends all her free time with Eddy."

"Dee? Eddy?" Lachesis asked.

"Dee," Inanna repeated. "Short for Demeter. She met Eddy Salem when he was over eighty, but fell in love with him almost instantly. The thing is neither man was young by anyone's standards when we first encountered them."

"They're both immortal now," Lachesis pointed out.

"But they weren't at the time Nin-ti and Dee started taking up with them," Inanna argued. "and, frankly, aside from their vastly improved health, I don't see any real changes in either of them."

"So you still think there's no real difference between gods and mortals?" Lachesis asked.

"No," Inanna shook her head. "Not really. Not counting the Infinites, of course."

"Of course," Lachesis murmured. "But don't gods have special powers?"

"We have abilities and affinities that are unique to each of us," Inanna allowed, "but so do mortals. Some are good carpenters, farmers, writers, scientists. Each has his strengths and weaknesses. Where's the big difference?"

"Mother Nature can control the weather or cause earthquakes," Lachesis pointed out. "Are you equating that with the ability to grow a turnip?"

"I couldn't grow a turnip to save my life," Inanna replied, "and divine attributes don't make us better people or even very different when you get right down to it. Zeus is still a blatant philanderer. Athena is still too ready to take sides and Hermes has always been a thief. The fact that Zeus can toss lightning around, Athena is the embodiment of wisdom when she can manage to keep her head screwed on and

Hermes is also a trustworthy messenger doesn't make them any better or worse than mortal people."

"Gods are complex beings," Lachesis noted.

"So are mortals," Inanna argued, "and some gods are fairly simple-minded. Clotho for example."

"Or a dryad," Lachesis added.

"Actually I know some fairly intelligent dryads," Inanna pointed out. "I don't think they've been given the credit they deserve over the millennia. Some of them are very deep thinkers, indeed."

"If you say so," Lachesis shrugged, "but would you say that if a mortal would suddenly become immortal..." she left the thought hanging like a baited hook.

"He or she wouldn't be a different person," Inanna told her immediately. "Even if there is a change it would probably take ages to occur and would be the same as growing up. Dee always says that Immortality is something you need to grow into."

"We'll see," Lachesis replied almost silently, although Inanna heard her all too clearly.

"And what do you mean by that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh," Lachesis stalled to think up an answer, "just thinking about what we'll have to talk about next month. Should we meet in Rome?"

"Let's make it Venice," Inanna suggested.

5

Ina met Mike as he got off the plane in Rome several mornings later and instantly whisked him off to the ancient remains of Nero's Domus Aurea, the great Golden House. "It's hard to believe so much of this was just recently discovered," Mike noted as they viewed those sections open to the public.

"To the people of Rome, the palace was a symbol of all Nero's excesses and perceived crimes," Ina replied. "So after they burned through several emperors in a single year, Vespasian opened those parts of the Domus Aurea that survived to the public and he and later emperors gradually, and in some cases not so gradually, demolished it to clear the way for newer structures. It was thought at the time and later that the Golden House was almost completely demolished, but it turns out much of it was just covered over or filled in – it was really incredibly large and garish even for its day."

"You sound like you were actually there," Mike told her.

“At times it seems I was,” Ina replied thoughtfully, “in another life, perhaps.”

“Oh?” Mike chuckled, “and were you Cleopatra’s handmaiden in a past life as well?”

“Hah!” Ina laughed. “I wouldn’t have had anything to do with that one. I never did know where she got her reputation for beauty. Her nose was too big, but she was sexy in a self-assured and somewhat arrogant way. Frankly, it wasn’t her beauty that attracted Caesar and Antony, though. Part of it was her intelligence, but most of it was the fact she controlled Egypt and that land was the bread basket of Rome. Without the grain from Egypt, Rome would have starved to death in short order.”

“Interesting perspective,” Mike nodded, “if not particularly romantic.”

“Mike,” Ina told him, taking his hand in her own, “if you want romantic stories that are true, don’t look to the celebrities of history. Look rather at the common folk. That’s where the true love and romance has always been, when it’s been anywhere at all.”

“You’re right about the grain, however,” Mike agreed. “Tacitus and Suetonius both mentioned it as a vital part of the economy.”

“Egypt wasn’t the only source of grain, of course,” Ina told him, “but it was such an important one that its sudden loss would have been disastrous at the time. Are you tired?”

“I didn’t get much sleep on the plane, I’m afraid,” Mike admitted with a yawn.

“Oh. You shouldn’t have let me drag you out here so soon, then,” Ina told him and started pushing him out of the Domus Aurea.

“No, it’s okay,” he assured her. “I wanted to come here anyway and now I can at least take a nap and not feel I wasted the whole day especially since you won’t be here this evening. Are you sure you can’t shift your plans around?”

“Wish I could, dear,” Ina shook her head, “but I don’t have a lot of control over this appointment. I should be back in Rome by midnight. I’ll slip into your room if you’d like.” He smiled his agreement. “Good, then let’s find out which room is yours. I don’t want to find you by trial and error.”

“The search would be easy enough,” he replied. “The first door you open behind which the occupant doesn’t scream will be me.”

“Uh, yes,” Ina replied dryly. “but I’m a perfectionist and want to get it right on the first try.”

The rest of Mike’s tour group had already checked into the hotel which was only a few blocks away from the ruins Mike and Ina had been exploring and several of them were sitting in the lobby trying to decide where to go first. This first day they were pretty much on their own until just mid afternoon when they were supposed to take a bus tour of the city. Mike had already decided that it was more important to take a nap, but told Ina he would probably take the tour if he managed to wake up in time. After she had helped him check into his room, she kissed him warmly and promised to be back soon.

As promised she was back just past midnight and they went out for a late night drink. However she was off again just after breakfast and didn’t return for two days. After that they spent the rest of the week together in Rome before Mike’s tour moved on to Herculaneum and Pompeii.

Mike was on his own again for the first two days in Herculaneum while Ina said she was visiting Sweden, but then she stayed with him throughout the visit to Pompeii and even rode with him to Firenze.

They were touring the Uffizi Gallery and admiring Da Vinci's Anunciation when a young blonde woman sidled up beside Mike and whispered something in his ear that made him blush. Ina's face turned red too, but it wasn't embarrassment that tinted her visage, but rage. "Excuse me, dear," she told Mike sweetly as she grabbed the other woman by the arm and rushed her out of the Leonardo room to the Botticelli collection next door. The room was empty and Ina finally let go as they stood before Botticelli's best known work, "The Birth of Venus."

"What the hell are you doing here, Clotho?" Ina hissed at her. "And don't tell me you're feeding your aesthetic sense."

"My what?" Clotho asked, confused. Then she shelved that and smirked at Ina. "What's the matter, Venus, can't you take the competition?"

"Love is not a competition sport, Nona," Ina told her.

"I don't like that name," Clotho whined.

"Tough!" Ina told her firmly. "I'm not particularly fond of my Roman aspect either, but you started it. Now talk."

"Hey," Clotho giggled, "all's fair in love and war. You ought to know that."

"Well, maybe you've forgotten, Nona, but I'm both. Now back off!" Ina told her sternly.

"You forget who you're dealing with, Love!" Clotho sniped back at her.

"Not really," Ina told her smugly. "You're the Spinner. I know you very well, indeed. You spin the threads of life. Well, child, I was born so long ago, someone else spun my thread. Not only that, but already being alive, I'm well beyond any power you might have."

"Not if I have Atropos cut your thread," Clotho threatened her. "Even Zeus is afraid of the Moirae."

"Really, little girl?" Ina replied quietly. It should have been a warning to Clotho, but the Spinner was oblivious to subtlety. "Atropos has my respect. So does Lachesis, but you're such a vapid little thing, you're going to need another few millennia before you are even worth my notice."

"Oh that does it!" Clotho all but screamed. "Hope you've enjoyed life so far, cause it ends today."

"Oh yeah?" Ina growled. "Okay. Never let it be said I couldn't stare Death in the face. Let's go."

"What?" Clotho asked.

"Let's go talk to Atropos. Right now," Ina suggested.

"She's very busy and doesn't like to be bothered," Clotho told her.

"Really?" Ina asked archly. "And to think Lachesis insists the fates can't change. Well, I don't blame

you for not wanting to be there, but I think it's high time I had a word with her. Come with me if you dare."

Ina took two steps toward the painting with Clotho close behind until they were suddenly standing on one of the branches of Yggdrasil, the great tree from which all the worlds hung.

Ina looked around and decided they were about halfway up in the Tree, a long way from the base near which the Norns were known to work. She looked back and forth and finally started walking toward the trunk.

"This is a mistake, Ishtar," Clotho warned her. "Nothing good will come of this." She sounded worried.

"I'm sure of that," Ina remarked, "but if you think Atropos' shears are sharp, just wait until I nip this in the bud." They continued on as Clotho continued trying to talk Ina out of it until they came within view of the trunk.

"Hey! What's all the racket down there?" a high voice that sounded like the second cousin once removed of Alvin and the Chipmunks. "This used to be such a nice quiet place!" A large squirrel, roughly the size of a German Shepherd, suddenly jumped down on to the same branch as Ina and Clotho. The he took a second look and whistled appreciatively, "Oh baby! Two gorgeous babes. Hey, Nona! Wanna fool around?"

"Eew!" Clotho wrinkled her nose. "Ratatosk, you're disgusting!"

"Don't you ever get tired of that joke, Ratty?" Ina asked him calmly.

"Hi, Ina," Ratatosk greeted her with considerably more civility, "Not so long as I can get a rise out of the Blonde Bimbo there. You know, she never fails to please."

"I've heard that," Ina laughed maliciously, "but not quite in that context."

"Hey!" Clotho complained a little too late. Ina just shrugged and Ratatosk laughed.

"Hey, Love Goddess!" Ratatosk asked suddenly. "Why are you going the wrong way?"

"Wrong way?" Ina asked. "Why? Isn't Atropos down at the base of the Tree today?"

"She might be," the squirrel told her, "but you have a game in Dilmun today."

"Plenty of time before that, rodent," Ina told him. "I have some business downstairs first."

"Hawk isn't going to like it," Ratatosk warned her. "You were late for batting practice all last week and he hasn't forgotten."

"This is more important," Ina maintained.

"Hawk won't see it that way," Ratatosk pointed out.

"I'll handle Hawk," Ina told him. "Even he knows it's more important to save my own life."

“I was only kidding!” Clotho told her.

“You threatened Inanna’s life?” Ratatosk hooted. “And you’re still breathing? Ina, you’re getting mellow in your dotage.”

“Shut up, Ratty,” Ina told him harshly. “That is unless you know a short-cut to the ground.”

“I know two, babe,” Ratatosk told her. “You could jump.”

“The fall could kill almost anyone,” Ina pointed out.

“Nah, the fall never kills anyone,” Ratatosk laughed.

“The landing then,” Ina cut him off before he could finish the joke. “Don’t tell me, let me guess, the other way is to fly.”

“You can do that,” the squirrel pointed out.

“I would prefer not to,” Ina told him. “But I do need a bit of exercise. I can run.”

“I’m not running!” Clotho complained.

“I didn’t say you had to,” Ina told her and started jogging toward the trunk.

Clotho just stood there and watched until Ratatosk taunted her, “I thought you were trying to stop her.”

“Eeps!” Clotho shrieked and ran pell-mell after Ina.

“Just too easy if you ask me,” Ratatosk shook his head and jumped off to another branch, making his way down the tree in his own fashion.

6

Ina and Clotho ran down the trunk of the World Tree and soon found themselves at ground level where Lachesis and Atropos were busy working. “Well, Love Goddess,” Atropos greeted her. “It’s been a while.” Lachesis was wearing modern style clothing in various shades of brown, but Atropos always wore long black dresses. She brushed her thin white hair out of her eyes and looked at Ina archly.

“I supposed I really should visit more often, Cutter,” Ina admitted. “Sorry. I’ve been busy in a whole new manner of ways lately.”

"I've noticed," Atropos chuckled, "and I've never been a popular party guest." She laughed a bit harder at the thought of anyone inviting her to a party.

"Careful, dear," Ina warned her gently, "That's almost a cackle. Do that too much and folks will talk."

"Have I ever cared what people thought of me?" Atropos countered.

Ina thought about that and decided, "Yes, I think so. This half-crazy, old woman pose is just an act and we both know it. You're sharp as a tack and twice as quick."

"And three times a lady," Atropos snapped back.

"See?" Ina pointed out. "Atropos, do you have a beef with me?"

"You, Nymphette?" Atropos asked, somewhat surprised. "I'm a little jealous, perhaps. How do you keep your girlish figure?"

"Like any other goddess," Ina laughed. "I have to work at it. You could be young if you really want to. You know that. You haven't always been depicted as an old woman, so it is within you to have a younger aspect."

"Ah, so you say," Atropos sighed, looking down at herself. "But this form is more comfortable and lower maintenance as they say these days."

"So you do get out from time to time," Ina noted.

"Everyone needs a break," Atropos told her. "I occasionally spend a few months in Florida."

"Your choice, I suppose," Ina shrugged, "but do you bear me any ill will, Mors? Do you harbor any animosity toward me?"

"Why would I do that?" Atropos asked.

"Do you have any reason to cut my thread?" Ina pressed.

"No, child," Atropos shook her head. "I have no plans to end your life anytime in the foreseeable future."

"And you can see a lot further in that direction than I can," Ina added and then turned toward Lachesis. "How about you, Decima? Are we at war? Do you intend me harm?"

"Of course not!" Lachesis replied instantly. "Don't be silly. If I did that who would I go out to lunch with?"

"Well, Nona here seems to think she can threaten my existence," Ina announced.

"I told you I don't like that name," Clotho protested.

Ina ignored her and continued, "I take that sort of thing personally, but I'm willing to forgive and

forget if it's just a matter of her ego growing even bigger than her libido."

"I didn't!" Clotho tried to deny Ina's charges.

"*Not if I have Atropos cut your thread,*" Ina mimicked Clotho's earlier threat. "*Even Zeus is afraid of the Moirae,*" she continued in her deft imitation. "Look here, little Number Nine. Maybe it was before your time, in fact I know it was, but one of my aspects was called Aphrodite Urania and as such I am the eldest of the Fates. It may have been a while since I flashed that particular union card, but if you think you can threaten Me again, I'll see to it that you'll have to spin your threads standing up for the next millennium. Capeesh?"

"Most impressive, Anat," Ratatosk complimented her a short while later as she made her way back up the Tree.

"There's not much of Anat left in me these days, Ratty," Ina told him. "I thought you knew that. Anat went on to become Athena and Minerva."

"Well," Ratatosk snickered, "what little of her is left in you was having a field day just a few minutes ago."

"I'd have thought it was pure Inanna, the Queen of Heaven," Ina replied tartly.

"Well, whoever it was, she took a lot longer to do it than you obviously think," Ratatosk informed her. "You have a game in less than two hours. You'd better hurry directly to Tiamat Field."

"No," Ina told him. "I have to go back to Firenze first. Mike probably thinks I abandoned him."

"Well right now you're not headed in either direction," Ratatosk told her. "This is the wrong branch for Italy or Dilmun."

"What?" Ina replied. "Oh, so it is." She turned around and headed back for the trunk, but turned the wrong way when she got there."

"Up, Love Lady," Ratatosk jeered, "not down."

Ina stopped for a few seconds and realized she was all turned around. "One of those three is having entirely too much fun today. It's been a while since anyone managed to cast a glamour of any sort on me."

"That's what happens when you let your guard down among the Norns," Ratatosk laughed.

"It's not funny, rodent, but it also won't happen again," Ina growled. "Maybe I'd better let you lead for a few minutes, however."

"I still say you ought to be getting to Dilmun first," Ratatosk told her. "Your boyfriend's capable of finding his own way home."

"How would you know?" Ina asked.

“I know you, chica,” Ratatosk laughed. “We’ve worked together a fair bit these last few years and I’ve seen you grow up in that short time.” Ina growled at his characterization of the changes she had gone through, but privately had to admit the squirrel was correct. “I seriously doubt you’d be interested in some of those boy-toys you used to date.”

Suddenly the Tree started shaking. It wasn’t enough to do any real damage, but the rumble did cause the branches to vibrate and some of the leaves cascaded down like a verdant snowfall.

“Now, what?” Ratatosk grumbled. There was the screech of a hawk off to the east. “That’s Vethrfofnir,” Ratatosk told Ina. “I’d better go see what he wants.”

“You want some help?” Ina offered.

“Thanks, but I can travel faster without a partner,” Ratatosk told her. “Just keep headed in the right direction and don’t forget your ball game.”

“Okay,” Ina shrugged and continued to head back to Italy. A few minutes later, however a strong east wind blew through the Tree and Ina was knocked down to the smooth bark of the branch she was traveling on. So strong was the wind, she decided she was safer staying down until it passed some ten long minutes later.

“Is this what you call progress?” Ratatosk asked her when she was finally able to sit back up.

“It’s not my fault,” Ina protested. “What’s happening?”

“Storm coming up from the east,” Ratatosk told her. Ina got back to her feet and continued on. “That’s quite unusual for around here. Vethrfofnir’s flying down to the base of the Tree to make sure it isn’t some new mischief from the Weird Sisters. They don’t normally do that sort of thing, but you may have stirred them up more than you know.”

“I gave Clotho a verbal spanking is all,” Ina retorted. “You can’t say she didn’t have it coming.”

“Sure I can,” Ratatosk countered. “I can say anything I like. It’s part of the job description.”

“The bearer of strife,” Ina nodded. “Very well, you’ve been fairly polite today, for you anyway.”

“That’s cause I like you, toots” Ratatosk told her in his squeaky voice.

“How soon before that storm hits?” Ina asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Ratatosk told her. “It’s not a real storm; not yet anyway.”

“What do you mean, Ratty?” Ina asked.

“It’s really more of a possible storm,” Ratatosk replied. “It’s the potential for a storm.”

“That was enough to shake the tree and blow off all those leaves?” Ina asked.

“Of course,” Ratatosk replied, “but Yggdrasil is a tough old twig. It will take more than a mere hurricane to damage Him.”

“That felt like more than a mere hurricane to me,” Ina opined.

“Not really,” Ratatosk told her. “It didn’t even blow through the entire Tree. It was just a stray gust. You got lucky is all. Had you been one or two branches over you might not have felt a thing, but you may have heard the wind rustling the leaves. Oh, now what’s the problem?” Ratatosk asked as another avian alarm sounded from somewhere above them. “First Vethrfofnir, now Samuel. When I woke up this morning I thought it was going to be such a nice day. ‘Scuse me, hot stuff. I’m needed again.” Ratatosk bounded back up the trunk, leaving Ina to follow considerably further behind until she found the branch that would lead her back to the Uffizi Museum.

Five minutes later Ratatosk met her coming back from the other direction followed by a tall brown haired man. “Mike?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I came looking for you,” Mike replied. “When you didn’t come back I tried following you into the Botticelli collection.”

“But how the heck did you end up here or all places?” Ina insisted.

“Darned if I know,” Mike shrugged. “Where are we anyway?”

“Yggdrasil,” Ratatosk told him simply.

“Gesundheit,” Mike replied automatically before performing a classic double take. “Yggdrasil? The great Norse World Tree? Are you having me on?”

“On what?” Ratatosk asked, smirking. “Look around you, boychik. Do you really think anything this large could be a natural tree? A sequoia is a mere shrub compared to this king of the tree world!”

“The rodent has it right, Mike,” Ina told him. “This really is Yggdrasil. It’s also the Biblical Tree of Life, Buddha’s Bo tree, the sacred fig of India and the Pacific Basin and so forth. All major religions have a sacred tree or two in them and this tree is the embodiment of all of them in one aspect or another.”

“Aspect?” Mike asked. “You used that word before when talking about various similar gods and goddesses.”

“Many entities on the divine plane of existence have more than one aspect,” Ina explained. “It comes from the changes all religions go through with time. Some things are seen in a new light or new people are converted and yet bring some of their old beliefs with them and sometimes people establish new cults just for the novelty of it. People can be odd that way at times. But really, how did you find your way to this plane?”

“I don’t really know. When you disappeared with that other woman... Who was she anyway?”

“Clotho,” Ina admitted.

“The youngest of the Fates?” Mike asked. “Are you kidding?”

“No, jocko,” Ratatosk put in, “she’s dead serious. Do you have any idea who this bit of fluff you’ve been dating is?”

“You’re not helping, Ratty,” Ina growled at him.

"I'm not trying to sugar-coat it, if that's what you mean, babe," Ratatosk shot back. "We don't have the time for it. In fact we should be headed for Dilmun right now or Hawk is going to have a fit."

"No," Ina shook her head. "I need to get Mike back to Firenze first."

"You don't have that luxury anymore," Ratatosk informed her. "We've wasted too much time, so if you go by way of Italy, you'll miss most of the game."

"What game?" Mike asked.

"One thing at a time," Ina insisted, and stopped to think a bit. "Why can't you take him back, Ratty?"

"I'm already overbooked today," the squirrel told her.

"I thought you could be in two places at once," Ina pointed out.

"And my other half is busy watching the game in Valhalla," Ratatosk replied. "Come on. It's not that big a deal and you're going to have to tell him who you are soon enough, Love. I'll do it for you, if you like."

"You won't unless you want to spend the rest of this cycle as a fur coat," Ina warned him. "Okay, Mike. That really was Clotho, the Spinner, Nona, or whatever else you want to call her. At the moment I have a lot of names for her, none of which are fit for mixed company."

"But you were able to man-handle her about," Mike noted.

"Comes from being a goddess," Ratatosk chuckled.

"Ratty!" Ina growled warningly.

"Goddess?" Mike asked.

"Mike? You remember the day we met," Ina reminded him. "Do you remember why I was in Memphis that day?"

"You were going to give a lecture to the local Venus cult," Mike recalled.

"A lecture?" Ratatosk hooted. "You?"

"Not helping, Ratty," Ina shot back. "It was a lecture, but also more of a farewell address. I first came across that group as a small cult of so-called neo-pagans in Little Rock. At the time I was just trying to explain that worship was all well and good, but I wasn't the goddess they thought I was anymore. Actually, I'm not sure I ever was the goddess they thought I was. Their notion was the sort that fills adolescent boys' dreams. Anyway, that first meeting didn't quite go the way I hoped. I had to prove I wasn't just some wacko who thought she was a goddess."

"How did you do that?" Mike asked. In reply, Ina changed before his eyes. He wasn't certain just what had changed, but suddenly She was definitely far more than human and almost infinitely desirable. A moment later he shook his head as she switched off whatever power she had momentarily turned on. "Powerful stuff there."

“It’s the sort of power that can go to a goddess’ head if she isn’t careful,” Ina told him. “I try not to do that sort of thing anymore. Love and devotion is too precious to be forced. Anyway, I manifested before them, for want of a better phrase, and they sort of went crazy for a while.”

“And a fun time was had by all,” Ratatosk put in. “Sorry to have missed it.”

“I can do just the opposite, if you like, Troublemaker,” Ina retorted. “Well, after things calmed down, I helped reorganize the cult along lines I found more to my liking and certainly more reasonable in light of this modern world, but it doesn’t really do a religion much good to have the object of worship right there sitting next to you, so I knew that after getting them started I would have to back off and let them make their own decisions and live their own lives. That was the night I broke it to them that I probably wouldn’t be back unless they really screwed up.”

“So let me get this straight,” Mike replied slowly. “You think you’re Venus?”

“Think?” Ratatosk howled with laughter.

“I’ve been getting back to my roots lately and prefer the name Inanna,” Ina replied. “but to tell the truth, I really like just being plain old Ina. It’s a guise I had to adopt a year and some months ago and it suits the new me, really.”

“*A date with Inanna*,” Mike recalled out loud, “*Way to go, Sport!* So that’s what she meant.”

“What was that?” Ina asked. “Who said that?”

“I don’t know,” Mike admitted. “I’d never seen her before and haven’t seen her since, but just after we agreed to meet for dinner there was another woman, one with dark hair nearby.”

“With violet eyes?” Ina asked.

“I thought it was a trick of the light,” Mike told her. “Anyway, that’s what she said just after you left. Then she disappeared almost as soon as she said it and I decided my mind was playing tricks on me.”

“I wonder what she was doing there,” Ina commented.

“Who is she?” Mike asked.

“No one you should have heard of, dear,” Ina told him. “Just a friend of mine. She must have been keeping tabs on me. She’s a dear, but sometimes she can’t help but want to butt in. I’d told her what I planned to do earlier in the day and, I guess she was curious as to whether I’d go through with it. Remind me to have a word or two with her next time I see her. Anyway, yes I am, or was Venus, Aphrodite – both of them, Astarte, Tanit to an extent, Ishtar, Inanna, Dimir, a pinch of Artemis and a soupcon of Alitta and a host of other names even you won’t have heard of.”

“You’re Aphrodite,” Mike replied, trying to take it in. He stopped walking and the others had to stop to face him.

“Not as much as I used to be,” Ina told him. “I call myself Inanna these days, although I’m not much like my Sumerian aspect anymore either. I’d like to think I’ve grown up a bit since I tried to vamp Gilgamesh, take his rejection out on Enkidu and then turn around and offer my husband up to the demons

of Hell.”

“As I recall the story, he wasn’t exactly in mourning over your death,” Mike replied.

“I didn’t need to order him dismembered first though and as for the sacrifice, any condemned criminal would have done,” Ina told him.

“So you and me...” Mike left the idea hanging.

“It’s been wonderful so far,” Ina told him instantly, “and I want to see where it leads us. Are you game?”

“I suppose I should start calling you Inanna, then,” Mike decided.

“You may, but Ina’s better,” she told him. “It’s the name I’ve been using since I got recruited... well, I think it fits me better than any of my previous ones. Who’d have thought Enki would name my modern aspect,” she mused.

They were about to embrace, but Ratatosk broke them up abruptly. “Hold up, lovebirds! We’re only getting later. Let’s keep moving. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Ina asked him.

“To make sure that portal you left open is closed now,” Ratatosk told her.

“I could have sworn I closed it behind Clotho as she followed me through,” Ina replied.

“Must be love then,” Ratatosk told her, “either that or you’re getting forgetful in your old age, toots!” Ina plucked an orange seemingly from out of thin air and hurled it at the squirrel, the Ratatosk ducked under the branch and then spiraled his way back up about ten feet further away. “Good thing you aren’t a pitcher!” he jeered and scampered back down the branch. Ina sighed and led Mike onward even as she muttered vile imprecations about the squirrel. “I heard that!” he shouted distantly.

“Good!” Ina shouted back. “Wait just a minute! Why do you have time to go there, but I don’t? Oh, heck. Come on, Mike.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You know all those times I’ve had to be away from you since we met?” Ina asked as they walked a bit more quickly.

“Yes, you said you had business in various places,” Mike recalled.

“Right,” Ina chuckled. “Well, now that you know who I really am, I may as well show you what sort of business I was conducting. Good thing I already know you like baseball.”

Part Two: Love on the Rocks

1

Ina left Mike outside Dilmun stadium with an elderly gentleman she introduced as Eddy Salem, his teenaged granddaughter, Amy Terrula and another friend whom she only introduced as Ash.

“Like the tree?” Mike had asked.

“I’m quite partial to all trees,” Ash told him with a smile as they turned to enter the stadium.

“I’ll say,” Amy laughed, “but then in a way I think we all are to one extent or another.”

“I’m missing something, aren’t I?” Mike asked. “Look are you all gods and goddesses like Ina too?”

“Oh, she told you,” Amy remarked. “I had wondered. Good, it would have been hard to hide the nature of this place if she had just invited you here to watch her play. Ash is the only goddess from the ancient world, though.”

“Most modern people have never heard of me,” Ash told him. “I’m Asherah, formerly a goddess of Canaan and the Israelites.”

“Hmm, that would also make you Thetis and some of Artemis and several others, wouldn’t it?” Mike asked.

“Those might have been aspects of mine and in the past I might have merged with them, but I did not and until about a year ago, I was somewhat out of circulation,” Ash explained. “It’s a long story and one best left for another time.”

At that point Mike had his first view of Tiamat Field. The grandstand, constructed of a white marble with thin green and blue lines throughout, formed a rounded “V” along the first and third base lines although there were no seats in the outfield area. The seats were all marble benches although there were cushions on them and, unlike stadia in the mortal world, admission and refreshments were free of charge.

“Hot dogs?” Mike asked. “In ancient Sumer?”

“They probably had some form of sausage, would be my guess,” Eddy replied, “But I understand Enki has arranged to have them brought in for serving at the games.”

“Last time I was here,” Amy added, “They were serving Fenway-style franks, but I’m told it changes from game to game. I wonder what we have this time.”

“Cincinnati Cheese Cones,” a server dressed in a long white, multilayered robe told her. “Hope you’re hungry,” he added.

“Thank you, Gibil,” Amy told him, accepting the sausage, cheese and chili concoction. “Gibil is the

god of fire here,” she told Mike.

“I still can’t get over the size of the field,” Mike remarked even as he accepted his dog. “The outfield goes on forever.”

“Just a quarter of a mile,” Eddy told him. Much shorter and any hit in this league would be a homerun.”

“And what’s with the sparkling grass?” Mike asked.

“I think they heard something about Astroturf and went along with that,” Amy smirked. “Honestly, I don’t know. It just is.”

“So who’s playing today?” Mike asked a moment later, looking out at the field as batting practice continued.

“The Dilmun Lamassu, of course,” Amy replied, “against the Pacific Basin Green Sox. Should be a good game, they’re first and second in their division, though we’re not quite halfway through the season.”

“And those are really gods and goddesses out there?” Mike asked uncertainly.

“Sure!” Amy told him enthusiastically. “That’s Enki taking batting practice right now. Do you know who he is?”

“The god of water, wisdom, magic and inventions,” Mike replied. “I’ve heard of most of the ancient gods, I think.”

“Okay,” Amy nodded. “Well, that’s Isimud pitching for the practice. That probably means he’s not playing today. Marduk is the big one waiting to bat next. That’s Gilgamesh over at third base and Nergal, the king of the dead, at first. Nanna Sin is in right field although I don’t know who the other outfielders are. Ninhursag or Mother Nature is at second base and Inanna is suppose to be at shortstop. Oh, and see the two visitors playing catch on the far side of the field? That’s Maui and Pele from Polynesia.”

“Very impressive,” Mike admitted. “And you’re the goddess of...?”

“Getting on the Dean’s List at Brown,” Amy chuckled.

“Is that what it takes in the Ivy League?” Mike laughed.

“No, but it helps,” Amy laughed back. “Uh oh, looks like Hawk is giving Ina trouble.” Down below it was obvious the team manager was reading the Riot Act to Inanna who was wearing a uniform with the number “3” on it.

“Well, we were late,” Mike admitted. “That may have been partially my fault. I’ll have to find a way to make it up to her.”

“She’s had to weather Hawk’s lectures before,” Amy told him, “but I suppose a nice dinner and a movie wouldn’t go amiss.”

“So is Hawk the god of baseball?” Mike asked.

“No,” Eddy laughed. “He a retired minor leaguer the Lamassu hired to manage their team.”

“And Nin-ti’s partner, Granddad,” Amy added. “You wouldn’t like it if people forgot you and Dee were together.”

“It would be none of their business,” Eddy replied, “but I take your point.”

Mike was about to ask another question as the batting cage was cleared from the field for the visiting team to practice fielding, but before he could, he caught Ash looking at him strangely. “Is there a problem, Ash?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ash apologized. “I was being rude. Forgive me.”

“That’s okay,” Mike shrugged. “Have you all known Ina long?”

“I first met her about two years ago,” Eddy replied. “Enki assigned her to act as one of my body guards. We were in the middle of a fairly important but controversial project and he was worried about attacks on me and my home.”

“I didn’t meet her until nearly half a year later,” Amy replied, “but Ash knew her in the old days, didn’t you, Ash?”

“I did,” Ash replied, “But she’s nothing like she was back then. It’s been a very long time and she has taken quite a few different forms since she was called Astarte. I like her much better now than when we were younger.”

“She had a fairly nasty reputation as Astarte,” Mike observed.

“According to the people who wrote your Bible,” Ash told him. “They didn’t like me very much either, but she was loved and worshiped by the Canaanites and Phoenecians and then by the Carthaginians, the Greeks and the Romans as time went on.”

“She used to play with people as though they were her personal toys, didn’t she?” Mike countered,

“She’s not like that any longer,” Eddy told him. “She’s more mature and respectful of her fellow beings. I don’t think she’s been playing with your emotions, if that’s what you’ve been trying to ask.”

“Trying not to, actually,” Mike admitted. “It’s just too tempting to just up and ask.”

“That’s understandable,” Eddy told him, “but you ought to try asking Ina instead of us.”

“You’re right, sir,” Mike replied, “and thank you.”

Their conversation turned to the game and soon the game began. Mike found that in spite of the size of the field and the supernatural abilities of the players, it was still the same game he had played as a boy. The only difference was that, unlike during a mortal game, he honestly hoped not to have a ball batted directly at him. The impact was likely to kill him.

As the third inning began, they were joined by a black-haired female with small horns that sprouted from her temples and a long pointed tail that hung down under her dark blue dress. She had a heart-shaped face that was accentuated by her deep violet eyes and Mike thought she looked somehow

familiar but was unable to remember just where he might have seen her. He was fairly certain he would have noticed a demoness if he saw her.

“Hi, Jael!” Amy greeted her with a hug. “I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“I’ve been busy,” Jael told her in a sexy contralto. “We do have some responsibilities, you know.”

“And Marcus likes to see us every now and then,” another higher voice said out of Jael’s mouth and for a moment her hair turned blonde and her face lengthened a bit.

“Well, he’s off digging in Israel again this summer so we’ll try to visit more often,” the contralto continued even as her original appearance asserted itself.

“How many of you are there in there?” Mike asked.

“Only two,” both voices answered. “I’m Rona,” the blonde human continued, “Jael’s better half.”

“Says you,” Jael retorted, regaining her demonic attributes. “You’re Mike, right? I’m Jael and Rona is... well the human soul I’m possessed by, I guess you could say. We get along most of the time. So are you here with Inanna?”

“Yes I am,” Mike replied, and then looked at her again. “I saw you at Geekers, didn’t I?”

“Could be,” Jael admitted cautiously.

“It was the day I met Ina,” Mike told her.

“Jael, were you spying on Ina?” Amy asked.

“Not really, I was just curious about her cult so I followed her to Memphis that day,” Jael admitted. “She had been talking about it for months and I finally had to see for myself. Good thing I did too. I didn’t really believe at the time it was going to be her last apparition there. I’m kind of surprised you remembered me though, Mike.”

“You’re a memorable...” he took another look at her horns and stumbled verbally. “uh person,” he concluded lamely.

“Uh person?” Jael echoed amusedly.

“Well, you weren’t wearing the horns that day, were you?” Mike asked.

“No, I was in guise that day,” Jael explained. “Wearing the horns and tail in public gets me stared at almost as much as if I were wearing deely boppers. I’m not shy, but I try to keep my exhibitionistic tendencies private.”

“Jael,” Ash interrupted. “Could we speak for a moment?”

“Sure,” Jael shrugged. “What’s up?”

“In private, dear,” Ash insisted and they got up and moved over a few feet further down the bench, speaking in hushed tones.

Mike glanced over at them curiously and caught them staring at him in the same way Ash had done earlier. "You're right, Ash," Jael told her in a more normal tone. "Someone has been playing games and I seriously doubt Inanna would have done it. It's not her style at all."

"What is it?" Mike asked worriedly.

"Don't worry, Sport," Jael told him quickly. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with you, trust me. You're perfectly all right." Coming from a demoness, her words did nothing to assure him.

It took another nervous inning, but eventually Mike was able to get back to enjoying the game and watched as Ina made several spectacular saves and two hits. By the time the Lamassu won 4-2 he had completely forgotten the odd looks Jael and Ash had given him until Jael suggested to Ash, "We need to go catch Ina while she's still in the locker room."

Mike was about to follow, but Eddy held him up, "Better give the ladies a chance to shower off after the game, Mike."

"Oh, right," Mike agreed. "That sort of makes sense, doesn't it."

"Five to ten minutes should do it," Eddy continued. "Dee and Ina don't normally feel the need for an extended shower."

"Okay," Mike agreed and spent the time asking Amy about her academic interests.

2

By the time they followed Ash and Jael downstairs, it was safe to enter the locker room, and in fact Jael greeted them with, "You all took your time getting here."

"Hush, Jael," Ash told her. "Mike, how have you been sleeping lately?"

"Huh?" Mike responded. "The usual way. I close my eyes and eventually I nod off. Why?"

"No tendency to stay up all night and still be fresh in the morning, perhaps?" Ash asked.

"No," Mike shook his head. "I'd have noticed that."

"Hmm," Ash murmured mysteriously.

"Why?" Mike insisted. "What's wrong with me?"

“Nothing at all is wrong with you, Mike,” Ina assured him.

“Yeah,” Jael agreed with a slight smirk, “It’s just that you seem to have come down with a case of immortality.”

“I what?” Mike responded disbelievingly.

“It must have happened very recently,” the tall, green-haired goddess who had been introduced as Dee told him. Mike remembered Amy pointed her out as Ninhursag or Mother Nature who had been spending a lot of her spare time in Eddy’s company. “Possibly even today. Have you had any strange feelings?”

“Not really,” Mike shrugged. “Are you sure of what you’re seeing?”

“Yes,” Dee nodded. “It’s very clear once you know what to look for. It’s quite possible you’re going to live forever.”

“There’s just one catch, though,” Jael put in.

“What?” Mike asked, fearing the worst, whatever that might be.

“The problem is that whoever did it made you immortal, but not eternally young,” Ash explained.

Mike was a classicist and had no trouble working out the implications of that. There was even a myth to that effect. “Great!” he remarked, sounding like it was anything but. “Just call me Tithonus.”

“Who?” Eddy asked.

“Oh, you’re much cuter than he was,” Jael chuckled.

“How would you know?” Amy rounded on her. “Wouldn’t that have been before your time?”

“Touché, youngster,” Jael sighed and then laughed, “but just you wait ‘til you’re my age and see what I let you get away with.”

“How old are you anyway?” Mike asked curiously.

“Who’s Tithonus?” Eddy asked again.

“He was the lover of the dawn goddess, Eos,” Mike explained quickly. “Eos asked Zeus to grant him immortality, which Zeus eventually did, but did not also make him eternally young. After Tithonus and Eos had a couple of children together it became apparent what was wrong and as time went on, he got more and more ancient, but without dying. Eventually, Eos turned him into a grasshopper or, as some would have it, a cicada.”

“A gentleman should not ask a lady her age,” Jael told Mike primly.

“Oh yeah. Sorry,” Mike apologized.

“Twenty-nine,” Jael then answered Mike’s question.

“What?” both he and Amy asked as one.

“Twenty-nine,” Jael repeated. “I decided to stop aging at twenty-nine, It’s a good age. It’s young enough to still be healthy and attractive, but old enough to be able to attract men who might appreciate a woman with a brain, not that there were a lot of them in the year 1000.”

“There still aren’t,” Amy grumped.

“You’re too young to be so cynical, kid,” Jael told her sourly.

“Besides they’re out there,” Rona added, speaking up for the first time in hours, “and they always have been. They’re just not as interesting on first sight.”

“Right,” Jael agreed. “Figure that out before your first millennium and you’ll be doing better than I did.”

“All that is interesting, I suppose,” Asherah interrupted, “but it doesn’t answer any of our immediate questions. “Mike, Ina, do either of you have any idea who might have done this?”

“How many people do I know who even have the ability?” Mike shrugged.

“Lachesis!” Ina exclaimed. “Gotta be her.”

“Decima?” Dee asked.

“Yeah,” Ina nodded vigorously. “Clotho and I got into a bit of a spat when I caught her trying to vamp Mike. I guess I still have some jealousy issues to work out, huh?”

“That one could never interest me,” Mike told her. “Too blatant and shallow. I’d keep looking for the blow-up valve on her neck.”

Ina laughed and nodded. “Thanks, honey,” she told him warmly. “but she does have the ability to attract any man she wants.”

“Only by casting a glamour on them,” Jael retorted. “I’ve met the Moirae on business and had to deal with Clotho more than I cared to. I could be buddies with Atropos, though. I like the way she thinks, generally.”

“She pushes everyone away,” Rona pointed out.

“Which is why we don’t hang out with her,” Jael added. “Clotho is personality-handicapped. Give her a piece of bubblegum and she’ll be entertained for hours.”

“Lachesis is another matter,” Ina told them. “Anyway, Clotho started threatening me with Atropos’ shears so I took the matter directly to Atropos herself. At the time I thought Lachesis was on my side, we do have lunch together on a regular basis, but she must have had mischief on her mind. She does like to play her little games and she and I have been debating the nature of mortal versus divine life. She contends that there is a certain, hard to define quality of divinity that sets us apart from mortals, whereas I feel the only really big difference is the length of our lifespans. As people we’re no better nor worse than mortals.”

“Except for the Infinites,” Jael added.

“Of course,” Ina agreed, “That’s different. Well, maybe it isn’t, but none of us are in a position to know, are we?”

“I wasn’t aware Lachesis was capable of bestowing immortality on someone,” Eddy remarked.

“Granddad!” Amy responded. “She’s the one who measures the threads of Life of all gods and mortals in the universe and weaves them together in the great tapestry we call Life. Of course she can do that. The length of one’s life is entirely within her control.”

“Not quite,” Dee corrected her. “Lachesis can extend your life indefinitely, but once she has done so, only Atropos can end it and she doesn’t often end an immortal life. It’s possible that she can only end a life under certain conditions, though none of us have been anxious to test that. Even the Fates have their limits, and they are constrained to do their tasks in a manner that is proper, so Atropos would only end a life at its right time, although she’s not perfect, she can be goaded into acting prematurely.”

“And was it proper for Lachesis to extend Mike’s life indefinitely?” Ina asked.

“Probably not,” Dee shrugged, “but I imagine all that weaving must get boring after a while. After a few millennia of tossing the shuttle back and forth, you tend to want to vary the pattern, just for variety’s sake.”

“What?” Ina all but screamed. “You think she did this out of boredom?”

“It’s a distinct possibility,” Dee nodded.

“Damn!” Ina swore. “I knew I went too far. I’m sorry, Mike, This is really all my fault.”

“Why?” Mike countered. “You didn’t ask for this and, heck! I still have my entire life to find the Fountain of Youth before you’re forced to turn me into a grasshopper.”

“It’s still my fault,” Ina insisted. “I went too far when I reminded the Three that one of my aspects used to be one of them.”

“Why would that bother them?” Mike asked.

“I was the eldest,” Ina reminded him. “In that aspect I out-ranked them. Atropos probably found it amusing. Lachesis and Clotho always did like playing games, but they’re both poor losers. I proved myself unassailable, at least at that moment. Clotho, however, tricked me into exposing my love for you as a weakness.”

“Aw!” Jael remarked sassily. “Our little Love goddess has all grown up!”

“Hush, Jael,” Rona told her, manifesting completely as a honey blonde who stood several inches taller than the demoness they normally appeared as. “The truth, Mike, is that Ina really used to be as shallow as the old myths paint her. But Time is a marvelous thing and some time since the end of the Roman Empire she’s had time to...”

“...to realize how many mistakes I’ve made along the way,” Ina took over. “Only a complete fool

fails to learn from her mistakes and maybe it's just vanity, but I'd like to think I am not a complete fool."

"A little foolishness can be endearing, though," Dee smiled. "Perhaps we ought to go visit the Fates again, however. Even I don't care to wrestle with those three, but a polite explanation is in order, I think. Eddy, maybe you should take Amy home, however."

"Aw!" Amy protested.

"You're already immortal, dear," Dee told her, "but you're very young yet. I doubt this is going to be the sort of thing you should be exposed to if it does turn ugly. Besides, by now Tanise is probably getting lonely and you did promise to bring in pizza tonight, didn't you?"

"I did," Amy agreed. "Oh, all right. But one of these days I want in on the interesting stuff!"

3

"Left you on your own again?" Ina asked Atropos as the party arrived at the base of Yggdrasil. Atropos was sitting on a chaise lounge and reading a paperback, but neither Clotho nor Lachesis were anywhere in sight.

"It's quiet here," Atropos remarked. "Those two are probably out shopping again."

"Somehow I got the impression you were busier than this," Mike remarked.

"Everyone needs a break every now and then, youngster," Atropos told him. "And contrary to popular belief, people live and die without our help and people don't die the moment I snip my shears. Each thread is measured and cut and then the subject lives for the length of the thread."

"And when a mortal gains immortality?" Mike asked.

"That's takes something special," Atropos admitted. "A new thread must be attached to the original." She took another look at him. "Oh, you're that one are you?"

"Probably," Mike admitted.

"Well, you're not indestructible," Atropos told him, "neither is your thread. It can still be cut, but for now you are immortal."

"So when are you going to cut it?" Mike asked.

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe never," Atropos shrugged. "That depends on you. See my real job is

knowing when to cut a thread. Generally it's at the full length Lachesis measures. Sometimes it's my job to end a life prematurely. That's the only time someone dies the moment I use my shears. It's because I cut their thread at the spot that represents now."

"What happens if you cut the thread before that?" Mike asked.

"I don't," she told him flatly. "Weren't you listening? I only cut the threads at points that are correct and proper. Lachesis and Clotho may be capricious. I am not. I am inevitable. I am 'The Inevitable.' There's is no reason for me to rush."

"So you have no idea where Lachesis and Clotho have gone," Dee asked her.

"I didn't ask, Nature," Atropos told her lazily. "They didn't tell."

"Somehow I thought you might keep better tabs on them," Dee commented.

"I don't own them," Atropos commented.

"But the Three must work together," Ina pointed out.

"It's a metaphorical sort of thing," Atropos told her.

"What do you mean?" Asherah asked.

"The Moirae are goddesses, yes," Atropos explained, "but we are also symbols, metaphors for the basic conditions of life."

"I could say that about most gods and goddesses," Ash told her.

"I grant you that, Sabbath Queen," Atropos told her, "but some of us are more metaphorical than others. "We are birth, life and death. We are also youth, middle age and old age. We also weave the tapestry of life, which is about as symbolic as you can get."

"And I am Mother Nature," Dee pointed out, "and at least as symbolic as you are. What's your point?"

"Well, I suppose you are," Atropos admitted, "but, you have also been a more standard sort of goddess. I have always been as I am."

"You've been younger and older frequently," Ina reminded her.

"Age and appearance doesn't make one different," Atropos argued. "I am Death. I have always been Death. It's not just my job, it is who and what I am."

"And that guy with the scythe, in the black robe and with a terminal case of anorexia?" Mike pressed.

"He is Death too and an alternative aspect of mine," Atropos admitted reluctantly after a long pause. "You have me. Maybe I'm not so different from the rest of you. But there is a difference. I am unassailable."

“As am I,” Dee asserted.

“You are not, Nature,” Atropos told her. “Your thread can be cut under certain circumstances.”

“When?” Dee challenged her.

“When you have betrayed your nature and failed to do your job. If you are caught in such a transgression, you are vulnerable.”

“I can be wrong, but I have never betrayed my nature,” Dee told her.

“Keep that up and I’ll never cut your thread,” Atropos told her.

“We’re way off the subject,” Ina told them all. “We need to find Lachesis.”

“Why?” Atropos asked.

“It’s about what she did to Mike,” Ina told her.

“She gave him immortality,” Atropos pointed out. “What’s the problem?”

“She did not give him eternal youth,” Ina retorted. “He may live forever, but eventually he’ll sure wish he could die. That’s not a gift, it’s a curse.”

“Go to the Fountain of Youth then,” Atropos suggested.

“Ever seen it for yourself, Mors?” Ina challenged her.

“Never needed to,” Atropos chuckled.

“It was polluted beyond redemption centuries ago,” Dee put in. “Ponce de Leon found it right enough, but it had lost its virtue.”

“There are gods who can grant eternal youth,” Atropos pointed out. “Try talking to Zeus.”

“The original Mister What’s-in-it-for-me?” Ina countered.

“Then take the quest of the Tree of Life,” Atropos suggested. “That always works.”

Just then Clotho arrived. “A party?” she asked breathlessly. “Hi, cutie!” she waved at Mike.

“Where’s Decima?” Ina asked her.

“Isn’t she here” Clotho asked in return. “She started back hours ago.”

“From where?” Ina asked.

“We were in Kyoto for lunch,” Clotho replied. “I love Chinese food!”

“Nobody can be that clueless,” Mike muttered to the person to his right.

"I take it Kyoto is not in China?" Asherah asked.

"Clotho can be that clueless," Dee sighed from Mike's other side. "On the other hand, I suppose you can get Chinese food in Japan. It just seems a bit senseless when you have the ability to go anywhere you please."

"You know, after seeing Clotho in action, I might try being a little less blatant in the future myself," Jael added.

"You're not that bad," Rona replied.

"Maybe she went shopping?" Clotho suggested.

"No, dear," Atropos told her. "That's your passion. She would happily wear jeans and a tee shirt."

"She's such a frump sometimes," Clotho replied, "but she really should have been back by now."

They waited several hours as Clotho became increasingly worried and as the midnight sun reached its nadir and began the long circular climb back up in the sky, she started pleading with the others to go find Lachesis.

"Where do we even start looking?" Mike wondered.

"We need an expert," Ina told him. "Fortunately I know exactly who to get!"

4

"It's not as badly over-grown here this time around," Enki decided as he inspected the site on Yggdrasil he had used before as an observatory.

"It hasn't been as long this time," Ina reminded him.

"There is that," Enki agreed. "I can fill the observation bowls, but this might go a lot easier if we had something that has a close symbolic attachment to Lachesis. An article of clothing, perhaps."

"I have a better idea," Dee told him. "You continue finish getting ready. I'll be right back."

"What are you trying to do?" Mike asked Enki as Dee raced away.

"I've used this place before," Enki explained as he worked. "There are several locations on the World Tree from which you can see everywhere in Creation. This is one of them. These bowls were formed by the Tree itself, pedestals and all, at Ninhursag's encouragement. I'm filling them up and will turn them into divinatory devices. It's fairly old magic and being that it works with water I have a special affinity for it. When I'm finished we'll be able to use these bowls to look for the missing Lachesis. I'll enchant them to respond to your thoughts so you'll be able to direct the view."

"I just hope they work better than last time," Ina told him, then went onto explain to Mike and Ash, "We couldn't see what we were looking for, just the area around it."

"That was different," Enki told her defensively. "We were looking for the new World Tree and it was naturally hidden. Besides, we found it, didn't we?"

"With a lot of help," Ina remarked. "I just hope we don't need an army to retrieve Lachesis."

"Something doesn't seem right about this, though," Asherah remarked. "Lachesis is one of the Fates. Anyone making trouble for her is likely to end up dead or worse. Who would dare? I doubt I would. Not without very good cause."

"I suppose that's something else we'll find out along the way," Enki replied.

Dee soon returned and handed a long rod of wood smoothed by millennia of handling. "The Rod of Lachesis," she announced. "It should be doubly effective. Not only has she touched this frequently, but it has an intimate symbolic connection to her."

"Good," Enki agreed, accepting the rod from Dee. "Maybe this is going to be quick and easy for a change." He placed the rod over one of the bowls and started chanting in a language both strange and unknown to Mike. "Ah! Found her," He told the others a few minutes later. "Now where the heck is she?"

"Enki, You're going to have to figure out how to attach one of these things to a GPS unit," Jael told him.

Dee took a look over his shoulder. "Looks like she's in the Labyrinth of Minos."

"Does that even still exist?" Mike asked. "I'd have thought it was an archaeological ruin at best these days."

"The Labyrinth was a special construction that gained mythic proportions of its own," Ina explained. "Therefore it has an existence here on the divine plane."

"Divine plane?" Mike asked.

"You've heard of someone ascending to a higher plane of existence? This is it," Ina replied.

"It doesn't seem so special," Mike observed. "Okay, the Tree is immense and it was odd seeing Dilmun as a flat world, but it's not like I can fly or do magic here."

"You haven't seen the more exotic locales of it yet," Jael told him, "and actually you can do magic here fairly easily if you know how. You can on Earth too, but it's more challenging there and the rules are different."

"Then how does one cast a spell here?" Mike asked her.

"We haven't time for that," Asherah interrupted. "According to this, Lachesis is being stalked by something in that great maze."

"The Minotaur?" Mike asked. "I thought he was killed by Theseus."

"He was," Ina agreed, "but the Bull of Minos was part divine and came back to life at the beginning of the next cycle. Oh you don't really understand the cycles either, do you?"

"Do you mean sort of like Wagner's Ring Cycle, which started out with the Rhinegold peacefully in place, ran through an entire history of Germanic myth culminating with Ragnarok or Gotterdammerung or something and then at the very end the gold ring is returned to the Rhine?" Mike asked.

"Very much like that, yes," Ina nodded. "That was just one of many cycles the world has gone through over time. The last cycle ended about seventeen years ago when the world was destroyed."

"I would think I would have been old enough to remember that," Mike remarked.

"When the new cycle begins," Ina explained, "everything and everyone is re-created pretty much as they left off, memories and all, although they have no memory of the Cataclysm. The only ones who remember are the few who managed to survive. Mortal survivors tend to have fairly hazy memories of the previous world and since in general their lives aren't too different, they shrug off the differences as though they were bad dreams. Only gods, angels and demons, those who are on the divine plane at the time the world resets, are actually aware of the change."

"So how are we going to get to Knossos?" Mike asked. Knossos was the place in which King Minos had built his tremendous maze.

"We're going to walk," Enki told him.

"From somewhere north of the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean?" Mike challenged. "That's quite a hike."

"It's not so bad," Enki told him as everyone started walking. "On the Tree here, it's only about a mile. Normally we could fly, but the branches of the tree are fairly thick in these parts and we'll be moving out into an even thicker section, so we wouldn't gain any time in the process."

"Is the Labyrinth really as large as the myths say?" Mike asked.

"Larger," Jael told him. "The original maze was maybe two or three acres, but it grew in the telling and on this plane it could grow as large as anyone could imagine it, so it's tremendous. The Labyrinth we are going to is obviously not the real one, but the divine aspect of it. Consequently it has to live up to everyone's imaginative expectations of it."

"So we could get lost inside for years?" Mike asked.

"If we aren't careful," Ina told him.

"And the Minotaur is still in the maze?" Mike wondered.

"He could be," Dee replied. "Although these days he could have a condo in Miami. None of us have been to the Labyrinth in centuries so we'll have to see when we get there."

"Hey! Where are you all going?" Ratatosk asked from a nearby branch.

“Knossos to enter the Labyrinth,” Enki informed the squirrel.

“Better you than me,” Ratatosk told him. “It’s not exactly Disneyworld you know.”

“Maybe we’ll go there next,” Enki laughed. “Would you like to join us?”

“In Crete?” Ratatosk asked. “I’ll pass and I got kicked out of EuroDisney a few years ago. Something about being a parody of Mickey Mouse. Those guys have no sense of humor even when it turned out I wasn’t wearing a costume. These days if I want a theme park, I go to Dollywood.”

“I’m not sure I want to think about that,” Jael whispered to Mike.

“Why are you going to Knossos anyway?” Ratatosk finally asked.

“Lachesis seems to be trapped in the Labyrinth of Minos,” Enki replied.

“Good for her,” Ratatosk remarked. “You ought to let her stay there. She’s more of a troublemaker than I am. Must be Middle Child Syndrome”

“What’s the matter, Ratty?” Jael asked tartly. “Can’t you take the competition?”

“Funny,” the squirrel replied flatly.

“You know we’d come for you if you were in trouble, Ratty,” Enki told him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ratatosk admitted. “And you have in the past, but that Lachesis gets somewhat malicious and full of herself at times. It’s a bad combination.”

“Well, she’s not particularly lovable,” Dee remarked, “But we aren’t going to leave her there, especially if the Bull is still in the maze.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Ratatosk asked. “He was there just last month.”

“How do you know?” Ina asked. “Do you two have lunch together?”

“Are you crazy, Inanna? He’d eat me in just a few gulps,” Ratatosk replied. “No, but Ares and some of his buddies like to bait the Bull, sort of.”

“Sort of?” Jael asked.

“Well, it’s not like bear baiting in the Middle Ages,” Ratatosk explained. “More like a really dangerous game of tag. They like to run up to the beast, touch it with their hands and then run away before it can catch them.”

“Counting coup, then,” Mike remarked. “Some of the Native American tribes used to wage war like that. The idea wasn’t to actually kill your opponent unless you really had to, because you could garner more glory by touching him and then getting away unscathed. There were all sorts of complexities to that, especially since they were fighting to kill anyway, but it sounds like what Ares is doing with the Minotaur.”

“More fool he, then,” Dee remarked. “The Minotaur could well kill him if he isn’t very careful, and

the only way to be that careful is to not go in at all.”

“Then we’re at risk too?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” Dee nodded, “but keep in mind that the Labyrinth is very large and there has always been only one Minotaur. He can’t be everywhere at once and since we’re looking for Lachesis and not the bull...”

“We have a very good chance of finding the bull first,” Jael concluded. “We should probably work in pairs. I’ve heard the Bull can get confused if there is more than one person taunting him from different directions. That’s probably why Ares goes there with his friends.”

“And we may find out soon,” Enki told her as the Tree suddenly disappeared and they found themselves outside a tall wooden gate set in a dark gray stone wall. “We’re here.”

5

“I thought the Labyrinth was built beneath Minos’ palace,” Mike remarked.

“The palace doesn’t appear to be anywhere in sight these days,” Rona pointed out as they stepped through the wooden gate. The Gate was nearly fifty feet tall and thirty feet wide. The door itself appeared to be made of many layers of wood accumulating to some ten inches thick, and yet it had been hung on its hinges with such precision that it swung open silently at a touch from Enki.

“As I recall,” Mike told them, “Theseus brought a ball of thread with him so he could find his way out again.”

“We have other tricks at our disposal,” Enki chuckled. “We should leave an occasional mark on the wall to point in the direction from which we came.” He gestured toward a nearby granite wall where a small arrow head-like mark suddenly appeared in the wall itself and started to glow softly. “Like that. Hmm, no side passages yet.”

“There may not be,” Mike informed him. “The most common representation of the Labyrinth from the ancient and medieval world was as a long curving passage, that gradually spiraled in toward the center. There are some scholars who use that image to differentiate a maze from a labyrinth.”

“So we could just have a very long hike ahead of us, but no chance of getting lost?” Enki asked. “That doesn’t fit the tales.”

“I think the Labyrinth is large enough to incorporate everyone’s notions of what it should look like,” Jael remarked. “Right now we appear to have a very long, straight passage in what from the outside looked like a square or rectangular structure.”

"Some representations of the Labyrinth are in a square with the passage following that shape toward the center," Mike replied. "A squared-off spiral if you will."

"Just so," Jael nodded. "Later on we may find it gets somewhat more complicated."

"Like that Muppet movie with David Bowie," Rona added. "I particularly liked the Escheresque center of the maze."

"I hope we don't have to navigate something like that here," Ina told them. "That scene always makes me dizzy."

"Seems strange that a goddess would spend her time watching modern movies," Mike told her.

"Why?" Ina countered. "Except for my incredibly long life and a few tricks I've picked up over the last dozen or two centuries, I'm not so different from any other woman."

"You're really that old?" Mike asked.

"What was that I told you about asking a lady's age, Mike?" Jael reminded him.

Ina answered anyway, "You know those stone and clay statuettes archaeologists have found associated with the Cro-Magnon people and the other first Homo sapiens to reach Europe? Well, that's partially me. The rest is Dee. At least we think so."

"You think so?" Mike asked.

"It was a very long time ago and Dee and I don't actually remember those times very clearly," Ina told him. "We weren't a very clearly defined deity at the time compared to the way we are now. We don't really recall diverging from each other, although it is obvious we did. Those statuettes represent Woman, the great Mother, the power of nature and all that. The Female Creative Force may be the best description. People back then didn't really understand that men had anything to do with making a baby, but they had no illusions where babies came from. No little stories about being brought by the stork, for example."

"No, to the Cro-Magnons, a stork was just another good meal," Jael laughed.

"Tastes like chicken," Enki added.

"Does it?" Mike asked.

"Not really," Enki admitted. "Closer to goose."

"Anyway, both Dee and I have some memories of being that deity, we just don't remember when we split into two distinct goddesses," Ina continued.

"I suppose we were not actually a goddess that far back," Asherah remarked. "More like a venerated spirit."

"You too?" Mike asked Ash.

"Well," Ash replied, "strictly speaking, the modern Mother Nature and I are aspects of each other,

but for reasons too complex to go into just now, we never merged. We're a bit too distant to become one now and I don't think either of us would want to, even for the added power it might give us. Our relationship now is more like sisters and after all this time, it's kind of nice to have a sister."

"Were there any male deities?" Mike asked.

"Male spirits, yes," Ash informed him. "Many of the animal spirits were male and there was a belief in a spirit of hunting that was male since in most cultures it was the men who did most of the hunting. But the Female or Mother Spirit was the big one and the only one to survive to today in us. You see, the creation of life was the greatest mystery of all."

"Still is," Jael remarked. "It's just that we're asking the question differently these days."

"Yes," Ash nodded, "but thirty thousand years ago, it was a simple question without a clear answer. But only a complete dolt could fail to see that babies came from women and the Cro-Magnons and their contemporaries were not stupid people. They were very clever, in fact. They had to have been to have invented gods. Anyway, because Life was such a mystery to them and because the beginning of Life was an incredible miracle, they sought to understand it in the manner that all Mankind has attempted over the years. They eventually concluded that all life was created by a great female spirit. The mechanism for that varied from band to band, of course, but since the female spirit was the originator of Life, then every living thing and all the other spirits as well, must have come from her. She became the first creator of the world according to what passed for religion among those people."

"They were spread across a very wide area," Mike remarked. "Were they really such a united people?"

"United?" Dee echoed. "Not hardly, but keep in mind that the Inuit of extreme North America traditionally ranged from Greenland to Alaska. And while most Inuit do not like being called Eskimos, if you include the other Eskimo peoples like the Yapik, the culture continues on into Siberia, ranging over half-way across the world. The people of Ice Age Europe were pretty much like that. Having come from similar cultures, their own cultures stayed similar for some time before completely diverging."

"And here's our final turn," Enki interrupted and peaked around the bend in the passageway. So far, since entering the Labyrinth, they had turned left three times and walked for quite a long way after each turn. "Another straight corridor, but only about fifty feet long."

"Maybe we should have turned left when we came in through the gate," Jael suggested as they reached the end of the passage.

"Jael!" Rona protested, "There was a stone wall to our left."

"Could have been a shortcut," Jael shrugged. "I think this is the same wall. Hey! Are we sure there are no secret doors along this passage?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm sure there must be," Enki replied. He turned to Dee. "Ninhursag, maybe if we work together?"

"All right," Dee nodded and took his hand, closing her eyes.

They stood together silently and with their eyes shut for a long time until Mike wondered if he ought to take a nap himself, but also noticed that in spite of having been awake for over forty-eight hours by his

watch, he wasn't in the least bit tired. He didn't think he had increased strength or stamina in the ordinary way. He was fairly certain if he decided to run a mile he would be huffing and puffing at the end of the run, but sleep no longer seemed to be quite as necessary as it once was. He asked Ina about that.

"It's a benefit of immortality, although I'm not sure why," Ina told him.

"I think fatigue poisons may be something that causes you to age over time," Jael put in. "I could be wrong, but you will find your body no longer produces them. You can sleep however, but it will be recreational rather than something you absolutely have to do."

"There's a way in about a quarter of the way back along the last hallway," Enki announced, coming out of his trance.

"And do you know how to get through that opening?" Ina asked.

"I imagine there will be a hidden doorway," Enki remarked. "If I have to, I'll eat the door itself."

"We will hold you to that, you know. It sounds more like something Ratatosk might do," Jael told him.

"I imagine there's a lot of good roughage in these walls," Enki chuckled.

They made their way to where Enki and Dee had detected an entrance to the inner parts of the Labyrinth and found nothing but a blank wall. "So now what?" Mike asked looking at the wall.

"Obviously there must be some sort of way to open it," Enki replied. "A hidden mechanism?" he paused to close his eyes again, then just as quickly shook his head and told them. "Nothing like that. It must take old magic to open the door."

"Good thing you're the god of magic then, Grandpa," Ina told him.

"Grandpa?" Enki asked, sounding hurt.

"Well aren't you?" she countered.

"Well, yes," Enki admitted, "but usually you say, 'Grandfather' and use it like one of my titles."

"So I've been learning to relax a bit lately," Ina shot back.

"You've been living in the Twenty-first Century too long," Enki remarked.

"Well, I still have nearly ninety-one and a half years left before that can change," Ina laughed. "Unless you've managed to invent time travel while I wasn't looking."

"Not really," Enki shook his head. "Right now I'm trying to invent a way past this wall."

"Have you tried walking through it?" Ina asked.

"Don't be silly," Enki told her.

"Because," Ina continued, "had you bothered to try feeling for a physical switch, rather than trying to

divine one, you might have noticed there isn't any wall here at all."

"It's an illusion?" Enki asked, poking his hand through the image of a wall. "A darned good one too, to fool me."

"It didn't even have to get you drunk," Ina smirked.

"Hey!" Enki protested. "No fair bringing up past mistakes. There are enough I haven't made yet. No need to repeat myself."

"Good," Dee remarked in the same tone as Ina. "Then we won't need to worry about you eating the moss just to see what it tastes like?"

"Did I forget to use deodorant this morning?" Enki asked plaintively.

"Gods need to use deodorant?" Mike asked.

"Doesn't everybody?" Enki countered. "It helps us fit into the modern world."

"Mike, he's kidding," Ina told him. "Oh we do sweat, same as anyone, but we don't have to stink unless we want to. Maybe someday I'll be able to show you how."

"In the meantime, I'd better keep a supply of Old Spice," Mike commented.

"Sure," Jael chuckled and quoted an old advertisement, "It makes you smell like you just got back from the sea." She paused before adding, "Unbathed and covered with tar."

"Let's keep moving," Dee suggested while Asherah looked slightly bemused by the interchange."

They stepped through the hidden doorway and found another series of passages just like the last. Once again Enki and Dee had to divine the location of a doorway that had been hidden by an illusory wall and then they found themselves in yet another square-shaped set of corridors.

"Why don't we just figure out where the next door is before we start walking in circles this time," Rona suggested sensibly.

"Good idea," Enki admitted.

"I've been thinking about this," Mike commented while they waited for Enki and Dee to finish their divination, "and I wonder if most people who entered the Labyrinth even had lights to see where they were going. Doesn't the myth say it was completely black in here?"

"I think so," Jael replied. "At least some versions describe Theseus having to feel his way along and then follow the string back out."

"So if it were completely dark we would merely need to run our hands along the inner surface of the wall in order to find our way to the center," Mike concluded.

"Right," Jael nodded, "and we could do that now. Is that where you're going with this?"

"Well, that's a good point and we should probably do that after these two wake up," Mike nodded

toward Dee and Enki, “but what I was really thinking was ‘Why is anyone bothering to hide these doors behind illusions if the illusion couldn’t normally be seen anyway?’”

“Hey, that’s a good point too!” Jael told him. “These illusory walls can’t be an original feature, can they?”

“They could,” Ina remarked, “but it would have been a remarkable waste of time and energy.”

“So the illusions are a recent addition,” Mike told them.

“That’s possible,” Dee agreed, opening her eyes. “The next door is just down the hall.”

“After that we can just feel our way,” Jael told her.

“What?” Dee asked. “Did I miss something?” Jael repeated the earlier conversation. “You’re right. There really isn’t any reason to keep using magic to find the next door now that we know the trick. We’re getting into a rut and that’s not good. The divination spell is a handy thing, but relying on it simply because you can is sloppy thinking. We really need to be more flexible-minded from here on out.”

“Or in,” Jael remarked.

“That too,” Enki agreed.

It was still a long walk, but they eventually found themselves in a large square room at the center of the maze. “It’s empty,” Mike observed. “This can’t be all there is to the Labyrinth, can it?”

“It doesn’t sound likely to me,” Jael agreed.

“This is supposed to have been based on an earlier maze in Egypt,” Ina told them. “Minos hired Daedalus to build something even larger and grander, and then decided he didn’t want to let Daedalus go and imprisoned him and his son in the Tower of Knossos.”

“Then Daedalus built the wings he and Icarus used to escape,” Mike added, “and I think we know what happened to Icarus, but that’s not got a lot to do with an empty Labyrinth.”

“I think we may be up against another illusion,” Enki told them. However, a few minutes later he concluded, “No, what we see is what we have.”

“Maybe a mechanical switch somewhere?” Mike suggested.

Enki concentrated again before stepping over to one wall where he pushed on one of the stone blocks. As soon as he did the floor dropped out from under them and they started falling.

They only fell a brief time before Enki managed to react and caught them all up in a bubble. Floating within the bubble, Mike asked, “Is this another trick I might be able to learn?”

“You might learn how to levitate,” Ina told him, “maybe, but this is one of Enki’s specialties.”

“I’m starting to wonder if we’re in the right place,” Rona remarked. “Why should the way into the Labyrinth have hidden switches and trap doors?”

"I can't say," Dee replied, "but this is the right place. If forced to guess I'd say the simple maze we followed to the center is the original Labyrinth. It's a bit of a challenge and large enough for the Minotaur to be able to take victims unaware. However, from here on in, we're in the realm of ages worth of imagination. People have imagined all sorts of fanciful features for this place and we could be in for all of them before we're done."

"Then we should go down?" Enki asked her.

"You have a better choice?" Dee countered.

"I know a nice bar in Papeete that serves pineapple daiquiris," Enki replied.

"I prefer both my pineapple and my rum unadulterated," Dee told him even as Enki started floating them toward the bottom of the pit.

As they went, the wall to one side gradually curved under them to form a long spiral ramp. "I suspect we wouldn't have been harmed even if we had fallen," Enki remarked. "Still I think it's best if we control our own progress. There's no telling what might be waiting for us at the end of the ramp."

The bottom of the ramp was another large room with stone walls and a sandy floor. "It's like walking on the beach," Jael remarked, "at low tide. You can practically smell the seaweed."

"You've got an interesting imagination," Dee noted.

"You said we needed that," Jael replied. "Anyway, it looks like we have a choice of options at this point. I see several exits from this room. Do we stay together, or split up so we can cover more ground?"

"Split up, I think," Enki replied. The others voiced agreement, so he continued. "Ninhursag and I will stay together. Jael, you go with Asherah and Mike, stick to Inanna like glue. If you run into trouble, try running out of it as well, otherwise make as much noise as you can and maybe the rest of us will hear you. Otherwise, I think we should meet back here in... hmm, maybe two hours?"

"Agreed," Ina told him, "but if disaster strikes, run for the exit and get help. We'll probably need it."

Ina and Mike waited to see the others disappear down their chosen passageways and then they went down one of the three remaining ones. "We'll have to come back eventually and check the other passages if we don't find Lachesis," Ina remarked.

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Mike replied. They walked for another forty-five minutes down a series of twisty little passages that Mike thought looked all alike. They were just starting back toward a place where the passage had forked into two when a large man-like creature with the head of a bull with immense horns roared and attacked.

Ina stepped forward to fight the Minotaur, and when the beast crashed into her, Mike was thrown against the nearby wall and knocked out.

The next time Mike opened his eyes, Jael, Dee, Asherah and Enki were kneeling beside him and looking concerned. "You all right, Sport?" Jael asked him.

"Depends on whether aspirin will work on an immortal," Mike replied.

"What happened?" Enki asked.

"Uh," Mike paused to remember. "It was the Minotaur," he finally told them. "Ina was fighting him and I got thrown against this wall. Well I think it was this wall. If you moved me..."

"Okay," Enki stopped him before he could babble on too much. "So now we have two missing goddesses.

"We have to find her," Mike replied, sitting up a bit too rapidly. His head began to spin, but he held on to consciousness.

"Any idea where she may be?" the god of water and wisdom asked. "Me neither. We've been all through the Labyrinth and I'm fairly certain she isn't in here. What I am certain of is that we were led into a trap. Maybe they would have been happy to abduct any of us, but I suspect Inanna was the only one they wanted."

"What about Lachesis?" Mike asked.

"We didn't find her either," Dee informed him. "I also doubt that was really the Minotaur. Ina should have been able to defeat him easily."

"Sure looked like the descriptions," Mike remarked, trying to stand.

"Hey, slow down," Jael told him. "We're not in that big a hurry to catch up. We don't even know where to look next."

"It could have been almost anyone wearing the Minotaur's semblance," Dee told Mike.

"Well, right now I don't give a damn about Lachesis," Mike decided. "Ina needs us though."

"So where do we look next?" Ash asked.

"Let's go back to the Tree," Enki suggested. "We'll have to go through this all over again. We'll need something of Ina's, but her baseball bat or mitt ought to do the trick."

They were just leaving the Labyrinth when they ran into Lachesis and Clotho looking entirely too smug. "Oh!" Lachesis cooed. "Did you enjoy the tour?"

"Hi again, cutie!" Clotho waved at Mike.

"Where's Ina," Mike demanded of Lachesis.

“How would I know?” Lachesis grinned. “Given her record, probably out picking up men. What? Did you think you were special? She’s had thousands of lovers, you know. The myths don’t tell half the story.”

“Whereas, you wouldn’t know love if it bit you in the butt,” Jael cracked back at her.

“Calmly, Jael,” Rona warned her in a whisper. “Work instead on keeping Mike from tearing those two apart.”

“So, Decima,” Dee greeted her. “You’re looking fairly well for someone who was supposed to be in dire trouble.”

“Trouble? Me?” Lachesis laughed. “Who would dare?”

“Well, just keep this in mind, youngster,” Dee told her sternly. “This time we thought you needed help and came running. Next time, don’t even bother holding out the ghost of a hope.”

Lachesis had nothing to say to that and they left the areas and soon found themselves back up on the Tree.

It took a few minutes of verbal sparring, but Ratatosk eventually agreed to run to Dilmun and bring back something that belonged to Ina. He returned half an hour later with a baseball jersey in his mouth.

Enki and the others went to work searching immediately but came up with results that in one bowl told them Ina was nowhere in Creation and another that indicated she was everywhere at once.

“You do realize that the Norns can watch anything you do here and interfere with your divinations, don’t you?” Ratatosk asked Enki.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Enki admitted. “But if they’re blocking us...”

“We need to go somewhere they hold no sway whatsoever,” Ash pointed out.

“I thought their powers were effective throughout the Universe,” Mike countered.

“Ah!” Dee exclaimed. “I know what you’re getting at and you’re right. But let’s say no more of that until we get there.”

They were abruptly swept up in another of Enki’s flying bubbles and whisked off to the Western quadrant of Yggdrasil. “Where are we going?” Mike asked.

“Tell you in a few minutes,” Jael replied mysteriously. “It’s like Dee said. Best not to say here, just in case.”

“Did you really need to take me along?” Rastatosk moaned. “This always makes me airsick.”

“Not in here, rodent!” Dee warned him.

“Besides,” Rona snickered. “I thought you never passed up a chance to see your girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Ratatosk replied, brightening up. “Is that where we’re going? Can’t this buggy go any faster?”

“Much faster and the bubble will pop,” Enki informed him. “If you think this is a wild ride, it’s nothing compared to what we’d be in for if that happened. Besides,” he added as they suddenly appeared in front of a fair-sized, dune gray house in what seemed to be a quiet, residential neighborhood, “We’re here. Let’s go in.”

Enki rang the door bell and Mike was surprised to see Eddy from the baseball game open the door. “Come in,” Eddy invited them. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Where are we” Mike asked again, once the door had closed.

“Hattamesett, Massachusetts,” Enki replied.

7

“Where?” Mike asked, carefully not adding, “Gesundheit!”

“Hattamesett,” Eddy replied as he and Dee hugged. “This is a small coastal town roughly midway between New Bedford and Cape Cod. It’s so small it doesn’t even show up on some of the maps, but we call it home. Uh... where’s Ina?”

“That’s why we’re here, dear,” Dee told him and went on to explain what had happened. “Ash thought we might have better luck searching from here.”

“It might still take a while,” Enki added. “I hope we won’t put you out.”

“Not at all, Mister Waters,” Eddy replied. “I still have all those extra bedrooms we built and most of them are empty. None of us sleep all that often anyway, well, except for Tanise during the winter. The rest of the time, she barely comes into the house.”

“I don’t get it,” Mike admitted, looking around. “You have a nice home here. But why can’t the Moirae see or interfere with us here?”

“Why don’t we all have coffee in the backyard,” Eddy suggested. “I think you’ll figure it out on your own when we get there.”

“Right,” Jael agreed. “Mike, I think you’ll be able to name that tune in two notes.”

As it happened, Mike realized what was happening before they even left the solarium that led to what

should have been a small, suburban backyard. "It's a whole other world!" he remarked, amazed at the expanse of the vista that spread out before him.

One hundred yards or so from Eddy's house stood a tremendous tree of impossible proportions. It reminded Mike of Yggdrasil, but instead of an ash, it was obviously a maple. It stood at the edge of a clear blue lake near a small cliff so that the lake emptied into a still larger one at the base. The lower lake was filled with flowers and seemed somewhat greener in color than the upper one. It was too far away to see for certain, but Mike assumed there were fish, frogs and other wildlife in that lake as well.

"A whole other universe actually," Rona informed him, while Ratatosk scampered ahead of them toward the Tree.

"Is there life in the upper lake?" Mike asked. "I can't tell from here."

"A few frogs and insects and an occasional pocket or two of algae," Dee told him, "but not much. The lower lake is brimming with life, however."

"Looks it," Mike agreed, "but they aren't that far apart. Why are they so different?"

"Well," Jael explained, "when we built them the upper one was just supposed to be the one that fed water into the lower one."

"You built this?" Mike asked, amazed.

"Yep!" Jael told him proudly. "I've never built a universe before. It was actually kind of fun. Actually, we built the lakes as small artificial ponds at the base of the Tree when it was still young and in our own world, but when a World Tree matures it takes what it wants from its surroundings and translates them into features of the new world. We haven't really had the time to explore extensively yet, this universe is only a bit over a year old, you see, but we know there are forests off to the west of here and an odd desert to the south of that."

"Odd?" Mike asked. "How so?"

"Well, the soil and sand is green for one thing," Jael explained. "It's too soon for indigenous life to have gotten much beyond the microscopic stage, so we don't know what will be living there. Should be interesting to find out."

"But you said there were frogs and insects here," Mike pointed out.

"Also squirrels and various birds, some cats and dogs and various other creatures we think might have been pets in the old world," Jael replied. "The Tree chose what to bring with him when he matured. We got quite a few surprises the first month. Believe me! But it really was neat to be able to help build a universe."

"Doesn't every universe need a resident devil?" Mike asked with an eye toward her cute little horns.

"Oh, I'm not of this world," Jael denied. "I just helped Eddy shape it a bit."

"But you may be the archetypal template for a devil figure in this world, Jael," Dee told her, "when and if one arises."

"I'm not really all that evil, you know," Jael pointed out, although the idea that she could have that much influence here clearly appealed to her vanity.

"No you aren't," Dee agreed, "so it will be interesting to see if and how that affects this world and the people who may eventually come to inhabit it."

As they reached the base of the huge maple, Mike spotted Amy sitting on a chair across a table from another young woman. This woman was wearing a flamboyantly colored dress made of maple leaves in their autumnal colors. She looked up and spotted the approaching people and immediately got up to greet them enthusiastically.

"Hi!" She shouted as she ran toward them. She hugged Dee first, then Jael and Asherah, but paused in front of Mike. "I'm Tanise," she introduced herself boldly and brightly. "Who are you?"

"Mike," he replied.

"Ina's boyfriend," Jael finished the introduction.

"Hi!" Tanise repeated and flung herself at Mike to give him a warm hug before finally greeting Enki in a similar fashion. "Welcome!" she told them all.

"Hi, guys," Amy told them rising briefly from her chair. "Have a seat."

"Nice place you have here," Mike told Eddy.

"It's not much," Eddy laughed at the old joke, "but I call it home."

"Is Maggie at work?" Ash asked Eddy.

"Eddy's daughter," Jael informed Mike softly, "and Tanise is this Tree's dryad."

"She is, yes," Eddy replied, answering Asherah's question. "She doesn't really need to, but she likes the job." He turned to Mike and added, "My daughter is an oceanographer. I imagine she will eventually get around to investigating the ocean here as well."

"Is there an ocean nearby?" Mike asked.

"Oh yes, about twenty miles off to the south and maybe fifty miles to the east," Eddy informed him. "I really ought to see about getting an all-terrain vehicle in here. I haven't learned how to fly yet and to tell the truth, I don't know I'd be all that comfortable doing it. But Tanise thinks we should leave the land as untouched as possible, so for now I only go where I can walk. I miss the smell of salt air here, but I can always go out the front door if I feel the need. The house is only a few blocks from the harbor. Waters," he called Enki by the name the water god had first introduced himself by, "I've been meaning to ask you. Nothing lasts forever, but in the meantime how do I continue to keep the house in Hattamessett without anyone noticing? I mean I'm in my eighties now as far as the government is aware. I probably wouldn't have lasted another ten or twenty years, you know. Eventually someone's going to notice I've been living here for an improbable length of time."

"There are all sorts of options when that time comes, Eddy," Enki replied. "You can stage your own funeral and bequeath the house to Maggie, for example, or maybe just create a new identity and buy it from yourself."

“Won’t the neighbors notice?” Eddy asked.

“They might, but so long as you live here as quietly as you have been, I doubt anyone will get particularly curious. Have you been active in local politics?”

“Never,” Eddy denied. “I lived most of my life in the Boston area and only moved down here permanently when I retired.”

“Then what’s to worry about?” Enki remarked. “No one will really know you in Town House except as one of the elderly gentlemen who stops in to pay his taxes each year. I imagine the clerks there change just often enough that none of them will notice you’ve been coming in for a century or two and always look the same. Although you could be younger if you want to.”

“You’ve said that before,” Eddy replied, “but I’m comfortable like this. It’s what I’m used to seeing in the mirror each morning.”

“So who are you really?” Mike asked Eddy while Enki and the others started discussing ways and means of searching for Ina.

“Oh, just a retired ad executive,” Eddy remarked.

“Oh, I got the impression you were a god too,” Mike replied.

“He’s not just a god, Mike,” Jael told him, having overheard the conversation. “Eddy is the God of this universe.”

“Sort of,” Eddy told Mike. “According to what the others tell me, because I was in possession of the Tree at the time it matured I am technically the supreme deity of this universe. It doesn’t feel very different. I have a bit more stamina and I feel healthier than I have in years, but I’m neither all-wise nor omnipotent. Maybe I can grow into those things or maybe that’s not the way it works. It doesn’t really matter. I like myself the way I am.”

“Tanise,” Enki told the dryad. “We need to use your help to find Ina.”

“Of course,” she agreed instantly. “Ina is my friend too. What can I do?”

“We need to use your Tree to look for her in the other world,” Enki replied.

“You can do that?” Amy asked interestedly.

“Dee and I think so,” Enki replied. “It will take a mixture of sympathetic and contagious magic, but we are fairly certain it will work.

We need to make some small changes to one of the branches of your Tree and we don’t want to do so without your permission.”

“What sort of changes?” Tanise asked nervously.

“This is something we did on Yggdrasil,” Dee told her. “We encouraged the tree to grow some natural bowls on one of his branches. We have used them from time to time to observe what’s happening

in the world. We'll only need one this time, I think."

"I don't know," Tanise replied. "It doesn't sound very safe."

"It's not dangerous," Dee assured her. "We don't even force the Tree to do it. If he doesn't want to, he just won't."

"He's such a trusting soul," Tanise pointed out. "Will it hurt?"

"It didn't hurt Yggdrasil," Enki told her.

"I don't know," Tanise told him uncertainly.

"It's how we found your Tree when Loki and Iblis stole him," Jael told her.

"It is?" Tanise asked. "Well, I suppose it's only fair... Are you sure it won't hurt?"

"If it does, we'll stop, I promise," Enki told her.

"Okay," Tanise finally agreed. "I'll allow it. Where do you want to do it?"

"There should be a place about halfway up in the Tree that will match up with my observatory on Yggdrasil," Enki told her. "That would be the best place to try."

"Try?" Tanise asked excitedly. "I thought you knew what you were doing!"

"Well, we won't know for certain if it will work until after we try," Enki told her.

"Then you don't know if you'll be damaging the Tree, do you?" Tanise pointed out.

"We don't know if we can find Inanna this way, but we know we won't harm your Tree, Tanise," Jael told her.

"Show me where," Tanise demanded. Enki formed another bubble, but Tanise stopped him. "No! I'll meet you there."

Enki dissolved the bubble and Tanise turned to the tree and walked directly into its trunk. "Wow!" Mike breathed. "That's pretty amazing."

"It comes naturally to a dryad," Jael informed him, as Enki's bubble floated them upward. "But she's a pretty special dryad anyway. She's brave and intelligent."

"You're best student?" Dee asked Jael.

"Tied for first," Jael replied. "Amy was just as good although in different subjects. Of course they were the only students I've ever taught."

"You were good at it," Dee told her. "Maybe you should do more teaching."

"Oh yeah," Jael laughed. "I can just see the job interview. Previous employer: Lucifer, Prince of Lies. Place of residence; 666 Mockingbird Lane, City of Dis, Hades. Previous experience..."

“666 Mockingbird Lane was the address of Herman Munster,” Mike pointed out.

“Well, I have a P.O. box in Cleveland Heights,” Jael replied, “but that doesn’t sound as sinister.”

“Says you,” Rona remarked, briefly appearing in Jael’s place.

“There are worse places,” Jael shot back. “Much worse. But I already have a job and I’m very good at it.”

“And sometimes we even get to do it,” Rona added. “You know, Dee is right. Maybe it’s time we let Gwenwyn take a step up. She’s doing most of our work when we’re out doing special assignments like this anyway.”

“I don’t recall anyone assigning us to this,” Jael noted.

“Exactly,” Rona told her, “and yet here we are. Why?”

“Well, we’re also working as deputy commissioner for the Celestial League,” Jael pointed out.

“There aren’t any baseball diamonds in this universe,” Rona countered. “Face it, we like doing stuff like this and if we’re going to, maybe we need to change our situation.”

“You have a point,” Jael admitted. “Let’s think about it and maybe we’ll do something about it after this is over.”

“Do they do that all the time?” Mike asked Asherah.

“Fun, huh?” Ash replied.

“You’ll never walk alone,” Jael and Rona sang together.

“That tickles!” Tanise giggled when Dee and Enki started forming the bowl for their observation pool.

“Not too bad, I hope?” Enki asked.

“Not if you stop soon,” she replied, still laughing uncontrollably.

“Almost done,” Enki promised. “There.”

“That’s it?” Tanise asked.

“As far as doing anything physically to the Tree, yes,” Enki replied. “Now I fill it with water and we can cast the spells that should allow us to use it to view the other universe.”

“What sort of spells?” Tanise asked.

“The first will symbolically connect your Tree to its parent,” Ash told her, to let Enki and Dee continue to work without interruption. “We can do that through the Law of Contagion which states that two objects once in contact remain in contact.”

“Huh? That doesn’t make sense,” Tanise shook her head. “Wouldn’t the act of taking them apart mean they are apart?”

“Not when using magic,” Ash replied.

“Magic!” Tanise scoffed. “Science is so much easier to understand.”

“That’s because you have a modern education, dear,” Ash told her. “We didn’t teach you magic because magic isn’t used in the modern world. Although it seems to me that maybe a few lessons might be in order sometime soon. When life first rises to intelligence here, you may occasionally need it. Anyway, once we establish the symbolic connection, we can use the Law of Sympathy to look for Ina over there.”

“Sympathy?” Tanise asked.

“It’s the property that allows us to duplicate what we do here to happen in the other universe,” Ash explained.

“It still doesn’t make sense to me,” Tanise told her stubbornly. “I’m going to talk to Amy about it.”

“Good idea, dear,” Ash told her. Tanise nodded and disappeared into the tree again.

“They’re tough concepts for someone with a scientific background, you know,” Mike remarked. “Just as computers would seem hopelessly odd to one of the ancients.”

“Only if you tried to explain how one works,” Ash replied. “When I first woke up in the modern world, I had no trouble with learning to use a computer. It was like learning to cast a spell in a new way.”

“A bad example on my part then,” Mike admitted. “How was your working knowledge of the periodic table of elements when you woke up?”

“Good point,” Ash agreed.

“Well, that’s done,” Enki told them. “It even works after a fashion.”

“That doesn’t sound too successful,” Mike remarked.

“It’s not so bad,” Enki replied, “but we have a bit of a lag in response time. Must be due to translation times across the universes. It will work well enough. It will just slow us down a bit.”

They started looking for Ina immediately, but results would not have been immediately forthcoming even on Yggdrasil. On the younger Tree, it took them over a week of all day surveillance, before finding even a trace of the missing goddess.

“Somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere,” Enki decided.

“Not exactly a big surprise,” Dee told him acidly. “Let’s try to narrow it down.”

“Too bad we’re not actually on Yggdrasil,” Enki told her. “We could have been working round the clock there.”

“This tree is not above the arctic circle,” Dee pointed out. “Besides, even if we don’t need sleep physically, a rest is good to keep us mentally fresh.”

They continued to search and finally narrowed Ina’s location down to the Chinese region of the divine plane. Further searching finally narrowed it down to Diyu, the mythological Chinese underworld.

“It’s not much,” Enki told everyone. “Diyu is tremendous. It would have to be to host the unvirtuous dead of China. Not only that, but it includes similar aspects from all over the eastern half or more of Asia. I’m not even sure who we should be seeing there.”

“I know a little about ancient Chinese mythology,” Mike told him. “The King of Diyu, at least I think that’s his title, could be an emperor. However, I believe that title is reserved for the Jade Emperor. Anyway the King of Diyu is Yanluowang or Yanluo for short. Buddhist and Hindu teachings tell us his name is Yama, or Yama Raja, King Yama. You say Ina is in Diyu? That’s the Chinese Hell. Maybe Jael would know more about it than I do.”

“We have an embassy there,” Jael admitted, “but they’re a stand-offish bunch. And I haven’t had much contact with any of them. The fact that we detected Ina in Diyu, which means ‘Earth Prison’ by the way, rather than in Naraka or Jigoku means we probably won’t have to worry too much about areas that are not strictly Chinese, although there has been a lot of mixing in from the religious beliefs of Southeast Asia in the last century, and I suspect we’ll have a large amount of overlap regardless.”

“That’s it?” Enki asked.

“Well, there are eighteen traditional levels to Diyu, sort of like Dante’s nine circles of Hell,” Mike replied. “Is Hell really built like that?” he asked Jael.

“Kind of,” Jael shrugged. “We showed Dante what he expected to see and built a lot of it on the fly. Most of the big features still exist, and did before as well, but there’s a lot more he never saw, mostly because they didn’t fit his notion of what Hell is supposed to be like and also because sin evolves as much as life itself does. There are sins these days that weren’t even imagined back in Dante’s day, and believe it or not, some sins go out of fashion or go extinct altogether. We have to adapt.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that just now,” Rona told her.

“Probably not, but I suspect Diyu has adapted as well. What I know is confusing and in some cases self-conflicting,” Jael admitted. “I have learned that there are ten Yama kings. In some accounts they are answerable to Yanluo who is the overlord of Hell. In others Yanluo is just one of them. Eighteen levels, as I said, but there is supposed to be a Yama king reigning over each one so either some of them are

doing double duty or there are some we just haven't heard about. Of course some texts mention as many as one hundred and thirty-some odd levels or worlds, but I suppose if we're dealing with entire worlds, there's room for some fine hair-splitting, much the same as Sam Clemens must have done the day he claimed to have seen over one hundred types of weather over the course of an afternoon. It was probably that observation that got the remark, 'If you don't like the weather in New England, wait a minute and it'll change.'"

"I thought it had been proven he never said it," Mike remarked.

"For all I know he said it a lot," Jael shrugged, "but evidently it wasn't original to him."

"Anything else before we go charging into Hell?" Dee asked.

"Diyu," Jael corrected her. "It's not really very much like the place I hang my hat."

"What hat?" Mike asked only to earn a frown from their resident demoness.

"And, of course, keep in mind that the souls in Diyu are being processed for reincarnation," Jael told them, "not their eventual fate to be determined on Judgment Day, although even that varies by religion."

"Which one?" Mike asked. "Hell or Diyu?"

"Both, actually," Jael replied. "Look, much as I like Tanise's Tree, and Eddy's hospitality always makes me feel as much at home as when I'm with Marcus, I think we've exhausted the amount of useful data either I or Mike can dispense. It's possible, you know, that all we'll have to do is have a polite discussion with Yanluowang and that will be that. He probably doesn't want Inanna there any more than we want her to be."

"I just hope we don't have to do what we did last time she got stuck in Hell," Enki remarked as they started making their way back down the Tree. Unlike on Yggdrasil, this younger tree still only had the one aspect and Enki had to float them back down to ground level.

"Good thing you're being faithful to her, Sport!" Jael laughed, punching Mike lightly on the arm.

"It's not funny," Dee told her. "Inanna has changed quite a bit since then and I doubt she would want to sacrifice any of us just so she could be free. I also doubt I could have said that even a few years ago."

They got to the base of the Tree, but there was no one there at the moment. They found Eddy and his family, Tanise included, having breakfast in the kitchen. "Amy, dear," her mother told her, "make some more pancakes, will you?"

"We really need to rush off," Enki demurred.

"Nonsense!" Eddy told him. "Even gods need to eat every now and then. Better stoke up now before you go off to wherever you're going. It won't do Ina any good if you get there all tired and hungry."

"Eddy's got a point, Enki," Dee told him. "There is not likely to be anything we can or should eat in Diyu. Better eat now and hope for the best."

Ash looked at the batter in the bowl Amy was scooping from and decided, "I think we're going to

need another batch. I'll take over, dear."

"Thanks, Ash," Amy replied, stepping aside. "Your pancakes are better than mine anyway. I can help, though."

After breakfast, it was time to be off and they opened the front door directly to a branch of Yggdrasil. "Did we leave Ratty behind?" Dee asked suddenly.

"No," Enki replied. "He came back here over a week ago. You know Tanise won't let him get too close to the new Tree's squirrel until she's of age. Yes, I know squirrels usually mature much faster, but these are special critters, after all."

"I never saw Ratty's girlfriend," Mike admitted, "although I did see the big cardinal."

"There's a pair of them, male and female," Jael told him, "No babies yet for some reason though, and a pair of really large robins. They have had chicks, but they flew off somewhere when they got old enough. Should make for an interesting mythology someday."

"Now, what's the best way to Diyu from here?" Enki wondered.

"Other side of the tree and three branches down," a large hart told them from another branch. Mike recalled this would have been one of the four deer that live on Yggdrasil itself, eating the young buds and representing the four winds,

"Thanks!" Enki told him and they walked briskly back toward the trunk. "I'm surprised we haven't run into Ratty yet. He usually greets us as we're passing through."

"I can do without some of his greetings," Dee remarked. "Those to and from the ballgame a couple of days ago were especially rude."

"We're not doing well without Inanna, are we?" Enki asked. "I told Hawk he was going to have to do without all three of us until we found her. He wasn't very happy about it, but he was even less happy about the prospect of losing her permanently."

"Hawk has his priorities straight," Dee remarked, "even if they're mostly related to baseball."

It took another hour, but they eventually found their way to the entrance to Diyu, a withered branch near an undefined, but horrible odor. "Doesn't smell too good around here, does it?" Jael remarked.

"I'm none too thrilled about the brimstone when we have to go to your Hell," Enki told her.

"I'm used to that," Jael replied, "but even so, you have to admit this is worse."

"It is to my nostrils, but I doubt the local denizens would agree," Enki told her. "We'll just have to hold our noses when we can and our tongues at all times. Let's go."

He walked forward and disappeared. Then Dee and Asherah did likewise. Jael turned toward Mike and invited, "After you, my dear Alphonse."

"No, no, after you, my dear Gaston," Mike replied.

“Oh, I insist,” Jael retorted.

“I implore.”

“I beg...” Jael stopped herself. “Let’s just go.”

9

“Be it ever so humble,” Jael remarked on the other side, “there’s no place like home.”

“And this is no place like home,” Mike added.

They found themselves on a vast desert plane just outside an impossibly large gate set into the mouth of a cave. The gate appeared to be made of beaten gold, with many scenes depicted thereon, and set with gems of all sorts. The cave mouth, if that was what it had been, was in the side of a cliff that seemed to stretch up for miles. But what caught Mike’s eyes were the two tall and muscular guardians, Ox-head and Horse-face. They were anthropomorphic, but as their names implied, they had the heads of animals. Mike could have sworn neither oxen nor horses had fangs like that, however.

“Hello!” Enki greeted them, taking a step forward. “Perhaps you could help us...” as he moved toward them the two guardians took a defensive stance as though preparing for battle. “Or not,” Enki concluded. “Look, we’re here to see Yanluowang. Would you mind letting us in?” Ox-head took a swipe at the water god, forcing him to take a step back. Further attempts by the others met with similar results. Nothing they said or did, whether polite requests or outright demands, made any difference. Ox-head and Horse-face were determined not to let them in.

“Not easy to intimidate these two, is it?” Enki remarked when they had stepped back from the gate to get their breath, “and I don’t really think fighting would be the best way to make a good impression with the local king.”

“Can we try an illusion?” Mike asked.

“What sort?” Dee asked. “I don’t think invisibility would work well here,”

“No, this sort of guardian is probably used to seeing the invisible,” Mike opined. “I was just remembering some of the mythology of this place, though, and an image of Sun Wukong might get their attention.”

“The Monkey King?” Jael asked.

“Yeah,” Mike replied. “Last time he was here, he was more than a bit of a nuisance. Actually he

pretty much trashed this place. That was before he was forced to apprentice with Xuanzang, of course, and eventually he even attained enlightenment, but it's worth a shot, I suppose."

"Anything to avoid a useless fight," Jael agreed. She projected the image of a large and angry monkey and the two guardians immediately cowered in fear.

"That's pretty amazing," Enki remarked. "Just a monkey?"

"Sun Wukong is no normal monkey," Mike replied. "He was able to defeat the entire Army of Heaven in pitched battle, the Four heavenly Kings, and even survived forty-nine days of being cooked in a mystic cauldron."

"A bad guy to have as an enemy," Enki nodded.

"To say the least," Mike replied. Then he stepped forward and demanded, "Take us to Yanluo immediately!"

Together Horse-face and Ox-head opened the gate to Diyu and led them down into a long, sloping corridor with oil lamps for illumination, but no doors or side passages. They eventually came to a second gate which, when opened, revealed a large room with thousands of waiting souls standing in line in front of only ten barred windows that resembled nothing so much as the tellers' windows in an old-fashioned bank. The queued-up souls each had a turn conducting business at the windows and were then allowed to pass through another set of doors at the side of the room. Mike and the others did not have time to discover what sort of business was being conducted, because Ox-head and Horse-face led them directly to the next set of doors. Two more guardians attempted to stop them, but Ox-head grumbled a series of unintelligible syllables and they were allowed to pass.

The next corridor had hundreds of doors, but rather than going through any of them. Ox-head and Horse-face led them to the end of the hallway where there was a large bank of elevators and a wide stairway. There were souls waiting for the elevators, but most were walking down the stairway. As they passed the elevators, one of the doors opened and the waiting souls pressed forward, with paper money in hand. It was a chaotic rush and many souls were shoved out of the way as others tried to press bits of paper into the hands of the spirit who operated the elevator. Mike and Enki got caught in the middle of the press but Ox-head turned around and fished them out as the others hurried further down the hall. Finally, they reached another elevator that none of the souls appeared to be trying to get into.

Mike assumed the apparent lack of popularity for this particular lift had something to do with the writing on the door, but since he was unable to read Chinese, he was not sure.

The door opened a few moments later and they boarded the elevator. While traveling downward, Enki fished a slip of paper out of his pocket. "What do you think this is?" he asked the others. "It sort of looks like money, but they don't even have denominations this high in that updated Monopoly game. Five Hundred Million Dollars! Really! Nice engraving for play money though."

"It's a Hell banknote," Mike told him. "See, it says so right on the top over the portrait of the Jade Emperor."

"A Hell banknote," Enki repeated. "What's the point?"

"Well, when someone dies, his or her family sends them this money, along with a variety of other paper presents, to help pay their way in the underworld and, if possible, to bribe the Yama kings into

granting them a shorter sentence. I understand modern Chinese people will also send their dead credit cards, although maybe they're really debit cards since it would be a pretty nasty trick to let them charge up a bunch without having the funds to pay when the bill comes around," Mike explained.

"So that's where all the credit cards came from," Jael remarked.

"Huh?" Mike asked.

"When I first met Marcus, the husband Rona and I share, he was surprised to hear we had money in Hell," Jael explained.

"I would have thought he would make a comment about it proving money was the root of all evil," Rona put in.

"He came close, but not about the money," Jael replied. "As I remember I said something like, 'Sure, and we have credit cards too,' to which he responded, 'I always knew those were an invention of the Devil.' At the time I ignored the remark because I was wondering why we had credit cards in the first place. I wonder if they sort of filtered in from here."

"Maybe not," Rona replied. "You've said on numerous occasions that Hell has to keep up with the times. Credit and Debit cards are just part of it. Since you and I started sharing this body we've had an influx of cell phones and PDAs as well. It's a mirror of the mortal plane after all."

"I guess," Jael nodded.

"So is this worth much?" Enki asked waving the bill at anyone who cared to look.

"Well, as I understand it," Mike told him. "The most common denomination is ten thousand bucks, so I guess that's a fairly high amount, but ridiculous amounts, by mortal standards at least, are typical of Hell banknotes. Why?"

"I thought we might be able to bribe Yanluo into giving us Inanna," Enki replied.

"I suspect Yanluo would see it as insultingly small," Mike replied. "Roughly analogous to leaving a two cent tip."

"Ah well," Enki sighed and put the note back into a pocket.

The elevator came to a halt and the door opened on a brightly lit room with murals to the right and left and a set of golden doors on the wall across from the elevator. The two guards there were wearing ancient-style armor and held long heavy spears. Horse-face grunted at them and they opened the doors to reveal the richly appointed throne room of Yanluowang.

The walls were of white, ornately carved marble and the floors of ebony planks so well polished and waxed that they reflected like a mirror. There were tapestries scattered about that Mike thought clashed badly with the room and each other, but which he realized must have been very expensive. Around the room stood a host of demons and servants of the court, both male and female.

There was a large chair in one corner that seemed to be made of gold, silver and more gems than Mike had ever seen in one place. He thought it looked more like a throne than the one in the middle of the room on which sat a large, rotund man with a long, thin mustache. And the chair he sat on was

something Mike would have expected to find in any La-Z-Boy outlet. The brown leather recliner was amply stuffed and Yanlou seemed to enjoy rocking back and forth on it. "Is there something wrong with my throne?" he asked challengingly when he realized the new arrivals were staring at him.

"Not if you're comfortable," Enki replied, before making a production of introducing himself and the others. "I am Enki of Abzu, the Wise, the Benevolent. God of Inventors and Magic, of Water and Wisdom. 'Twas I who invented beer and agriculture, irrigation and architecture..."

"Yes, yes, most impressive," Yanluo replied, yawning. "Do you juggle as well? I assume the rest of these are your entourage?"

"Not at all, O King of Diyu," Enki denied and turned toward Dee. "I have the honor to introduce, Mother Ki, Ninhursag, Ninmah the Bountiful, Aruru, Gaea, Tellus, Demeter, Ceres also known to the modern world as Mother Nature."

"All those?" Yanluo asked, not sounding impressed. "That's more names than you have persons standing here."

"Ah, but all those and many more are embodied by this great lady with the green tresses," Enki announced.

"You'll have to let me know who does your hair," Yanluo replied toward Dee.

"I also have the honor to travel with Mother Asherah, she who was the Queen of Heaven and consort to El Shaddai."

"Sorry to hear about the divorce," Yanluo commented uncaringly. "And the others? Do they have similarly impressive stories attendant on them?"

"Jael of Hell," Enki began to wind down. He was about to let it go at that, but added, "Deputy Commissioner of the Celestial League."

"Interesting," Yanluo commented, sounding more bored than ever. "Let me know when you start playing football."

"American, Australian or Soccer?" Jael asked.

"Whatever," Yanluo replied, "but I see you are more than one as well. I can cure you of the terrible mortal infection, if you like."

"No, thank you," Jael replied, forcing Rona not to come to the surface and tell the King of Diyu off. "I'm sort of fond of her by now."

"To each his own perversities, I suppose," Yanluo told her. "And this one?"

"I'm the token human," Mike told him.

"Mister Michael Fulden, a professor of the classics," Enki finished his introductions.

"And why have you invaded my court this day?" Yanluo asked blandly.

"We're looking for a lost companion," Enki replied. "Our divinations tell us she is here somewhere in your realm."

"And will I have heard of this companion?" Yanluo prompted him.

"Some call her Venus and others Aphrodite," Enki began. "She has also been Tanit, Astarte, Ishtar and Inanna, to name just a few. She too has been the Queen of Heaven, the Goddess of Love and War, the Eldest of the Fates and, by sheer happenstance, my granddaughter."

"I've heard of her," Yanluo admitted. "Good fielder, but she needs to work on her batting average."

"I thought you weren't interested in the game," Dee remarked.

"It's something to do on weekends," Yanluo told her. "I don't think she's here. Sorry you had to come all this way."

"Begging your pardon," Enki replied, "but we know for a fact that she is."

"No, that cannot be," Yanluo told them. "I think I would know if an alien deity were anywhere within my domain."

"Then perhaps she has been hidden from you," Enki suggested. "All we ask of you is your leave to search for her."

"And I say she is not here," Yanluo replied, suddenly angry. "Do you have the gall to call me a liar in my own throne room?"

"Not at all, Lord Yanluo," Enki replied gently. "There are ways to conceal her presence from all but the Infinites. If she has been hidden here without your knowledge, it is as much an assault on you as it was on her. All we request is permission to search for her within your realm. If she is not here, we simply won't find her."

"You may look anywhere you like," Yanluo decided as suddenly as he had gotten angry, "but if you do, I will not allow you to leave unless you actually find her."

"What?" Enki almost screamed.

"It is fair recompense for doubting my word," Yanluo replied. "Accept my word and leave immediately without looking or prove me wrong and you may leave with Inanna. But the moment you begin your search, you are committed and, when you find she is not in my domain, you will stand before one of the Yama Kings to be judged and consigned to your punishment. That is what I offer. Take it or leave it. I care not."

"Your realm is large, Lord Yanluo," Asherah spoke up. "Might we have a guide to help us keep from getting lost?"

"If any here care to aid you, they may do so with my permission," Yanluo told her, once more affecting boredom.

Enki turned around to see that none of the members of Yanluo's court would look at him eye-to-eye. "Hey, Horse-face! Care to give us the two-bit tour? Ox-head?" Neither of them even acknowledged the

presence of the foreigners. "Anyone else here like to go walk-about?" Not even a whisper of recognition met his request. "On our own again, it seems," Enki concluded. "Any suggestions, Mike?"

"Me?" Mike asked in reply.

"You're the one who insisted we come here," Enki pointed out.

"I didn't hear anyone trying to talk me out of it," Mike shot back.

"Because we all agreed with you," Dee told him. "We know she is here."

"Like we knew Lachesis was in the Labyrinth?" Jael asked.

"She was," Asherah reminded the demoness, "but she was hiding from us until after Inanna was abducted."

"Well, we're none of us accomplishing anything in this dump," Mike told them, earning a scowl from Yanluo. Perversely, the fact he had angered the god made him feel a bit better. "Let's go find her."

"Mike's right, guys," Jael told them. "The day's not getting any younger."

They started back toward the door, but Yanluo stopped them. "Not that way," he smiled maliciously and pointed to another door hidden in a corner of the throne room. "That way."

The door was modest in size and black in color. As Mike and his companions passed through it, it suddenly slammed shut and on testing it, they discovered it could not be opened again. "Could have been worse," Mike decided as they started walking away.

"How's that?" Jael asked.

"I half expected him to pull a lever and send us down a trap door," Mike replied. "It's what all the cartoon villains do."

"This isn't a cartoon," Jael replied grimly, "and if someone here drops a piano on your head we're not going to be able to heal you with a bicycle pump."

"You know," Asherah remarked, "sometime it would be really nice to understand what you're talking about. Even the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge hasn't enlightened me that far yet."

"I'm not sure cartoons are a form of enlightenment," Enki replied, "although they can be fun. But, cheer up, you've only been with us for a year and a half or so. It takes time to catch up on two and a half millennia."

They soon found themselves in a vast maze of rooms. Each one featured a form of torture. It was cold in the first room and there were thousands, maybe millions of souls who had been frozen up to their necks in pools of ice. "Ninth Circle?" Mike wondered aloud.

"I don't think so," Jael remarked, "although the punishment is similar." As they passed through, demons were busily inserting souls into the ice. As they did so a small area would melt and they would drop the soul in and the spot would freeze over instantly. The soul would scream for a few second before he or she was frozen solid.

It was a large chamber and about the time the party had gone half way around the edge of the room, for that was the only clear area in which they might pass, a loud gong sounded. A few seconds later all the ice melted and the souls within the room started screaming in unbelievable agony. This lasted for an eternity and also only one minute after which the water froze once more and ghastly silence once more embraced the room.

“We probably ought to be getting a bit closer to the clients here,” Jael suggested. “Ina could be hidden among them. It would be just like Yanluo to hide her in the first place we looked just because we wouldn’t expect to find her so soon.”

“At least the demons here seem to be ignoring us,” Mike remarked.

“I suspect all of Yanluo’s people will,” Enki told him. “Just like in the throne room.”

“Does any of this seem too well-planned to be believable to you?” Mike asked.

“Yanluowang is not a good actor,” Enki remarked. “He hammed it up far too much to be believable. Inanna is here somewhere and he knows precisely where she is, but he thinks he’s clever. Maybe he is, but he’s a rotten actor so if he wanted us to believe him, he didn’t have a sucker’s chance.”

“I don’t think whether we believed him or not was very high up on his priorities, guys,” Jael told them. Both nodded and started looking through the souls in the room.

They spent a long while looking and not all the tortured souls were visible or even recognizable. Twice Mike had to be fished out of the water before it refroze and what he thought was merely dirty water, turned out to be a mixture that was much worse.

Finally, as they were about to leave and look somewhere else, an old woman entered the room, walked toward one of the souls on ice. She reached down and the water around him melted. He screamed very briefly, but then she put her hands on either side of his head. He smiled with blessed relief and she gave him a cup of something. He drank it, smiled again, somewhat more vacantly this time and then faded away.

“What was that?” Mike blurted out the question.

The old woman turned to face them. “Oh, hello,” she said. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Yanluo gave us his leave to search for a friend,” Enki told her.

“Doesn’t surprise me in the least,” she told them. “It’s a game he likes to play from time to time. You won’t find your friend. Not soon in any case. If he is letting you search, it means he doesn’t think you can find him or her.”

“Her and obviously we think he is mistaken,” Enki replied.

“Obviously,” she replied, with a slight smile.

“Will you help us look?” Asherah asked.

“I can fit you in,” the old lady replied. “Call me Meng.”

“Meng Po?” Mike asked.

“Po is my title, yes,” Meng replied.

“You’re the Lady of Forgetfulness,” Mike continued.

“I know that,” she replied, with some amusement. “Forgetfulness may be my domain, but I am not absent-minded.”

“It is Meng Po’s job to ensure those souls ready for reincarnation do not remember their time in Diyu or their past lives,” Mike told the others and then quickly performed the introductions.

“Where have you looked so far?” Meng asked some time later.

“So far just here,” Dee replied. “What is going on here, by the way?”

“This is the Chamber of Ice,” Meng explained. These are the souls who have mistreated their parents or elders, or failed to properly venerate their ancestors. Since you won’t have been elsewhere yet, you may not believe this is one of the milder punishments that are dealt out here.”

“Most of us have seen this sort of thing before,” Enki told her grimly. “Our own versions are as bad or worse.”

“Very well,” Meng replied. “We will proceed. Are you aware there are technically eighteen levels to Diyu?”

“Yes,” Jael replied, “but we are unclear as to how they are arranged or what each one’s purpose is.”

“Purpose?” Meng laughed. “They all have the same purpose – to punish those who have sinned and to prepare them for the next life.”

“Jael misspoke,” Rona suddenly cut in. Meng’s eyebrows rose slightly in surprise, but gave no other indication this was not something she might have expected to see or had not experienced millions of times before. “She meant we do not know who is being punished in each chamber, why or how.”

“I know what she meant,” Meng told her, “but I prefer people to say what they mean.”

“I’ll try to speak more precisely in the future,” Jael grumbled when Rona let her out again.

“No,” Meng laughed. “You will be yourself and come up with something you think is witty banter the moment the opportunity presents itself. I have heard of you before, my little demoness. For a middle management demon in the Judeo-Christian Hell, you seem to have made a name for yourself across all Creation. I keep wondering why you seem content to merely punish environmental wasters, but now I think it is because you occasionally need a vacation from saving the world from itself.”

“I haven’t done that sort of thing all that often,” Jael remarked.

“No, perhaps not. No doubt the story has grown in the telling,” Meng chuckled. “But it is still being told. You know, had you brought what you like to call your little zap gun here, I suspect Yanluowang would have given you the Queen of Heaven the moment you started pointing it at him. Is it true you single

handedly depopulated Jotunheim?”

“No, I had a lot of help,” Jael remarked modestly, “but I did thin the frost giants’ ranks down a little.”

“More than a little, I’ll bet,” Meng chuckled again. “Well, come along we have a lot more than eighteen chambers to search, regardless of how we are supposedly structured here.”

10

“This modern world we need to keep up with,” Meng explained, “has been running us ragged. We have always had close aspects in the various Buddhist Narakas, our analogues in the Japanese belief structure, all the variants that exists in Southeast Asia and more, but in the last century or so, humans have tended to mix us up and match our aspects as it seems to please them. Consequently these days we are all jumbled up together. Well, in some ways that is convenient, but as personal divine aspects merge, we occasionally come up short on man power. That Chamber of Ice back there used to freeze and thaw far more often, but now we just don’t have the time, what with all the work we must accomplish elsewhere.”

“Is that bad, Lady Meng?” Mike asked.

“Of course it is bad,” Meng told him. “It means the souls we are preparing must stay here even longer before they are ready. That means we have a backlog and with far more souls arriving every day, it’s only going to get worse.”

“I would have thought consolidation would have had just the opposite effect,” Jael remarked. “You should have more demons available than ever.”

“On the lowest levels, perhaps,” Meng shrugged, “but those of us known by name to the mortals have analogues, aspects in related religions. Sometimes you can’t help but merge with an aspect, you know. It’s not always a conscious decision.”

“You could diverge by force of will, though, couldn’t you?” Jael asked.

“We’ve tried,” Meng replied, “and sometimes it works, for a while. But that sort of thing is easier for a deity that no longer has much of an active cult. We still have so many believers that the force of their belief is impressed upon us. You must remember what that is like.”

“It wasn’t much of a problem back in the old days,” Enki replied. “There were minor changes, of course, but except for changes over time, not a lot. A new people coming into our lands would inquire about the proper forms of worship more often than they would try to remake us into what they wanted us to be. When there were changes, they tended to be additive, ascribing more powers and adventures,

rather than taking them away. It was a different way of treating one's gods than you see these days."

"Lucky you," Meng told him. "The next stop along the way will be the Chamber of Grinding where those who were wealthy and yet did no good works are ground into powder."

"Charming," Dee remarked.

"I told you the Chamber of Ice was comparatively mild, Mother Nature," Meng reminded her. "Actually it is just one of the Chambers of Grinding, just as that was but one Chamber of Ice. There are actually quite a few needed to accommodate our..." She was searching for a word.

"Clients?" Jael suggested.

"Yes," Meng replied thoughtfully. "Clients is as good a way to think of them."

They searched through all the levels of Diyu, without pausing to rest, from the Chamber of Pounding, reserved for the punishment of those who kill in cold blood to the Chamber of Disembowelment where tomb-robbers, hypocrites and those who, in life, sought to cause trouble for trouble's sake. "We keep this particular chamber for politicians only," Meng told them. "The politicians think they are getting special treatment and our more common clients don't have to feel they are slumming."

"You're kidding?" Mike asked. "You've been saying things like that since we met you. I have trouble telling when you're serious."

"Good!" Meng retorted with a smirk. They had also visited the Buddhist Narakas, many of which were, in fact the same chambers used by the Chinese underworld pantheon although there were also some that were wildly different. There were aspects that were more Taoist than Confucianist and those that best befit worshippers in other parts of Asia. There were, in fact, hundreds, if not thousands, of torture chambers throughout Diyu and when questioned Meng merely said, "The customer is always right. Yes, we have eighteen levels but some Buddhist scholars claim there are a thousand and other groups have different descriptions so we must accommodate. You came looking for Yanluo in his Chinese aspect, so we have spoken of eighteen levels."

"All religions are valid," Jael remarked, "even when they conflict."

"There is room in Infinity for paradox," Meng replied.

Finally Meng told them, "Now we've been through nearly all the levels as best we could in such a short time. Our last stop is the Chamber of Avici. There's only one, but it is more than sufficient to accommodate the ones we send there."

The Chamber of Avici, she went on to explain, was for those who had committed the most heinous crimes imaginable, brought great misery to the people and betrayed their rulers. The Chamber consisted of a relatively small platform that stood over a white-hot fire. The condemned souls were placed on the platform where they attempted to keep from being pushed off and into the fire.

"Some hold on longer than others," Meng told Mike and the others, "but eventually they all fall in and burn." They were standing on an observation platform above the one on which the condemned stood.

"How do you fish them back out for reincarnation?" Rona asked.

“These souls are never allowed to reincarnate,” Meng told them sadly. “One by one they are consumed by the fire. They are not even consumed instantaneously. It takes a very long time to destroy a soul this way.”

11

“Inanna is not here,” Enki reported. “I’m absolutely sure of that. I doubt she ever was.” He turned to Meng Po and asked, “What have we missed? Are there places we have not yet been?”

“Of course,” Meng replied. “It would take forever to look absolutely everywhere. Have you been to the ten courts of the Yama kings yet?”

“We were in the court of Yanluowang,” Enki replied.

“So there’s another ten places to look,” Meng replied, “and, when you were before Yanluowang, did you actually look for her in his court?”

“Wouldn’t we have seen her there?” Enki asked.

“Not if she had been turned into someone else,” Mike remarked, “or something else.”

“That old trick?” Enki chuckled. “I can see through any glamour.”

“Only if you think to look,” Dee told him, “which none of us did.”

“I assume Yanluo has private chambers,” Asherah remarked.

“None more private,” Meng replied. “I doubt he will let you look in there.”

“He did say to look anywhere,” Jael remembered. “I think it’s time to take him at his word.”

“Keep in mind that there’s no guarantee she’s been kept in the same place while you’ve been searching,” Meng told them. “He might have waited until you were done in the Chamber of Ice and then stashed her there. However, I think it’s more likely he’s keeping her out in plain sight.”

“Why?” Jael asked.

“Because he can,” Meng replied. “Because he would think it was the clever thing to do. Of course he does not confide in me, so who knows?”

“Well, I think it’s time to take a good look though Yanluo’s dresser,” Enki decided.

“My private chambers?” Yanluo protested with great affront when they told him where they intended to look next. “How dare you even suggest such a thing?” He shook , apparently with rage, and started rocking back and forth in his recliner.

“You did give us leave to look anywhere we wanted,” Enki replied. “It just seems to me that the best place to hide someone would be where you wouldn’t allow us to look.”

“You have my word she is not in my chambers,” Yanluo told him.

“I had your word I could look anywhere I chose,” Enki countered.

“That is not where Inanna is,” Yanluo told him angrily, shaking even more and then rocking a bit harder.

“And I had your word she wasn’t in Diyu at all,” Enki replied.

“So you are calling me a liar!” Yanluo shouted.

“It appears so,” Enki replied, “and I insist on looking absolutely everywhere.”

“Never!” Yanluo screamed, now shaking on the chair more violently than ever. Then almost as suddenly he changed his mind. “Well, if you insist, go take a look.”

“What’s the catch?” Enki asked suspiciously.

“No catch,” Yanluo replied, trying to sound nonchalant. “What are you looking at?” he demanded testily of Mike.

“Your recliner seems to be moving,” Mike observed.

“I uh, got the massage option built in,” Yanluo attempted to cover and rocked a bit harder.

“Enki,” Mike told him, “I think we can spare Yanluo the embarrassment of our seeing that he forgot to make the bed or pick up his underwear this morning. What do you think of his new throne?”

“The rocking recliner?” Enki asked and took a deep look. “Oh ho! That was almost clever enough to fool me, but not enough to fool Mike.” He and Dee held hands briefly and a moment later the chairs disappeared to be replaced by Ina, who immediately shoved Yanluo off her lap and halfway across the room. She stumbled at that point and Mike stepped forward to catch her.

“How dare you!” Yanluo sputtered. “I’ll have you all thrown directly into Avici!”

“No, Yanluo!” one of the members of his court stopped him. Yanluo spun around to see who had spoken but it was one of the ten judges, one of the Yama kings of Diyu. “You promised that they should go free if this foreign goddess were found within this domain. She is here and your judgment must stand. They are free to leave Diyu.”

“Do not expect me to be so hospitable should you ever return,” Yanluo warned Enki and the others.

“And there I was going to invite you over for beer and pizza,” Enki replied. “Come on troops, time to go home.”

Part Three: Love Conquers All

1

“Where the hell is Lachesis,” Ina demanded the moment they were out of Diyu. She had been a bit shaky after spending several weeks as a chair, but she had recovered as soon as she felt the bark of Yggdrasil under her feet. “I’m going to send her into the next century.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Dee warned her. “Even I don’t go out of my way to cross the Fates.”

“I’m not the one who started this,” Ina retorted, “and I already know Atropos is staying out of this.

“No, you don’t know that,” Jael corrected her. “You only know that she says it’s not her concern. Besides I seriously doubt she’ll stay neutral for very long if you and Lachesis start tearing strips out of each other.”

“Then I’ll take all three of them down if I have to,” Ina replied. “It’s bad enough Yanluo used me for a rocking chair. I will not let the Three treat me like a doormat! I’m headed directly for the base and you can’t stop me.”

“Don’t bother,” they heard Ratatosk as he jumped down from a higher branch. “The Norns aren’t down there. And where the heck have you all been? The team hasn’t won a game all month. Hawk is worried out of his mind and even Enlil was about to round up a posse and come looking for you.”

“A posse?” Mike asked, picturing in his mind a bunch of gods dressed up like cartoon cowboys.

“So to speak,” Ratatosk replied. “Look, while you lot have been off in Neverland, the whole world’s gone crazy. Hey, where are we going?”

“I’m hungry,” Enki replied, “and I doubt I’m alone in that. Any suggestions?”

“Chinese food in Hong Kong?” Ratatosk suggested.

“I’ve had enough of anything Chinese for the moment,” Enki decided.

“Texas barbecue?” Jael asked.

“Pizza sounds good to me,” Ash added.

“Right now I’d settle for fried chicken in Kentucky,” Mike told them.

“A very rare steak,” Ina growled.

“That’s my girl!” Ratatosk chortled.

“Chowder and clam cakes is my vote,” Dee told them.

“Oh heck, we’ll never come to a consensus,” Enki groaned. “How about we just find a restaurant and order what we want?”

A few minutes later they were seated in a round booth at one end of a classic diner, splitting several quickie appetizers while waiting for the real food to arrive. “So what have we missed,” Enki finally asked Ratatosk over a first cup of coffee.

“A lot of strange stuff,” Ratatosk replied.

“What sort of strange stuff?” Enki pressed.

“Well for starters there has been a rash of monkey thefts in southeast Africa,” Ratatosk replied.

“Someone is stealing monkeys?” Jael asked, half laughing.

“No,” Ratatosk corrected her, “These are thefts being committed by monkeys.”

“It happens every so often,” Jael shrugged. “Someone trains a monkey to pick pockets or climb through windows and rifle a jewelry box.”

“Over one hundred and sixty per day?” Ratatosk told her pointedly.

Jael laughed, “That’s one busy little monkey!”

“You’re not taking this seriously, are you?” Ratatosk asked sourly.

“You are?” Jael continued laughing. “Monkey thefts!”

“It’s not funny,” Ratatosk insisted.

“Have it your way,” Jael told him, trying to catch her breath and then losing it again.

“What else has been going on?” Dee asked the squirrel.

“Several terrorist attacks in Europe,” Ratatosk reported. “One in Spain, two in Italy, another in Germany and three in Britain and a host of arrests that may or may not have been plots that were foiled. Not all by a single group like al Qaida, although they’d been doing some of it. All sorts of old gripes seem to be resurfacing at the moment.

In Brooklyn, New York, people have been attacked by parrots,” Ratatosk continued.

"That's not new," Mike remarked. "It's been going on for years."

"Parrots in Brooklyn?" Jael asked, having finally stopped laughing, but looking like she might start up again.

"Yes," Mike nodded, "I think they may have hitched a lift on a plane that landed at JFK in New York. According to the story I heard, one of the crews there made a practice of opening crates to pilfer the contents. They thought they were opening a crate of Argentinian wine, but unable to read Spanish, especially when handwritten, they instead opened a crate bound for a pet shop. I imagine the green feathered chaos that greeted them must have been pretty funny.

"Well, they are hardly the only colony of monk or Quaker parrots in North America," Mike continued. "There are others in New Jersey, Chicago, Florida, lots of places. In fact I hear there's a colony down in New Orleans that not only survived Hurricane Katrina, but did quite well in the aftermath."

"The Boids of Flatbush," Rona quipped.

"Tough little boids," Jael added.

"Tougher than you think," Ratatosk told them. "They've taken to hunting in packs."

"Hunting?" Dee echoed. "Packs? Ratty, the word is flock and Quaker parrots are not carnivorous. They don't form packs. The closest they come to that is to form flocks that will build multi-unit nests. That's probably why they can survive a Brooklyn winter, in fact. They can huddle together for warmth when the temperatures drop really low. The closest they come to hunting behavior is when they feel threatened. They may band together to try and drive an invader off."

"Then they must be completely paranoid," Ratatosk told her, "because these hyperthyroid budgies have started scouting together in flocks and attacking anything that moves."

"Ratty," Mike told him. "They've been doing that for years. They defend their nests cooperatively."

"Yeah," Ratatosk nodded. "Better than watching Looney Tunes, but it used to be that local hawks could make a good meal of one of those birds, but now any hawk in sight is getting buried under a mound of green feathers. They only used to attack people who came too close to one of their nests. Now, several times a day a dozen or more birds will swoop down and start biting men, women and children, pets. Anyone they can find."

"That is most unusual," Dee admitted. "What else."

"An upswing in illegal immigration in the United States," Ratatosk reported.

"That's cyclical," Mike replied.

"Maybe," Ratatosk replied, "but we're not talking border crossings from Mexico or Canada. They're coming in cans; in shipboard containers into just about every port, major or minor in the States. Volcanism is up too; Mount Saint Helens, Anak Krakatau, Vesuvius, Cumbre Vieja, Kilauea, Etna, Stromboli, Harat Ash-Shamah, Fuji and a whole lot more I'd never heard of. With all that ash in the air I expect next summer to be a cold one, maybe longer than that. Could be the start of fimbulwinter, you know."

“It’s too soon, Ratty,” Dee told him. “This cycle is less than two decades old.”

“Then an ice age,” Ratatosk replied. “Can’t say that’s impossible. Quite a few folks may look back on the good old days of global warming soon enough. All this tectonic activity hasn’t been confined to volcanoes, of course. There have been two tsunamis in the Pacific, and it’s a more active hurricane season in the Atlantic than anyone expected, especially with a strengthening El Niño.”

“All that in the last few days?” Enki asked.

“Days?” Ratatosk repeated unbelievably. “It’s been over a month!”

“My how time flies when you’re having fun,” Ina remarked sourly. “I still want to jump down to ground level.”

“I told ya,” Ratatosk replied, “There’s no one down there. The Three disappeared without a trace just after this lot went storming off to your rescue. Have you bothered to thank them yet, by the way?”

Ina looked stricken, realizing she hadn’t at all. She started to say something, but Enki waved her off. “Later,” he told her. “Ratty, tell me more about this disappearance of the Fates.”

“What’s to tell?” Ratatosk replied. “They packed their bags and didn’t leave so much as a whisper of an aura in their wake.”

“Oh, really?” Ina asked. “That’s interesting. Why would they be so worried about covering their tracks. I’ll tell you this much, though. If they’re in trouble, I’m not lifting a finger to save them now.”

“They do move around from time to time,” Dee reminded her.

“Sure,” Jael added. “Maybe they decided on a Hawaiian vacation.”

“In the teeth of Hurricane Halola?” Ratatosk countered.

“Huh?”

“It’s nasty on the Big Island just now,” Ratatosk reported, “and the storm looks likely to hold together enough to at least brush the rest of the chain.”

“Any more good news like that?” Mike asked.

“Scads,” Ratatosk replied easily. “How much can you take?”

“What’s been happening on the divine plane,” Enki asked.

“Lots of little things,” Ratatosk told him. “There have been the same sorts of odd sightings we experienced during the first season the Celestial league played. You know, before the actual emergence of the Gods of Baseball?”

“Babe Ruth and Shoeless Joe are walking through Times Square again?” Enki asked.

“Not exactly,” Ratatosk replied. “It’s not baseball players this time. Instead we’re seeing a lot of

images of the Oriental gods and not just at baseball games. They can appear anywhere.”

“So you think another new batch of gods is about to hatch out, Ratty?” Jael asked.

“Well, there are any number of cults in the Orient,” Dee considered. “Any one of them could suddenly gain a vast following, I suppose.”

“It’s different this time,” Ratatosk told them.

“How so?” Enki asked.

“These aren’t new faces, or even the old ones with new attributes,” Ratatosk replied. “It’s more like an emergence of well established gods. I know that doesn’t make sense, but there you are. Maybe you should check in with Hawk.”

“Hawk is the manager of our baseball team,” Enki replied. “I think we might be better advised to consult the various kings of our pantheons on this one.”

“Well, let Hawk know you’re alright anyway,” Ratatosk advised. “He worries. I keep telling him there’s nothing to worry about, but...”

“I’ll make a point of seeing him when I’m in Dilmun,” Enki replied. “I think we’d better split up for a bit. We’ll cover more ground that way.”

“I don’t have a pantheon,” Mike remarked. “I’m not a god.”

“But you are immortal,” Ina reminded him.

“At least Enki didn’t tell you to go to the Devil,” Jael laughed.

“I wasn’t aware you would have a problem with that, Jael,” Enki pointed out.

“Mike, you’ll come with me,” Ina decided. “I could go with you, Enki, to see Enlil, but instead I’ll stop by Olympus and see if Zeus has a different perspective.”

“I’m not part of any particular pantheon these days either,” Dee pointed out, “but maybe I’ll stop in Valhalla for a chat with Odin and his gang. After that we have a lot of other ground to cover.”

“I’m no longer the Queen of Heaven,” Asherah considered, “but I’ll go see if Yahweh will share an insight into this situation.”

“Lotsa luck, babe!” Ratatosk told her sourly. “He’s an Infinite now, and the Infinities have been keeping their hands off the affairs of the mortal plane since the start of the current cycle.”

“I’m told He moves in mysterious ways these days,” Asherah admitted, “but He was once my husband and since my return, I’ve only occasionally been away from Hattamessett. I should, at least, pay a social call. Many of His angels are new since I was there last, but I’m sure there will still be some familiar faces.”

“Good point,” Jael agreed. “and even though He stays out of both mortal and divine plane activities, His angels certainly do not.”

“No?” Asherah asked.

“They are His agents even as I am an agent of Lucifer,” Jael replied. “Hey! Give my love to Saint Pete, will you?”

“We should see about sending representatives to the rest of the Celestial League pantheons,” Dee recommended.

“I’ll send out Isimud with a request for a Council,” Enki promised. “We’ll need the other messengers too, though. While you’re in Valhalla, see if you can sweet talk Thialfi into trotting a few notes here and about.”

“And I’ll have a chat with Hermes in Olympus,” Ina promised.

“What about the Indus Karma and their Hindu-Buddhist deities?” Ratatosk asked. “Some of them have close aspects among the Chinese pantheon, don’t they? Especially the Buddhist ones and Hanuman is as close to Sun Wukong as you can get without being one and the same.”

“Haven’t they merged?” Dee asked.

“Not sure,” Ratatosk admitted.

“We should still be talking to them,” Enki considered. “It could well be that this is a situation that requires talk to resolve instead of action. Besides just because they have Chinese aspects, it doesn’t mean they are working with them. No need to alienate potential allies.”

“No need to give the enemy a roadmap to your strategy, either,” the squirrel told him.

“I’m willing to take that risk,” Enki replied, “at least until we know better. Right now we have fairly warm relations with the Indus crew via the Celestial league. They may be involved in whatever is happening, of course, but then we don’t really know what’s happening, do we? Let’s go remedy that.”

“Surprised by all the color?” Ina asked Mike as they arrived in Olympus.

The homes of the Greek and Roman gods looked very much like the temples that had been erected in their honor in the ancient world. They represented a wide variety of styles that reflected the various

changes in architectural taste of Greece and pre-Christian Rome. Many of the buildings have been covered in marble, with many carved panels. Those panels had been painted in many bright colors, giving the whole divine city a rather garish look, even when those buildings that had been left in their natural shades of brick and concrete were in the vista.

“Am I supposed to be?” Mike asked.

“Most moderns think the ancient Greek temples were left in their natural colors,” Ina commented.

“I’m a classicist,” Mike reminded her. “I generally have to tell my students this is the way they looked at some times, anyway. So is the Temple of Zeus the big one up ahead?”

“Home really,” Ina replied. “Well, I suppose the temples were our homes, but no one worships in these homes. Anyway he shares this one with Hera or Juno, whichever she thinks she is today.”

“Identity crisis?” Mike asked.

“Not really, but she keeps changing her mind concerning which name she prefers,” Ina told him.

“If that’s her only quirk, it’s mild enough.” Mike decided.

“I just hope we can catch them in together,” Ina told him. She paused to wave to several other gods who were sitting in the shade of one of the temple-style homes. They waved back, although without much enthusiasm and none of them got up to greet her.

“I didn’t know the Greek gods were so reserved,” Mike commented.

“Reserved?” Ina laughed. “Not hardly! But a lot of the pantheon resents the fact I went back to my roots to play ball with the Lamassu.”

“Why did you?”

“Because they didn’t let any of the goddesses play with the Olympus Cubs in the first year. Dee, Athena and I all wanted to play, but Zeus expected us to be cheer leaders or something. So Dee and I tried out for the Mesopot team and Athena accepted a job as deputy commissioner. After the first season, when the Lamassu won, the Cubs decided a mixed squad wasn’t such a bad idea after all, and Athena now plays on their team, but Dee and I saw no reason to change. I like our manager and I’m closer to my teammates than I ever was to most of the gods in this pantheon. Besides the Lamassu accepted me from the start. This lot did only after I was part of a winning team. I’ve outgrown them,” she added in a strange tone Mike couldn’t quite identify. “Anyway, I get along with most of the actual Cubs, but these are the fans. They take the game more seriously than the players.

“I’m tempted to change my appearance,” Ina told Mike as they got closer to Zeus and Hera’s palace. “This isn’t the way I looked when I was Aphrodite or Venus. Actually, it isn’t quite right for any of my previous aspects. This is the new me – the way I’ve developed gradually since Rome became a Christian empire.”

“If your cult was suppressed, how could you change?” Mike asked. They were almost to the palace now.

“Actually in some ways it’s easier to change when worshipers aren’t expecting you to meet their

vision of you, but I was not entirely forgotten. My cult went into hiding and lasted longer than most scholars believe and I was a favorite subject of artists and poets off and on through the Medieval period and the Renaissance. They had a lot to do with my transformation too, but mostly it was my own gradual change in tastes combined with the birth of the current cult.”

“The one in Memphis,” Mike remarked.

“It started in Little Rock, that’s where I found them,” Ina told him. “Took me a while to convince them I was for real.”

“I’ll bet,” Mike laughed. “It took me a while.”

“You accepted me much faster than they did,” Ina told him, stopping on the threshold of Zeus’ palace.

“Kind of hard to deny who you were once I found you on the Tree,” Mike reminded her.

“There is that,” Ina told him, “but you accepted me as I am; warts and all.”

“So far I haven’t noticed any of them,” Mike told her.

“And you came to rescue me in Diyu,” Ina continued.

“Was I supposed to wave goodbye to Enki and the others when they left?” Mike asked.

“They’re gods and close friends and family,” Ina replied. “Enki I’d expect to come after me in the underworld. He’s my grandfather and he’s done it before. Dee was related to me once too, but more recently she’s become a comrade in adversity. Asherah’s still new to this world, but she and I were frequently confused with each other in the old days, so we share some attributes. And Jael... well she’s Jael. The rules don’t define her and if anyone needed proof that demons and angels are the same species, she’d be the example I’d point too. We were all part of the team that brought Eddy’s and Tanise’s Tree to term and that made us almost like sisters.”

“What can I say?” Mike remarked, at a loss for real words.

“Mike, I’m your girlfriend, but your education tells you a lot about my history,” Ina told him. “If you were to believe everything you’ve heard, or even some of it...”

“We’ve been seeing each other for a fair amount of time, I think,” Mike replied. “I think I know you better than that by now and your friends do too. Besides I was willing to go to save Lachesis simply because you asked me to. Of course I would come to you in Diyu.”

“Well, just you keep in mind that most women have to wonder if their man would follow them to Hell if need be,” Ina said seriously. Suddenly she hugged Mike fiercely, “I know mine would!”

“Aphrodite?” a female voice asked from just within the palace. “It’s been quite a while since you stopped by. Do come in.”

Ina loosened her grip on Mike, but leaned forward to kiss him, before completely letting him go. “Hera! I just wish I had time to visit more frequently, but you know how it is.”

“Not really,” Hera admitted. “I’d heard you found a modern cult, lucky you! And everyone is still talking about your close attachment to the new Tree.”

“To the Tree?” Ina echoed. “Not me. I helped out, but all of us elder gods kept our distance as best we could.”

“I doubt you stayed completely detached, dear,” Hera told her. “I know you still visit frequently and Demeter and Asherah still live there.”

“I like Eddy and his family,” Ina remarked, wondering where Hera was going with this. She seemed friendly, but the Queen of the Greek pantheon was known to have a short fuse. “We all did and if by chance the Tree himself chose to accept us as part of its world, we aren’t aware of it and none of us have attempted to capitalize on it.”

“Then why did you get involved?” Hera asked.

“Because Enki asked me to,” Ina replied. “And because it was the right thing to do. That was the first Tree to come to term in cycles. You should visit sometime. Tell them I sent you, or I could go with you if you prefer.”

“Perhaps,” Hera nodded. “Oh, this is stupid! Here we are standing on the doorstep when we could be comfortable and I’m pretending I haven’t been hearing about your latest misadventure. Come in and let’s be honest with each other for a change.”

“It’s been a long time since I attempted to be less than honest,” Ina remarked once they were comfortably seated in a garden that was part of the palace. “Nice wine, this,” she added. “I’ve forgotten how nice the Greek wines can be.”

“Thank you,” Hera replied. “This just came in last week. I suppose it has been a while at that, but then you haven’t spent much time in Olympus in the last millennium. Well, I already admitted I knew some of what you’ve been up to lately.”

“Did you hear about my recent disagreement with Lachesis?” Ina asked.

“Don’t cross any of that trio, dear,” Hera warned her. “Even Zeus doesn’t dare give them trouble.”

“So they were quick to tell me,” Ina remarked. “Well, I caught Clotho trying to horn in on Mike here and...” she went on to describe the encounter, the disappearance of Lachesis soon after and the trap they had fallen for in the Labyrinth. By the time she was done telling the tale, Hera had called for slices of melon to go with the wine and eventually decided she might as well serve a whole meal and a lamb roast was served with fresh greens.

“You are living an exciting life again, aren’t you?” Hera asked. “Is that why you’ve been so active lately, staving off boredom?”

“There was some of that at first,” Ina admitted, “but I got over that by the end of the last cycle. These days I figure I’m alive, so I may as well live. Of course it may have something to do with having an active cult, no matter how small. Somehow, currently worshiped gods and goddesses inspire myths and legends. The problem with myths and legends is that there has to be some truth behind them. Anyway, at the moment the problem is that all three of the Moirae have disappeared and the mortal plane has gone crazy.” She went on to describe all that as well.

“That is most disturbing,” Hera admitted. “When I saw you here, I must admit, I really thought you were here to cause trouble.”

“Cause? No,” Ina shook her head. “Deal with? Hopefully. Enki and the rest of us are a fairly small team and we’re, none of us, omniscient. We need help figuring out just what is happening and then deciding how to deal with it. I was hoping to talk to both you and Zeus at once.”

“I don’t know where the old goat is,” Hera admitted disgustedly. “Probably chasing some nymph again.”

“He’d be well advised to stay away from the dryads,” Ina warned. “They’re starting to wise up and realize just how powerful they can be in numbers.”

“Might be fun to watch if he tries,” Hera replied maliciously. “But you don’t need to talk to him. What can I do to help?”

“Well, I need to have a chat with Hermes and ask him to run a few messages to various other gods, but Enki wants to hold a council of gods to discuss the problem,” Ina told her.

“Your Enki talks a lot, I’ve noticed,” Hera observed.

“Well, among other things, he invented the written language,” Ina admitted, “so I guess it’s fair to say he likes using words, but this time I think he’s right. If we don’t talk and work together, it’s going to be difficult to figure out what’s happening.”

“Have the council here,” Hera suggested. “We have the space and Zeus was a bit steamed when you held the last council in Hawaiiki.”

“We couldn’t do it here,” Ina told her. “Zeus was holding himself officially neutral and the rest of the pantheon was picking sides. The Polynesian gods were solidly on the side of protecting the Tree.”

“Well, we don’t have sides to consider yet,” Hera pointed out. “We haven’t even defined the problem.”

“I’d be glad to hold the council here,” Ina told her, “but I’ll need to get a message to Enki to let him know Olympus is available. Hermes, perhaps?”

“Better yet,” Hera told her, “Iris is still my personal messenger. I’ll send an invitation with her to Enki.”

The Council of Olympus was nothing like the great Council held seventeen years earlier on the Plain of Megiddo. There was no need to hold such a large gathering of deities. The situation was different; there were no armies marching, no divine weapons being leveled on their targets. The Council of Olympus was there to allow those interested deities a chance to compare notes concerning what they had observed of late on both the divine and mortal plane.

Another major difference this time was that the twin dryads, Nina and Mina, were seated among the more important gods. They were actually there to represent Tanise, who, after Enki and Dee left, had continued to study the world from the scrying bowl they had formed on her tree. "I didn't realize she knew how to use the bowl," Enki had admitted when the dryads arrived.

"Tanise is a very intelligent young woman," Dee remarked. "She watched us at work and probably figured the rest out for herself."

"That's fairly amazing even for one of us," Enki replied. "It's a shame she's trapped in that world. We could use her here."

"That's why we have the twins instead," Dee pointed out.

"Tanise has detected a great, but subtle, imbalance in this world," Mina reported to the council. "She is unable to give us as many details as she would like, but she believes it is more centered on the divine plane than the mortal one. The odd events on the mortal plane are mere reflections of the main activity."

Other gods reported a large number of signs and wonders that started appearing across China and Malaysia and had now spread to the rest of Asia. "There have been numerous visions of Sun Wukong," Enki reported his findings. "He appears and talks to the people of a village or neighborhood advising them, mostly. Many people have seen what they describe as a wise face in the clouds and some have identified it as that of the Jade Emperor. Cai Shen and Tu Di Gong, both gods of wealth, were seen just two days ago entering the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and then just two hours later they were seen buying and selling at the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Numerous accounts have been heard about household spirits suddenly awakening and doing various chores about the homes they protect. The rest have been appearing in one form or another; Kuan-shi Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, Zao Jun, the Kitchen God, Kuan Yu, a god of loyalty and righteousness, and a whole lot more who may not have been readily identified. They're building up to something, I think, but so far all they've been doing is appearing, sometimes advising, sometimes leading by example as fits their purpose."

"That's what is causing the imbalance," Dee took up the argument. "This spate of manifestations is enhancing belief in their worshippers and influencing converts."

"It sounds like the gods of Asia are attempting to expand their influence in time with the growth of the Asian economy," Mike remarked.

"Well, that is possible," Zeus nodded. "In recent years China and Japan, and many of the other Asian nations, have been growing ever more influential in the mortal business world. It would be only natural for the deities of Asia to band together to increase their own power and influence. As the mortals seek to gain money and influence, their gods want the same. It's the same as has happened numerous times over the history of the world."

"If this were a natural expansion," Enki argued, "I wouldn't be concerned, but as you heard in Tanise's report, there is a growing imbalance building up. This is not the normal pendulum-swing type of

situation that is always going on, this is like someone pushing hard on that pendulum to swing it further than it might normally go. I think the Jade Emperor and his court and other associated deities are trying to increase their power far out of proportion to what they would gain naturally. They're trying to corner the market, so to speak, and push all of us out."

"I don't have an active cult," Zeus remarked. Several other gods of various pantheons nodded their heads in agreement. "Why should that matter to me? Why does it matter to you, Water god?"

"It matters because while I may no longer be worshiped," Enki replied, "I still live in this world. It's my responsibility to help out where I can."

"I wouldn't be too sure you have absolutely no worshippers," Mike put in. "There are people, small in number, but they still exist, who feel that certain veneration should be made to all gods and goddesses. They're not the active cults you once enjoyed, but even a little belief is better than none."

"All right," Odin rumbled. "You have convinced me this could be a problem, but I note that there has been increased political and economic growth in the so-called Arab world as well. These are followers of the Prophet Mohammed, believers in Allah. Would not His influence be growing as well?"

"Allah is already an Infinite," Enki replied. "He could, if He chose, stop the Jade Emperor in his tracks, of course, but like the other Infinites he is staying out of this for reasons they won't tell us. Ash, you were in Heaven. Did you learn anything from your ex?"

"Not from Him, although it was a pleasant visit. His angels, however, are most concerned and, although none thought they should attend this council, they did request reports as to what we decided."

"I got pretty much the same reaction in Hell," Jael agreed, "although most of my fellow demons were on the apathetic side. Too self-absorbed, I fear, and quite a few of them may have been playing the market on the side. They're riding a financial wave and don't think they'll ever wipe out."

"Good metaphor!" Lono, the old Hawaiian god to whom surfing was a sacred activity, complimented her. Jael winked at him. "And as the image implies, no ride lasts forever. Not our own – most of us have seen our best days, but we're still here because we haven't been completely forgotten – and not the one these Chinese gods are on. They are at the top of the wave right now and may have a good long run, but then again, maybe not. Even a good run can end in the rocks if you don't keep a close eye on where you are."

"Cowabunga, dude," Jael whispered so that only Ina and Mike could hear her.

"Well, I'm convinced we have a problem," Lugh, the Chief of the Celtic Tuatha De Danaan admitted. "I'm also convinced it is one we should be involved in, but what can we do? These Chinese deities are not attacking us physically. How do we fight back?"

"I am not sure," Hera admitted, "but we must. Too great an imbalance will destroy the world again and bring the current cycle to an end prematurely. The consequences of such a disaster could be felt for several cycles to come or maybe even forever. The mortals have weapons that truly could destroy the world and everything in it, including us in the long run."

Mike wondered about that as the debate continued. "Surely the balance of power must change with the rise and fall of human populations, doesn't it?" he asked when he finally managed to get a word in.

“Yes,” Ina agreed, “but those are natural changes and they usually happen gradually, or suddenly at the turn of the cycles. This is something else. The current cycle is only seventeen years old. It is not the right time for such an abrupt change. What’s happening here is the Jade Emperor and his cronies are attempting to gain power and worshippers – same thing, really – by trying to gather up all the faith they can. If they are successful, they might even be able to supplant the Infinities.”

“That’s possible?” Mike asked.

“It’s an infinite universe, Sport,” Jael told him. “Anything is possible. All the gods would love to gain more worshippers and maybe even become the supreme god, even those here today. Power and prestige among us is everything. The thing is, when we try to do it like this, all sorts of collateral damage can occur. Most of us are content to gain such power in the course of natural events. We might try to influence those events, but in general there are lines we won’t cross. Some of us have been at the top several times. Ina has maybe been one of the most successful goddesses that way. She’s been the Queen of Heaven more than once. Dee may be even more successful. She’s gone from being Mother Earth, demoted to a goddess of the harvest and then back to Mother Nature. She is about as close to being an Infinite as you can get without crossing that particular line.”

“That is a good point,” Enki noted. Jael had been talking quietly, but Enki overheard and repeated what she had said to the rest. “We all have an unwritten agreement as to what constitutes the proper way to garner power and prestige. Now the Jade Emperor, Yu Huang, or Yu Di as some call him, and his court are using the spread of Chinese political and economical influence to gain precedence over the rest of us in a grand sweep that goes beyond what we normally accept as polite behavior. In a sense, they’re cheating, but if successful they will rule the heavens and, I think, have more influence and power than any other diety, including the Infinities. That means the Infinities will no longer be Infinite and that could be disastrous.”

“They have not always been Infinite,” Odin argued. “In some past cycles, they were just normal gods, similar to us. There is no law that there must be Infinities to make the world go round.”

“No, there isn’t,” Enki agreed, “but They are integral to the current cycle. Supplant Them and it all come crumbling down.”

“You’ve said that before, God of Wisdom,” Zeus noted formally. “You are repeating yourself.”

“The danger bears repeating, Lord of Thunder,” Enki replied with equal formality.

“This isn’t good,” Ina whispered to Mike and Jael. “Whenever they start using formal language it means we’re close to an argument. We can’t afford that right now.”

“There are times we can?” Mike asked.

“Not really,” Jael replied, but Ina was already standing to get attention.

“Friends,” Ina addressed the crowd of gods, “perhaps we should take a page from the mortal politicians and break up into small groups for an hour or two. Each group can work on possible solutions and then we’ll reconvene this meeting to discuss what we’ve come up with.”

“That’s calming things down,” Jael approved as Freya seconded Ina’s motion. “Good thinking, Ina!”

“I still don’t completely understand,” Mike admitted. “The Infinities as you call them are omniscient,

omnipotent, all-wise and, well, infinite, right?"

"That's right," Jael agreed.

"Well, why can't They stop this imbalance we're talking about. It should be simple for a God with all the power in the Universe to command," Mike pointed out.

"We're not sure," Jael admitted. "They won't even tell us that. Some of us believe since They know all, They have also determined, or maybe They just know – honestly it's impossible to know the mind of an Infinite if you aren't already one yourself – They can best preserve the Universe by standing aside and letting the mortals and lesser deities handle the problems of this nature. Remember, to be an Infinite is to be all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and all-that. But it also means They must know what They Themselves are doing."

"Or not doing," Mike added.

"After a while," Ina told him as various gods started breaking up into smaller discussion groups, "you learn to stop worrying about why the Infinities stay out of the fray. They do what They do and Their means and motives are a mystery to us as much as it is to you. We just have to move along, doing what we think is right, Mike, like anyone else."

"Okay," Jael wondered out loud as Dee, Asherah and Enki approached. It seemed they would continue on as the team they had been since this had started. "How do we counter a battle of words and images?"

"With more words and images, I would think," Enki replied.

"Well, we sure can't fight this with armies," Mike replied.

"We could," Dee told him, "but it would cause more harm than good, I think."

"Odin had a point," Mike told them. "There has been growing influence in the Arab world as well as the Oriental. Shouldn't the prestige, if not the power, of Allah be growing as well?"

"Yes, but look at what's happening there," Jael pointed out. "People, especially in the Christian parts of the world, seem to think Islam is a single unified religion. It isn't. It has as many schisms as most others. There are the Sunnis and the Shiites, there are still some Sufis running around and a lot of local interpretations of those and more. That's the thing about Islam. All believers, well, maybe only men in some parts of the world, are encouraged or even required to study the Holy Scriptures and to eventually be able to interpret them for themselves. Well, you put any five people together and you're just as likely to end up with twenty different opinions as you are to have perfect agreement, maybe more so. There are thousands, tens or hundreds of thousands, really, of people who are interpreting the Koran for themselves. They get bunched together by points of similarity and by who their teachers were, and who taught those teachers and so on, but there are almost always differences. Many times the differences are amicable, or at least tolerated, and sometimes they are not. The only time you really see Islamic unity is when a non-believer has attempted to force his way into whatever the believers see as theirs, being territory, influence, etc. Even then, these are people we're talking about, so some are quite tolerant and others... not so much.

"But let's look at what's been happening of late in the Islamic world," Jael continued, "Increased radicalism, violence not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but with each other along ethnic,

religious and political lines. Ask me and I'll say they're already fairly stirred up. It could well be the agents of Allah are already positioning themselves to benefit from an imbalance."

"But they're supposed to be benevolent," Mike protested.

"So is the Jade Emperor," Jael pointed out. "I don't know about Allah's angels. Maybe they aren't sticking their feet into this. Sometimes... most of the time... people just do things without divine prodding. There's a lot of cross-over between the Christian and Islamic aspects of Heaven. But The Jade Emperor and his minions and agents are actively trying to tip the balance. They aren't doing it out of maliciousness. They are not likely to be in it for personal gain, although they will benefit, should they succeed. I'm fairly certain they are acting in a way they feel will most benefit their worshippers first and the rest of us second. They don't mean us harm, but they may not realize the full extent of what they are doing."

"Jael is probably right," Dee decided. "This is not a struggle of Good versus Evil, Order versus Chaos or Light versus Darkness. It's simply Us versus Them."

"Aren't they all?" Enki asked.

"I sure hope so," Rona replied, speaking for the first time in a while.

"You do?" Enki asked, surprised.

"Oh yes!" Rona told him. "I'd really hate for it to be Us versus Us! How would we know who won?"

"Good point," Enki allowed.

"It seems to me, we need to fight this war of ideals with ideals of our own," Mike proposed.

"You mean counter their miracles," Enki asked, "most of which are probably illusions, with ones of our own?"

"Is that bad?" Mike asked.

"I like it," Ina replied "So in order to counter the spread of Taoism, various forms of Buddhism et cetera beyond their natural boundaries, which are fairly vast already if you want to know the truth, we need to promote the main gods of the Western World."

"But the main gods, so to speak, of the Western World," Jael argued, "are really all aspects of the one God."

"See?" Rona teased, "Your tongue didn't burst into flame."

"Funny," Jael replied flatly.

"It doesn't matter," Enki replied.

"But, you heard Ash. He won't get involved," Jael told him.

"He won't, Ash agreed, "but there are quite a few angels who will."

“And we’ll help,” Mike told them.

“What?” they all asked as one.

“Well isn’t that why we’re here?” Mike asked.

“It isn’t really normal for one god to attempt to promote the ascendancy of another,” Enki informed him.

“That’s really just a side effect,” Mike replied. “What we want is to maintain the status quo. Am I right?” They nodded warily. “And God won’t get involved even though some of his angels may. Right?” They nodded a second time. “Then we shall just have to show people signs and wonders from their current God or gods and let them take the credit.”

“That would sort of feel like cheating,” Ina remarked.

“It is cheating, I think,” Rona told her.

“I don’t see how,” Ash told them, “and Yu Huang is already cheating.”

“Not from his perspective,” Dee told her.

“You’re defending him now?” Mike asked.

“Not really, but I told you this wasn’t a matter of good guys against the bad guys,” Dee replied. “The Jade Emperor is a benevolent ruler and god to his worshippers. He and his fellow gods are just trying to expand the congregation.”

“If they were doing their missionary work door-to-door, it wouldn’t bother me as much,” Mike remarked.

“Yes, well,” Dee replied, trying to keep from laughing at the notion of gods ringing doorbells in attempts to gain converts. “The thing is not everyone will be hurt in this sort of imbalance. Some will do quite well indeed.”

“But thousands, maybe millions will be hurt,” Mike argued. “Doesn’t the Jade Emperor know this?”

“Of course he does,” Ina laughed. “He is very wise, but from his perspective the good out-weighs the bad.”

“Then maybe he’s right?” Mike asked.

“Not from where we stand,” Jael shot back.

"I hope they don't ever hear about that down below," Jael was saying as she stepped into Eddy's greenhouse room. "I'd never live it down." Rona abruptly appeared, singing, *If They Could See Me Now*. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Jael grouched.

"Pay back for all those times you've sung *Me and My Shadow*," Rona replied.

"What was so terrible?" Amy asked. "Coffee?"

"Make it a double," Rona told her.

"That's usually my line," Jael reminded her.

"What happened?" Amy asked again.

"We seem to be switching roles today," Rona pointed out.

"Well, it's not like you could have done it," Jael retorted.

"Oh for God's sake!" Amy shouted. "What did you do?"

"You know how we've been out creating signs and wonders in order to counter those put out by the Chinese pantheon?" Jael asked.

"Well, of course," Amy replied, filling a large mug with black coffee. "Which one of you is drinking this, by the way?"

"I am," Jael told her.

"She is," Rona said at the same time.

"Anyway," Jael continued, "Enki's been getting creative again."

"Is that bad?" Amy asked.

"You haven't known him as long as I have," Jael sighed "He decided he wanted me to impersonate a saint."

"Which one?" Amy asked.

"Does it matter?" Jael countered. As Eddy and Tanise came in from the world outside his backdoor.

"Does what matter?" Tanise asked.

"Jael impersonated a saint," Amy told her.

“Which one?” Tanise and Eddy asked as one.

Jael sighed dramatically, “If you really must know it was Saint Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo, but that doesn’t matter. If my fellow demons ever find out...”

“They’ll hound us mercilessly,” Rona finished for her, “So we just won’t tell them. None of them want to help us anyway, so how would they find out?”

“You may be right,” Jael agreed, “but I was more comfortable just projecting imitation visions. It’s easier.”

“Couldn’t you have just projected a vision of Saint Monica?” Amy asked.

“Enki wanted a moving saint, not just a blurry picture of one,” Jael explained. “It was easier to just cast a glamour on myself.”

“You want a shot of whiskey in that coffee?” Eddy asked.

“No thanks,” Jael smiled at him. “I’ll survive.”

Just then Ina and Mike arrived. “Jael!” Ina called. “You must have done a bang-up job in Nairobi. Your appearance nearly caused a riot!”

“You tell Enki I’m not doing that again!” Jael told Ina.

“Why not tell him yourself?” Ina asked.

“Because I’m not sure I’m still talking to him,” Jael retorted.

“Good job, Jael,” Ash commended her as she and Dee entered a moment later.

“Oy!” Jael moaned.

“I think this jaunt embarrassed her,” Ina remarked softly to Dee and Ash.

“I wouldn’t have thought anything could embarrass her,” Amy wondered. Jael glared at her. “Oh, sorry,” Amy apologized. “It’s just that you’re usually so fearless and maybe a bit brazen.” She braced for another glare, but instead Jael gave her a half-grin.

“We all get embarrassed about something, kid,” she told Amy fondly. “For some of us it’s the old dream of walking around naked.”

“What’s so embarrassing about being naked?” Tanise asked. One of her purest joys was dancing in a warm rain with her clothes off.

“It bothers some people,” Mike told her. “It’s a common enough dream. I’ve never understood why it bothers people, though. I’ve had it from time to time. I generally find it curious rather than disturbing, but then I’ve never had the sort where everyone else around is laughing at me, so maybe that’s the difference. I usually just think, “Huh? No clothes? Must be dreaming,” and let it go.”

“You actually think you’re dreaming in a dream?” Ina asked.

“Sometimes,” Mike replied. “If the dream is too surrealistic, it’s kind of hard to miss the clues.”

“Want to order in pizza?” Eddy asked.

“Yes!” Tanise nodded enthusiastically.

“Why don’t you phone the order in, Granddad,” Amy suggested. “I’ll walk down the street to pick it up. It’s really lucky to have such good pizza just three blocks away.”

“I’ll come with you, Amy,” Ash offered.

“Cool!” Amy nodded. A moment later, on her way out the door, she winked at Jael as though to say, “See? I changed the subject.”

Amy and Ash had only been gone a few minutes when Enki arrived. “We may have to curtail the current operation,” he told them. “Jael, you did very well, but the religious frenzy afterward was well above anything we expected.”

“Religious frenzy?” Rona asked.

“Not just in Nairobi,” Enki clarified, “although that was bad enough, but all over the world. Religious fervor has built well beyond what any of us wanted. All the traditional animosities are flaring back up, even the ones that have been quiet for years. Arab versus Jew and Catholic against Protestant. Various tribes in South America are being repressed. In Africa tribal warfare is breaking out all over the place, only with modern weapons in the streets of various cities. Looks more like a gang war. Well, I suppose it is, really. In the United States, there are round-the-clock evangelical shows that have been going on for two weeks now. And there are religious pilgrims of many sorts all converging on Jerusalem. And through all of this is religious intolerance. Everyone thinks God is on their side and they’ll break every commandment to prove it if they have to.”

“Then we need to slack off,” Ina concluded. “Obviously, we went too far, and if we keep going on the way we have, we’ll tear the world apart. Do we need to attend another council?”

“The heads of pantheons have been meeting continuously since we left Olympus,” Enki replied. “They’ve already declared a moratorium on further miraculous sightings until we can figure out where we went wrong. Call it vanity but, as we’ve been coming up with the best ideas, I’d like to come up with our next strategy.”

“Are signs and wonders the only way to counter the Chinese campaign?” Mike asked.

“War,” Ina replied, “but that would be far worse.

“Do you have a better idea?” Jael asked.

“I don’t know if it’s better,” Mike replied. “Maybe. The reason religious belief has been increasing is because everyone is seeing actual miracles.”

“Not every time,” Jael pointed out. “I was impersonating Saint Monica, remember. And most of those miracles could only be called so on the loosest definition. They were divine works, but not by the deity or deities getting the credit.”

“But the point is they think they’re seeing real miracles,” Mike pointed out. “The result is pretty much the same thing. So I was thinking that if using the same tactics as the Jade Emperor’s game is blowing up in our faces, maybe it would be safer to discredit the Chinese miracles.”

“That’s not all that easy,” Enki told him. “We can’t just go on a few chat shows and say they’re doing it with smoke and mirrors, you know.”

“That wasn’t what I had in mind,” Mike told him. “I figured we could sort of sneak in and make these genuine signs look like tricks and hoaxes. Make a genuine miracle look like a cheap parlor trick.”

“And how do we do that?” Dee asked.

“It will take imagination, since we won’t want to repeat ourselves, at least not too often,” Mike replied, “but for example, right after Sun Wukong does a walk-on in Hanoi, we could materialize a puppet in his place and let the strings show visibly, or maybe just let it fall to the ground while everyone is looking.”

“Now that sort of thing is more up my line,” Jael laughed, “or we could put words into the mouths of some of their divine visions.”

“Or Fu, Lu and Shou, doing a Three Stooges act,” Mike suggested.

“Marx Brothers might work well too,” Enki considered.

“Not with the gods of Health, Wealth and Longevity,” Jael chortled, “But imagine the Yu Huang as Groucho, Zao Jun as Chico and Sun Wukong as Harpo. Well, sort of, the Monkey King could go, ‘Ook, ook’ instead of honking horns and playing the harp... or not.”

“Amusing as that is,” Enki told them when he managed to stop laughing, “I had better run this past the council before we start, but I suspect they’ll let us give it a shot as soon as they catch their breaths. However, I hear Amy and Asherah coming in the front door. Time to eat. Eddy, what do you have for beer?”

The next few weeks were spent countering the Chinese gods’ signs and wonders with heaping helpings of blarney, dollops of bunkum, a soupcon of bogus, a pinch of balderdash and a whole lot of baloney. P. T. Barnum might never really have said, “There’s a sucker born every minute,” but there

were millions of people who felt they'd been fooled by the mysterious miracle sightings, but who were now returning to their normal lives and attitudes.

The tactic was so successful, that after the first few incidents, Enki advised they only interfere with some of the wondrous events. "Otherwise, the Chinese god may feel they have to attack physically to stop us. A little debunking here and there should be enough to make the rest of the miracles look phony."

He was mostly right, although, there were arguments on both sides as to the validity of the sightings and *The Electric New Paper* out of Singapore came close to the truth when it asserted that the miracles must be real, and the incidents afterwards were clumsily staged hoaxes. "Clumsily staged?" Enki had protested. "It takes a lot of precisely careful work to make a real miracle look fake!"

As the battle turned into a cold war between the gods of the East and West, however, Inanna realized they had all but forgotten what had started all those problems in the first place. "Any signs of the Moirae?" she asked one evening as they met at Eddy's house once more.

"Not a peep," Ratatosk informed her. "To tell the truth, it's actually been kind of nice in Yggdrasil with them off somewhere else for a change. Now if we could only keep you lot from using the Tree as a highway we could catch up on our sleep."

"When do you sleep, Ratty?" Jael asked him.

"In the winter," Ratatosk told her. "When I feel like it. Nights last a couple months in the winter you know. There's not much else to do except watch gods stumble about with their flashlights. Anyway, the Norns haven't been seen in any of their usual haunts. They're not at the Tree and out of curiosity I checked in a few of the other usual places; Delphi, Mount Parnassus, Stonehenge and a dozen sacred groves. I couldn't even spot them from Enki's war room. Even Heimdall hasn't heard anything out of them, and, face it, if anyone did, he would."

"We could use the bowl in my Tree," Tanise offered.

"The observatory on Yggdrasil is more precise, dear," Dee told her. "The one here is useful because we can use it undetected in the older universe, but we lose data in the translation across, so the resolution isn't as fine. You might have better results, however, because of your bond to the Tree."

"We don't have to worry about hiding from the Fates right now," Ina pointed out. "They're hiding from us. The problem is where."

"I'd like to know how?" Mike wondered. "Can't you see anywhere from there?"

"There are ways to hide completely and the Moirae must be using one of them now," Enki told him.

"Well, I'm going to look for them anyway," Ina decided. "I owe Lachesis and intend to pay with interest."

"So much for the kinder and gentler Inanna," Jael chuckled.

"Actually what I had in mind was putting her over my knee and making sure she'll be working on her feet for a long time to come," Ina told her.

"You're going to give Lachesis a spanking?" Jael asked. "Not exactly the path to a long and happy

life, you know.”

“Well, that’s what’s on my mind at the moment,” Ina laughed. “Decima is a sophisticate. Being treated like a baby might be the worst punishment she could suffer.”

“No points for creativity, however,” Jael remarked.

“Sometimes the clichés are only clichés because they work best,” Ina shot back.

“You have me there,” Jael admitted. “You know, summer vacation’s almost over, Mike. Don’t you have to report back to school soon?”

“Another three weeks,” Mike replied. “Oh oh! By now someone must have reported me missing in Italy. If I suddenly show up in Memphis…”

“Customs is going to wonder how you got back into the country,” Jael finished for him. “Security is tighter these days and while there are still thousands of miles of unguarded border, getting caught sneaking across them is still a crime. Hold on a sec.” Eddy’s computer was still sitting in a corner of the solarium and Jael got out of her seat to turn it on. A few minutes later, she reported, “There, that should keep any red flags from going up.”

“What did you do?” Mike asked.

“I entered a record of you re-entering the country at JFK two days ago on an Alitalia flight from Roma,” Jael replied.

“I was supposed to fly back from Athens,” Mike told her.

“You got separated from the tour in Firenze,” Jael replied. “You eventually made your way back to Roma and caught a flight from there.”

“And the fact I don’t have the stamps in my passport?” Mike asked.

“No one’s going to look,” Jael assured him. “According to their computers you re-entered the US legally, so there’s no reason to even think of looking. You may want to replace your current passport, though. Most customs officials might not notice, but the last stamp in the book is for entering Italy. There are still a few small countries where they don’t bother to stamp, but Italy isn’t one of them.”

“Thanks, Jael,” Mike told her. “That could have gotten sticky.”

“Hey. It’s what friends are for,” Jael shrugged,

“Hacking the national database?” Eddy asked pointedly.

“Don’t try this at home, kiddies!” Jael quipped. “Those databases may not be 100% impregnable, but there are only a few machines on which I could pull off something like this with such ease. This just happens to be one of them. Haven’t you ever wondered why you never get billed for service, Eddy?”

“I thought Springtime Seed was picking up the tab,” Eddy shrugged.

“Enki’s mortal world front? Well in a sense,” Jael told him, “But your connection is on a very special

line. In fact, you could unplug the phony cable modem if you want. Your connectivity is on a higher plane. Well, enough of that. Any good movies tonight?"

The next morning Ina, Ash and Mike went back to the observatory on Yggdrasil to start the search for the Fates. Without Enki to activate the bowls, it took Ina and Ash, working together, nearly an hour to make three bowls work for them, but when Enki stopped by later that day, he made the war room fully operational. From there they started a long and laborious scan of all Creation. Ratatosk occasionally helped, along with Jael and Dee and on the third day Mike got a shock that nearly sent him off the Tree.

"Hi, Mike!" Tanise's image greeted him from inside the bowl he was using. "This is fun!"

"What?" Mike grumbled, "Getting me to jump out of my skin?"

"Well, that part was fun for me," Amy told him from just beside Tanise.

"Terrific. I didn't know we could use these to talk back and forth," Mike admitted.

"What's that?" Ina asked him. She looked over from the bowl she was using. "How did you get sound? We've never done that before."

"I didn't do anything," Mike replied. "The Trouble Twins did."

"How'd you do it, kids?" Jael asked.

"We just tuned in to Yggdrasil and there you were," Tanise told her.

"Must be due to the close connection between the Trees," Ina concluded. "But why did you even try?"

"We wanted to help look," Tanise told her, "and Amy thought we could use this bowl to look at some of the ones there."

"Doesn't look like it works that way, but it was a nice try," Mike remarked.

"Well, we'll keep looking from here and get back to you if we find something," Tanise promised. Then they disappeared.

"Always something new," Ina remarked. "Hard to get tired of this world when you realize there's still so much we don't know about it. Although right now I'd really like to know where the Moirae are."

"I keep getting strange results on my bowl," Jael admitted.

"What sort of strange results?" Ina asked.

"Well, every time I relax it seems to want to home in on Antarctica," Jael admitted. "Maybe I need to work on my mental discipline."

"Ha!" Rona laughed flatly, suddenly manifesting in Jael's place. "This from the girl who called her injuries after fighting Lilith, 'Just a few scratches.' Even Oriel didn't know how you managed to keep walking under your own power."

“Actually,” Ina told them, “That keeps happening to me too, How about you Mike?”

“It happened a couple times,” Mike replied, “but I’ve been jumping back and forth a lot anyway so I didn’t think much of it. Maybe we should give Antarctica a second look?”

“Or a third and fourth look,” Jael retorted. “I’ve lost count.”

A few hours later they still hadn’t spotted any of the Fates, but the view in the bowls continued to return to the southernmost continent. “Could they be holed up in a mortal research station?” Mike asked.

“Not that I can see,” Ina told him. “For all I know, they’ve transformed themselves into penguins.”

“Would that hide them from these scans?” Mike asked.

“Not by itself,” Jael informed him.

“Well, I’m also picking up something strange way out over there where there ought not to be anything at all,” Mike told them.

Jael and Ina looked over his shoulder. “Oh, that’s just Enderby Field,” Jael replied at last. “The celestial league plays its championships in there, then we fill it back up again until the next year. Play-offs are in just over a month. That might just be the groundskeepers getting to work early.”

“I don’t detect anyone there,” Ina mused. “No, it’s more like I’m detecting a bit of nothingness...”

“Or maybe it’s someone saying, ‘These aren’t the droids you’re looking for. Move along,’” Jael suggested. She had started the statement facetiously, but by the time she had finished, she was quite serious.

“Could be,” Ina agreed. “Let’s continue to look. Let’s have the Trouble Twins – good name for them – look too.”

They took a closer look at the buried baseball field, but, “I don’t actually see anyone in there,” Ina remarked six hours later.

“Me neither,” Jael agreed, “but I get the feeling someone’s in there hiding from us anyway. It’s like my eyes keep sliding past them.”

“You could just be getting paranoid,” Mike commented, “After this long staring into these bowls I’ve been imagining all sorts of stuff. Every time I take a second look there’s nothing.”

“I don’t think that’s the case,” Jael told him. “I mean, I thought of that too, but the more I look the less there seems to be there, if that makes sense to you.”

“In an odd way, it does,” Mike admitted. “Either that or we’re both getting paranoid in our old age.”

“Hey!” Jael protested, “I’m not old and neither are you.”

“You’re over a thousand years old, Jael,” Rona pointed out.

“I’m young for my species,” Jael maintained testily.

“We found them!” Tanise announced suddenly, occluding the view in Jael’s bowl.

“Yah!” Jael exclaimed in surprise. “Can’t you give us warning before you do that?”

“I don’t see how,” Tanise replied, looking contrite. “But we found them where you said you thought they would be.”

“You saw them?” Ina asked, “Clearly?”

“I saw three women,” Tanise replied. “One was a couple years older looking than Amy, one looked about like her mom and one was really old, older than Eddy. They looked what Amy described to me as the Fates.”

“What did Amy think when she saw them?” Ina asked.

“Amy went to sleep a while ago,” Tanise told her.

“Sleep?” Ina asked. “Amy doesn’t have to sleep.”

“Her mother insists,” Tanise replied.

“Maggie doesn’t have to sleep either,” Jael told her.

“Well, maybe she doesn’t really believe it,” Tanise replied. “Amy usually goes to her room for an hour or two and then sneaks back out after Maggie goes to sleep.”

“Never mind her sleeping habits,” Ina cut in. “Why can’t we see the Moirae from here?”

“How should I know that?” Tanise asked, puzzled.

“Sorry,” Ina told her. “But you’re sure they’re at Enderby Field?”

“I don’t know what it’s called,” Tanise admitted, “but it’s about where you told me to look. You can come here and look for yourself if you want.”

“Maybe I’d better,” Ina decided.

“Better not,” Mike told her. “I think they’re moving out of there now. You can’t really see them, but there’s a bit of, well, nothingness, I guess, moving north and away from Enderbyland.”

“Yes, that would be the middle aged one only,” Tanise told them. “The other two are still there. The old one seems content enough but the young one keeps walking in and out of the room they’re in.”

“Must be one of the locker rooms,” Jael conjectured. “Well, we can see where Lachesis is when she’s on the move. Let’s stick around and watch where she goes next.”

As they watched, the spot of nothingness moved through the mortal plane briefly then ended up somewhere on the far south quadrant of Yggdrasil. It moved through the Tree, rapidly making its way to the trunk and then upward and to the east.

“Do you think she’s coming here?” Jael asked.

“I hope she is,” Ina commented. “I can solve a whole mess of problems if she does.”

“Why not just intercept her on the Tree?” Mike asked.

“I probably should,” Ina admitted, “but I want to see what she’s up to.”

“We know how to track her,” Jael added. “Let’s give her enough rope to hang herself with.”

“We already have,” Mike told them, “but I’ll go along with you on this. Should we bring Enki and the others in?”

“Eventually,” Ina told him, “but let’s hold off. They’re busy with their own projects and countering the visions of the Chinese gods is just as important.”

“She’s headed into the divine zone, I think,” Jael opined.

“The what?” Ina asked.

“Haven’t you noticed?” Jael asked. “The Tree, of course, leads everywhere, but similar places are clustered together. Cleveland, for example is not all that far from Detroit, the extant points of Toledo are somewhere in between.”

“Well, yes, that’s obvious,” Ina agreed. “So?”

“Well, there are limbs of the Tree that correlate only to points on the divine plane,” Jael told her.

“I never noticed that,” Ina admitted. “Usually when traversing the Tree, I just think of it as following a path. I know which turns to take and how to get from one place to another. I just never noticed how the regions were clumped together. That’s probably because I didn’t travel via Yggdrasil until fairly recently.”

“Neither did I,” Jael replied. “Hellspawn aren’t generally allowed here. I’m a rare exception, mostly because of Rona, I think.” There was a long pause as Ina looked at her. “What?”

“I was waiting for Rona to say something,” Ina remarked. “She usually does.”

“Rona’s asleep at the moment,” Jael explained. “She’s another one who really doesn’t have to. Maybe it’s just habit?”

“Could be,” Ina decided. “She just stopped moving.”

“Rona?” Mike asked.

“Lachesis,” Ina clarified. “She’s somewhere on the Chinese portion of the divine plane. I’m not sure where though. I’ve never been there.”

“Must be T’ien,” Jael opined. “That looks like it could be the palace of the Jade Emperor.”

“That big complex of buildings with the multi-tiered roofs?” Mike asked. “Could be. It looks a little bit like the Forbidden City in Beijing.”

"If that's the case," Jael commented, "I think we have our proof the recent machinations of the Fates are related to the expansion attempts by the Chinese gods. Do you want to try to stop her there?"

"I want to try and stop her before all this even started," Ina remarked, "but that's not really within my abilities. I'm not sure even the Infinities can do that, but there are stories."

"I used to stay up all night discussing stuff like that at University," Jael replied.

"Me too," Rona admitted.

"Jael?" Mike asked. "You went to a university?"

"Salerno," Jael replied. "Class of 1021. Are you surprised?"

"They accepted a female student in 1021?" Mike asked.

"I had to hide my true nature in a number of ways," she admitted. "But in many ways the world of 1021 was much like it is now. Prophecies were interpreted to mean the world was due to come to an end one thousand years after Jesus. When the anniversary of His birth passed and everything continued on as usual, at least as far as the mortals were concerned, they started speculating that maybe it was supposed to end on the anniversary of His death. So everyone was waiting for the Millennium."

"As far as the mortals were concerned?" Mike asked.

"A cycle did end at about that time. The Millennium madness spawned all sorts of weirdness," Jael replied. "Anyway, I was a young demoness, masquerading as a young man. I doubt my charade was perfect, but if anyone suspected, they never said. Maybe they thought I was gay, not that it was the word for it at the time. I'm sure they noticed I wasn't interested in girls, but there were other over-serious students at Salerno at the time, so I was just another nerd among my fellow nerds. I got over it, though, but that was another century or two later. With age you might get all stiff and formal. You might get intolerant of the young, or you might just loosen up and learn to really enjoy life. That's the route I chose. Oh look. Whatever business our middle child had in T'ien, she seems to have finished."

"Let's see where she goes next," Ina told them. "I wish Ratty were here, though."

"Why?" Mike asked.

"That's a first," Jael remarked simultaneously.

"Hey, Venus!" Ratatosk called from the next branch over.

"Speak his name and..." Jael remarked. "And I thought that only worked for my boss."

"Bout time you came around," Ratatosk continued.

"Shut up, Ratty," Ina snapped. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Shut up, Ratty?" Ratatosk echoed. "I need you to do me a favor? You sure know how to make friends and influence people, don't you?"

“Sorry,” Ina muttered irritably. “I’m a bit distracted here. I need you to run a message off to either Enki or Mother Nature. Both if you can find them together and Asherah too. Tell them we found the Moirae and are currently tracking Lachesis and ask them to meet us here.”

“What’s the magic word?” Ratatosk prompted her tauntingly.

Ina growled, but Rona quickly told the squirrel, “Steak dinner.”

“You’re on!” Ratatosk agreed instantly and shot off and out of sight.

“You might have at least said, ‘Please,’” Jael commented softly.

“I don’t know,” Ina shook her head. “I’ve just never been able to warm up to the varmint.”

“Ratty would be crushed,” Jael laughed. “Okay, Lachesis is back on the Tree.”

They watched as Lachesis went to various places, all in China, all on the divine plane. Most of her stops were in various aspects of T’ien, although she did stop in Diyu once. She was still in Diyu when Ina decided, “Enough watching. Decima is stirring up something out there and I don’t want to wait for Enki and the others to show up. Jael, would you be a dear and stay here? Keep an eye on me as well as Lachesis, so if I get in trouble again you’ll at least know where I was last seen. Mike, you’ll stay here with Jael.”

“No,” Mike denied. “I’m coming with you.”

“We can’t risk that,” Ina told him.

“We can’t not risk it,” Mike argued. “A woman’s place in ancient China was pretty well defined and the word ‘Liberated’ doesn’t figure into any of it unless you want to put the word ‘not’ in front of it and a great big exclamation point after. I believe having a man to at least escort you into the court of the Yu Huang will put you in better stead.”

“I’m sure the Jade Emperor has at least heard of me,” Ina told him, “and gods are a little less strict about such things when we meet even in this sort of circumstance.”

“But, the Jade Emperor will likely appreciate respect for the customs of his people,” Jael remarked. “Take Mike with you. He’s right.”

Ina nodded and considered, "We may as well dress the part too." She looked at Mike and then down at herself, muttered a quick incantation and gestured cryptically with her hands. Mike felt his clothing change and, in a few seconds, his workshirt and jeans had been transformed into traditional Chinese garb. Ina's skirt and blouse underwent a similar transformation and they were off.

The majesty of T'ien had somehow eluded Mike when viewing it through a scrying bowl. The image had been framed within the rim of the bowl and he had only seen parts of the Chinese Heaven. As it turned out, he had only seen parts of Yu Huang's palace as well. The palace was, in fact, larger than most cities and populated with enough functionaries to populate several third world nations. It took several hours after he arrived with Ina to discover that.

"Passport?" the official asked at the gate to the palace. Ina wore a puzzled expression but Mike pulled his United States passport out of his shirt pocket and presented it.

"Good thing I still have it," he remarked.

"Are you trying to be funny?" the official asked.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked.

The man studied him for a long moment and replied, "This is no good here. Show me your heavenly documents."

"This is our first visit," Ina explained. "We'd like an audience with the August Personage of Jade."

"You would, huh?" the official replied flatly. "The line forms on the left." Mike and Ina looked in the indicated direction to see a line of people stretching out of sight.

"We don't have time to wait," Ina replied.

"That's not my concern," the official told her unfeelingly. "If you have no papers you have no appointment and must wait in the line."

"Do you know who this is?" Mike asked, trying to match the man's officiousness.

"I couldn't care less," came the reply.

"Fine," Mike nodded. "Come along, Your Majesty," he allowed Ina to take his arm. "I'm sure the Jade Emperor will avenge this insult when he learns of it."

"Wait!" the official tried to stop him. "I did not know!"

"You did not care," Mike reminded him. "Good day." They continued to walk away.

"Please come back!" the official pleaded. "I shall personally expedite your audience." They stopped and turned around. "You will not have to wait more than a week at the most," the man continued. Mike and Ina turned around again and continued walking away. "I mean minutes," the official corrected himself. "I will present you to the August Personage of Jade myself."

"Very well," Ina replied at her haughtiest. "I will permit that." She gave Mike a wink and kissed him

quickly on the cheek when the official turned to signal for someone to take his place. Then the official bowed to them and turned to lead the way.

They followed the official, a short man in colorful robes deep into the palace complex. After a quarter of an hour and walking through the vast maze of streets, buildings and passageways, the little man turned and asked, "And how would Your Majesty like to be introduced?" Mike thought it was an exceedingly polite way to ask, "So who the hell are you, anyway?"

"This is Her Supreme Majesty, Inanna of Uruk, Queen of Heaven," Mike informed him. "Ishtar of Erech, Astarte the Mighty, Beloved of Ba'al, Aphrodite Urania, Eldest of Fates and much more besides. However, it will be sufficient to announce her as Inanna only. The August Personage will, I am sure, know her by name."

"Of course," the little man agreed. "And you?"

"In this time and place," Mike replied, "I am Michael Fulden." He hoped that first part sounded mysterious enough to keep him from being treated as a servant. He was never really sure if he had fooled the official but the man nodded and gestured them to hurry along.

It was another ten minutes before they finally reached the next gate, a pair of doors which opened into the sacred inner sector of the palace. Their guide paused to argue with his counterpart for several minutes, while Mike and Ina looked on.

"No wonder Lachesis stayed here longer than anywhere else," Ina remarked.

"I'm kind of surprised I understand everything they say," Mike admitted, "and that they understand English."

"Some call the differentiation in languages the Curse of Babel," Ina told him. "The story of the Tower of Babel comes from an earlier legend from Sumer, although the motives and explanations in that story have a different thrust. Also the tower, or ziggurat in that story, is being built in Eridu, not Babylon. That's not too surprising, really, Eridu was a major city at the time that one was written down but Babylon was far more important when the Biblical story was written. In any case, that does not apply on the divine plane. All languages are the same here."

"Please follow me," their guide told them with a deep bow at last.

The inner sector was easier to navigate than the outer one. Instead of a maze the Inner Palace was a single immense structure surrounded by a wide open courtyard. There was a long street leading from the inner gate to the foot of a long stairway that climbed up over three hundred feet..

"Have you thought of putting up a snack bar or a lemonade stand or two on these stairs?" Mike asked when they were about one third of the way up. The official glared at him, but said nothing. They continued the rest of the way in near silence, although Ina chuckled as quietly as she could.

When they finally reached the top of the stairs they stood before another large set of double doors. Mike thought they would have to wait while their guide argued once again, but this time the doors swung open the moment they arrived. Inside was a room with doors on all four walls, but they walked straight ahead and through a final pair of doors which brought them at last to the throne room of Yu Huang.

It was an immense room, much larger than that Yanluo used to hold court. It was richly appointed,

but without the garishness of Yanluo's court and held many more members of the court who moved to the sides of the room as Ina and Mike entered.

"O, Pure August Jade Emperor," the little man announced as he sank to his knees even though they had barely entered the throne room. "It is my great honor to announce Her Most Heavenly Majesty, Inanna of Uruk." Having said that, he bowed even deeper, touching his head to the floor and keeping it there.

He paraphrased me, Mike thought to himself, but then I was improvising, so what the heck!

"We are most pleased to welcome The Queen of Love into Our court," Yu Huang replied warmly.

"Your Majesty is most kind," Ina murmured.

"Not at all," the Jade Emperor replied. "You grace Our court with the beauty and charm of a lotus blossom. Please introduce me to your escort." Ina introduced Mike and was about to get down to the business which had brought her there, but Yu Huang addressed Mike. "You have an interesting problem."

"I do, Your Majesty?" Mike asked, wondering if that was the proper term of address. Ina had used it without rebuke, but he was not a god.

"It is not common to meet an immortal mortal, even in T'ien," Yu Huang remarked. "We perceive that you have the capacity for unlimited life, but not the ability to remain young. One might think of your condition as a curse."

Mike shrugged. "Your Majesty, I prefer to think of it as a challenge. It has been suggested I seek out the Tree of Life. I will probably do just that."

"Ah," the August Personage of Jade nodded, "then this is not why you are here today?"

"No, Your Majesty," Mike replied politely. "My problem is nothing compared to the one we wish to discuss with You." He and Ina began to outline the situation on both mortal and divine planes and their fears of what might happen if it continued.

"Your subjects," Ina concluded, "are pushing their priorities most avidly."

"There is no problem We can discern there," Yu Huang replied. "They are merely taking advantage of the current conditions in the manner gods have throughout history. We would naturally want to extend Our influence."

"It might appear so, Your Majesty," Ina insisted, "but they are creating a dangerously strong imbalance that if not redressed soon could destroy the world."

"It is not such a great imbalance," Yu Huang replied calmly. "The balance always tilts in one way or another just as a pendulum does. It will correct itself naturally and without harm in time."

"Heavenly One," Ina continued, "I have reason to believe this is considerably more than a normal, natural swing."

"But your own Lachesis, who We believe is of your family of deities, informs Us that this is not the

case,” The Jade Emperor replied with just a touch of uncertainty.

“And Mother Nature is certain we are at the very edge of a precipice,” Ina replied. “She tells me that such a change as we are building toward would harm nearly everyone. There is even a danger that the cycles themselves would be broken.”

“That would, indeed, be a calamity,” Yu Huang nodded, “if it is true. If the cycles are broken, the world, once destroyed would not rise phoenix-like from its own ashes. But then why would one of the Fates inform me that all is well and normal?”

“Lachesis is playing a game of her own, Your Majesty,” Ina remarked. “She has been for some months now and her target appears to be me.”

“You, Love goddess?” Yu Huang inquired. “How does the expansion of Our court harm you?” Ina did not have an immediate answer.

“I don’t think it does, sir,” Mike told him. “Not directly, but were You aware that Ina was held captive in Diyu recently?”

“Ina?” the Jade Emperor mused. “This is a mortal guise, Venus?”

“As You may be aware, Majesty,” Ina replied, “I was involved in the protection of the new Tree and its guardian. For a time it was necessary to hide my nature from him and I went by the name of Ina Loveall. It is a new name for a new aspect of me, so I have continued to use the name.”

“A modest name for a great lady,” Yu Huang murmured.

“You flatter me, Heavenly Grandfather,” Ina replied.

“Hardly,” he denied, “but your captivity in Diyu was kept hidden from Us. It gives Us pause to consider what else may have been kept hidden as well.”

“If the imbalance continues,” Ina told him, “it could well continue until the Heavens themselves are shaken to their foundations.”

“I assume you are not yet ready to see the succession of the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door, Your Majesty?” Mike asked.

“Our successor has not yet been chosen,” Yu Huang replied gravely.

“Not by Your August Personage,” Ina agrees, “but Lachesis is the pivotal Fate. It is she who determines the length and nature of life and how one will live.”

“Not in my demesne,” the Jade Emperor replied, brow furrowed in anger.

“She would naturally want to extend her influence, Your Majesty,” Mike told Yu Huang, echoing the Jade Emperor’s own words.

“An interesting perspective, young man,” Yu Huang nodded thoughtfully. “There is wisdom and perception in you.” Mike bowed in acknowledgement of the compliment. There was a long pause as Yu Huang considered the matter. “We believe you have convinced Us that you are telling the truth, but an

attempt by Us to chastise Lachesis as she so richly deserves could cause nearly as much damage as her recent machinations might have had you not appeared to apprise Us of the danger.”

“I have a score to settle with Lachesis, Divine Majesty,” Ina replied. “So long as she can no longer influence You, I believe I can handle her.”

“Be careful, Queen of Heaven,” Yu Huang warned her. “The world needs Love.”

Ina chuckled ruefully. “I was really the goddess of sex, not romantic love,” she remarked.

“We all change, Inanna, do we not?” the Jade Emperor replied, “and We seem to remember that as Urania you represented spiritual and intellectual love.”

“As You said in Your great wisdom,” Ina replied, “we all change. I hope I have changed for the best.”

7

“Back so soon, cutie?” Ratatosk jeered as Ina and Mike stepped back on to the branches of Yggdrasil.

“Shut up, Ratty!” Ina snapped.

“Who says I’m talking to you?” Ratatosk snapped back.

“Shut up, Ratty,” Mike echoed.

“Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, you know,” Ratatosk told them both.

“Terrific,” Mike remarked. “You can misquote Emerson. The whole thing is, ‘A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do.’ I don’t claim to be a politician, a philosopher or a prophet and lately I’m busy enough. What else have you got?”

“More than you care to put up with,” Ratatosk told him, looking more happy than provoked. “Hey, Lady Love, everyone’s waiting for you at Enki’s war room.”

“Change of plans,” Ina told him. “Please go tell them to meet us at Eddy’s place.”

“Huh?” Ratatosk responded. “Why?”

“Same reason as last time,” Ina told him. “We’ll meet you there.”

Mike and Ina brought the others up to date while sitting by the upper pond next to Tanise’s tree. “Anyway,” Ina finished up, “we know where they’re hiding and we know they’re behind the recent attempts at expansion by the Jade Emperor and His court. I intend to go down to Enderbyland and call them out. You don’t have to go, of course, but I felt that after everything else, you all deserve to know what’s happening.”

“Count me in, granddaughter,” Enki told her. The others all seconded that, including Ratatosk.

“You, Ratty?” Ina asked. “Why?”

“Well, you know,” Ratatosk told her uncertainly, “The Norns have been getting more than a bit full of themselves in the last millennium. They need to know that they are a part of the world and should act like it. And the more of us involved, the stronger the statement will be.”

“And he likes you,” Ash added.

“Hey!” Ratatosk protested.

“Admit it, Ratty,” Asherah told him.

“Aw, she knows that,” Ratatosk replied.

“Well, I appreciate the support,” Ina told him, then swept the room with her eyes to include everyone present.

“So, when do we leave?” Jael asked.

“Right now?” Ina asked.

“Eat first,” Eddy advised and he and Amy and Tanise carried out a large picnic lunch. “What you’re doing sounds dangerous and one of the Fates is Death, after all.”

“Right,” Ina admitted. “No need to die on an empty stomach.”

“*Morituri prandium edamus*,” Mike quipped.

“Huh?” Amy asked.

“We who are about to die eat lunch,” he translated.

“Mike,” Ina told him while Amy started passing out sandwiches. “I think you ought to stay here.”

“What? Why?” Mike asked.

“A number of reasons,” she replied. “First of all I intend to appear as Aphrodite Urania so I suspect the Moirae are going to be somewhat sensitive when I start throwing rank around. Second, I’m worried they might use your life against me.”

“Atropos can cut my thread whether I’m there or not, dear.” Mike replied. “I’m coming no matter who you look like.” That settled the matter and Ina smiled lovingly at him.

They wasted no time after finishing lunch and were soon back on Yggdrasil and headed for the far south quadrant of the Tree. Once there, Ratatosk led them expertly to a twiglet that would let them off directly into one of the locker rooms of the secret ice-bound stadium.

It was even odds they would appear in the same locker room the Moirae were holed up in, so naturally they ended up in a frigid, dark room that no one had entered in nearly a year. Enki quickly produced a light and they made their way out of that room and around to a similar one on the other side of the stadium.

“We’ve been expecting you,” Atropos remarked as they entered the much warmer space the Fates had been using.

“There was no need for stealth on our part,” Ina told them stepping forward from behind Enki and Dee. It was the first time since leaving the Tree that Mike had seen her. She did, indeed, look like a different person. She was a few inches shorter in this form with dark brown hair that was just starting to turn gray at the temples, with a few scattered gray hairs elsewhere. Her face was similar, but there were a few light lines that gave her a mature look and she had a perceptible aura of power, very different than what she had exhibited up until now. This was subtle power; power that lurked in the back corners waiting to be used, rather than the sort that stood up in front of the user like a sword. “We wanted you to know we were coming.”

“And yet you hid away from us in that new universe,” Lachesis sneered.

“No need to bother you with all the ideas we played with,” Ina told her. “You do recognize me, don’t you?”

“You wear the semblance of Aphrodite Urania,” Atropos identified her, “but it is a sham. Urania would, indeed be beyond our power, but you gave up that power long ago.

“No,” Ina shook her head. “I chose not to use it. That’s very different. I agreed when the matter was put to me that no one should be completely exempt from Fate, but that includes you Three as well. You can compel the gods, but even you must bow to a higher power when you transgress. You too can be held accountable for your misdeeds.”

“And you think you are that higher power?” Atropos asked, holding her shears up where they could be seen clearly.

“I am,” Ina replied. “It’s been a long time, and I put this aspect so far behind me that I had all but forgotten it, but I am the necessary check on your power.”

“But by your own admission,” Atropos concluded, pulling a gleaming thread from the air, “even you are not exempt from the power of Fate.” She attempted to use the shears, but they only closed a little way and stopped before they could touch the thread.

“Only when I have betrayed Fate herself,” Ina replied. “Ladies, you are not Fate. You are the personifications of Fate – her representative – but you are not actually Fate herself. Even you have limits.”

“All right,” Atropos conceded. “You are beyond my power.”

“What are you going to do to us?” Lachesis asked, worry in her voice.

Ina was about to speak, but Mike cut her off. “Nothing.”

“Mike, they must be punished,” Ina told him.

“And they will be, dear,” Mike replied, looking her eye-to-eye. He turned toward the Moirae. “You Three, you guardians of Fate, have betrayed your trust. By failing to conduct your offices as you should, you have failed in your jobs. Can any of you argue otherwise?”

“What do you know of our jobs, half-mortal?” Clotho demanded haughtily. “You are not a god.”

“No, I’m not,” Mike admitted freely, “but I am immortal, and by having changed the thread of my life in that way, none of you can change it back, can you?”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself,” Lachesis smiled.

“If you can,” Mike challenged her, “then do it now. Make me mortal once more immediately or admit I am right.”

“Very well, Michael Fulden,” Lachesis admitted grudgingly. “You are correct. Having made the determination that your life will continue on indefinitely, I cannot undo that change.”

“Then much like the words of Omar Khayam,” Mike replied, “‘The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: Nor all thy Piety nor Wit shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.’”

“He was talking about you,” Mike continued, “or your Islamic counterparts. You can make changes, but you cannot undo those changes. Like us all, you are bound by your decisions.”

“Ah,” Atropos smiled wickedly, “but you are not Aphrodite Urania. You are not invincible or unkillable. I can still end your life.”

“No,” Mike shook his head confidently, “you cannot. Not here and now in any case. Ina is your check and your balance. It is proof that you have limits. It is as you told Dee, so long as she does not betray her nature her thread cannot be cut. The same applies to you, but I’ll go a step further. Having been caught in a transgression you lose the ability to act against those who find you out. That is the one limit you fear to admit openly. You cannot end the life of the ones who catch you in the wrong, not before their natural time anyway. You allowed Lachesis to make me undying, therefore my time may never come and certainly is not now. Also I have caught you betraying your own nature. All three of you have stepped over the line and I am calling you on it.”

“Well reasoned,” Atropos complimented him, “if that were true. But I have no such limit. You are not beyond the power of my shears.”

“Then even you have never been aware of your limits,” Mike laughed. “Interesting. Well, maybe I’m wrong. Go ahead try to cut my thread and we’ll find out together.”

“Mike!” Ina protested. “No! Don’t, this is foolishness.”

“Foolhardy, maybe,” Mike admitted, “but I’m certain I’m correct. Well, Mors. I don’t fear you. Whether you use shears or scythe, in this time and place I am as unassailable as Dee and Ina.”

“Fool!” Atropos spat, pulling another gleaming thread out of the air. “You can feel this is yours?”

“Yes,” Mike agreed. “It tickles.”

“Tickles?” Atropos wondered, a hint of confusion in her voice. “It will be more than a tickle in just a moment.” She put her shears to the thread and paused.

“Go ahead,” Mike told her, “Cut it, if you can.”

“It,” Atropos argued, “would not be right.”

“It cannot be done,” Mike denied. “Not here and now.”

“No,” Atropos shook her head, “that is impossible. All lives fall to my shears. I am the ultimate conclusion.”

“Then cut,” Mike commanded. “Prove me wrong and bring this farce to an end.”

Atropos stared at him for a long time and then finally sighed and closed the blades of the shears on the thread that represented Mike’s life.

8

Atropos closed the blades of the shears on the thread that represented Mike’s life. They snapped shut, having met no resistance, but when she put them down, the thread remained uncut. She stared at the glowing thread and tried to cut it once more. Then she tried again twice more.

“You really ought to keep those things sharp,” Enki chuckled. “I believe Mike has proved his point and you will find yourself unable to terminate any of our lives for the duration.”

“And how long a duration is that likely to be?” Lachesis asked.

“I’ve never heard of a situation like this,” Dee replied, “but I would guess it would be so long as any of you hold a grudge against us, and I’ve noticed you can hold a grudge forever. You might consider

counseling.”

“Or a hobby,” Ash added. “I understand they are very therapeutic.”

“Be good,” Ratatosk taunted them. With his voice it was a fair approximation of the alien from *E.T.*

Jael suddenly realized everyone was looking at her. “What?” she asked. “My turn? Don’t mind me, I’m just taking notes. Unlike the rest of you, I’m probably going to have to write all this up as a report.”

“Now,” Mike cut back in, “you asked what Ina is going to do with you. Well, she could end your lives and replace you with new Moirae. I imagine there will always be Moirae, but that would be bad for the world; three new Fates just starting out and all. I’m sure there’s a rather steep learning curve involved with your jobs and you Three have aspects in religions that encompass the world. So instead, you’ll be on parole for the rest of the cycle. Step out of line even once between now and World’s End and your personal fates are subject to Ina.”

“Not you, half-mortal?” Lachesis sneered defiantly.

“Mike is your judge and jury,” Ina told her. “I’m the executioner.”

“Oh full of yourself,” Clotho laughed humorlessly, “aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Ina admitted. “It’s a failing of mine still, but I’m getting better. That’s why it will be Mike who decides whether I must act against any of you. He’s intelligent and fair-minded. The fact he didn’t just choose to replace you all is proof of that.”

“Now for the duration of your parole,” Mike continued. “We’re all going to pretend nothing has changed. So long as you don’t misbehave again, all this will be our little secret.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” Lachesis bridled.

“Mike is clever,” Ina told her, “and much more constructive and creative than I would have been.”

“So now he’s the judge of gods?” Atropos asked.

“If it makes you feel better,” Mike told her, “you may think of me as your parole officer.”

“Well, I think that pretty much wraps this up,” Enki opined. “Time to get back to our normal business, which today just happens to be Eddy’s barbecue. Anyone else hungry?”

The others made noises of agreement and began to leave the locker room, but at the door, Ina turned back and asked Lachesis, “Lunch again next Tuesday?”

Lachesis stared at her disbelievingly, and finally shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Epilogue

It was Eddy Salem's delight to host an annual barbecue every Labor Day. The area around the newest World Tree was filled with deities from many pantheons. Gilgamesh had relieved Eddy at the grill an hour earlier and Eddy was finally getting a chance to learn what had happened during the encounter in Antarctica.

"So we're all going to play nice," Jael explained, "and make believe nothing happened, unless they dare to abuse their powers again."

"And the world is rapidly returning to normal," Enki added.

"Whatever that is," Eddy chuckled.

"You have me there," Enki admitted. "All is not sweetness and light by a long shot, but the animosities aren't going to turn the world upside down."

"That's hard to believe sometimes," Amy remarked. "I have to admit there are moments I envy Tanise for her inability to leave this universe."

"Well, this is your universe too," Enki told her, "and you are one of its guardians. One day you'll be able to stay here all the time if you want, but by then I think you'll find life is not any simpler here."

"Maybe not," Amy agreed. "I've been thinking, though. It's been over a year and so far we haven't done very much to explore this universe."

"Haven't you?" Enki asked.

"Well, Dee brought in an all terrain vehicle and we've ridden around the local area, but there's a whole universe here."

"Thinking of being an astronaut?" Enki chuckled.

"I don't have to do that," Amy replied. "We have the Tree."

"In time that will be a good way to explore," Enki agreed, "maybe in another few years, but right now the worlds the Tree leads to are still forming. "Don't worry too much about it for now. Stay in school and by the time you have your degree, there will be all sorts of interesting places to go. What are you studying, by the way?"

"Geology and Music," Amy replied.

"Interesting combination," Enki remarked. He was about to advise her on even more diversification,

but he noticed she had stopped listening and was staring at something over his shoulder.

“Who’s that?” Amy asked.

Following her gaze, Enki saw Tanise greeting a portly, bearded man in a traditional Chinese robe over a pair of jeans and sneakers. He said something to Tanise and she laughed before leading the newcomer over to where Mike and Ina were sitting on a rock with their bare feet in the water of the upper pond. “I don’t know,” Enki admitted. “Let’s go find out.”

They got there just in time to hear Tanise introduce the Chinese god, “Mike, Ina, this is Zao Jun, did I pronounce that properly?” she asked him.

“Very good,” Zao Jun replied.

“Ah!” Enki exclaimed happily, “the Kitchen God. Your reputation precedes you, sir.”

“As does your own, Water God,” Zao Jun replied.

“Zao Jun wants to talk to Mike,” Tanise added.

“I do, indeed,” Zao Jun nodded happily. “More accurately I am here as an emissary from the August Personage of Jade, who sends His compliments to Michael Fulden and this small token of His esteem.” Zao Jun had been carrying an ornately lacquered box which he now presented to Mike.

“Thank you,” Mike replied simply and opened the box to find a letter written on rice paper and a small crystal bottle, whose contents glowed with a clear blue light. He opened the letter and read, “Greetings and felicitations to Our friend Michael Fulden of Memphis, Tennessee from Yu Huang, Pure August Jade Emperor.” The letter went on in a flowery manner for several paragraphs extolling the wisdom exhibited by Mike’s handling of the affair with the Moirae. It eventually got down to the real business Yu Huang had with Mike, “However, you appear to have embarked on the long road to enlightenment and it would be a shame if you were not still young enough to appreciate it when you finally get there. Accordingly I hope you will accept this token offered in payment for the service you have graced Us with. Yours, Yu Huang.”

Enki spotted the small bottle and laughed, “I think you can stop worrying about Ina having to turn you into a grasshopper one day, Mike.”

“Why?” Mike asked, staring at the small glowing bottle.

“It is the divine elixir of eternal youth,” Zao Jun informed him. “Drink it and you will never age another day.”

“Bottoms up, Mike!” Enki told him, holding his own beer bottle up in toast.

Mike smiled, drank the contents of the bottle, and began the rest of his very long life.

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