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A Plethora of Deities VI

Teasing the Furies

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Cover Art: The Remorse of Orestes by William Frederic Bouguereau (1825-1905)

Author's Foreword

And sometimes things just come together...

I don't mean to say the following story came together effortlessly. Actually, it took a fair amount of careful planning, but long-time readers will recall I've said that *A Plethora of Deities* was never planned as a series. And yet here we are at the sixth installment with another in the offing along with a spin-off series being planned as well. Not bad for what I once referred to as a non-series.

Speaking of planning, over the last few years I have commented about how much faster I seem to be writing than I used to. My plot sketches are more detailed and tight and closer plotting leads to faster writing. I've always said that the speed I write at is no indication of the quality of the end product, but since I no longer need to spend much time considering what to write next, I can concentrate more on my characters. My characters have always been a chatty bunch. They don't seem to ever stop talking; they're a lot like me in that respect.

The speed up of the writing process has definitely allowed me to concentrate on the voices of my characters. Each of them has a unique way of talking; there are phrases and sorts of jokes some use, that others don't, characters they banter with and others they do not. Many of them share such traits in common, but you will not, for example, find Jael saying something in the same way Enki or Ratatosk might. When I write a line of dialogue I instantly know who would have said it and will frequently either assign a line intended for one character to another or reword it to fit the speaker.

Along those lines, some characters are fairly constrained. Dee, for example, normally has a fairly serious demeanor; so much so that the one time I showed her lighter side, I had to seriously consider whether to cut the line or find a way to make it fit.

Others can say almost anything. Ratatosk is a great character that way. If there is something so rude or outrageous none of my other characters can say, he's my boy. Ratty has boundaries, but he only hits them occasionally. Jael is another good one for getting in a wiseacre comment. She's nicer than Ratatosk... well, nicer to nice people. I wouldn't ever want to cross her or her new protégée.

"Protégée?" you ask. "Jael has a protégée?"

Read on!

Jonathan Feinstein
Westport, Massachusetts
August, 19, 2008

Teasing the Furies

Prologue

“I’ve been waiting for you two,” Persephone told them. She was seated on her throne deep within the City of Dis. Before her stood a single figure, a demoness with long, wavy black hair and violet eyes. There were actually two entities within that body, however. The demoness Jael shared her existence with the soul of a human woman named Rona. Rona, when she manifested, was taller than Jael with pinker skin, blond hair and a slightly longer face, but for now only Jael was visible.

Jael knelt before the throne and replied, “We’re sorry to have kept you waiting, Your Majesty.”

“No need,” Persephone shook her head. “When I sent my invitation I did not realize the members of your former department would be giving you a send-off party. I’m sorry to have pulled you out of there so abruptly.”

“It was just another office party from Hell,” Jael chuckled. “I’ve been to a thousand of them. Being the guest of honor didn’t really make much of a difference and the appetizers were definitely not to Rona’s tastes – Mine neither these days, I fear.”

“The margaritas were pleasant enough,” Rona admitted, briefly manifesting. Her hair was straighter and shorter than Jael’s, although because she had not taken the time to manifest fully, Jael’s short, curved horns could still be seen at her temples. “Even if Jael had to taste them first.”

“You never know what that lot is likely to use as a mixer,” Jael reminded her. “A vitriol-flavored drink would give you considerably more than an upset stomach, but for once they kept the drinks mortal realm-conventional. I guess they really liked you.”

“I suspect it’s more because they respect you, Jael,” Rona told her. “They’ve known you much longer than they’ve known me.”

“Have they?” Jael mused. “I’m not the same girl I was eighteen years ago.”

“You haven’t changed all that much, dear,” Rona replied.

“Actually you both have,” Persephone cut in. “Jael, you were always a very competent woman, making your way easily in a world dominated by men, but you were far more ruthless before you and Rona joined. Now you have a conscience and limits to how far you would go to achieve an end. Paradoxically, you would also go much further to achieve your goals along certain lines because you have a new perspective on the concept of right versus wrong. Rona, you were a somewhat timid soul when we first met. The environment of Hell scared you nearly out of your wits, but you acclimated and learned your way around to the point where many seasoned demons are afraid to cross you.”

“Me?” Rona asked, surprised.

“Mortals are less predictable than demons,” the Queen of Hell told her, “and strange as it might sound, demons do have their limits.”

“So do mortals, Your Majesty,” Rona replied.

“Yes, but those limits are different,” Persephone replied, “and most demons have a case of ethical tunnel vision. They have no trouble doing things you find horrendous, but when you calmly do something they can’t bring themselves to do, it bothers them to the point of fear.

“Anyway,” Persephone continued, “I did not mean that you had kept me waiting today. I’ve been trying to get you two out of middle-management for nearly a decade.”

“We liked our job and it gave us ample time to pursue personal interests, Your Majesty,” Jael replied.

“But I have all sorts of plans for you,” Persephone retorted. “Most of them involve the sort of problem-solving you two are the best at.”

“Hmm,” Jael considered, basking in the flattery for a moment, “but we were hoping to continue our inter-pantheon duties.”

“Absolutely!” Persephone exclaimed. “You are our best known and most respected representative on the Divine Plain. You can certainly count on being outside of Hell as often as not, probably more so, but we also need you here as well. For now, however, I have a rather unusual internal problem for you to handle, although I think you may be surprised at just how far afield it might take you.”

Managing Anger

One

Evrona sat at the top of a low hill and leaned back against the lonely elm that grew there. She allowed her wings to fully unfurl and stretch behind her on either side of the tree in a rare moment of relaxation. Below her stretched the Plain of Dis with the lights of the capital city of Hell just barely visible on bottoms of the sulfurous clouds near the horizon. This was her special place. The place she came when her troubles became too much for her to bear and she needed to get away for a while.

Evrona was an Erinys, a Eumenide, or as the mortals of the modern world might call her, a Fury. Some Erinyes had the wings of a bat, but Evrona’s wings were bird-like or even angelic save that instead

of being covered with pure white feathers, Evrona's wings were a light tan where they sprouted from her back and shaded to black toward their tips. She had curly dark brown hair that was naturally entwined with a pair of bright green snakes and her eyes almost always appeared bright red because of the blood that mixed with the tears of the Erinyes.

Twin trails of dried blood streaked Evrona's cheeks as she sat on her hill. She had been crying.

It was the job of the Erinyes to punish the damned souls of those who were condemned to Hell for the breaking of the "natural laws." The Erinyes tore apart the souls of those who had broken the ties of kinship through patricide, fratricide, or by the swearing of false oaths. They had other similar duties, but it all came down to shredding the morphogenic embodiments of souls apart, waiting for them to heal and then doing it again. Given the nature of the souls damned to Hell, very few did not meet the Erinyes on a regular basis, so while only three of the Erinyes were well-known in the mortal world, there were many more on the job in the netherworld.

Evrona was also a teenager. She had been born just eighteen years earlier when the world had come to an end and then started again. That last was thought to be coincidental. Erinyes could be born at anytime, but some felt Evrona was strange because of the timing of her birth. Perhaps that was why she was not happy in her work.

She had tried to explain to her sisters that she truly wished she could have been almost anything but an Erinyes, but it was not a thought any of them could understand. Most Erinyes were supremely suited in temperament and tastes for their jobs. Compassion and empathy were not in their natures.

Evrona frequently thought about what she might have been had she been born differently. She primarily thought succubus duty was disgusting, but admitted silently that it was preferable to what she was expected to do. What Evrona really wanted was to be able to do something beautiful, like paint or sculpt, but no one, it seemed, could even understand her urge to create.

So when not on duty, Evrona would come here to sit on her hill and contemplate the unfairness of her world. Below her on the plain she could see the highways and the vehicles all racing to and from the City of Dis across the scorched surface of the land. But Evrona preferred to picture the valley below her as a place of life filled with daffodils and daisies. Such flowers could not long survive in Hell, but she did keep a small cactus in her room.

Evrona had lately graduated the Hellish version of high school, having spent half her time in general classes and the other half learning the craft of her kind. She would love the chance to attend the University in Dis, but quite unfairly that opportunity was not available to the Eumenides. Also, while her grades were certainly high enough to get her into the University, she had several severe reprimands on her permanent record. She had constantly asked the unforgivable questions, "How?" and "Why?" and similar questions, none of which her classmates seemed to be interested in.

So Evrona sat on her hill with a sketch pad and a stick of charcoal and concentrated on drawing the Plain of Dis, not as it was, but how she desired it to be. She was so intent on her work that she was unaware of another teenaged demon sneaking up behind her until she was suddenly drenched head-to-foot by a water-jet spell. This was children's magic in Hell, the equivalent of a water balloon, but it rocked Evrona out of her reverie.

She rocketed back to her feet and spun to face her tormentor, recognizing the bane of her life instantly. "Tomislaw!" she shrieked. Her mouth opened to reveal long pointed fangs. "How dare you? This is my place. Mine!" The snakes in her hair rose up and hissed at the young demon and the nails on

her hands grew and thickened into sharp claws as she advanced threateningly, but Tomislaw was not frightened. He evaded her attack and ran away laughing at her, leaving only another water-jet in his wake.

Evrone stopped following and returned dejectedly to her tree to find her sketchpad had been ruined. Staring at the sodden mess that had been the center of her delight just moments earlier, Evrone fell to the ground weeping.

This was just the latest such attack by Tomislaw although he had never dared to torment her in this place before. Most young demons had sadistic streaks in their natures that their teachers tried to steer them away from, but since such sadism helped in their work later on, it was the rare demon who could shrug off such tendencies.

Evrone was still sniffing a bit when she heard another soft footstep nearby and she sat back up instantly, ready to retaliate against Tomislaw's latest indignity. Instead she saw a mature demoness, dressed in a slightly revealing blue garment.

"Well," Jael observed as Evrone turned away to stare at the ruined sketch pad again, "I suppose asking how your day's going would be a bad way to start."

"Jael!" Rona admonished her instantly, manifesting nearly completely for just a moment, although with her back turned, Evrone was unable to see the transformation.

"Uh uh, Rona," Jael pushed her back. "This is my bailiwick."

"Don't be so sure of that, dear," Rona shot back. "Unusual assignment. Remember?"

"Oh great!" Evrone exclaimed with more tears of visibly diluted blood running down her cheeks, "Now I'm an assignment?"

"Not quite the way you're thinking," Jael tried to assure her.

"And how do you know what I'm thinking?" Evrone demanded, finally turning back to face the older demoness.

"Well, I can make an educated guess," Jael replied easily. "You're having a really bad day for starters. I know that because Erinyes are not noted for their tendencies to break down in tears. Succubi are nearly all manic-depressives. They cry on a regular basis."

"They always seem so happy," Evrone observed.

"Laugh and the world laughs with you and all that," Jael told her, sitting down next to the young Erinyes. "You mostly only see them in their manic phase. They go into seclusion when depressed. Just as well, there's not much worse than a depressed succubus."

"Any idea of where they go?" Evrone asked. "I could use a place like that."

"Looks to me like you have one," Jael pointed out. "Can't be a lot of folks who would want to bother you way out here."

"Just one," Evrone grumbled darkly, "I just wish I could get away from here entirely."

“Be careful what you wish for,” Jael warned cheerfully.

“Who are you anyway?” Evrona asked suddenly, “and why are you here?”

“Ah,” Jael sighed. “Well, last question first, I suppose. Your superior doesn’t think you have your mind on your work.”

“She hates me,” Evrona replied.

“Could be,” Jael shrugged. “I haven’t met her. Tell me, though, do you like your job?”

“Hate it!” Evrona replied vehemently.

“Why?” Jael asked.

“Oh, I get it! You’re a counselor, aren’t you? I wondered how long it would be before they sent another one.”

“You’ve spoken to a counselor already then?” Jael asked gently.

“Three of them!” Evrona nearly shouted. “They keep telling me to buckle down and do my job and that will make me happy.”

“Amazingly, that works with most young demons,” Jael chuckled, “but not all. It had the opposite effect on me, for example.”

“You were counseled?” Evrona asked.

“Yeah and I think I gave them as many headaches as you have,” Jael told her.

“I believe that!” Rona laughed suddenly and manifested.

“Huh?” Evrona started at the sight of the raven-haired Jael suddenly transforming into the blonde Rona.

“I’m Rona,” Rona introduced herself. “I live inside Jael, sort of.”

“I think of Rona as my other half,” Jael explained, “but I guess technically I’m possessed by a mortal soul. It’s a long story and I’ll explain later if you want.”

“So we’re both defects then, huh?” Evrona asked.

“Defects?” Jael laughed. “I like me just the way I am, thank you very much. If that’s a defect, I never want to be perfect. Besides, you’re not defective. You just don’t fit in with your sister Erinyes, so I’ve been asked to take you in hand. Think of it as a second apprenticeship.”

“An apprenticeship to do what?” Evrona asked suspiciously.

“Whatever turns out to be best for you,” Rona told her.

"I'd rather just get out of Hell altogether," Evrona retorted.

"Good!" Jael replied. "How soon can you be ready?"

"Ready for what?" Evrona asked.

"You said you wanted out," Jael reminded her. "We travel light, kid."

"We're leaving Hell?" Evrona asked, suddenly sounding nervous. "Really leaving?"

"You made a wish, kid," Jael told her, "and we got nominated to play fairy godmother."

"Huh?" Evrona asked uncertainly. "Fairy godmother?"

"So much to teach you..." Jael sighed.

Two

Jael led Evrona down around the back of her hill to where a powerful-looking motorcycle was waiting. Tomislaw was lying on the ground next to the motorbike, unconscious. "He tried to steal my bike?" Jael chuckled. "I suspect he'll be a bit more cautious about that sort of thing in the future. Don't worry about him, though. He'll wake up in a few minutes with one heck of a headache."

"Heck?" Evrona asked, wondering about Jael's choice of word. Most demons did not worry about using the words "Hell" or "Damn."

"It never hurts to keep a civil tongue, Evie," Jael told her, "especially where we're going. Makes me wonder how either of you got way out here, though."

"I flew," Evrona replied. "I imagine he did too. Don't you have wings?"

"I do," Jael confirmed. "Nice big bat-like wings and I'd like to think they suit me as well as yours do you, but if I allow them to manifest while wearing a blouse like the one I have on, it will just ruin the blouse. Besides, motorcycles are fun. Hop on behind me and hold on. No," she added a moment later, "hold on to me. It's safer and you'll get a better notion of how to lean into the turns. Got those wings tucked in?"

"I do," Evrona confirmed, furling them even more tightly against her back.

"Good," Jael replied as they started moving forward. "I'll ride this thing like an old granny biker for the first few miles until you get used to riding back there, then I'll really open her up. Fun, huh?"

"Uh," Evrona gulped in fear. Jael's notion of driving like an old granny evidently equated to roughly a mile per minute and Evrona felt her snakes ducking down deeply within her brown curls to get out of the sudden wind. "My snakes!"

"Don't like the breeze, huh?" Jael asked. "What do they do when you're flying?"

"Put up with it," Evrona replied.

"I'm sure they find this preferable to having you wear a helmet," Jael remarked, "but here, does this help?" Suddenly the breeze around them stopped and they seemed to be riding in a large bubble of still air.

"Much better," Evrona replied. "What did you do?"

"It's old magic," Jael explained as her bike accelerated to several times their previous velocity. "The sort they don't teach us anymore, in fact, but I find it handy from time to time."

"How did you learn it then?" Evrona asked. "Or are you one of the Originals?"

"Oh, she's an original, all right," Rona laughed without manifesting.

"But not like that," Jael added. "Did I take the Fall, like Lucifer, do you mean? No, I'm just a bit over one thousand years old and the counselors had even less of an idea of what to do with me back then than they did with you. They eventually sent me to a mortal university probably more just to get rid of me for a while than anything else."

"Too bad they couldn't do the same with me," Evrona replied.

"We might yet," Jael told her. "According to your permanent record you're too smart for the job they gave you anyway. It would be a waste not to give you a more advanced education, but we do need to work on your appearance a bit."

"I'm not very good looking, am I?" Evrona asked sadly.

"Hah!" Jael laughed, leaning into a turn on the highway. "Erinyes have an odd sense of aesthetics. You aren't all that scary to look at, but actually, I think once we clean up the blood you're going to be gorgeous. Do you know how to maintain a mortal guise?"

"Why would I need to?" Evrona countered.

"We're going out into the mortal world, Evie," Jael told her. "We need to fit in. Well, it's not hard to learn, but I don't think we'll be able to do that on a Harley. We'll be in the city in a couple minutes though. We'll get you cleaned up and in new clothes and be on our way."

"I'm not all that dirty," Evrona argued.

“By Hellish standards, no,” Jael agreed, “but all three of us stink of brimstone at the moment - can’t help it really when we’re out here – and while there are spells that act as deodorants, there’s nothing like a long hot shower. Besides we have to get the blood off your face. Having blood in your tears does nothing for the complexion, dear, and it stains your clothes.”

They soon arrived outside the main administrative building of Hell, a monstrously large construct that covered several square miles in the center of Dis. Jael steered the bike down to an underground parking lot and into her assigned space. “I don’t get to ride her very often,” she remarked, taking the key out of the ignition. “Maybe I’ll take her up to the mortal plain one of these days. Well, come on. There’s a bank of elevators just around the corner.”

Evrone followed Jael quietly, taking in the unfamiliar sights, sound and smells of the car park. Evrone had spent most of her life in the suburbs of Dis and had only once been inside the city on a school field trip some years earlier, so she was totally unprepared for the surge of cool, conditioned air that spilled out of the elevator as the door opened for them. “Cold!” Evrone shivered.

“I suppose it must seem so to a country girl like you,” Jael noted clinically. “You’re acclimated to the torrid climate outside, but you’ll get used to it in time and this isn’t cold at all compared to some places around here.”

“Maybe we should get her a sweater,” Rona suggested.

“In Hell?” Jael asked, pushing the button for the two hundred fifty-ninth floor.

“When we get out, then,” Rona replied. “She can wear a blazer for now.”

“Corporate feminine, huh?” Jael mused, taking a closer look at the young Erinys. “Yes, I think you can pull it off.”

“Here?” Evrone asked incredulously, but started lifting the hem of her long flowing dress.

“No!” Jael laughed, pulling the fabric from Evrone’s hands and letting it drop into place. ““Pull it off” is just an expression. I mean it will look good on you, but we need to get you into mortal guise and now is as good a time as any. You need to imagine the shape of a mortal’s body and then allow it to form around you. We demons have a natural aptitude for such things. It’s really the simplest form of transformation spell.” As she explained that, the elevator door opened and two male demons with long curled horns and massive fangs entered the elevator. One pushed the button for floor one hundred.

“I don’t know how to do those either,” Evrone pointed out.

“What are they teaching in school these days?” Jael wondered out loud.

“They took that out of the basic curriculum,” one of the demons told her. “Someone decided that only those going out would need to know how, I guess.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jael shook her head. “In my day we were encouraged to learn as much as we could.”

“But not old magic,” Rona pointed out.

“You have a point there,” Jael conceded, “and I’m sure the older demons were bemoaning the state

of modern education then too.”

“Probably,” the talkative demon agreed.

“Do I know you?” Jael asked, taking a second look at him.

“Azarael,” he introduced himself. “I play shortstop on the team.”

“Team?” Evrona asked.

“Baseball,” Jael explained and turned back to Azarael, “So you got Lilith’s slot, huh?”

“I hear I have you to thank for it,” Azarael replied.

“Not quite,” Jael denied, “I fought her, but it was my mortal other half that took her out.” She paused to let Rona manifest. Rona smiled charmingly at Azarael.”

“Mortals must be tougher than we thought then,” Azarael’s friend commented.

“This one was,” Jael told them.

The elevator reached the one hundredth floor a moment later and the two demons got off. The car only climbed one more floor before stopping again. A demoness stepped in and smiled. “Hi, Jael! Sorry, I missed the party but I was out auditing the office in Abyss City.”

“It may still be going on for all I know, Brenith,” Jael replied. “We got pulled out early. Oh, this is Evrona, my new protégée.”

“Pleased!” Brenith told Evrona, holding out her hand.

“Protégée?” Evrona asked, even as she accepted Brenith’s hand.

“Unless you prefer ‘student,’ kid,” Jael told her.

Brenith got off a few floors later and was replaced by a tall demon wearing a slick black business suit. He nodded at Jael and Evrona politely, but otherwise ignored them. He was still there a minute later when five giggling succubi got on the elevator.

The female demons looked at Jael and Evrona and started giggling again. Evrona’s face darkened and the snakes rose back up out of her hair and hissed. A pair of blood drops escaped the corners of her eyes. “Don’t let them bother you, kid,” Jael advised, handing her a handkerchief. “Sorority girls,” she added dismissively. “I didn’t even spend time with that sort back in Salerno.”

“Women weren’t allowed to attend University a thousand years ago, Jael,” Rona commented. The car stopped and the business demon got off. The sorority succubi stopped giggling and stared at Jael/Rona.

“If women weren’t allowed,” Evrona asked, “how did you get in?”

“Mortal guise, kid,” Jael told her. “I pretended to be a young man.” Evrona looked Jael up and down, taking in her ample proportions and looked skeptical. “Who do you think Shakespeare got the

idea from?" Jael countered. "Besides I did say I was in guise. You don't necessarily have to look like yourself, although that's the best place to start and the easiest sort to maintain. Ah, here's our floor. Ta ta, girls," she fired at the succubi just as the door closed. "Hah," Jael gloated. "That lot will think twice before they snub anyone in the future."

"Why?" Evrona asked, mystified.

"I called you a country girl a few minutes ago," Jael explained. "I didn't mean it as an insult, it was just a statement of fact. Very few Erinyes have much occasion to come into the city. Your boss' boss has an office here, no doubt, but all your work is out there among the damned souls and very few furies have the necessary patience for paperwork. In all fairness, you probably could handle that sort of thing with ease, but it's what some mortals call a 'good ole boy's' network in Hell. You would need to come up through the ranks even if you'd be better suited to sit behind a desk.

"Well, I think you have better things ahead of you," Jael continued, "but none of that gaggle does. Anyway, what they know but which you are blissfully unaware of is that Rona and I are fairly well known around here. We have status and respect both in Hell and throughout the Divine Plain. Until earlier today we headed the Environmental Punishment Agency, but now we work directly for Persephone, one of the Queens of Hell."

"And you are our protégée," Rona added.

"So are we on our way to report to Queen Persephone?" Evrona asked. The prospect excited her. Persephone and the Erinyes both originally came from the same Greek pantheon and that sort of thing gave deities a sense of kinship.

"Not this time, Evie," Jael told her. "We have another appointment ahead of us, but don't worry. You'll meet her sooner or later, I'm sure. First, however, we have a lot of work to do and it all begins with a long hot shower. In here," she indicated a door on their left.

Living accommodations for the demons were commensurate with their status. Evrona had been living in a fairly simple dormitory just a few miles from where Jael and Rona had found her. She had a small room with a cot and a closet just barely large enough to hold her two dresses and a small shelf on which to put her other few belongings. She had the room to herself, but only because there was no room for anyone else in it to begin with. And she shared a common bathroom with the other twelve Erinyes on her floor, but only three people could use that bathroom at the same time so there was a lot of waiting involved.

The bathroom into which Jael directed Evrona was like nothing she had ever seen. It was a tremendous, tiled monument to the plumbing industry with baths and shower stalls large enough for a demon to stretch out and truly relax in. Never before had Evrona been able to open her wings so wide while bathing and it was a luxury she was reluctant to bring to an end, so by the time she finally wrapped one of the large black and red courtesy towels around herself she was probably cleaner than she had ever been in her life.

She emerged to find Jael waiting for her with a stack of clothing. "Where's my chitan?" Evrona asked, looking around for the long dress she had been wearing.

"Gone, kid," Jael told her.

"It was all raggedy along the hem, dear," Rona added.

“And two millennia out of fashion as well,” Jael concluded, “So we have a nice selection of modern clothes that ought to fit at least once you’ve shed the wings.”

“Why is everything black?” Evrona asked.

“The color scheme is rather unimaginative,” Jael agreed. “These came from the stores we keep for visiting dignitaries. The visitors’ entrance tends to be a bit hard on one’s clothing, but you’ll see that for yourself eventually. We’ll take you shopping on the Mortal Plain at our first convenience. For the meantime, however, let’s find something you’re comfortable in. I figure a classic blouse and skirt should do it, unless you’d rather wear jeans.”

“Jeans?” Evrona asked. Jael held up a pair. “You want me to wear men’s clothing?”

“Erinyes do tend to be old-fashioned, Jael,” Rona reminded her. “You said that yourself. No, dear,” she added to Evrona, “you don’t have to wear jeans if you don’t want to, although, you might find them more suitable in some situations.”

“Not immediately,” Jael cut in, “and we won’t be carrying spares. These visitors’ clothes are even sturdier than they look. But first we’ll need to work on your guise. I’d hoped to have you ready by the time we got off the elevator, but there were too many distractions. Here, look at yourself in the mirror and imagine how you would look without the wings or snakes. Got the image? Good. Now just concentrate on looking like that.”

Evrona closed her eyes and concentrated. A moment later she felt badly off balance and fell forward only to be caught by Jael and helped back to her feet. “Sorry about that, Evie,” the older demoness apologized. “It’s been a long time since my first transformation into guise and I forgot what it was like to suddenly not have those great flapping wings on my back. I don’t wear them very often even now.”

“No, just the tail and horns,” Rona pointed out.

“I have a better choice of blouses that way,” Jael pointed out.

“Most of which are blue,” Rona noted. “Not that I’m complaining. I look good in blue. Better than you do, actually.”

“Huh?” Jael asked.

“Honestly, dear,” Rona told her, “with those eyes of yours you’d look great in lilac and shades of brown perhaps, or maybe with red accents.”

“I don’t look bad in blue,” Jael protested.

“Jael, you don’t look bad in almost anything,” Rona told her seriously. “Frankly, I’m jealous of that, but I really don’t think blue is your best color, except when you wear jeans. Really, Evie, Jael just owns denim!”

“Owns?” Evrona asked.

“Another slang expression,” Jael cut in, handing her a black silk blouse. “Just put this on.”

“Without a bra?” Rona asked.

“Rona,” Jael explained patiently, “Evie’s never worn modern underwear in her life.”

“Then this is a good place to start,” Rona insisted, completely manifesting and shoving Jael into the background for a while. Rona helped Evrona into her modern-style clothing, an all-black blouse and skirt combination. “Not bad,” she decided.

“The skirt is very short,” Evrona complained.

“Actually it’s quite conservative by today’s standards,” Rona assured her, “and I’m glad the panty hose were more smoke-colored. It almost gives you a touch of color. Too bad we can’t do something about your eyes, though. They’re still blood red.”

“Eyes are the toughest to change,” Jael commented for the first time in a while. “That’s why I brought the shades.”

“Shades?” Evrona asked predictably.

“Dark sunglasses,” Jael explained, reaching into the pocket of a black blazer that had been left on the bench. She pulled out an eyeglass case and handed the glasses to Evrona. “You don’t have to wear these in here, but it will be a good idea when we’re in a mortal city. Oops, your eyes are bleeding again.” She found a paper towel and cleaned off Evrona’s cheeks. “You’ll have to work on controlling that. I know you can. You’re not the first of your sisters I’ve worked with over the years. They usually manage to keep it under control here in Dis. Until you get the hang of it, it’s probably a good idea to wear dark colors that won’t show the stains. Hmm, and a few extra handkerchiefs.” She stuffed three extra cloths into the blazer’s pockets and handed it to Evrona.”

“Something’s missing,” Rona noted when Evrona had donned the jacket.

“Bling?” Jael asked impishly.

“Possibly,” Rona commented. “Ah! I know.” She took a final kerchief, a large silk one, and tied it loosely around Evrona’s neck. “Much better, but Jael all those handkerchiefs are making her pockets bulge. She ought to have a purse.”

“We don’t have courtesy handbags for visitors,” Jael pointed out.

“We have the courier bags,” Rona pointed out. “We’ll get one on the way out.”

“What happened to my snakes?” Evrona asked worriedly. She was staring into the mirror and feeling for them in her hair.

“Don’t worry. They’re still with you,” Jael told her. “They’re just in another part of reality for the time being. They’ll be back when you return to your normal form. No! Not now. The wings would ruin your new clothes.”

“Can’t I change just my head?” Evrona asked.

“You probably can,” Jael agreed, “but I want you to practice your mortal guise for now. You’ll need to maintain it in your sleep, so the longer you hold it while conscious, the easier it will be. Well enough of

that. I think we're ready to move on."

Three

They passed through a large central office on their way out of the building where Jael took a quick detour to a supplies closet and pulled out a black canvas pouch with a shoulder strap. She also grabbed two pads of paper and a variety of pens and pencils. "Here, Evie," she told the young demoness. "You can put those extra cloths in here too. Rona's right, they're ruining the lines of that jacket."

"What's the paper for?" Evrona asked, looking inside the bag.

"I noticed you liked to sketch," Jael replied as they started walking on again. "This stuff isn't exactly artist-quality but it should do if the urge comes on you in a spare moment. What's wrong?" Evrona had stopped. Her lower lip was quivering a bit and she just stared at Jael. "You okay, kid?"

"No one's ever encouraged me to sketch before," Evrona admitted, tears of blood threatening to spill from her eyes once again. "Just the opposite, in fact."

"Well, that's stupid," Jael told her. "What you do on your own time is your business and no one, not even Lucifer himself, has the right to say otherwise. Oh, here," she mopped the bright red tears off Evrona's face again and hugged the young demoness. Evrona stiffened slightly under the gentle pressure, but eventually relaxed a bit. "Better?"

"It's been a long time since anyone hugged me too," Evrona admitted.

"I hear you," Jael nodded. "Not a lot of affection wasted in Hell. Well, this is only one world and we won't be here any more often than we need to be. Now, let's see if we can snag the express elevator to the basement."

"The motorcycle again?" Evrona asked hopefully.

"You liked my bike, huh?" Jael asked.

"I, uh, got used to it," Evrona admitted.

“Hah!” Jael laughed. “Not this time. The Harley won’t take us where we’re going next and it isn’t fast enough either.”

“Not fast enough?” Evrona asked. “It seemed very fast to me.”

“Perhaps,” Jael agreed, “but it won’t approach light speed no matter how hard I twist the accelerator. We’re off to the Great Egress and for that we’ll need to take a shortcut.”

The elevator was not quite an express to the lowest level of the administrative complex of Hell, but it only made three stops along the way, each time to pick up more passengers. Evrona felt tightly squeezed at the back of the elevator car by the last stop. “Claustrophobic, Evie?” Jael asked concernedly.

“No,” Evrona wheezed back. “I’m really being pressed hard into the wall here.”

“Oh,” Jael nodded. She tapped the eight foot tall gargoyle in front of them on the shoulder. “Hey, big boy! How’s about a bit of room for a lady, hmm?”

“Hmm?” the gargoyle replied. “Oh, sorry,” he continued, furling his wings in a bit tighter.

“Thank you,” Evrona told him gratefully.

“Evie, you need to learn to speak up for yourself in situations like this,” Jael advised her.

“I didn’t want to be rude,” Evrona replied.

“You don’t have to be rude about it,” Jael told her. “Everyone knows how crowded an elevator can be. Most folks will do what they can to make space for you.”

There was a long, sleek train waiting at the far end of a concrete platform when the elevator finally opened. Everyone from the elevator, and four others besides, boarded the train although there was still ample room for everyone once they had taken their seats. A moment later Evrona felt like she was being shoved back into her seat by the force of something large sitting on her chest. The sensation lasted only a minute and then faded away.

“These things used to have private compartments,” Jael explained to Evrona as the initial acceleration slacked off, “but these days this crate moves so fast it’s hardly worth the bother. We’ll be at the Egress in just a few minutes.”

“It hardly feels like we’re moving at all now,” Evrona remarked.

“It’s a very smooth ride and a straight one,” Jael told her, “so you won’t feel much except at the beginning of the trip and the end, but right now we’re making the bullet trains of Japan look about as effective as an old ox cart. In fact if you could see stars outside these windows they’d look more like rainbow-colored streaks, assuming you could see into the far ultraviolet.”

“About as far as x-rays,” one of the other nearby demons added.

“I suppose,” Jael admitted reluctantly.

“Definitely,” Rona added.

"Is everyone on this train headed outside?" Evrona asked.

"Not at all," Rona explained. "The Egress is at the geographical center of Hell... um, sort of."

"Sort of?" Evrona asked.

"Hell is infinite in scope, just as Heaven is," Rona told her. "No matter how many souls arrive here, there's always room for more. You can't actually find an outer edge, but the Abyss has been mapped roughly and by convention, at least, and by the way Dante saw it. The Great Egress is always placed at the center."

"Not that Dante called it the Egress," Jael added.

"No, that was P. T. Barnum," Rona agreed.

"I don't know who either of those are," Evrona admitted.

"Don't worry, dear," Rona assured her. "It will come in time. We know about a millennium's worth of modern history that somehow you've missed out on. Why is that?"

"I've already said the educational system has gotten shot to heck around here," Jael commented. "They used to want us all to have a well-rounded education but now the emphasis is on specialization. Darned University has become just another trade school if you ask me. Look at Evie here. She's smart and creative, but she's a Eumenide, a Fury, all she needs to know to do her traditionally assigned job is how to tear souls into shreds. I'm surprised they bothered to teach her how to do her sums and letters."

"Paperwork," the demon in the next seat told them. "They have to report on how many souls they've tormented anyway and having it totted up on a sheet of paper is better than trying to count on one's fingers or talons."

"Good point," Jael admitted, "but why not give young demons the same education we all used to get. If nothing else it makes us all more interesting to talk to."

"The bureaucracy isn't interested in talking to us," he replied.

A bell rang gently throughout the train and the seats slowly rotated until they were facing toward the rear of the cabin. "Coming in for a landing," Jael remarked and advised, "take a deep breath."

Once again Evrona felt like a hippo had decided to take a nap on her chest as she was crushed back into her seat. The breath was forced out of her lungs and she began to feel faint until the pressure suddenly was released as the train came to the end of the line.

"Whoa! I could stand to lose that part of the trip," Jael remarked. "Maybe I should have let Rona have the seat. The train accelerates and decelerates more gently when a mortal is detected on board. I never actually answered your question, though, Evie. There's another administrative center here and most of our fellow passengers are headed upstairs to it. It's not as big as the center in Dis, but as Number Two they might try harder. The Egress is on the next level down. Let's take the stairs."

They walked to the end of the platform to a wide glass door which opened automatically at their approach. There were two demons dressed in medieval armor standing on either side of the door and holding long polearms. They nodded to Jael as she showed them a small card and allowed her and

Evrona to pass. Behind the door was an equally wide staircase leading down to the next level and another door. They slipped through that door and found themselves in the middle of a very long gray hallway with no door or windows in it.

“What happened to the door?” Evrona asked, noticing that it had disappeared behind them.

“This section is all one way out,” Jael pointed out. “No turning back now. Follow me.”

“Just where *are* we going?” Evrona asked curiously as they approached the end of the long featureless corridor.

“Out,” Jael told her. “We have a lot of different responsibilities, kid, and only a very few of them have anything to do with Hell.”

Two more steps took them out of the Abyss and into the teeth of a howling gale.

Four

They found themselves at the top of a rocky peak, surrounded by a storm of monumental proportions. The black clouds roiled in the sky about them and lightning flashed frequently and thunder mixed with the shrieks and moans of the wind.

“Hang on, Evie,” Jael encouraged her as they crouched down among the rocks. “We’re tough. We can take this for centuries if we must.”

“I’d rather not!” Evrona shouted back into a sudden silence. “Huh?” As suddenly as they had been thrust into the storm the storm itself had stopped as if someone had hit a meteorological “Pause” button.

“Jael, Rona, Evrona,” a soft voice came to them from out of the supernatural calm, “thank you for coming.”

“How do you know my name?” Evrona asked in reply.

“He knows everyone’s name,” Rona told her quietly, and then added, “Shh.”

“Sorry if we’re late,” Jael added.

“You arrived when I knew you would,” the soft voice replied.

“Of course,” Jael chuckled. “Is this League business?”

“It is,” came the reply. “There is a new team asking to join. I would like you to meet with them and please make certain they understand the rules.”

Jael’s brow furrowed in consternation. “That’s not usually a problem,” she replied at last.

“They are different,” the quiet voice replied.

“Do we have new rules of play?” Jael asked.

“No, and they may find it a challenge to meet our requirements.”

“All right,” Jael nodded. “Who are they and where?”

“You will find them in the Dreamtime,” He replied.

A moment later the storm resumed, but it seemed to have resumed at a distance. Evrona looked around and saw they were now standing on the branch of a tremendous tree. As she watched, the storm became more distant still until all she could see were the branches of the tree.

“Who was that?” she asked finally.

“God,” both Rona and Jael replied out of the same mouth. “You should have been able to figure that out for yourself, Evie,” Jael added.

“But I thought He was great and mighty and...” Evrona searched for words, “and all that?”

“He is an Infinite,” Rona explained, “and may appear in any manner He pleases.”

“Or any manner She pleases for that matter,” Jael added. “Who are we to say, hmm?”

“But...” Evrona started to object.

“God is not a showoff, Evie,” Jael told her firmly. “Okay? Now, where are we?”

“Don’t you know?” Evrona asked.

“Only in the most general terms,” Jael replied, “This is Yggdrasil, the great World Tree. It exists coextant with everywhere in Creation. Not knowing which branch this is, I can only tell you we’re somewhere in the World... uh, maybe.”

“We’re obviously not in Hell,” Evrona observed.

“There are a lot of places we’re not, kid,” Jael snapped. “Well, we’d better start walking. It’s a very big tree and at this time of year I doubt we have more than an hour or two of available light.”

“Why’s that?” Evrona asked.

“This aspect of the Tree is north of the Arctic Circle,” Jael explained. “In a few weeks it will be nighttime here for about two months. Remind me to bring a flashlight next trip.”

“Nonsense, Jael,” Rona laughed, “You know you use magic to produce light when you need it.”

“Can’t let me have my little joke?” Jael asked archly.

“You’re the one who disdains sorority girls, dear,” Rona replied. “So it’s no fair hazing Evrona, especially since you know she’s going to believe anything we tell her. Don’t worry, Evie. I’ll keep this one honest.”

“The other side of me,” Jael remarked darkly. “Oh all right, I’m a big girl and can admit when I am wrong. Sorry, Evie. No more jokes at your expense.”

“I don’t know how to make magic lights,” Evrona pointed out. “Maybe I should carry a flashlight?”

“I’m not likely to send you out here on your own anytime soon,” Jael pointed out, “but if it makes you feel better I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to give you a small one to carry in your purse.”

“Thank you,” Evrona told her. “Jael?”

“Yes?” Jael responded automatically.

“What’s a flashlight?”

Jael chuckled. “I should have expected that. It’s a hand-held light source. No, it will be easier to just show you when we get it. And I never explained what I meant by fairy godmother.”

“I assumed you were just making a joke,” Evrona told her.

“I was,” Jael confirmed, “but it all comes down to teaching you about the Mortal Realm and the pop culture references that attend it. That’s something I think you need to know in order to feel comfortable out here.”

“Okay,” Evrona nodded.

Jael took a deep breath and began, “Once upon a time...”

She had only gotten to point where Cinderella had climbed aboard the pumpkin coach when a voice hailed them from a nearby branch. “Jael?” it called.

Jael stopped, looked around and spotted a large male deer just before he jumped over to their branch. “Hi, uh...” she began.

“Durothrôr,” the hart introduced himself.

“Durothrôr,” she repeated. “Sorry, I hate to say this but all you guys look alike to me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Durothrôr told her. “If Ratatosk cannot tell us apart, I see no reason to expect

you to and, truth be told, if we shaved we probably could use each other as mirrors.”

“Durothrôr is one of four deer who live here on Yggdrasil,” Rona explained to Evrona.

“Well, I’ll have to start looking for differences among you,” Jael commented.

“Manage that and you’ll be the first,” Durothrôr replied. “So, whither are you bound?”

“Whither?” Jael echoed with a small laugh. “We’re headed south, but at the moment I’m just trying to get my bearings.”

“South?” Durothrôr asked. “Then you’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“Okay,” Jael drawled, “but are we on the right branch at least?”

“That depends on where you want to be,” Durothrôr pointed out.

“Want to be?” Jael chuckled, “I know a nice quiet beach on Oahu...”

“Oh, so this is one of your secret missions?” Durothrôr concluded uncertainly.

“I wouldn’t call any of them secret, really,” Jael replied. “Sometimes I have to handle matters of some sensitivity so I keep my mouth shut, but...”

“Then where are you headed?” Durothrôr asked again.

“To the Dreamtime,” Jael replied.

“What or where is that?” Durothrôr asked, awash to the term.

“Well, to most mortals it only existed in the distant past, but it is also the home on the Divine Plain of the gods of Aboriginal Australia,” Jael explained.

“Australia, I see,” Durothrôr nodded. He took a nibble from the tip of a nearby branch and considered the matter. “You’re already on the right branch, I should say,” he told them a few chews later. “Turn around and keep going until there’s nowhere else to go, then step off the left side of the branch.”

“Go to the end of the World and turn left,” Jael repeated. “Got it. Thanks!”

“My pleasure, Jael,” Durothrôr told her before leaping off to another branch.

“Well it could have been worse,” Jael commented once they were headed back outward on the branch. “At least we found out before we reached the trunk.”

“And at least we ran into one of the more polite inhabitants of the Tree. It’s going to be dark soon, Jael,” Rona pointed out. “It’s already hard to see the branch.”

“Right,” Jael nodded. She held her hand up and it burst into flame.

“That doesn’t hurt?” Evrona asked.

“I’m not really on fire,” Jael explained. “It’s an illusion. A lot of demonic magic is illusory. It’s part of why mortals think of us as liars and deceivers. Of course, we’re not all nice people, so it’s only part of the reason.”

“You seem pretty nice,” Evrona commented.

“Thanks, Evie,” Jael replied with a smile. “You seem like a nice kid to me too. But I haven’t always been this way. I had to grow into it. Hell isn’t a place where you get ahead by being everyone’s doormat, you know.”

“Then why aren’t you that nasty?” Evrona asked.

“Well, for starters I was always a square peg that wouldn’t fit in the round hole,” Jael replied.

“What?” Evrona asked.

“There’s a children’s toy that teaches them how to identify shapes,” Jael explained and went on to describe the various shaped pegs and the holes they were supposed to fit into. “It’s a technique that can also be used to test a person’s ability to distinguish shapes. You’re supposed to take each shape and fit it into the hole of the same shape and do so as quickly as possible, okay?”

“I think I used to have something like that,” Evrona admitted.

“So you know what I’m talking about,” Jael concluded. “So when someone says something or someone is a square peg in a round hole, it means they don’t fit. You know what that’s like, right.”

“I’m definitely a square peg, then?”

“Better than being a defect,” Jael told her. “So I already told you how they packed me off to a mortal university, right? Well, I didn’t exactly fit in there either. I had to pretend to be a boy just as I was becoming sexually aware that I really like boys. It was a very confusing time for me and I sublimated those feelings by burying myself in my studies – good little nerd girl... or boy, I guess.

“After the University,” Jael continued, “I returned to Hell with the ink on my Doctorate still a bit damp and found I was unemployable.”

“Unemployable?” Evrona asked.

“I was a Doctor of Philosophy back in a day when that really meant philosophy,” Jael chuckled, “and if there’s one thing Hell didn’t need it was a philosopher. So I spent the next couple of centuries or so going from department to department, and then the world began to change. Well, the world is constantly changing, if you want to know the truth, but what we now think of as science had been around for a while but was finally becoming prevalent enough on the Mortal Realm to affect the Divine and as an early natural philosopher, I was in on the ground floor. I started making suggestions to my various bosses and pretty much got ignored.

“Part of that is just natural social inertia,” Jael continued, “and if there’s any place in Creation that resists change, it’s Hell. Who are the top three Erinyes?”

“Maegara, Alecto and Tisiphone,” Evrona replied instantaneously.

“And they’ve been around forever, haven’t they?” Jael pressed.

“Pretty much,” Evrona admitted.

“That’s because we’re all immortal,” Jael explained. “We don’t die forever except under extraordinary circumstances. We get more lives than comic book characters and, if killed, are usually reborn at the start of the next cycle.”

“Cycle?” Evrona asked.

“I’ll explain that later,” Jael promised. “Let me finish this. So those who were on top at the beginning are pretty much still in control but Hell is always growing in step with the Mortal world so there’s always room for advancement even though almost none of us will ever be at the very top. But even Hell has to keep up with the times. We’re not the medieval torture chamber Dante saw and described and the sins on Earth have evolved so the way we handle them had to evolve as well so I used my education and put together a proposal for a feasibility study into sins uniquely related to natural philosophy. Frankly, I thought the proposal was shaky, but I guess I dazzled them with ten dollar words.”

“Ten dollar words?” Evrona asked.

“The sort only the highly educated use, Evie,” Jael explained quickly. “Well maybe I didn’t so much dazzle them with brilliance as baffle them with bullshit, but either way, I got the go-ahead to do my study. I ran my study over the next decade and got pretty used to being my own immediate supervisor. I think that’s what really got me my first real promotion. The higher-ups in management didn’t care about what I learned, but they did take note of how industrious I could be when allowed to work on my own.

“So I got to develop plans for a new section of Hell,” Jael went on. “I had to devise fit punishments, plan the environments and so forth. It started out small as so many things do and I wasn’t even in charge at first, but Hell’s torments can be very specialized so my little section grew into its own department and then a host of departments. Finally, there came a time when I was offered one of those departments.”

“Should have happened much earlier,” Evrona told her.

“Perhaps,” Jael agreed, “but perhaps not. I had a lot to learn about leading a team and as a solo researcher I never had the opportunity to do so. I was given the Department of Environmental Sins, which had formerly been a subsection of Wasters. It was something near and dear to my heart as I had grown rather fond of Earth during my sojourn there and didn’t have a lot of sympathy for those who spoiled it. It was also a small department at first so I was able to grow into the job for a century or so. And then the world came to an end a bit over eighteen years ago.”

“About the time I was born?” Evrona asked.

“Just about, yes,” Jael smiled. “It’s a long story, but that’s when I met my husband and got even closer to Rona here.”

“You’re married?” Evrona asked.

“I am, yes,” Jael replied. “Is that a problem?”

“I didn’t think demons ever got married,” Evrona remarked.

“It’s unusual and when it does happen it’s normally for reasons of convenience,” Jael replied, “but Marcus isn’t a demon and neither is Rona.” Evrona was shocked beyond words. “Hey! I said I was a square peg. Oh good it’s getting lighter just ahead.”

“That was a very short night,” Evrona remarked as they suddenly stood near the end of the branch and in full daylight.

“We are about to step off into the Southern Hemisphere,” Jael explained, “and nowhere near the Antarctic Circle. The seasons are reversed and, on this side of the world, so is the order of day and night, so while it was late autumn where we were, here it’s late spring and about time for a coffee break. Okay, this is where we turn left.” And together they stepped off the Tree.

Five

They slid down an arch of light and landed gently on their feet in the middle of a landscape as different from the Tree as any could be.

“I don’t think anyone has a pot on for us,” Rona commented almost immediately.

“It’s so bright!” Evrona complained.

“You have sunglasses, Evie,” Jael reminded her. “Put them on. I’ll admit I only thought of them to help hide your eyes, but they’re nice and dark and polarized too. Really cut down the glare. Wish I’d thought to get a pair for myself, come to think of it.”

“I have a pair,” Rona offered.

“Yours are prescription,” Jael pointed out. “Everything would be blurry and I’d get a headache. It’s okay I can take it.”

“Where are we?” Evrona asked, looking around. They appeared to be in the middle of a desert. Here and there green clumps of grass and scrub stood out against ochre sand and every so often a lone tree raised its head, looking somewhat alien to the rest of the landscape. In the distance something large and also ochre-red stood up over the rest of the mostly flat terrain.

“Over the rainbow, kid,” Jael told her.

“Is that Ayers Rock?” Rona asked.

“Uluru,” Jael replied. “They’re calling it mostly by its original name these days, I hear, and that’s the real Uluru, the divine aspect, and where we’re headed. This, I guess, is the Dreamtime and while it all looks fairly stable, we’ll find that it really is like a dream and almost anything can change at anytime. The sky, you’ll note, was bright blue when we got here, but now it’s striped in all sorts of colors.”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” Evrona remarked. “Have you been here before?”

“No, and I’ve really never seen another place like it,” Jael replied. “Is that a flying wallaby?”

“How can it fly without wings?” Evrona asked.

“Hmm, maybe it’s just hopping very high. It seems to be nibbling on a cloud,” Jael mused. “I wonder...”

She started bunching up her leg muscles in preparation to jump, but Rona stopped her, “Don’t get distracted, Jael. You know what this place is like.”

“How do you know?” Evrona asked.

“Good question,” Jael admitted. “I didn’t realize I was particularly knowledgeable about the Dreamtime or the gods who live here. I suppose we’ll have to chalk this up to being a gift from God... literally.”

“So no hopping with the kangaroos,” Rona told her.

“I can’t help but be curious,” Jael admitted. “Maybe later. Right now we have our work ahead of us.”

“So who are we looking for?” Evrona asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jael admitted. “I don’t know who the Owner of Record is supposed to be.”

“Owner of Record?” Evrona asked.

“In each of the teams of the Celestial League, one divinity is in charge and considered the owner of the team. Usually it’s the king of the Pantheon or the creator of the world according to the religion involved. The thing is, there are several gods here who might serve in that position. My guess is Altjira. According to the local mythology, he created the Earth, but it could be a number of other deities. Various tribes will probably disagree as to who’s in charge, if anyone is. Even with the gift of knowledge, the Australian gods are a confusing lot. The designated owner could be Wallungunder or yet another creator god. There are a fair number of them.

“They aren’t really an organized pantheon like most of those in the Celestial League,” Jael went on. “They’re more like the gods of Polynesia than, say, those of Olympus, although they aren’t much like the Polynesian gods either.”

“And why would they want to play this Baseball game?” Evrona asked.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Jael shot back.

“I don’t,” Evrona replied.

“Well, they do,” Jael replied. “My job is to ease them into a league in which the other teams have been playing for years. To tell the truth, I was wondering how we were going to balance the league after the Chinese pantheon decided to join last year.”

“Balance?” Evrona asked.

“The League is divided into Western and Eastern Divisions,” Jael explained. “There’s no rule both divisions have to contain the same number of teams, but it makes things a lot more even when they are and no one will complain about playing more teams outside their division than in. That can be important as we get nearer to the playoffs, you see.”

“Of course this will mean there are two more teams in the Eastern Division than the Western,” Rona pointed out.

“Maybe not,” Jael shrugged. “The terms are for our convenience. I’ll talk it over with the Commissioner. He likely has a plan for that already.”

“Commissioner?” Evrona asked.

“God again,” Rona told her.

Distances in the Dreamtime were only vaguely related to those in the mortal world and they soon found themselves approaching the base of Uluru where their forward path was blocked by a very large lizard.

Evronea nervously stepped back, but Jael calmed her, “Evie, this is Adnoartina, if I’m not mistaken. The guardian lizard of Uluru. Greetings, Great Adnoartina! We have peaceful business on Uluru. May we pass?” The lizard continued to silently block the path.

“Our mission is on behalf of all the gods of the Dreamtime, Adnoartina,” Jael tried reasonably. “Hmm, maybe we’re blocking your way? No need to stand on our pride, won’t support our weight anyway. Here, we’ll stand aside for you to pass if that’s what you want.” Jael and Evrona stepped off the path deferentially. However the lizard, Adnoartina, remained firmly motionless save for the occasional flick of its tongue.

“Lizard,” Jael tried again a bit more sternly, “we have been sent here by the one power that cannot be denied. Stand aside and let us pass.” Nothing. “This is ridiculous. Move! Scat! Vamoose! Please?”

“Why not try ‘Abracadabra’ while you’re at it?” Rona asked archly when the lizard stayed put.

“I’ve tried nearly everything else,” Jael admitted. “I hate to admit it, but we may have to fly over the critter.” At that the lizard seemed to grin and shake its head. “Ah ha! So at least you can understand me,” Jael crowed and continued to try convincing the guardian to let them continue onward.

Finally, Jael got frustrated with the wait and shouted, “Oh, for pity’s sake! What do you want?”

Walkies?”

“That might be nice,” Adnoartina replied at last.

“You can talk?” Jael asked exasperatedly.

“Cannot everyone?” Adnoartina replied.

“I don’t suppose you’re part squirrel, are you?” Jael asked suspiciously.

“What?” both Adnoartina and Evrona asked at once.

“Never mind,” Jael shook her head. “We are expected, you know.”

“There’s no hurry,” the great lizard told her.

“Look, could you take us to whomever is in charge around here?” Evrona asked.

“You want me to take you to my leader?” Adnoartina asked, obviously amused.

“Kimosabe, I’ll settle for whoever claims to be the Owner of Record for the new baseball team,” Jael told him. “Um, does the team even have a name yet?”

“Alchera, of course,” Adnoartina replied.

“Of course,” Jael sighed and explained to the others. “Alchera was the primordial timeless dream that existed before the world began according to the local Aboriginal religion. It’s the native word for Dreamtime. Most teams are named after mythical creatures, but I don’t see that as a law and calling yourselves the Roos or Wombats or something like that would sound inappropriate somehow.”

“That was our thinking,” Adnoartina replied.

“So are you going to stand there all day, blocking our path?” Jael asked.

“If you like,” the lizard replied maddeningly.

“This one could give Ratatosk lessons,” Jael told the others.

“Would you please lead the way, Adnoartina?” Evrona asked.

“Since you ask so nicely,” the lizard replied, turning around and making its way up the steep path to the top of Uluru.

“That’s a nice talent you have there, Evie,” Jael commended her. “And they say I’m a natural diplomat.”

“I think Adnoartina was just having fun with us,” Evrona told her. “I didn’t mind as much as you did. Compared to what I went through back home, this was gentle and friendly.”

“Really? Remind me to put in a request to audit the Erinyes Department next time we’re back there,” Jael told her.

“It wasn’t so much my sisters,” Evrona told her hurriedly. “They just thought I was strange and shunned me most of the time. Most of my trouble came from a demon boy in my class. He was always picking on me. He’s why I was all wet when you met me.”

“I should probably have a short sharp talk with him then,” Jael muttered, “but then I’d say there’s a good chance you’ll never see him again, so why bother?”

“Suits me,” Evrona told her almost cheerfully.

Eventually Adnoartina delivered them to the edge of a pool of water improbably perched at the top of Uluru. In the water was an odd snake-like creature with the tail of a fresh-water crocodile and the head of a kangaroo. Its body was decorated with waterlilies and various tendrils that seemed to be constantly in motion.

“Ah, I should have known,” Jael remarked. She introduced herself, Rona and Evrona. “Are you Yingarna or Ngalyod?”

“I am both as it suits me, child,” the Rainbow-Snake replied. “Call me Almudj if it pleases you. It is the name that I have chosen for this meeting.”

“Whatever you like,” Jael nodded. “Names are important, but more so to their owners. If you wanted me to call you Mickey Mouse, I would do so out of common courtesy. You are the Owner of Record?”

“I could not very well play, given the anthropomorphic requirement,” Almudj replied.

“You could play in guise,” Jael pointed out.

“That did not seem right to me,” the Creator Serpent replied.

“Then just as well you won’t,” Jael nodded. “And someone has to sit out the season and I think the Great Creator Serpent is certainly qualified to act as team owner. Who will be on your team and have you chosen a manager yet?”

“No,” Almudj admitted, “not yet. We know very little of this baseball and hoped you could instruct us.”

“I can run down the rules with you and answer basic questions,” Jael nodded, “but you really need to find a manager. I’m surprised you don’t know more about the game, though. There are scads of teams in Australia and, last I checked, around seventy Aussies playing pro-ball on one level or another in the United States and Canada.”

“And how many Aborigines play baseball?” Almudj asked pointedly.

“I haven’t made a study of it,” Jael told him, “but I imagine a fair dinkum lot have tried their hand at it, even if Cricket is more popular in these parts. Seems to me that anyone with the eye-hand coordination to be able to use an atlatl effectively can probably hit a ball with a bat. It’s a modern world you know, and your people aren’t locked up in the anthropological present.”

“What’s the anthropological present?” Evrona asked suddenly.

Jael was about to shush the young Erinys, but then changed her mind. “Anthropologists are people who study the cultures of other groups of people, Evie. When they do, they generally publish their findings in various papers, monographs, and textbooks. In these studies they describe the people they study in terms of how they arrange their families, who they may marry, how they provide food for themselves, how they interact with their neighbors and so forth. Such descriptions are always in the present tense, since at the time they are written, that’s the way the people are. But even cultures that are pristine when first found, don’t stay that way. Missionaries may move in and convert them to a new religion, teach them to read and do their sums, their children may go to the cities for jobs or agricultural agents may show them new and improved crops and crop management and so forth. So five years, ten, a generation or two later the same culture has changed quite a bit, but students are still learning about them the way they were fifty or sixty years before as if they were still like that.”

“Why don’t they study them as they are now?” Evrona asked.

“Well, first of all, there are a lot of different cultures to be studied and only so many anthropologists and, more importantly, only so much grant money to go around to study them,” Jael explained. “Also, just because a culture has changed, it doesn’t mean the study is invalid. What we learn about people from such cultural snapshots is still true even if the people don’t live like that anymore.”

“What’s a snapshot?” Evrona asked.

“A picture taken at a single moment in time,” Jael replied. “I’ll explain it in detail later. Anyway, we refer to these studies as taking place in the anthropological present because we treat the people discussed in them as though they still exist.”

“But doesn’t anyone ever go back and study such people again?” Evrona asked.

“Sometimes,” Jael admitted, “and those follow-up studies are added to the store of anthropological knowledge as well, but it’s often like studying another culture, one closely related, often enough, but still a different one.” She turned back toward Almudj and suggested, “Maybe we can accomplish more by meeting with your entire team.”

Six

They spent several days with the gods of Alchera, helping them build a baseball stadium. Several of the gods had wanted to place it on the very top of Uluru, but Jael changed their minds. “Yes, nice view,” she chuckled. “I can see my house from up here, but you’re going to have a bit too much work to do to make it a playable field. You’d have to drag tons of dirt and water to both level the field and then grow grass on it.

“What you need to keep in mind,” she continued, “is that while they call it a ball field and the popular image is of a small town game, baseball is very much a game of the city. This isn’t so much a field as it is a park or a garden. We’re all gods here and you could go to the bother to make a playable field way up here and the other gods will all ooh and ah over the view, but I think they’ll be just as impressed if you build your field down there at the base of the rock.”

“They could make Uluru the outfield wall,” Rona suggested.

“I was thinking of it more as a backstop,” Jael told her.

“What about as part of the outer wall,” Altjira, a god with the feet of an emu suggested thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t make these homeruns you’ve told us about more difficult?”

“A homerun is hard enough to achieve as it is, especially since our fields are a quarter of a mile deep,” Jael told him. “You want to make them even harder?”

“Only to one side of the field,” Altjira replied.

“Which side do players hit toward more often?” Birrahgnooloo, a female deity of floods and fertility asked.

“That depends on whether they are batting right or left handed,” Jael replied. “Most of the playing gods are ambidextrous. They can bat from either side of the home plate, although I’ve noticed that most seem to prefer batting right-handed. Put Uluru in left field, if you feel you must. I doubt it will make much of a difference against the other teams, but it will be the highest and most impressive wall in any league.”

Once they had a field plan to work with, the many creator gods of the Dreamtime made short work of building the actual stadium and playing field. “I love it,” Jael applauded them. “It has a raw natural beauty, but I’d put it up against some of the architectural wonders some of the other pantheons have built. So you have a field, and you’ve all memorized the rules, but you still have a long way to go. You really need a manager.”

“Which of us should manage?” Daramulum, a powerful god of the sky, asked.

“Well, any of you could if you wanted,” Jael shrugged, “but given how little practical knowledge of the game any of you have, I seriously recommend you hire a mortal with professional experience both playing and managing. Most of the original teams did that in the first season a few years ago and nearly all of them have continued to do so, but you have time to find one. Spring training doesn’t officially start for another three months, although there’s no law that says you can’t start early. You should go watch some mortal games. The Australian season is on right now and I think you’ll find teams playing in Latin America as well. You can’t use magic during a game, but that doesn’t mean you can’t use divination to find the coach best suited to manage your team. Cast a few auguries or gut a sheep or do whatever you do to tell the future and find someone to work for you. You’ll also find that most of the players on the other teams will be glad to talk shop with you during the off season before they start training. There’s a feeling of collegiality among our players and none of them really want an easy victory. That would take all the fun

out of it. There are even a few mortals who have managed Celestial League teams in the past who are available now. I'll get you a list of them. Go interview them and see if anything clicks."

She spent the next day running some simple plays with them on the field, getting them to play catch and run the bases. "Shouldn't we be getting some batting practice?" Daramulum asked.

"All in good time," Jael told him patiently. "Have you been looking for a manager?"

"We have several candidates," he told her.

"Good!" Jael exclaimed. "You'll need whoever you choose to help you pick your best players. There are more of you than the league rules allow on your active roster. On the other hand, don't get too caught up in your own individual abilities. Any coach you choose will tell you that a good team of competent players can defeat a group of individual champions. I've seen it happen often enough and, of course, it's really important to remember that this is a game and games are supposed to be fun."

Jael, Rona and Evrona stayed in the Dreamtime several more days until the gods of Alchera had selected a retired mortal baseball coach of their own. Once, he had arrived, Jael gave him a quick run-down on the sorts of things to expect within the Celestial League, and then she and Evrona made their farewells, leaving behind a horde of enthusiastic gods.

"Looks to me like you have a fun job," Evrona remarked as they made their way back to Yggdrasil.

"Some parts of it are better than others," Jael admitted, "but yes, by and large, it is a lot of fun."

"So, where are we going now?" Evrona asked enthusiastically.

"I'm hungry," Jael told her.

"So am I," Rona added.

"Of course you are," Jael laughed, "We share a common stomach. Let's go grab a pizza."

"What's a pizza?" Evrona asked.

Employing Anger

One

“And this is called pepperoni?” Evrona asked, peaking over the rims of her dark glasses and pointing at a round piece of meat on her pizza. Jael had found a quick route through the Tree and in only a few minutes ended up on Mayfield Road in Cleveland, Ohio.

“That’s right,” Jael agreed. “See? You’re getting the hang of this.”

“I’m not sure I like it,” Evrona replied uncertainly. “After the Witchetty grubs we had in the Dreamtime, I’m giving serious thought to becoming a vegetarian. And this sausage...” she left the thought hanging.

“You should have said something, Evie,” Jael told her. “We could have ordered something else. Tell you what, pick the meat off that slice and I’ll order you an onion and pepper.”

“You can do that?” Evrona asked.

“With money you can order anything you want,” Jael told her confidently.

“We didn’t have restaurants in my part of Hell you know,” Evrona commented.

“You didn’t?” Jael asked. She ordered the second pizza and then inquired, “You had to cook your own food all the time?”

“We had a communal cafeteria,” Evrona replied, “and took turns working in it.”

“I knew the backlands of the Plain of Dis were a bit old-fashioned,” Jael remarked, “but I didn’t think it was communistic. No wonder Erinyes are such a dour lot. Someone ought to open a McDonalds or a Starbucks out there.”

“Jael,” Rona interrupted, “they also don’t have money out there.”

“What?” Jael asked. “Since when?”

“My sisters live in a large commune,” Evrona told her. “I don’t know where the food comes from. Until now I never thought about it, but we don’t use money.”

“But money is supposed to be the root of all evil,” Jael protested. “That’s why Hell practically runs on debit cards these days.”

“Are Erinyes evil, dear?” Rona asked, “Or are they just people doing their jobs, same as you?”

“Um, well, you have me there,” Jael admitted. “A part of Hell where there is no money. Sounds wrong to me. Wait a minute, Rona, how did you know that when I didn’t?”

"I keep my eyes open, dear," Rona replied. "You should have known too. It comes up frequently enough on the annual reports and the food is on a barter system, Evrona. The Furies do their jobs and the rest of the department supplies the food. Jael, you just had other more immediately important things on your mind so you never noticed."

"Do I have to wear these dark glasses even at night?" Evrona asked, letting the frames slide down her nose again.

"Unless you've managed to improve your guise enough to hide those eyes of yours, Evie," Jael told her. "Besides, the dark glasses just complete the ensemble. What with wearing all black, you look like a cute Goth chick."

"She's got too much of a tan to really look Gothic," Rona argued. "Just as well. I've never liked that look anyway."

"What's a Goth chick?" Evrona asked.

"The Goth culture is one of a fair number of nonconformist movements that have come and gone over the centuries," Jael explained. "It's best known, at least among those who aren't part of it, for the black clothes, and attempts to look like vampires or their victims, although from the Goths I've met, I can see that's not really the point at all. There are some notable exceptions, but Goths tend to be sensitive and often artistic people who, for one reason or another, have become fascinated with the macabre. There seems to be a lot of influence from Nineteenth Century literature and the music that came out of the post-Punk period... no, I guess you wouldn't know about those either."

"Well, like any other group of people it's only sloppy thinking that makes one try to paint them all with a single brush," Jael continued. "There are points of commonality, like the clothing, although I know Goths who almost never wear black, but to think they all like the same movies or music or whatever... that's wrong. People are individuals even when they try to seem the same. If I had to sum Goths up, I'd guess they're mostly people who either don't care at all, or care too much, but who have found a few common interests."

"Sounds like any other group of people," Evrona remarked.

"Pretty much," Jael nodded.

"So what's a Goth chick?" Evrona asked again.

"A female Goth," Jael replied.

"Chick?" Evrona asked yet again. "A chick is a baby bird. Isn't that a bit demeaning?"

"I didn't make up the term," Jael shrugged. Her cell phone rang just then. "Hello? Oh, hi, Ninti! It's not the Tree again, is it? Oh, good. Really? I might be interested. Can't you tell me over the phone?" Jael sighed, was silent for a while and then told her, "I have a new protégée I've been showing the ropes to. I'll have to bring her too. The more, the merrier, huh? Okay, we'll be there tonight. We'll see you in a while." She hung up and told Evrona, "I guess we'd better get that second pizza to go. Life just got interesting again."

They took two steps out of Mama Santa's and directly back on to the limbs of Yggdrasil. It had been early evening in Cleveland, but it was still fully dark on Yggdrasil and Jael had to use her hand as a

torch again, while Evrona carried the two pizza boxes. "I don't know any shortcuts this time," Jael admitted, "but it shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes or so to get to South Carolina this way. The pizza will still be warm and even if it isn't, Ninti will have a microwave we can use."

"Microwave?" Evrona asked.

"A sort of oven," Jael explained. "Very fast."

"Who's Ninti?" Evrona asked.

"An old friend of mine," Jael replied. "One of the oldest, come to think of it. She's a divine aspect of Eve, the first human woman. You know about aspects, don't you?"

"Not really," Evrona admitted.

"Where to begin?" Jael mused. "Well, I'm exactly what you see. I'm just a garden variety demoness who happens to have done well for herself even if I did get infected with a human's soul sometime back."

"Infected!" Rona objected indignantly.

"You know I'm just kidding," Jael told her. "I'm fairly high up on the Abyssal hierarchy these days, but it was entirely through talent and industry – mostly the latter – and not because I was born to it. But I have no worshippers. Very few mortals have heard of me and of those who have, less than a handful know what I really am."

"What do they think you are, then?" Evrona asked.

"A woman," Jael replied. "The wife of a faculty member at a university back there in Cleveland. If my phone hadn't started playing 'Poisoning Pigeons in the Park,' a few minutes ago, you would have met Marcus this evening."

"No she wouldn't have," Rona chimed in. "Marcus is at a conference this weekend, remember?"

"Oh? Is it Friday already?" Jael asked. "I lost track of the day in the Dreamtime."

"I think that might be part of what the Dreamtime is for," Rona remarked. "It might make scheduling interesting this summer."

"Fortunately, that's not our concern," Jael replied, "though now that you mention it, I'll put it in my report."

"You have to write a report?" Evrona asked. "Why? Isn't God omniscient?"

"He is," Jael nodded.

"Then why does He need a report?" Evrona pressed.

"He doesn't," Jael replied, "but the rest of the league will. My report is for them, but don't worry, I'm not going to have to cozy up to a computer to get it written. My report is transmitted telepathically, I guess you could say. I just have to think about it, and it gets distributed."

“How?” Evrona asked. “Magic?”

“Not like you’re thinking,” Jael shook her head. “You already said it yourself. God is omniscient. He knows what my report is and He’ll see that it is distributed to the others. To tell the truth, it took me a while to get used to that myself. Anyway you asked about aspects.

“Supernatural beings who have no worshippers define themselves, just like natural people do, but gods with active religions are defined by the beliefs of their worshippers’ beliefs,” Jael continued. “The thing is, people’s beliefs change over time. They tell new stories about their favorite deities and forget the older ones and attribute new powers and abilities to the gods, or even different personalities, so gradually the deities themselves change as well. Sometimes it’s a gradual process and sometimes it’s fairly sudden. When there’s enough of a difference and it is sudden enough, a whole different religion is spawned in the process.

“Let’s take the Greek god of war, Ares,” Jael suggested. “Interesting enough fellow, gets to ride out with Death come the Apocalypse.”

“Is there an actual personification of Death?” Rona asked suddenly.

“Supposedly,” Jael shrugged. “Come to think of it, I’ve never actually met him or know anyone who has.”

“Or at least who lived to tell of it,” Rona added.

“Good point,” Jael conceded, “but then I’ve never heard of anyone who has met Pestilence or Famine as personifications either, so maybe that whole passage is metaphorical rather than literal. It’s a discussion for college sophomores and church scholars, if you ask me. It’s been a long time since I was the former and I’ll never be one of the latter. We’re off the subject again.”

“You do that a lot,” Rona observed.

“It’s a sign of an interesting personality,” Jael laughed and quickly added before Rona could, “I think they study me in ‘Abnormal Psych’ courses. Okay, Ares is the Greek war god. Any decent classicist can tell you the stories about him and describe the attributes associated with him on the statues. The Romans had a god of war too and they called him Mars. Well, the Greeks and the Romans had a lot of gods that seemed to be in common and if you trace their histories back far enough you’ll find they had a common origin, but they were different cultures and until the Romans decided to annex Greece as a sort of collective vacation home, their religions had some marked differences between them, but the Romans came to Greece, saw all these gods that sounded like their own gods, and decided they must be the same gods.

“Well, in a sense they were right,” Jael went on. “Many of them were the same gods, but because they were worshipped differently, they were different aspects of the same gods. So Mars and Ares are different aspects of the same god. Get it?”

“Sounds strange,” Evrona remarked, “but I think I follow you.”

“Good,” Jael nodded. “Well, very often if two aspects are similar enough a god will choose to merge them into a single entity, and sometimes he or she won’t. There are all sorts of reasons to merge or not and eventually I’ll introduce you to deities who, for their own reasons, have done both over the ages. Anyway, sometimes in a new religion the aspect of a god or goddess is mortal rather than divine. It’s not

all that common, but it does happen, and in Ninti's case it did. They weren't really all that close, mind you. The relationship is more obvious in a literary sense – descriptive phrases and attributes – than in the stories about them, but that's mortal religion for you."

"Jael?" Evrona asked.

"Yes, Evie?"

"Thank you for being so patient and answering my questions," Evrona told her quietly. "I must seem like such a nuisance." She sniffed a bit and there was a quiver in her voice that sounded like she was about to cry.

"You're not a nuisance, kid," Jael told her almost affectionately. "Ignorant, but that's what we're trying to fix, right?" Evrona started crying softly and tears mixed with blood once more ran down her cheeks. "Hey, hey," Jael told her gently. "There's no reason to cry." She pulled a handkerchief from Evrona's shoulder bag and wiped off the bloody tears. "And you really do look much better when you don't, you know. Woof!" she exclaimed as Evrona suddenly hugged her. "Watch it, Chica. You're starting to get as manic-depressive as those succubi."

"Am I?" Evrona asked.

"Well, you've been through more than a bit of culture shock since we met," Jael considered. "I guess I ought to be amazed it hasn't hit you before. Come on, let's get you to the next shock. You'll like Mount Pleasant. It's warm there most of the time."

"It's really very cold here, isn't it?" Evrona noted.

"It smells like it's about to snow, if you ask me," Jael told her, finally disentangling herself from Evrona's embrace. "It's also dark. You surprised me so much I forgot to keep the light on." She held up her hand and willed it to produce the illusory torchlight once again.

"Hey!" a squeaky voice called grumpily from somewhere above them. "Turn out that light! I'm trying to sleep here. It's bad enough you lot won't stop talking."

"Third time's the charm," Jael sighed. "I wondered how many trips we could make through here before you showed up, Ratty."

"Do I know you?" Ratatosk asked sleepily. He sounded like one of the Chipmunks on a bad day.

"I'm crushed," Jael laughed. "Go back to your beauty sleep, rodent. You need it."

"Jael?" Ratatosk asked a bit more brightly. "Hey, cutie! What brings you to my den?"

"Since when do squirrels have dens?" Jael asked.

"My nest, then," Ratatosk corrected himself. "Did you bring your better half? The blonde has a sweeter disposition."

"Eew," Rona remarked disgustedly.

"See?" Ratatosk replied gleefully, now fully awake. He jumped down to the same branch they were

on and Evrona could see he was, indeed, a talking squirrel, albeit one the size of a large dog. “Oh, hey! Who’s the new girl? Hiya, babe. Gothic girls are so hot!”

“See, I said you looked like a Goth chick,” Jael told Evrona. “Don’t mind the rodent, though. He’s all talk. Ratty, this is Evrona, my protégée, and if you’re half as smart as you think you are you’d be a bit more careful about teasing one of the Erinyes.”

“The who?” Ratatosk asked.

“The Eumenides,” Jael tried again. “Evie’s a Fury. Kid, show him your fangs.”

There was ripping sound as Evrona suddenly sprouted wings. The snakes reappeared in her hair and their fingernails lengthened once more into claws. Then she flashed a smile at Ratatosk to reveal her vampire-like canines.

“Hey, cute!” Ratatosk laughed. “Hey, kid how about you and me? A Fury and a furry, you know?”

Jael’s lip curled in disgust and she was about to chastise the squirrel for taunting her young charge, but suddenly Evrona laughed and gave the squirrel a warm hug. “Ratty, you already have a girlfriend,” Jael reminded him.

“Only one,” Ratatosk replied.

“And I’m sure she’d be thrilled to hear you said that,” Jael threatened.

“You wouldn’t,” Ratatosk remarked uncertainly and he stepped away from Evrona. “You would,” he decided. “I think I’ll go back to sleep.” He jumped up to his previous branch and could soon be heard snoring theatrically.

“Yeah, ham it up, Furface,” Jael laughed. “I only meant to show your fangs, Evie,” she told her. “Now we’ll have to replace both your blouse and jacket.”

“Maybe some more cheerful colors?” Rona suggested.

“Maybe,” Jael nodded, “though with those tears, I think black tops might still be the order of the day. Let’s see what Ninti has to say? Her fashion sense is impeccable, but maybe we can peck at it for a while anyway.”

Two

"I was right," Ninti observed. "Green is most definitely your color." They had arrived too late to do any serious shopping, but Ninti did have a supply of polo shirts embroidered with the logo of the Springtime Seed Corporation. She had taken a quick look at Evrona and pulled a deep green one out from nearly the bottom of the box. Evrona had accepted it gladly and stepped into the ladies' room to change. "It's a shame I don't have anything to replace that skirt with. Really, Jael? Did you have to garb her all in black?"

"Hell has the same color sense in clothing that Henry Ford did in Model T's," Jael chuckled, and then held her hand up toward Evrona and added, "Later. I promise. It's all I had to work with, Ninti. Actually, I meant to go shopping almost as soon as we got out, but the Commissioner had other ideas."

"I'm sure He would have understood," Ninti remarked.

"It didn't come up in the conversation," Jael replied. "You had to be there, really."

"If you say so, dear," Ninti sighed. "Evrona? You look sad."

"Not really," Evrona denied. "I am a bit tired." She sat down in a comfortably padded chair, and flopped her shoulder bag on to her lap.

"Do Furies need to sleep?" Ninti asked.

"Not once we reach maturity," Evrona replied. Reaching into the black canvas bag and feeling around. "I don't have to sleep, although a nap would help. The thing is I haven't really had a chance to rest since I met Jael and Rona. Sleep is one thing, but I'll bet even you need to rest once in a while."

"I do," Ninti agreed. "The difference is I just got back from Dilmun so I'm already rested and recharged. We have a few cots upstairs if you want to take a nap."

"Maybe a little later," Evrona decided. "Right now I'll just sit and try to keep up." She finally found one of the pencils and pads of paper in her bags and pulled them out. While the others talked, she planned to doodle on the top page.

"Then do me a favor, dear, and smile," Ninti requested.

"Erinyes aren't supposed to smile when we're not working," Evrona replied seriously, putting her bag on the floor next to the chair.

"Try it anyway," Ninti urged her. Evrona hesitated, but after a long moment allowed the edges of her mouth to curl just a bit. Ninti raised a questioning eyebrow and Evrona allowed the smile to grow just a bit more. "That's better," Ninti told her, flashing back a broad grin. "Practice on that. Next time I want to see some teeth."

"I have fangs," Evrona warned her.

"Then I'll want to see some fangs, dear," Ninti told her.

“Ninti,” Rona broke in, “you haven’t told us why you called us here so abruptly.”

“Enki’s been thinking,” Ninti replied.

“Oh oh,” Jael laughed. “Time to duck and cover!”

“Funny,” Ninti replied flatly.

“So what great idea does he have this time?” Jael asked skeptically.

“He has decided to produce a television show,” Ninti replied, “hosted by Springtime Seed, of course.”

“About gardening?” Rona asked. “There are quite a few shows like that, but mostly on public broadcasting stations.”

“Can you really see Enki on Public Television?” Ninti laughed.

“I can,” Jael decided seriously, “but I take it keen Mister Clever has a different idea?”

“It’s a reality show,” Ninti explained.

Jael burst out laughing. “I should have seen that coming!”

“What sort of reality show?” Rona asked.

“What’s a reality show?” Evrona asked at the same time.

“A very strange phenomenon,” Ninti replied to Evrona. “The producers put together a series of contests. And people compete for a fabulous prize of some sort.”

“That’s your explanation?” Jael asked.

“Was I wrong?” Ninti countered.

“Hard to be wrong when you don’t actually say anything,” Jael retorted. “Evie, reality programming is cheap and easy to produce, and as in everything else in life, you get what you pay for. It doesn’t matter if the contestants are eating a worm salad, dancing for their lives or falling off a log, most of them are trash playing to the lowest common denominator.”

“I like some of the dancing and modeling ones,” Rona remarked.

“They’re mindless enough,” Jael nodded, “but I’ve never found any of them as interesting as a good book. Heck, I’ve never found any of them as interesting as a good cartoon or professional wrestling for that matter.”

“Since when do you watch professional wrestling?” Rona asked pointedly.

“I don’t,” Jael admitted. “That’s the point. Anyway most reality shows are contrived and ridiculous and have absolutely nothing to do with reality.”

“Then why are they called reality shows?” Evrona asked.

“Marketing,” Jael replied. “Someone was just barely bright enough to realize that calling them mind-numbingly stupid contest shows wasn’t likely to garner enough of a viewing share to keep them on the air. Sadly, whoever it was didn’t happen to be bright enough to come up with more than a few that could hold up through the first season. That doesn’t matter anyway, since most successive seasons aren’t all that different from the previous ones. New faces, new contests, yes, but the same old trash as well. Still I suppose it beats having an honest living.”

“So I take it you’re not interested?” Ninti asked.

“I haven’t heard Enki’s idea yet,” Jael countered. “Some of those reality shows are probably fun to be on the inside of. So tell me about it.”

“He calls it ‘Living Legend,’” Ninti told them.

“That name might get him into the second show,” Jael remarked.

“It’s a vast improvement over ‘Who Wants to be a Demigod?’” Ninti smirked. “That was his first working title.”

“First?” Jael echoed. “There were others?”

“‘Beat the Dragon!’” Ninti sighed. “‘Fight to the Finish,’ ‘Ziggurat of Fame,’ and more. I lost track of all the silly names and themes he went through before finally settling on ‘Living Legend.’”

“I hesitate to ask,” Rona began.

But Jael finished the thought for her, “what sort of stupid games is he planning to play with the contestants?”

“And why?” Rona added.

“I’m working on a number of classic scenarios from ancient legends and myths,” Enki told them as he entered the room. Enki was slightly shorter than average for most modern men, but his mouth seemed to be creased in an almost perpetual smile and his eyes spoke of untold ages. Today he was dressed in a dark brown business suit. “Hello, Jael, Rona. Thank you for coming. Oh? And who is this young charmer?”

“Complete with her own snakes,” Jael warned him. “This is Evrona. I’ve taken on an apprentice.”

“Really?” Enki asked. “An apprentice for what? Punishing environmental sins or helping to run the Celestial League.”

“We’re not sure yet,” Jael replied. “Maybe I’m just training her to be Hell’s next best trouble magnet.”

“She has a long way to go before she can equal your record, you know,” Enki pointed out.

“Everyone has to start somewhere,” Evrona cut in. “What’s a trouble magnet?” Jael quickly

explained. “Oh, I do that already.”

“Yes, but mostly to yourself,” Jael chuckled. “We want to harness that talent a bit more constructively. But, the king of trouble magnets here still hasn’t explained why he wants to produce a television show.”

“Well,” Enki took a deep breath and continued, “I think we did fairly well over the last few years with Marcus, Hawk, Eddy and , uh, Ina’s new boyfriend...”

“Mike,” Jael reminded him.

“Right,” Enki nodded. “anyway in each case we found a fairly normal mortal, put them through extraordinary situations and saw them come through famously.”

“Famously?” Jael echoed. “I don’t recall a lot of headlines. As a matter of fact we took great pains not to make headlines, but I’ll grant you they each did as well as anyone could... Oh, wait a minute! No! You aren’t actually planning to give the winner immortality as the grand prize are you?”

“Not for winning the game,” Enki replied, “but...”

“But?” Jael argued. “Enki, Marcus and the others all earned their immortality by succeeding against incredible odds and in life-threatening situations.”

“That’s sort of required in any form of the Quest for Immortality, you know,” Rona added.

“So Ninti keeps reminding me,” Enki agreed.

“Yeah?” Jael replied. “But if anyone actually dies on your show the network and sponsors are going to pull the plug on you so fast, you’ll empty out with the bathwater.”

“They would?” Enki asked.

“Oy!” Jael moaned. “You didn’t think this completely through, did you? Of course they would. Don’t give me the old ‘The show must go on!’ routine because I know for a fact that quite a few shows – movies, TV, plays – that did not go on because someone died on the set. You’ve got to admit that even if the higher ups didn’t stop the show, the contestants would hesitate to go on.”

“Well, okay,” Enki agreed at last. “You have a point. So we have to keep the contests exciting but non-lethal.”

“How?” Jael asked. “By having them eat raw dragon eggs or something equally or more disgusting? It’s been done to death.”

“Where would mortals find dragon eggs?” Enki asked.

“Something equally or more disgusting,” Jael repeated. “Enki, how many of those shows have you actually watched?”

“I watched a few just last week,” Enki admitted.

“Last week?” Jael asked. “That’s the sum total of your research? I really hope you did a bit more

than that before creating the world.”

“That was a team effort,” Enki replied, “just as I hope this will be.”

“It was a bit before my time,” Ninti remarked, “but from the stories, part of the problem is the creators didn’t spend as much time thinking about it before creating the world.”

“In your part of reality, perhaps,” Jael replied. “Where I come from, the world was created by an omniscient and omnipotent God. I’m fairly certain He knew what He was getting into before He started.”

“Your world was created by one of the Infinities,” Enki replied. “My own pantheon was and remains somewhat more fallible.”

“Huh?” Evrona grunted from her easy chair. She looked up from her pad of paper. Several sheets had been folded over the top as she worked. “I don’t get it. There’s only one Mortal Realm world, isn’t there? If God created it on his own, how could you do it too?”

“The world has aspects, Evie,” Jael replied, “just as some gods do. The biggest difference is that they’re all merged in the world. All legitimate religions are valid, so while Yahweh created it in six days, the various creator gods of the Dreamtime dreamed it up and Enki and his extended family did it in whatever manner they claim to have. Did you have to invent the hammer and nail first? Or the trees you could cut down and turn into lumber?”

“What?” Enki asked, uncharacteristically confused.

“Well, from what I’ve seen so far,” Jael smirked, “I suspect you all built a bunch of stage flats and painted on the scenery, placed the early humans in front of the flats with a few animals to hunt and keep busy with, then went on to cobble the rest of the world together behind the backdrops.”

“If I wanted that sort of abuse, I could have invited Ratatosk to join us,” Enki replied sourly.

“You probably should,” Jael suggested. “The squirrel has a wonderfully devious mind. Who else have you tapped for this project?”

“The usual team,” Enki replied, “Ninhursag and Inanna will be here in the morning. That should be enough for our core group, but we can consult with others as we go along.”

“We’re a pretty diverse team,” Jael admitted, “but I have the feeling we’re going to need a lot more of us this time around.”

“We were enough to handle bringing the new Tree to term,” Enki noted.

“We had an entire army of gods to help though,” Jael told him. “Still, you’ve managed to get me interested. So where do we start?”

Three

She had the head of a woman and the body of a winged lioness. The Sphinx had been having a good day. Dawn had come to her mountain with rosy fingers that caressed everything they touched. Below her, the valley had filled with fog that moved like a river of mist beneath the early morning light although, from her vantage point, the air was clear and delightfully crisp.

She had flown across her domain in that perfect moment, catching and feeding on a dove that had erroneously thought it was a good time for everyone to fly. And then, as the early morning sun burned off the foggy blanket that shielded the earth, she had sat down beside her favorite path to contemplate the world.

Jael/Rona and Evrona were the second and third people she met by mid-morning. There wasn't much left of the first and the Sphinx's belly was comfortably full. "Hi, Lizzie!" Jael greeted the Sphinx as she came into view. "How's it going?" Asking the first question was always a good way to keep the Sphinx at bay.

"Four legs, two legs, three legs," the Sphinx replied dreamily. "Sometimes the classics are the best."

"You mean there's someone who never heard that one?" Jael laughed.

"There was," the Sphinx replied contentedly. "Why do you always call me that? 'Lizzie,' I mean."

"You won't tell me your real name," Jael replied easily, "and you sort of seem like a Lizzie to me. Oh, this is Evrona. She's with me."

"A Eumenide, I perceive," the Sphinx observed even though Evrona was in guise. "Welcome, sister. Your name is appropriate."

"I only live up to it occasionally," Evrona admitted.

"Good!" the Sphinx told her. "The key to a proper hunt is to never do what they expect. If you like, you may fly with me sometime. What do you want of me, Jael?"

"What makes you think I want something?" Jael replied.

"Do not play that game with me, little demoness," the Sphinx chuckled. "Or perhaps I should be talking to your other half. Hello, Rona."

"Hi, Lizzie," Rona replied politely. "Don't mind Jael. She likes to play as much as you do."

"I know," the Sphinx nodded. "It's why we get along so well. But you did not answer my question and you know how I hate unanswered questions."

"I was wondering," Jael replied, fading back into view. "Can you ask a question without lethal consequences if the victim fails to answer correctly?"

"Killing is not a requirement, Jael," the Sphinx admonished her. "I will have you know I am a well-brought up lady with a classical education, but I am also part lion and must, on occasion, hunt. The riddles are a part of the hunt. They are my way of making it a fair contest."

"A fair contest?" Evrona asked.

"I cannot be killed easily and, as a supernatural creature, I am reborn at the start of the next cycle," the Sphinx replied.

"Cycle?" Evrona echoed. "Jael, you've said something like that too, but never explained it."

"The world lives through endless cycles," the Sphinx replied. "Just as in life, there is a beginning, a middle and an end, but there are always new generations. Each new generation can be seen as a cycle. The phoenix is a perfect example of this, being born anew from its own ashes. The world does this too. Great nations are born, grow and eventually die, and are replaced by other great nations. History repeats itself in the same way. This repetition is a reflection of the divine cycles in which the world is born, lives for a while and then dies. Sometimes it dies in flame and sometimes in ice, but then it is born anew and all those mortals who were alive just prior to the end of a cycle are reborn as well. We supernaturals can live through the destruction of the world, but even if we do not, we too are reborn at the start of each new cycle. You are young, Evrona, but someday you too will see the start of a new cycle."

"Thank you, Lizzie," Evrona replied softly.

"You are welcome," the Sphinx told her. "Jael, I am still waiting for my answer. Three tries is the most I've ever given anyone."

"True," Jael agreed. "If you can restrain yourself from actually trying to kill someone who does not have an answer, I may have an interesting job for you." She went on to describe Enki's ideas for "Living Legend."

"Keep me fed and I am sure I can restrain myself," the Sphinx told them at last.

"Then we can count on you," Jael concluded.

"It sounds like fun," the Sphinx replied. "Do you think I might try jokes as well?"

"Jokes?" Jael asked. "How do you mean?"

"I've been practicing," the Sphinx told her. As always the Sphinx's voice remained calm sounding, but there was a hint of enthusiasm in her body language. "A werewolf and a gryphon go into a bar..."

Four

“No, Grandfather,” a light brown-haired woman was telling Enki as Jael/Rona and Evrona returned to Springtime Seed’s headquarters that afternoon. “I will not try to recruit the Minotaur for you. Frankly, I think it’s a stupid idea to begin with. You can’t reason with him. He’s an animal and a vicious one at that.”

“The Minotaur?” Jael asked and then added, “Hi, Ina.” They hugged and Jael introduced Evrona. “Enki, Inanna’s right. You’ll never convince the Minotaur to restrain himself. He might play with his food a bit, but he’ll still think of our contestants as food. Even you will never talk him into anything resembling restraint. I got the Sphinx interested, although I think you’re going to have to give her a bit of airtime to try her hand at standup comedy.”

“Is she funny?” Enki asked.

“Downright peculiar, if you ask me,” Jael bantered. “She has a good sense of humor, though her jokes tend to be rather mythically oriented. I’m not sure how much of the audience will understand them. She may make a good announcer at the start and end of each show, though. She can use humor effectively then, I should think, especially if we write her jokes.”

“I’ll think about it,” Enki nodded, “and discuss the matter with her.”

“Well, I suppose she could symbolically kill those who can’t answer her question by making them listen to her routine,” Jael added.

“Perhaps, not,” Enki decided. “You know, we’re going to need some fairly exciting battles and all the best monsters are a little short on reasonability.”

“We can probably fake one or two,” Jael replied.

“No one is going to believe they’re real anyway,” Ina added.

“Who’s real?” Ninti asked as she joined them in the conference room.

“Old Wet and Wizardly here seems to think we need to have real monsters to battle,” Jael told her.

“We’ll have to choose very carefully,” Ninti considered, “although I suppose some of us can disguise ourselves as monsters.”

“We don’t want to have to do too much of that,” Jael pointed out. “Being defeated in battle is generally a sure way to be forced to show one’s true form. Except for Evie, maybe, none of us have a true form that is guaranteed frightening.”

“I would think most mortals would find an undisguised demoness fairly scary,” Ina remarked.

“Some perhaps,” Jael shook her head, “mostly women, I’ve found. Far too many men actually get turned on when they see my horns, tail and wings. Pervs! But Evrona can be truly horrific if she wants. Show them, Evie.”

“But I would have to take my shirt off,” Evrona worried.

“There’s nothing under there we haven’t seen before,” Enki commented, causing Evrona to shyly shield her chest with her arms.

“Don’t worry, Evrona,” Ninti assured her. “I have some new tops for you and I’ve been modifying them with slits in the backs so you won’t ruin one every time you transform.”

“Really?” Evrona asked gratefully. “Thank you, Ninti!” She paused and allowed her true form to manifest. Her wings spread out to fill her entire side of the room and the two green snakes in her hair reared up. Twin rivulets of blood ran out of her eyes and down her cheeks and her fangs and nails grew to the size of serious weapons. “Will this do?” she asked.

“I’m impressed,” Enki admitted, “and I think we can use you.”

“Now why don’t you change back, dear,” Ninti suggested. “We can try out your new clothes. Your human guise is really more appropriate to your personality, you know.” She escorted Evrona out of the room.

“What’s this?” Enki asked, noticing the sketchpad Evrona had left behind.

“Evie likes to draw in her spare time,” Jael shrugged. “It does no harm so I let her do it even though her sister Erinyes would never understand.”

Enki flipped through a few pages. “She’s very good, especially since she’s only using ordinary paper and a ‘Number 2’ pencil. I particularly like the one of the Sphinx.”

“I didn’t realize she had done one of Lizzie,” Jael remarked.

“Lizzie?” Enki asked.

“It’s a very long story,” Jael admitted. “It goes back to the first time I met the Sphinx over a century ago. I asked her name and she refused to answer.”

“Why would she do that?” Enki asked.

“Superstition, maybe?” Jael shrugged. “She wouldn’t say, but it did keep her from trying to kill me, so I started calling her Lizzie.”

“One of these days we’ll have to have a long talk about that sense of humor of yours,” Enki decided.

“Don’t like the competition?” Jael chuckled.

“Could be,” Enki laughed. “Get Evrona some real artists’ tools. There’s a supply shop on the next block. Charge them to the company, of course.”

“I can afford to buy her some charcoals or pastels or whatever other medium she wants to work in,” Jael replied.

“I’m sure you can,” Enki replied easily, “but I plan to put her to work drawing, painting or whatever. Seems to me, we need an artist on staff and if she’s as good as these sketches seem to indicate, I’m going to let her do most of the design work for us.”

“Who’s this?” a woman asked from the doorway. She was tall, had dark green hair and eyes and held herself with regal dignity.

“Hi, Dee!” Jael, Rona and Ina all greeted her in unison.”

“Ninhursag,” Enki added. “It’s good to see you again. Thank you for coming.”

“It sounds like an interesting idea,” Dee told him, “and I have a bit of time to spare. Life is nice and quiet in Hattamessett these days.”

“I’m certainly glad to hear that,” Enki nodded. “It seems Jael has a young protégée with a fair amount of artistic talent.”

“Really?” Dee considered. “I’d like to meet the young lady. Or it is a young demon?”

“I’m an Erinys,” Evrona replied as she and Ninti reentered the conference room. Ninti had once more dressed the young Fury in a leaf green blouse, but this time the skirt was a medium brown. “My name is Evrona.”

“If not for your eyes,” Dee remarked gently, “I might mistake you for a nymph. You may call me Dee, if you like. That’s what most of this lot does these days.”

“Evie,” Jael cut in, “Dee is really Mother Nature.”

“Oh!” Evrona gasped and curtsied to the older goddess. “I was taught we Erinyes were as much in your service as we are to those who punish.”

“Most people in the modern world usually forget the Erinyes stand for the rightness of things,” Dee nodded. “But I wouldn’t say you were in my service. More that we are allies, or should be, in the proper situation.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Evrona nodded respectfully.

“I understand you’re an artist, Evrona,” Dee remarked. “That is quite exceptional for one of your order.”

“I am not really very good,” Evrona replied. “And I’m not supposed to, but sometimes I just can’t help myself and,” she added in almost a whisper. “Jael allows it.”

Enki handed the sketchpad to Dee. “Only allows it? Jael, you should be openly encouraging her.”

“I’ve been trying to ease my way up to that level,” Jael admitted. “As You said, Erinyes support that which is right. In Evie’s eyes, an artistic Fury is at least a little wrong, so I’ve been gently easing her into the idea that it is neither right nor wrong.”

“For a brash young demoness,” Dee remarked sternly, “Jael, you can be amazingly cautious at times. Evrona, the only time you can be wrong concerning your artistic talent is when you deny it. Enki is right, you’re really very good.”

“Thank you, Dee,” Evrona replied, “but my sisters say it’s a waste of time and therefore a sin.”

“Your sisters are not infallible, Evrona,” Dee told her. “They can be, and in this case are, very wrong. So long as you use your talent constructively it is right.”

“But Erinyes are not creative,” Evrona protested. “We’re destructive.”

“Most Erinyes, yes,” Dee nodded, “but not all, obviously. You are part of a group, but you are also an individual. If any of them ever try to stop you from creating again, you may tell them I have given My permission. If that’s not enough, I’ll have words with them myself. Trust me, my little Erinys,” Dee added locking her deep green eyes with Evrona’s red ones, “Hell truly has no Fury like Me.”

Evrona nodded silently and backed away one step a bit nervously until Dee flashed her a tight little smile which Evrona returned with a half smile of her own. “Well and good,” Dee decided. “So what else have you come up with so far.”

They all gave her a quick synopsis, finishing up at the point where they were discussing battles.

“So Enki was trying to get Ina to recruit the Minotaur,” Jael was saying, “until...”

“Enki, are you out of your mind or just dehydrated?” Dee asked caustically. “The Minotaur can’t be reasoned with.”

“So everyone has told me,” Enki agreed. “Let’s just skip ahead. I was saying we really do need to stage some real battles even if they are dangerous.”

“Well, if we’re going to have battles,” Dee told him, “let’s bring in some professional consultants.”

Five

“So, what you’re really trying to devise isn’t a battle,” Ares concluded after hearing Enki describe his plans. “It’s a war game.” Enki had invited Ares, Marduk, and Tyr, three gods noted for their association with war and with whom he had also worked in the past, to help overcome the difficulty of planning a “safe” battle.

Enki stroked his long curly beard. “Well, yes, I suppose you could say that.”

“Then you should have said that from the start,” Ares pointed out in reasonable tones.

“Well, I have to admit that until just now I hadn’t really thought of it that way,” Enki shrugged.

“Ah, then you weren’t considering the matter properly, Father,” Marduk told him.

“I suppose I wasn’t,” Enki admitted.

“Then perhaps you did not realize that nearly all of your proposed contests can be seen as military exercises,” Tyr pointed out.

“Not all of them,” Enki disagreed. “I would hardly call the eating and drinking contest a war game.”

“No,” Tyr agreed. “That is more like what I would expect of warriors on their time off, but your team challenges are very much like small war games and your individual challenges are analogous to warrior training.”

“That’s right,” Ares added. “The whole point of a war game is that it is not supposed to be lethal. It is an opportunity for warriors to learn their skills before having to go into battle.”

“War is no place for the untrained,” Marduk nodded. “Warriors must learn to fight together and as individuals. Have you considered adding wrestling to the contests?”

“Hmm,” Enki considered, “It would probably be best to keep that between contestants. Can you imagine the average mortal facing off against Hercules or Gilgamesh?”

“That would be a bit unfair,” Ares commented dryly. “You have some good ideas, but I really think we need to develop them.”

“We will need to test your scenarios,” Tyr added. “Eliminate those that are pointlessly simple as well as those no mortal could complete.”

“You’re absolutely going to need at least one dragon, you know,” Marduk told him.

“We thought about that,” Enki admitted, “but that’s as bad as the Minotaur. Dragons aren’t exactly known for their kittenish purring and playfulness, you know.”

“That depends on the dragon,” Ares shrugged. “They’re not all Tiamats or even Lambton Worms, but who says you need a real dragon? Use an illusion or do it in guise.”

“We’re already planning to use one of the Erinyes in guise,” Enki replied, then corrected himself. “No, we plan to use her in her natural appearance in the game, but she will be a guide in her mortal guise. We do want to keep illusions to a minimum, however. If any one of them fails, we’re all going to look bad.”

“I think it all depends on how you use them,” Marduk replied, “but it might be better to avoid illusion of all sorts. Guises aren’t the same as illusion.”

“That’s a good point,” Enki agreed. “Maybe we can use a Minotaur game after all. I still need to pitch this idea to the networks, though, and while we can fine tune the whole thing as we go along, I want to have a total competition to show to the buyers.”

“I’ve seen some of these reality shows,” Ares remarked. “It’s hard to believe they aren’t at least half improvisation.”

“Maybe they are,” Enki admitted, “and maybe not. But I suspect most of those shows are being produced by people they at least have heard of. I’m using my usual alias of Waters since it has an established history and Springtime Seed will be the primary sponsor.”

“You’re really putting a lot of time and energy into this mortal guise of yours, aren’t you?” Ares asked.

“I am,” Enki admitted.

“What’s the point?” Ares pressed.

“It’s a game,” Enki replied. “A contest to keep my mind occupied, and I find having an established identity convenient. I spent over two thousand years doing nothing but watching the world go by when it was my only choice, but now that I can, I intend to be more than a watcher.”

“I have enough to do without worrying about all that,” Ares scoffed.

“I wasn’t trying to convert you to my way of thinking,” Enki laughed. “I do need to get you three to work with the rest of the team, though. You’ll be working most closely with Inanna. I hope that’s not a problem.”

The three gods shook their heads and Marduk added, “When I was in my Baal aspect and she was Astarte, we were married. We have always worked well together.”

“Well, just keep in mind she has a new fiancé these days,” Enki warned him.

“So I have heard,” Marduk chuckled. “A mere mortal could hardly give me any problem.”

“Not so mortal as you think,” Enki told him. “He managed to impress the Jade Emperor, but he’s not the one you should be worrying about. Inanna has an active cult again these days. You really don’t want to get on her bad side.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning on being obnoxious,” Marduk admitted.

“We’re all capable of being obnoxious without planning to,” Enki laughed.

They spent the next two days brainstorming with the rest of the team and finally settled on a competition that involved five teams of five contestants each. Then it was time to put together sample teams to test some of the ideas. Enki wanted to recruit athletes from the local schools, but Jael pointed out, "We should test the obstacles ourselves."

"Don't you think they'll be too simple for the likes of us?" Enki asked.

"The physical challenges might be, but there's a lot of thought needed for some of the challenges," Jael replied. "We're strong and have stamina to burn, but none of us is perfect in the mental department. Let's test the contests with ourselves first to make sure they're safe. Then if you want to give the local college students a new and unique workout, I'm all for it."

Ina stepped into Enki's office just then. "Well, we have our dragon," she announced happily. "Quetzalcoatl is actually thrilled to have been invited."

"I don't know why," Jael shrugged. "He's known us all for years through the Celestial League."

"The Mesoamerican gods are generally a standoffish bunch," Ina remarked. "We don't socialize as much with them as some of the other teams, but it was Evie who really brought him on board. She's such a charmer without really trying to be. I'm glad I brought her along."

"I'm glad that worked out," Jael replied.

"She's been a little happier since we left Hell," Rona remarked, "but I wouldn't have referred to Evrona as a charmer."

"Oh, but she is," Ina told them. "She's bright and cute and that little half smile she uses is so much more effective than some of the broad grins I've seen."

"Well, She was getting a bit of cabin fever here so it was good for her to get out for a bit. I haven't had much time to spend with her the last few days," Jael admitted.

"Well, I was perfectly happy to fill in for you," Ina told her. "I felt a real connection with her."

"Must have been the wings," Jael chuckled. "You have a warrior bird aspect and in her natural state she's also a flying creature who hunts."

"I wonder if there really is a connection," Ina remarked thoughtfully.

"I don't see how," Jael told her.

"Well, I was the Queen of Heaven even before the Greeks had developed their notions of the Erinyes," Ina pointed out. "That's the aspect my warrior bird form comes from. My various attributes changed or went to other goddesses as time went on, as you know. I'm just thinking it's possible my avian attributes were later attributed to the Erinyes."

"It's possible, I suppose," Jael commented, "but I doubt it. There have been a lot of flying humanoid divine beings over the course of human religious history. I'm one of them, but there's no clear connection between us. There's a lot of the 'avenging angel' to the Erinyes and I'd say there's a close relationship there, but the similarities to your earlier aspect are superficial at best."

“I was very much the avenger myself back then,” Ina pointed out.

“You did have one heck of a temper,” Jael chuckled, “but the only attributes you had in common with the current Erinyes were the wings.”

“There is that,” Ina shrugged. “It was just a thought.”

“There have been stranger things,” Jael admitted. “I just don’t see it in this case.”

They were all kept busy for another week as they tested scenarios. Evrona’s role as an avenging Fury in one of the challenges got cancelled early on when they realized that some of the challengers would attempt to fight her. “You’re not indestructible, Evrona,” Rona told her toward the end of that week. They had skipped out of Springtime Seed’s offices one morning and found a diner a few blocks away. “You heal quickly, but not quickly enough to be attacked five times in a single show. We think you’ll be most valuable as a team guide.”

“Team guide?” Evrona asked, taking a sip of coffee and wishing it was a bit hotter. She would have preferred it just below boiling.

“That’s the latest idea,” Jael cut in. “Rona pointed out that a lot of mortal contestants aren’t going to know some of the more obscure mythological characters or if they do, their view of them will be somewhat influenced by comic books and Saturday morning cartoons. So we’re going to assign one of us to each team to sort of leak certain key bits of information. It will mostly be a way to give each team their marching orders, but you’ll be able to answer certain questions along clearly defined limits.”

“What if I tell them too much?” Evrona worried.

“Well, another of us will be feeding you the answers through a small earpiece anyway,” Jael explained. “Whoever it is will stop you if you go too far and we’ll coach you in advance.”

“Well, okay,” Evrona decided. “I didn’t really like using my true form much anyway. It seemed wrong to appear that way here when it wasn’t a matter of punishing sins against nature.”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose,” Rona agreed. “So how do you like the scenario testing?”

“It was fun to try it for myself,” Evrona remarked. “But I enjoyed it even more while working with some of the students Enki recruited.”

“That’s where we got the idea of team guides,” Jael admitted, “but what do you think of the contests?”

“Well, some of them seem a bit silly to me,” Evrona replied, “but the students seemed to like them. Everyone liked the Dragon Scenario and even the bravest ones were bothered by the “Descent to the Netherworld” game. That seemed so real, even to me. How did we manage it?”

“It was real,” Rona explained. “We made a deal with Erishkigal, the Mesopotamian Queen of the Netherworld, and opened up a portal directly into her realm.”

“Sure glad she’s been feeling better since we got her into counseling and on her medications,” Jael remarked. “I met her briefly at the end of the last cycle and she was one sick Fruit Loop.”

“Fruit Loop?” Evrona asked.

“It’s an impolite term unless you’re describing a breakfast cereal,” Rona told her. “In this case Jael means Erishkigal was certifiably insane. I understand she is still a little shaky at times, but her husband, Nergal, keeps an eye on her these days.”

By the time they got back to the office, however, Enki had called a council meeting upstairs in the big conference room. “I want to thank everyone for all their fine work,” he told them. “I think we’ve hammered this project into as good shape as we can at the moment. In fact I pitched the idea to one of the networks just yesterday afternoon and we got the green light for next fall.”

“Green light?” Evrona asked.

“It means ‘Go,’ Evie,” Jael explained softly. “Just like in traffic.”

“Enki?” Ninti asked a bit jadedly. “That seems unusually fast, especially for mortals to make such a decision. Did you cast a glamour on them?”

“Not at all,” Enki replied, looking honestly hurt by the question. “I want this project to succeed or fail by its own merits.”

“And besides,” Jael chuckled, “we all know how proud you are. You don’t want to get caught cheating.”

“Is using magic cheating?” Evrona asked.

“It would be in this case,” Enki replied. “The point of the exercise was to plan and develop a successful reality program, and we seem to have done it. We’ll start a call for contestants and will hold auditions next June and then start filming toward the end of the summer. In the meantime we’ll keep working on polishing the various scenarios, but we won’t have to meet here on a daily basis until next spring. Thank you every one!”

Redirecting Anger

One

“So we have a job,” Jael commented to Evrona.

“In about seven or eight months,” Rona corrected her. “It’s still November, you know.”

“True,” Jael agreed, “but there’s always something to do. We should go report to Persephone and see what else she has planned for us. I’ve sent her occasional notes, but we have been out a long while this time.”

“Not as long as we were while helping Eddy with the Tree,” Rona argued.

“That was a special case,” Jael laughed, “but we really should report to her directly, don’t you think?”

“We haven’t seen Marcus in weeks either,” Rona complained.

“We’ll go to Cleveland right after we finish up with Persephone,” Jael replied.

They were walking briskly through the branches of Yggdrasil when Ratatosk suddenly stopped them on the trunk. “You’re going the wrong way, babes!” he told them rudely. “The party’s that way.” He pointed upward.

“What party is that, Ratty?” Jael asked.

“Eddy’s annual Thanksgiving bash, of course,” Ratatosk replied. “Have you forgotten which week this is?”

“I suppose I have,” Jael admitted.

“Getting forgetful in your old age then,” Ratatosk taunted her.

“Look who’s talking, rodent,” Jael snapped back at him. “You’re constantly forgetting what I’m like when I lose my temper.”

“Oh, I don’t forget, babe,” Ratatosk laughed. “But I know you’ll never do something like that to me.”

“Don’t be so sure, Ratty,” Jael muttered darkly. “Look, just do me a favor and let Marcus know we’ll be a little late for the party. He was supposed to meet us there as I recall.”

“Must be my magnetic personality,” Ratatosk commented to no one in particular.

“What?” Evrona asked.

“First she threatens me and then expects me to do her a favor,” Ratatosk told Evrona tragically. “Tell me, sweetie. Do I look like a bear skin rug to you?”

“Um, a little?” Evrona guessed.

“Must be why everyone is so anxious to walk all over me then,” Ratatosk told her.

“Either that or your friendly and outgoing demeanor,” Jael snapped back. “Look, we really need to check in with Queen Persephone before going off to Eddy’s shindig.”

“Then you’re still going the wrong way,” Ratatosk told her. “She passed this way just an hour ago.”

Jael thought about that, but Rona told the squirrel, “You’d better not be lying about this, Ratty or I *will* turn you into a rug.”

“Would I lie about something like that?” Ratatosk asked in return.

“I think you would,” Rona decided. “Just keep in mind the Tree isn’t large enough to hide in if you do. Come on, Jael.”

“Yeah,” Ratatosk chortled. “Come on, Jael. One foot in front of the other... Ouch!” he concluded as Jael kicked him. He scampered around the trunk of the World Tree and complained, “That hurt!”

“It was supposed to,” Jael told him.

“That was mean, Jael,” Evrona told her as they started up the trunk.

“The little flea trap has had it coming for years, Evie,” Jael explained. “He isn’t always this friendly and helpful.”

“But he’s helping us now, Jael,” Evrona pointed out, adding, “and I like him.”

“Hmm,” Jael considered the matter. “Oh all right, I’m sorry, Ratty. It seems you have a champion after all these eons. Make sure you never betray her though, because I assure you Hell does have a Fury and Evie is one of them. You’d find this place mighty cold without your permanent fur coat.”

For once Ratatosk didn’t have a wise-ass retort, and he fell in quietly beside Evrona as they made their way toward their new destination. They did not have to travel too far up the trunk before getting off on another branch. “We ought to turn down here,” Ratatosk suggested as they came to a diverging branch. “It’s the back way in. Remember?”

“I’d feel better if we rang the front doorbell, Ratty,” Jael replied. “This is a party we’re going to and we’re still trying to keep the back door a secret.”

“Yeah, well I might think that way too if I weren’t a giant squirrel,” Ratatosk told her.

“Ratty, you know as well as I do that most mortals don’t really notice you,” Jael commented.

“But some do,” Ratatosk told her, “and it seems to have some relationship to how often I visit a particular place.”

"I see," Jael nodded. "Well, you can go around the back way if you want. We'll see you inside."

Jael/Rona and Evrona continued down the main branch a few yards then turned out on another branch. Beside them, Evrona could still see Ratatosk walking down the almost parallel path until he suddenly disappeared. "Where'd he go?" Evrona asked.

"Same place we're going, kid," Jael told her. "Into an entirely different universe. Follow me." Jael and Evrona stepped off the branch and immediately found themselves on the front porch of a cottage on a quiet small town street. Jael reached out and rang the bell, and then immediately opened the door and led the way into a happy sort of chaos.

"Jael!" Several people called out at once. Evrona looked around as Jael waved back at everyone. She recognized a few of the people in the room, all of whom she had met in the offices of Springtime Seed and she attempted to smile at them, knowing she still couldn't do more than let the corners of her mouth curl a bit.

Jael suddenly ran across the room and flung herself into a man's arms and while kissing him suddenly phased into Rona. Evrona was just trying to get used to that when another young woman caught her attention. "Hi! I'm Tanise."

Tanise's face was smiling and open as she held out her hand in greeting. She wore her dark brown hair long and loose and was wearing a dress that seemed to be made entirely of red and yellow maple leaves.

"Uh, hi," Evrona replied a little guardedly. "I'm Evrona."

"Pretty name. Ooh! Jael's new student, right?" Tanise asked. "Lucky you. It sounds like you're having so much fun. I wish I could join you all."

"Why can't you?" Evrona asked.

"I can't leave this universe," Tanise explained. "This house is the closest I can come to your world. It's a long story, but my universe is outside the backdoor. I'd show you, but we won't see much in the dark. Not beyond the patio. Tomorrow morning, I promise. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"Maybe some water," Evrona decided.

"We have a lot of soda and cider if you would rather," Tanise offered.

"What's cider?" Evrona asked.

"I guess it's sort of a raw apple juice," Tanise replied. "Eddy heated it up with all sorts of spices. It's really good. Would you like some?"

Evrona found Tanise's enthusiasm infectious, so she nodded and told her, "I'll try a bit."

"And after that we should find a place to put your things," Tanise decided as she cleared their way through the milling gods and goddesses. "I'm told you'll be with us all weekend at least."

"I will?" Evrona asked as Tanise grabbed a couple of glass mugs and started filling them with a clear golden liquid from a large pot on the stove.

“Sure, if you came with Jael and Rona,” Tanise replied. “They’re spending the weekend here with their husband.”

“Marcus?” Evrona tried to remember.

“You’ve met him, of course,” Tanise commented.

“Not yet,” Evrona replied.

Tanise glanced back toward the living room and decided, “Well, maybe that’s best put off until morning too. I’m not sure they’re even aware anyone else is in the room at the moment.” She sighed, but the sigh turned into a yawn. “Oh, excuse me. I’m generally awake all summer, but when my Tree goes to sleep in the fall I start to fall asleep too.”

“Your tree?” Evrona asked.

“I’m a dryad,” Tanise explained. “A tree nymph, although my Tree is very special. He’s the child of Yggdrasil and the World Tree of his own universe. Anyway, most dryads sleep when their trees do, but I’ve learned to resist the urge, though I still sleep and take a lot of naps during the winter.”

“If it’s natural for you to sleep,” Evrona asked, finally taking a sip of the mulled cider, “why don’t you sleep too? This is very good, by the way.”

“I hoped you would like it,” Tanise replied. “But I don’t want to miss all the fun, by going to sleep for several months, I mean. More importantly I’m one of the new Tree’s guardians and what sort of guardian would I be if I slept half the year away?”

“But you do have to sleep sometime, don’t you?” Evrona asked. “I’m not keeping you up, am I?”

“You are,” Tanise confirmed, “but in a good way. I napped most of the afternoon so I could stay up for a while tonight while people are still coming in. Amy should be here soon too.”

“Amy?” Evrona asked.

“Eddy’s granddaughter,” Tanise replied, and then went on, seeing Evrona was about to ask another question, “This is Eddy’s home in the old world, your world, but actually He’s the supreme deity of the new universe.”

“He’s God?” Evrona asked, not really knowing how to react.

“Only of the new universe represented by my Tree,” Tanise replied. “Yes, I know it’s confusing to just be thrown into all this. A lot of gods and goddesses still don’t really get it.”

“And I’m not even a goddess,” Evrona commented.

“You’re a demoness like Jael?” Evrona asked. “I thought as much when I heard about you.”

“I’m an Erinys,” Evrona explained. “My sisters punish the souls of those who, in life, break the natural laws.”

“Your sisters,” Tanise noted the phraseology. “You don’t?”

“I don’t enjoy it,” Evrona replied. “You said my name sounded pretty, but it really means ‘Overflowing Anger.’ That’s not a pretty concept, is it?”

“I suppose not,” Tanise agreed. “But you seem nice to me, Evrona.”

“Maybe you should call me Evie,” Evrona decided. “Jael does all the time and Rona usually does too. I like that better. It’s like I’m a new person that way, a nicer person.”

“I think you’re too hard on yourself, Evie,” Tanise told her.

“How can you tell?” Evrona asked. “We’ve just met.”

“I don’t know,” Tanise admitted. “I just can with most people. Besides it’s like Dee says to me all the time, it’s not what you are that’s important but what you do. Most dryads are seen as brainless beauties, you know, but I’ve had an education – Jael was one of my teachers – and I’ve been fed fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. I’m neither stupid nor ignorant. I don’t think other dryads are particularly stupid either, but most of them just haven’t had my education and their concerns rarely extend beyond the bark of their trees. There are exceptions though, I’ve met them, though they are all sleeping by now. That’s why I’m glad you’re here. It gets a bit lonely sometimes while Amy is at school and I have no one of my approximate age, well, in personality – I was sort of born a teenager a few years ago – to talk to.”

“I’ve never really had anyone my age I could talk to either,” Evrona admitted. “My classmates thought I was strange and used to make fun of me. I’m glad to be away from there now.”

“Sounds like,” Tanise nodded. “Well, why don’t we find you a place to keep your things. Do you sleep?”

“Only if I’m bored,” Evrona admitted.

“Good! You can share a room with Amy and me,” Tanise decided. “I really will have to sleep sometime after midnight, I think, and Amy’s Mom just thinks Amy does, so you’ll be able to keep Amy company while I’m being a slug-a-bed. That’s what Amy calls it. She likes to tease me sometimes. Will that bother you?”

“Her teasing you?” Evrona asked. “Not if it doesn’t bother you.”

Tanise laughed, leading Evrona down into the basement. “No. I meant would it bother you if she teased you a bit. She isn’t very serious about it. It’s just part of her way of showing friendship and love, I think.”

“I can probably tolerate it,” Evrona decided as they got to the bottom of the stairs. The basement was divided into various rooms all attached to a single corridor. “I’ve gotten far worse from people who hate me.”

“Stupid people,” Tanise muttered darkly then immediately brightened again. “This is our bedroom,” she told Evrona, opening the door into a small room. “We only have two beds, since neither you nor Amy really needs to sleep, that ought to be enough, don’t you think? And we have a nice large closet with plenty of room. I don’t need many clothes and in the summer I often do without anyway.”

“You do?” Evrona asked.

“I find most clothes restricting and unnatural,” Tanise replied. “Not my leaf dress, of course. I was born into it and it’s actually sort of a part of me, but other clothes just feel wrong, I only wear them because it makes Eddy happier when I do.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out to walk around naked,” Evrona shuddered at the thought.

“Not naked,” Tanise corrected her. “Nude. And you should try it. There’s nothing like the feel of a gentle spring rain on your skin.”

“Does Amy do that too?” Evrona asked.

“Amy? Nude?” Tanise laughed. “She tried it once and blushed all over from head to toe when Ratty made a rude comment. Well, that’s Ratty for you. He’s a little coarse, but he generally does the right thing when prodded to.”

“I like him,” Evrona commented.

“You do?” Tanise asked. “That’s unusual. He bothers me sometimes when he’s being crude, but I guess he’s all right deep down. Way deep down. Here, let me help you hang your clothes up. Do all your tops have slits in the backs?”

“They’re to make room for my wings without ripping the blouses,” Evrona explained.

“You have wings?” Tanise asked. “Let’s see!”

“It’s not very pretty,” Evrona stalled.

“Are they like Jael’s bat wings?” Tanise asked. “They’re not so bad. Come on, we’re friends. Show me, Evie.”

Evrona sighed and gave way under Tanise’s gentle assault. “I warned you.” A moment later she had wings and claws and the two snakes appeared in her hair.

“Wow!” Tanise reacted. “That’s great! May I touch one of the snakes?”

“You don’t find this a bit scary?” Evrona asked. As she allowed Tanise to reach out toward her head. As the dryad did so, one of the snakes reared up and then slid gently into her hand, wrapped gently around Tanise’s wrist and made a gentle sound that Evrona had come to associate with contentment.

“Should I?” Tanise asked. She reached back and let the snake return to its customary spot.

“Most people do,” Evrona replied.

“Yeah, but Tanise is strange,” another young woman said from the doorway. “Nice wings, but who does your nails?”

“Amy!” Tanise laughed and stepped around Evrona to hug her friend. “This is Evie. She’s with Jael and Rona. Actually, Evie, Amy might be right about me. I don’t always react the same way others do.”

“You belong to an entirely different universe, Tanise,” Amy told her. “Why should your values coincide exactly with anyone else’s. Are you a Fury?” she asked Evrona.

“My sisters and I mostly call ourselves Erinyes,” Evrona replied with a sigh, “But, yes.”

“You get that question a lot, huh?” Amy asked perceptively.

“I have lately,” Evrona replied.

“Okay, I’ll try to be more creative,” Amy promised. “Why are you wearing dark glasses?”

“Jael thinks most people would find my eyes disturbing,” Evrona told her.

“Well?” Amy asked.

“Well what?”

“Let’s see them,” Amy requested. Evrona took off her glasses and opened her mouth to flash her long fangs as well. “Cool!” Amy enthused. Tanise nodded agreement.

“You’re both strange,” Evrona decided.

“Oh we get stranger visitors than you all the time, Evie,” Amy laughed. “Did you know there’s a sphinx telling jokes in the backyard?”

“Lizzie’s here?” Evrona asked.

“She must have just arrived,” Tanise guessed. “What’s a sphinx?”

Evrona explained and noted that it felt good to be the one explaining something for a change, “but Jael says Lizzie is ‘The’ Sphinx. Like she’s the only one.”

“That can’t be,” Tanise replied thoughtfully. “Where would little sphinxes come from?”

“Well, there’s only one mentioned in Greek mythology,” Amy commented. “I guess Lizzie must be her. She looks like the Greek version of one.”

“I should go meet her,” Tanise told them. “Oh, Evie, are you okay? There’s blood on your cheeks.”

“Oops,” Evrona replied, reaching for one of her handkerchiefs. “I have to work on keeping that under control especially when I’m not in guise. Maybe I’d better switch back, otherwise I’ll have to start wearing all black again.”

“Everyone is a supernatural of one sort or another here,” Amy told her, “mostly gods and goddesses. I think it’s safe to be yourself. It would really freak out my Mom, but that’s probably a good thing.”

“But I don’t want to leave bloodstains on your grandfather’s carpet,” Evrona replied. “I haven’t even met him yet.”

“Well, we should take care of that too then,” Amy told her. “Hmm, you’re right about switching back

at least for a bit, though. I don't think you can fit those wings through the door. They're huge!"

"They have to be if they're going to lift me into the air," Evrona replied. "There's nothing magical about the way an Erinys flies." She took a deep breath and returned to her human guise.

"Your eyes are still red," Amy noted.

"Eyes are tough to change," Evrona told her. "Jael says that's because they're the gateway to the soul."

"You ought to match them with red nail polish," Amy recommended and they started back up the stairs.

"What's nail polish?" Evrona asked. Amy just laughed.

Two

"I'm thinking of building an extension in the back for parties like this," Eddy Salem was telling Thor, the Norse god of thunder, as Tanise and Amy approached him with Evrona. "The house is filled beyond capacity and we really need the room. We got lucky with the weather, but it could have been snowing."

"So do the seasons in the new world coincide with those in Hattamessett?" Thor asked politely.

"Roughly," Eddy replied, "although so far we have alternated between cold winters and warm ones. It's more like we have eight seasons instead of four."

"Maybe you do," Thor nodded. "For that extension, maybe you should consider a mead hall."

"A mead hall, huh?" Eddy replied. "Well, I suppose it would be something like that, although I've never even tasted mead."

"Oh, you should!" Thor told him enthusiastically.

"Isn't it some sort of honey wine?" Eddy asked.

“That depends on the brewer,” Thor told him. “Depending on who makes it, mead could be like a beer, a wine or like champagne. I’ll bring a few kegs from Valhalla for your New Year’s party.”

“Thank you,” Eddy told him. “That’s very generous.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Thor laughed. “Oh, excuse me. I need to go talk to Gilgamesh and it looks like these ladies want to talk to you.”

“Grandad,” Amy finally broke in, “This is Evie. She’s here with Jael and Rona.”

“Ah, Evrona,” Eddy identified her. “Dee has mentioned you. Welcome to Hattamessett and the world beyond.”

“Evrone?” Amy asked.

“That’s my full name,” Evrona explained, realizing Tanise had only been calling her Evie.

“Pretty name,” Amy remarked. Tanise whispered something in her ear. “Yeah? So mine means ‘Hard Working.’”

“What does my name mean?” Tanise asked.

“Dunno,” Amy replied easily. “Whatever you want it to, I guess. The meaning of one’s name isn’t as important as what it means to be you anyway.”

“Sounds deep,” Eddy laughed. “Have you been taking philosophy classes?”

“Dee insisted,” Amy replied. “It doesn’t really interest me much, though.”

“I’m sure that if Dee wants you to take the class it must be worthwhile,” Eddy told her, “but I was never very interested in philosophy either.”

“Well, that was last semester,” Amy replied. “This year my electives are in anthropology. I relate to that better. Maybe I should take comparative religions. I’ve actually met a lot of gods and goddesses by now.”

“Not a good idea, dear,” Dee told her, coming up from behind them. “Some of the things you know are in direct opposition to what your professor would think. Religion can be like that. Hi, Evrona. Are you enjoying the party?”

“So far,” Evrona replied.

“She just got here a little while ago,” Tanise pointed out, “but we’re showing her around.”

“Good,” Dee remarked, “I hoped you three would get along. Evrona, I think Jael and Rona would appreciate a bit of time alone with their husband. Do you think you might like to stay here for a week or two?”

Evrone looked over to where Jael and Marcus were still partially wrapped around each other even though they were now chatting with friends. “I think I’d like that,” Evrona replied at last.

Tanise squealed with delight at the prospect and Dee added, “maybe you can even stay here until after New Year’s Day.”

“If it’s okay with Jael,” Evrona replied, looking around. She noticed Amy was still there, but that Tanise had wandered off.

“I’m sure it will be,” another woman cut in. Evrona turned to face a stately looking woman with long brown hair, green eyes and a silver tiara that looked like daisies.

“My daughter, Persephone,” Dee introduced the newcomer.

Evrona blanched and immediately averted her eyes, “Your Majesty,” she stammered nervously.

“Don’t do that,” Persephone told her gently, picking up her chin to look her squarely eye to eye. “You’re an Erinys and can face anyone.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Evrona replied, her voice still shaking a bit.

“Good girl,” Persephone told her. “I shall make the arrangements for you.”

“Thank you,” Evrona told her with a brief curtsy.

Tanise suddenly reappeared with three cups of cider in her hands. “Here, Evie,” she said handing one of the cups over, then she gave another to Amy. “Let’s go see who else is here. You can introduce us to Lizzie.”

“So the jackalope says, ‘Twenty dollars. Same as in town,’” the Sphinx was just finishing a joke. “Hi, Evie!”

“Hi, Lizzie,” Evrona replied. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Enki invited me,” the Sphinx admitted, sitting down on her rear legs.. “It was nice of him, don’t you think?”

“Uh huh,” Evrona agreed and introduced Tanise and Amy. “Most of the food is inside. May we get you something?”

“I’ve already eaten, thank you,” the Sphinx replied. “You should eat something though.”

“You can tell we haven’t?” Evrona asked.

“A lucky guess,” the Sphinx admitted, with a wry smile. “Amy keeps looking at the appetizer table. Unless you’d like to play a game of riddles?”

“Uh, no thanks!” Amy blurted suddenly.

The Sphinx laughed gently and started telling another joke to Ratatosk and another squirrel almost as large as he was, but with black fur instead of gray.

The trio eventually made the rounds, but a few hours later when Tanise started yawning uncontrollably and made excuses to go to sleep, Amy’s mother, a woman named Maggie Terulla,

suggested firmly that it was Amy's bed time as well. Amy rolled her eyes theatrically, but Evrona remembered something Tanise had told her early and faked a yawn of her own and suggested that sleep sounded like a good idea.

"I almost never sleep anymore," Amy told Evrona. "Are you really tired?"

"Not really," Evrona admitted, "but Tanise told me you might appreciate the company while she sleeps." Ahead of them, Tanise stumbled a moment and then caught herself before starting down the steps.

"Maybe we'd better help you into bed tonight," Amy suggested to the dryad. "You aren't really supposed to be awake this time of year, you know."

"Who says?" Tanise replied, her voice slurring a bit.

"I do, of course," Amy laughed, fitting her right shoulder under Tanise's left arm as Evrona did likewise on the other side. Together they helped their friend safely down the stairs and into bed. Tanise was fast asleep before she was entirely horizontal. "Oh no, I was hoping she'd stay awake long enough to get herself undressed." Amy sighed, "Help me get her into a more comfortable position, why don't you? If we don't straighten her out a bit she'll just be miserable in the morning."

They straightened Tanise out on the bed and made sure her head was on a pillow before finally tucking her in under a warm quilt. "She would really be better off sleeping with her Tree," Amy told Evrona, "but try telling her that. Well, we can talk as loud as we want now. She'll be out for hours."

"And she's like this all winter?" Evrona asked.

"Well Tanise doesn't normally try to stay up at night in the winter," Amy replied. "and she'll acclimate to the new schedule in another week or two, at least she has every year so far, but it's only been a couple of weeks since she normally would have begun hibernating. Don't worry, she'll be up and cheerful in time for breakfast. Oh heck. I really should have had more to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Not really," Evrona replied.

"Well, I'd better wait another hour before trying to sneak up to the kitchen anyway," Amy decided. "So do you go to school?"

"Erinyes don't need a lot of education," Evrona replied. "I was in my final year and bored out of my mind when Jael came along and got me out of there. Going to university might have been nice, but they don't let my kind attend."

"Why not?" Amy asked.

"They say knowledge just gets in the way when you're on punishment duty in Hell," Evrona told her.

"That's stupid," Amy decided. "They should be more concerned about finding the place you fit in best, rather than trying to make you fit where they want."

"That's just the way it is," Evrona replied. "It doesn't seem to worry any of my sisters."

"You know," Amy told her thoughtfully. "Maybe they are trying to find the place you fit in best."

“What?” Evrona asked. “No way.”

“Yes, way!” Amy shot back. “They let you train with Jael, didn’t they? From what she tells me, very few demons are actually allowed out of Hell. Maybe they think you can do the sort of stuff she does.”

“I don’t even understand the game of Baseball,” Evrona argued.

“Not that, though you could learn,” Amy replied, “but Jael is also a sort of inter-pantheon diplomat. You could probably do something like that. I mean people seem to like you.”

“Do they?” Evrona asked.

“Sure! And you seem to get along with the Sphinx, I was always told she was a fairly nasty character,” Amy added.

“Maybe people just don’t really know her,” Evrona replied.

“Oops,” Amy said, suddenly reaching for some tissues. “Your eyes are bleeding again. Is it something I said?”

“Not really,” Evrona told her. She dabbed at her cheeks “It’s just that every so often I forget. Normally we’re encouraged to do that. It’s supposed to be horrific.”

“It is pretty gross,” Amy admitted, “but then so is eating with your mouth open.”

They continued to chat for a couple of hours until it seemed quiet upstairs and then they went up to the kitchen. “Good morning, ladies,” a tall, dark-haired goddess greeted them. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Hi, Ash,” Amy replied. “Have you met Evie?”

“Last night, very briefly,” Asherah replied. “Are you hungry, Evrona? I was thinking of making waffles this morning.”

“What are waffles?” Evrona asked.

“Waffles it is, then,” Amy laughed. “Did everyone leave?”

“Quite a few did,” Asherah informed her, starting to mix the waffle batter, “but they promised to be back this afternoon. Most of the rest are out back. Dee provided some illumination and they’re out walking around, I guess.”

“Everyone does that when they come here, don’t they?” Amy asked.

“Even gods and goddesses don’t visit other universes very often, dear,” Asherah told her. “and I think they find it somewhat novel that many of their innate powers don’t work there.”

“Why is that?” Evrona asked.

“We’re not really certain,” Asherah admitted. “It may be because most of them had little or nothing

to do with the creation of that universe. Or maybe just that the rules are different there. I haven't noticed very much of a difference, nor has Dee."

"What about Jael?" Evrona asked.

"I'm not sure Jael has ever tried doing anything supernatural in there, but she would probably have no trouble if she tried," Asherah speculated. "She actually helped build parts of the divine plain there."

"She did?" Evrona asked, sounding impressed.

"She helped Eddy build a water garden," Amy explained. "When the Tree transcended to the new universe it took that garden with it and expanded it. I'll show you when the sun comes up. Oh, we have coffee?"

"It's a party weekend," Asherah told her. "I doubt you'll find a time we don't have some ready at any given moment."

"Good!" Amy helped herself, and then thought to offer some to Evrona. They were finished eating, but still drinking coffee when some of the others came back inside.

Three

Amy had to return to school after Thanksgiving weekend, and with Jael and Rona back in Cleveland with Marcus, Evrona had ample time to establish a warm friendship with Tanise. They spent a few days in Tanise's tree, walking the wide branches and peering into still-evolving worlds. "At least there's life out there," Tanise remarked as they watched some large amphibians fighting over the ownership of a pond. "It was a bit boring at first when even the stars hadn't properly formed yet."

After a week, however, both young women were showing signs of restlessness and Ash suggested they go exploring. "We've been limited so far by the range of the all-terrain vehicles," she explained to Evrona.

"I don't like the cars," Tanise spoke up. "They leave marks in the land. That can't be good."

"Well, I've been thinking about that," Asherah told her, "and it seems to me that we do have other

means of transport available to us.”

“You mean flying?” Tanise asked. “I thought Eddy was uncomfortable with that sort of god-magic.”

“Flying without wings bothers him for some reason,” Asherah nodded, “but I saw some movies yesterday that gave me an idea. Have you seen any of the Sinbad films?”

“Who?” Evrona asked.

“Never mind,” Asherah told her. “The point is I could enchant a carpet and we could fly around on that. It should leave the surrounding land alone, but allow us to explore a bit.”

“Are you sure?” Tanise asked hesitantly. Evrona had come to recognize certain stages in how Tanise reacted to new things. At first she was uncertain, even slightly timid, but as she grew used to strange new notions, she not only accepted them, but did so whole-heartedly.

“It will either work or it won’t,” Asherah replied practically. “I was planning to go into town today anyway. We can buy a suitable carpet in a discount store and experiment with it tomorrow. How does that sound?”

Both Tanise and Evrona liked the idea and that afternoon Asherah returned with a wide and colorful oriental carpet, which she unrolled out on the back patio. She was still trying to both make it fly and hold the weight of passengers when Dee strolled out with a pot of tea. “What are you doing?” Dee asked. Asherah explained. “Oh,” Dee laughed. “I’m not sure if anyone has ever tried such a thing before, but I think you’ll first need a spell that keeps the carpet stiff, then you can try lifting it the way you’re doing. If you do it the other way around, it will just keep dumping you off.”

It actually took Asherah a few extra days to get it completely under control and by then Amy was back from school for the semester. “All my finals were on the first three days,” she explained. “That was moderately horrendous, but I did get to come home early. What’s with the rug in the backyard?”

They told her their plans and the next morning the three young women flew up into the sky with Asherah. “First stop, the beach, I should think,” Asherah suggested.

“It’s not really a beach day,” Amy argued as the carpet turned and started southward. “It’s not all that cold, but...”

“I wasn’t planning on swimming, dear,” Asherah told her. “The world beyond the immediate area of the Tree is still a bit too wild for that.”

“Surf’s up today, I see,” Amy noted as they flew over a line of dunes.

“Why is the water all green like that?” Evrona asked.

“Algae,” Asherah explained. “Nothing particularly dangerous, just evolution in action. This is a late season bloom and probably won’t last much longer. If it was a red tide, I’d be tempted to stay until nightfall to see if it has the same bioluminescence it sometimes does in the old world. That means it glows in the dark,” she added for Evrona’s benefit. In a few years I expect the ocean will look a bit darker and bluer, although a greenish blue hue isn’t all that unusual.”

“Hey! I can still see the tree from here,” Evrona remarked. Looking back, she saw the bare branches

of the Tree stretching up to the top of the sky and apparently outward beyond the visible horizon. She blinked and then it just seemed like a normal, but very large tree again, but as she studied it, it once more seemed to embrace infinity.

“Well, yeah,” Tanise laughed. “He’s very tall.”

“Impossibly tall, I’d be tempted to say,” Evrona told her.

“You can say that after having seen Yggdrasil?” Amy asked.

“I haven’t seen Yggdrasil from this far away,” Evrona pointed out. “When you’re on the actual branches of either tree, it’s hard to tell just how tremendous they are.”

They ate a picnic lunch on the beach and then flew off to the south and west, following the coastline for a while. By nightfall they had arrived in a region where the climate was pleasantly mild, so they collected a bit of firewood and made a small fire for Tanise to sleep next to while Asherah, Amy and Evrona stayed up telling ghost stories. The next day they turned inland to see what lay beyond the coastline of the continent.

“There’s no grass around here, is there?” Amy remarked as they flew over what seemed to be a forest of incredibly tall ferns.

“It hasn’t evolved here yet,” Asherah told her. “We have modern plants around home in the backyard because Tanise’s tree brought it with him when this world was created, but the divine ambience of the Tree himself is keeping it from spreading out until the world is ready for it. At least that’s the way Dee explained it.”

“Well, she ought to know, being Mother Nature and all,” Amy replied.

“Dee isn’t omniscient,” Asherah reminded her. “None of us are, especially in this universe. Anyway, you’ll find the plant and animal life here is roughly similar to what was found on Earth during the Permian period. If this world continued on with the same sorts of cycles ours did, there should be a mass extinction in another year or two followed by the rise of whatever will pass for dinosaurs in this place.” As she said that, they discovered a herd of large reptilian creatures with sails of skin on their backs. These sails were held erect by long thin bones that extended from their spines and from the way the animals were standing, it looked like they were using the sails to soak up as much sunlight as possible. “They also use the sails to help cool off when over-heated,” Asherah lectured as they flew over the strange creatures.

“Are they herbivores?” Amy asked.

“These are,” Asherah replied. “But you’ll find carnivores with this same adaptation. These are the ancestors of modern mammals and those sails are the beginning of warm-bloodedness although these creatures are still very much cold blooded. They are very similar to the synapsids of the Earthly Permian epoch. I doubt they are identical, there are always some differences, but close enough to see this world is following the same evolutionary template as the old world.”

“So the eventual people will be human?” Amy asked.

“Probably,” Asherah nodded, “although there are a wide variety of traits they may or may not have and the physical laws are somewhat different here, so there may be some great differences, but maybe

not since the template they are following is us, you know.”

“How are the laws different here?” Evrona asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Asherah admitted. “The basics are the same, but no two known universes are exactly alike. This one just hasn’t developed enough for us to understand the differences.”

“You mean this is exactly how Earth was during the Permian epoch and the changes came afterward, Ash?” Amy asked.

“I doubt that,” Asherah shook her head. “The Permian might have been like this and was very similar, but keep in mind nonsentient lizards don’t have gods. We are only eternal in retrospect and none of us were around back then, so we just don’t recognize the differences for what they are. It’s very complex which is probably why Dee insisted you take philosophy. One view is that Man created the gods in their own images, and other is that God, or the gods, depending on your beliefs, created Man in his own image. The thing is these two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive.”

“Is that like how some people claim the universe was created with the light and energy from the Big Bang already on the way?” Amy pressed.

“Only a little bit like that,” Asherah replied. “For starters you won’t find any gods arguing against evolution by natural selection. We understand that there is such a thing as paradox and on the divine plain there’s room for paradox, Amy.”

“Jael told me all religions are valid,” Evrona commented.

“Yes, that’s right,” Asherah nodded. “And religious beliefs that in the Mortal Realm are mutually contradicting, don’t contradict at all on the Divine Plain.”

“Can you prove that?” Amy challenged her.

Asherah smiled mysteriously and replied, “Better yet, wait until the end of the current cycle and see if you still feel the need to ask for proof.”

“I hate wait and see answers,” Amy grumped.

“That is because you’re still so young,” Asherah laughed.

“You’ve said there will be cycles in this world,” Tanise noted. “When do they start?”

“They already have,” Asherah told her. “There have been several cycles already. The Cambrian explosion of life and mass extinction that followed it for example. Not all cycles involve people. But every world we know of has cycles, even that really odd one where there are no gods and the laws of physics go through cycles all their own. Well, that last is hearsay. I haven’t been there yet. Ask Dee about it if you’re curious.”

“So for now this world is very Earth-like?” Amy asked.

“Couldn’t you tell?” Asherah countered. “The area around the tree is most likely the template the rest of the world is following. In a relatively short time, a matter of a decade or two, the rest of the world will reach the evolutionary state indicated by the Tree and His environs. At that point evolution will slow

down to a more sedate speed and change will happen considerably more gradually.”

“Strange,” Amy sighed. “I would have expected this world to be entirely unlike Earth.”

“No, this world is fairly constrained to develop like the one we’re familiar with,” Asherah told her. “But if you want real variety, keep in mind that this isn’t just one world but an entire universe. On this world you’ll get variations on an Earthly theme. Other worlds will be very different indeed.”

“Evolution isn’t an intelligent process,” Amy argued. “It’s totally random.”

“But there is more than just random evolution at work here,” Asherah told her. “It’s another paradox, but there is both evolution and a divine plan involved.”

“You mean my grandfather is directing the development of this universe?” Amy asked.

“Maybe,” Asherah nodded. “Not consciously. Consciously he doesn’t really believe he is this universe’s supreme deity, but we think a part of his mind is directing this universe’s development. Of course, you’ll see a lot of differences once hominids start to evolve.”

“Why do you say, ‘Of course?’” Tanise asked.

“People think and the more they think the more they control their own development. Evolution for the time being may be nearly the same, but history won’t even be close, and the new gods who come into being are likely to seem very strange to us. That’s a long way off, though and the new gods may not even be aware of us. Dee tells me there’s one known world where we can visit and observe but for some reason the entities there can neither hear nor see us.”

“What if we were to touch one of them?” Evrona asked.

“Oh, they would feel it,” Asherah replied, “but would probably chalk it up to malicious and invisible spirits.”

“They might not be very far off in that belief,” Amy giggled. “Wait a minute. If this world is developing nearly identically to Earth so far, is it geographically similar to the Permian period?”

“Welcome to Pangaea,” Asherah laughed. “The land that will one day make up the modern continents is currently one single super-continent. But, as I tried to say, the area around the tree is the seed of this universe’s divine plain. At the moment we’re out in the real world and the divine plain is relatively small. As people evolve, the Divine Plain will achieve the same sort of separation that currently exists between the Mortal Realm and the Divine plain of the old world. As the humans of this world develop, so too will the Divine Plain.”

Six

They continued to travel inland and discovered a wide, but shallow inland sea and a very long river that emptied into it. It had been a long day and as Tanise began to yawn again, Asherah directed their flying carpet a bit further on where they camped that night in a range of mountains. "We should have a spectacular view in the morning," Asherah predicted.

It got very cold that night and it started snowing just before dawn. "We should have planned this better," Amy admitted as she huddled with the others for warmth. Asherah, a goddess of the hearth, was keeping them warm with a touch of divine heat, but when the wind started blowing, the effect was minimized.

"This is wrong," Tanise shivered from within the only sleeping bag they had brought. "Too cold!"

"Well it is winter," Amy remarked.

"No, Tanise is correct," Evrona told them. "There is something not quite right to this. I can feel it. Can't you?"

"What am I supposed to be feeling?" Amy asked. "It's cold."

"Not the cold," Asherah told her. "The force behind the cold. There is a wrongness in the world. I think we had better find out what it is."

The snow abruptly stopped at daybreak and was abruptly replaced by oppressive heat. As the women sought out the source of the wrongness over the next two days, the temperatures and weather conditions changed drastically over and over again. They also heard the rumblings of earthquakes and several erupting volcanoes. Finally they spotted a powerful tornado spinning at the peak of a volcano, picking up and flinging red hot ash and black smoke all across the sky.

"That's just impossible!" Amy remarked.

"It's wrong," Tanise agreed.

"That's what I said," Amy told her.

"No, she meant it was Wrong in a divine sense," Evrona told her. "There is evil and maliciousness at work here."

"Well, you can take it from me that evil doesn't go away just by being ignored," Asherah told them. "It must be confronted. This could be the first divine Adversary of this world."

"Isn't it a bit early for that?" Amy asked. "If this world isn't up to having native gods yet, would it have its own demons?"

"Normally, I'd say no," Asherah told her, "but every world is different. This evil may not yet have a personification."

However, as they drew closer to the source of Wrongness, they spotted a single anthropomorphic

figure dancing on a bed of semi-molten lava. He had large black bat-like wings, curly black hair, deeply tanned skin and a long pointed tail which stuck out from the back of his jeans. He was unaware of the approaching goddesses until Evrona suddenly shrieked out, "Tomislaw!"

Evrona, abruptly assumed her natural form and flew avengingly at the young demon. Tomislaw turned just in time to see her coming, but not in time to ward off her claws as they raked his face. Still hovering, she kicked him with all the force she could muster, half burying him in the lava, but as a demon he was impervious to natural heat and just got back up again, only to face Evrona's angry attack once again.

"Evie, stop!" Asherah shouted. "Girls, calm her down." Immediately Tomislaw started to retaliate against Evrona, but Asherah cast a spell that placed a moratorium on all other magic for the time being. "And you, young sir will calm down as well." Her arms stretched out and grabbed Tomislaw and grabbed him with grips as strong as oaks. She pulled him up on to the carpet while Evrona followed, still shrieking her anger at him.

They quickly flew a few miles away with the struggling demon and finally landed on the top of a low hill. "Catch her," Asherah told Amy and Tanise. "I need some answers from this one. Depending on what they are I may let her have him though," she added mostly to herself since Amy and Tanise were trying to grab hold of Evrona.

Finally, while Amy held Evrona's wings, Tanise's cool green eyes locked with Evrona's blood red ones and the anger suddenly drained out of the Erinys. "Better?" Tanise asked gently through the magic she had not even realized she possessed.

"I'm sorry," Evrona apologized, sagging to the ground, but still unable to look away from Tanise's eyes.

"Don't apologize," Tanise laughed. "You stopped him. Can you control yourself now?"

"I'll try," Evrona promised.

"Well, here," Tanise handed her a piece of cloth, "Better wipe off the blood and tears. You do look a fright."

"She's supposed to," Amy remarked. "She's a Fury."

"I should still have self-control," Evrona admitted. "But him. What the Hell is he doing here of all places?"

"Let's find out," Amy suggested.

Tomislaw seemed very pleased with himself. "Did you see what I can do?" he asked Asherah enthusiastically.

"Yes, we did," she replied coldly.

"Normally it takes a whole team of demons to change the climate in a small region," Tomislaw gloated, "but I was doing it all myself!"

"What you did caused damage all over the world," Asherah replied.

“What the Hell are you doing here?” Evrona repeated her question angrily to him. She noted with some small satisfaction he was still bleeding from where her claws scratched his face and the fact kept her from losing control all over again, although she retained her full aspect as an Erinys.

“Just doing my job, sweets!” Tomislav laughed.

Evrona fumed but before she could utter a reply, Tanise stepped in. “Not here, demon boy!” Evrona turned to look at Tanise and her face had assumed a stormy aspect even more frightening than any Fury could assume. “This is my world. Not yours.”

“How did you even get here?” Evrona demanded.

“I, uh,” Tomislav replied, dropping his voice to a whisper, “followed you...”

“Why?” Evrona asked sternly. “Wasn’t it enough to torture me in Hell? Did you have to come and ruin this for me too?”

“No!” Tomislav immediately denied. “It’s just that... uh... uh,”

Amy started laughing all of a sudden. “I think he likes you, Evie.”

“And he shows it by tormenting me constantly?” Evrona argued.

“It happens sometimes,” Asherah noted quietly.

“It’s just another way to get at me,” Evrona decided and turned her back on Tomislav.

“Well, I think we had better head back,” Asherah decided. “We’ll let Eddy figure out what to do with this one.”

“Who’s Eddy?” Tomislav asked.

“This world’s God,” Asherah replied at the same time Amy told him, “My Granddad.” That was enough to make Tomislav quiet for most of the trip back although Amy constantly asked him questions about how he got there and why. Evrona pointedly ignored the young demon all the way back to Eddy’s house so she didn’t notice how uncomfortable he was under Amy’s inquisition.

Jael and Rona had returned and were waiting for them on the back porch as they swooped in on the carpet. “How Arabian Nights!” Jael delighted, coming out to meet them. “Who’s this?” she added in a less happy tone, spotting Tomislav.

“One of your cousins, apparently,” Asherah told her.

“I see the family resemblance,” Jael chuckled, “but it must be a distant relationship as I don’t recognize Junior here. How did you get past the guards at the Egress?”

“I told them I was with you,” Tomislav replied after a bit of coaxing, “but was running late.”

“My pass was only for two,” Jael recalled. “I’m going to have to look into this when I get you back.”

“I don’t want to go back,” Tomislav told her.

“Who says you get a choice, bunky?” Jael asked.

“My name is Tomislaw,” he told her.

“Did I ask?” Jael shot back. She turned to Evrona. Tanise was still comforting the young Erinys. She was holding one of the green snakes and stroking it gently behind its head. It seemed to have a calming effect on Evrona. “Who is this clown, Evie?”

“He was just a bully back home,” Evrona told her.

“Hmm, dipped your pigtails in the inkwell a few times, did he?” Jael asked. Evrona blushed and shook her head. “Well, Tommy, there’s no place for demon boys here.”

“But there is for Erinyes?” Tomislaw asked.

“I don’t live here,” Evrona told him, quietly wishing she did. “I work with Jael and Rona.”

“Then why can’t I do that too?” Tomislaw asked.

“You just want to ruin it for me too,” Evrona told him, “just like you ruin everything for me!”

“I don’t want too,” Tomislaw whispered, but Evrona had already turned away and didn’t hear him.

“Well, I don’t have time to take you back to the Pit just now,” Jael noted, “so I guess we will have to take you with us, but you only get one chance with me, kid. One step out of line and I’ll find a place to put you that will make you dream longingly of Hell. Capiche?”

“He’s going with us?” Evrona asked.

“No help for it,” Jael sighed. “We’re in too much of a hurry. That’s why I’m here now, in fact, Evie. Better go pack your bags because I got a call from Ninti. ‘Living Legend’ just got pushed up on the schedule and we need to start the production right away.”

“But, why?” Evrona asked.

“Because we go on the air New Years Day,” Jael replied.

One

“You’re really taking Tomislav with you?” Asherah asked Jael.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave him around here” Jael replied.

“No, he was causing enough trouble before we found him,” Asherah agreed.

“Don’t worry,” Jael laughed. “I’ve handled young upstarts before. If he gives me any trouble he’ll just wish I dropped him in Lucifer’s lap.”

Evrona soon returned with her bag packed and changed into fresh clothing. “Yes, that looks much better,” Rona decided. “Too bad about the stains in that top. I liked it. It looked very good on you.”

“I’m sorry,” Evrona apologized.

“Don’t be,” Rona advised. “These things just happen sometimes.”

“I may be able to get the blood stains out,” Asherah offered.

“Thank you,” Evrona told her, hugging the elder goddess.

“Doesn’t anyone care about me. She scratched my face!” Tomislav complained.

Jael took a quick look at him. “Looks like those scratches are healing cleanly. Kid, you’re just lucky she never shredded you to pieces back home. Cheer up. I hear scars are quite fashionable this year.”

“Did I really scratch him that badly?” Evrona asked quietly a few minutes later as they prepared to leave.

“Hardly,” Jael laughed. “Give it a week and you won’t be able to tell you ever hit him. Try to score a little deeper next time.”

“You want me to hurt him?” she asked.

“Not especially,” Jael shrugged, “but he doesn’t impress me as the sort that is easily influenced by half measures either. Well, come on, we’re burning daylight, not that there is any on Yggdrasil this time of year.”

They picked up their stuff and Jael led the way toward the front door. “Give Dee and Eddy our love,” Jael told the others. “We’ll be back on New Years Eve, for a while at least.”

They stepped out the front door and onto the branches of Yggdrasil. Jael instantly created her illusory

torch and they started walking trunkward. “What’s with the burning hand?” Tomislaw asked.

“Can you see in the dark, Bright Eyes?” Jael asked him, letting the light go out completely.

“Not really,” Tomislaw admitted.

“Right,” Jael nodded, lighting up her hand-torch again, “so unless you want to take a quick trip to the bottom to feed Niddhog – I imagine that varmint is tired of chewing on roots by now – we’ll keep the light on until we get to where we’re going.”

“Where are we going?” Tomislaw asked.

“You’ll find out when we get there,” Jael snapped back at him testily.

“Uh, Jael,” Evrona asked hesitantly. “Where *are* we going? Back to Mount Pleasant?”

“For the time being,” Jael told her. “Enki is looking for the perfect location so we’re mustering, so to speak, at Springtime Seed and will move out as soon as we can. There are still plans to finalize so we won’t be lying around.”

“Hey, Jael!” Ratatosk shouted from the next branch, “Are you headed south?”

“We are,” Jael answered.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Do we have a choice?” Jael muttered. “Aren’t you supposed to be hibernating?”

“Hi, Ratty!” Evrona waved to the squirrel cheerfully.

“Squirrels don’t really hibernate,” Ratatosk told her. “We scamper through the snow all winter. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever really done a study on the life cycle of a squirrel,” Jael admitted. “So you’re up all year? Well, yes, I suppose so. You never miss one of Eddy’s parties, do you?”

“I’d have to be nuts to miss one of those,” Ratatosk told her. “Hey! Who’s this?” he indicated Tomislaw. “Evie’s new boyfriend?”

Jael chuckled wickedly but Evrona spun on Ratatosk. “You take that back!” she demanded. “Take it back or... or... I’ll never like you again!”

“Now there’s a threat!” Jael remarked. “You’d better apologize, Ratty or you’ll lose your biggest fan.”

“Sorry, Evie,” Ratatosk told the young Erinys. “Sometimes I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“Why can’t I be her boyfriend?” Tomislaw protested.

“Are you just going to argue with anything someone else says?” Rona asked. “Or do you actually

have a reason to be flapping your lips?”

“Silence is golden, Tommy,” Jael advised, “and it’s high time you started investing.”

A breeze started blowing through Yggdrasil and just behind it came a flurry of snowflakes. “Something’s happening,” Ratatosk commented.

“What sort of something?” Jael asked. “Damage to the Tree?”

“No, nothing like that,” the squirrel replied, “but there’s some unusual activity going on, especially for this time of year. Winter is often the quiet time for us.”

“It’s not winter all over the world, Ratty,” Jael reminded him. “Just in the northern hemisphere.”

“And we’ve definitely gone global,” Ratatosk agreed. The snow continued to fall gently. “Well, maybe it’s just all of us getting ready for Enki’s foray into the modern entertainment industry.”

“That’s a distinct possibility,” Jael admitted. “A lot of us have been traveling all over the place these past two weeks.”

“Did I miss something important?” Evrona asked.

“Depends on your priorities,” Jael replied. “Enki’s such a perfectionist, he kept trying to tweak the scenarios we worked out before Thanksgiving. That kept several of us hopping, looking for new resources and gods to help us, but in the end nearly everything stayed the way we had it planned, so I’m pretty sure you didn’t really miss anything except a bit of frustration, and it sounds to me like you got your fair share from Tommy Boy back there.”

“He is frustrating,” Evrona grumbled. She looked over her shoulder and noticed Ratatosk was taunting Tomislav.

“Typical teen-aged demon, if you ask me,” Jael remarked. “Obnoxious, crude and hasn’t got a clue. Worse, he’s a bit sulky for my tastes. Are you sure you didn’t date him back in Hell?”

“Him?” Evrona asked. “He hates me and picked on me all the time.”

“Young demons have trouble showing the softer sides of their emotions, you know,” Jael pointed out. “That could have been his way of showing you special attention.”

“Not hardly!” Evrona denied. “You weren’t there.”

“True,” Jael nodded. “I wasn’t.”

“He’s the reason I was all wet the day you met me,” Evrona explained.

“All he did was get you soaked?” Jael asked. “And then he followed you out of Hell and literally all over Creation? Wow! He must hate you bad.”

“Why don’t you just say it, Jael?” Evrona told her.

“It’s obvious,” Jael laughed. “He’s in love.”

“Eww!” Evrona wrinkled her nose, only causing Jael to laugh some more.

“Oh come on, Sparrow,” Jael reached out with a one-armed hug, “You could do a lot worse.”

“Sparrow?” Evrona asked.

“You would make me explain that,” Jael sighed.

“Serves you right,” Rona told her.

“See?” Jael told Evrona. “At least you aren’t sharing a body with your tormentor.”

“Oh thank you so much!” Rona grumped.

“You know I love you, Rona,” Jael laughed before going on to explain about Batman and Robin and a dozen or so parodies concerning them. “One of these days, you’re either going to catch up to me,” she concluded after additionally explaining how appropriate the remark was considering the nature of their respective wings, “or come up with some pop reference I don’t understand.”

“That whole ‘Sparrow’ remark wasn’t exactly straight-forward for me to pick up on either,” Rona told her.

“So I was being subtle,” Jael shrugged. “Unusual for me, I’ll admit.”

“No, you were being obscure,” Rona told her. “You deal out subtlety with a sledge hammer.”

“Tap tap!” Jael laughed.

“Thunk thunk!” Rona retorted. This time, even Evrona laughed. “Oh, that’s much better, Evie. You really need to laugh more often. And have you been practicing that smile?”

“Not practicing as such,” Evrona replied, “but I think I had fun with Tanise and Amy.”

“You only think you had fun?” Jael asked.

“Well, it’s not like I have a lot of experience at it,” Evrona retorted. “but it felt... uh... good to be with them. Tanise is sweet, most of the time,” she added remembering how the normally gentle dryad had rounded on Tomislaw, “and Amy is... hmm, I don’t know exactly.”

“Sassy?” Jael prompted her.

“A little, maybe,” Evrona admitted. “I was more thinking she is complex. Tanise seems to have a single defining quality, but Amy is a mix of a lot of things. Am I making myself clear?”

“I know what you mean, if that helps.” Jael told her. “Amy was born both human and mortal. She came into her divinity, such as it is, through her association with Tanise and the new World Tree. Humans tend to be more complex than gods and demons. We’re the embodiments of primal forces, you know, so most of us only have one or two definitive traits.”

“You’re fairly complex, Jael,” Evrona observed.

“Thank you. I had to work at it, Evie,” Jael replied. “It’s very easy to just sink back into the one purpose you were born to. It’s another thing to push yourself forward into the unknown. That’s what I did, in essence and it’s sort of what you’ve been doing too, with your artwork, for example. Speaking of which I have some more supplies for you in my bag.”

“That feels so strange,” Evrona told her.

“What does?” Jael asked.

“Having you encourage me to draw and paint,” Evrona told her. “I was punished for it several times. Mostly because I would doodle during classes, but sometimes even just because I dared to do something different.”

“Hell isn’t known for encouraging rugged individualism, Evie,” Jael told her. “I think I’ve said something like that before.”

“You have,” Evrona confirmed. “Several times.”

“Then I’m consistent,” Jael remarked. “Starting to snow in earnest now. I hope it doesn’t build up too much. I slipped off one of these branches once. Not fun.”

“What happens then?” Evrona asked, closing her winter coat a little more tightly around her.

“Rule one, Sparrow” Jael told her. “Don’t fall! Rule two: catch yourself (see Rule One).”

“But you said you did fall,” Evrona pointed out.

“Well, since you have wings, if you’re lucky, you will materialize in some co-extant point in the world. If you’re very lucky you’ll be able to hover before winking out to somewhere unpleasant. If you are not lucky you’ll end up somewhere very unpleasant and, if you are not at all lucky, you’ll be dead. The ground below is a long way down. You won’t survive.”

“Well, you obviously didn’t hit the ground,” Evrona observed.

“No, but I wasn’t lucky,” Jael sighed.

“Where did you end up?” Evrona asked.

“New York City.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Evrona remarked.

“More accurately,” Jael told her as though it was difficult to talk. “I landed a bit under the city. In a sewer. I had to shower and bathe for a week before I got the stench out of my hair. Oh sure! Now you smile.”

“I’m sorry,” Evrona apologized. “But why didn’t you just try to use your wings?”

“I was wearing one of Rona’s silk blouses,” Jael admitted. “My wings would have destroyed it.”

“It got destroyed anyway,” Rona added distastefully.

“Yeah,” Jael agreed. “For all my care, I might as well have let my wings sprout.”

“But then you would have been nude from the waist up,” Evrona pointed out.

“I’m not as modest as you are, Sparrow,” Jael told her. “It would be embarrassing to me, but because I had slipped and fallen, not because I was showing more skin than normal. Keep that in mind.”

“All my tops have been modified for my wings,” Evrona replied.

“That parka hasn’t been,” Jael pointed out. “Oh wow, we’re losing visibility here. Hey, Ratty! Maybe you ought to be leading the way.”

“Why me, babe?” the squirrel asked.

“I imagine you know the Tree well enough that you don’t have to see where you’re going,” Jael explained.

“You have a good imagination, sweetie” Ratatosk told her. “In weather like this I usually just find a place out of the wind and ride out the storm.”

“Do you even stay on the Tree?” Tomislaw asked.

“I’m a guardian, kid,” Ratatosk told him. “I may be a troublemaker, but I don’t abandon my post.”

“There you are!” a familiar voice said from just ahead of them. Looking ahead through the snow, Jael saw a glowing white light. As they approached the light resolved into the figure of Ninti. “Fun weather, isn’t it?”

“I know you’re originally from southern Mesopotamia, but after all this time I’d think the novelty of snow would have worn off,” Jael replied sourly. “What are you doing here, anyway? We would have been at the office in another half an hour anyway.”

“Perhaps,” Ninti nodded. “But we’ve had a change of venue. “I tried calling you in Hattamessett, but you had already left. So I came out to find you before you went too far.”

“We’re moving the offices?” Jael asked as they started walking again.

“No, but Enki found a place to run the contests and decided we may as well go there directly and get acquainted with the location,” Ninti replied.

“I do wish that man could hold to a plan for at least half a day,” Jael commented. “You’ve known him a lot longer than I have. Haven’t you even once wanted to just whack him upside the head with a bronze axe or something?”

“I’m a healing goddess, Jael,” Ninti replied, unable to completely suppress a giggle. “But he can be quite exasperating. This time, however, it’s not his fault. We’ve been negotiating for the site since just after Thanksgiving and when we got the approval it made sense to go straight there and set up camp.”

“So where are we going?” Jael asked.

“Florida,” Ninti replied. “We’ve been given permission to take over most of one of the state parks so long as we provide safe areas for spectators.”

“Well, okay,” Jael shrugged, “though to tell the truth I would have thought Enki would have wanted to film in Southern California, somewhere in the Carribean or even New Zealand. Come to think about it, I thought we did pitch using New Zealand.”

“The network accepted the show but with the proviso we chose a locale not already done to death,” Ninti replied.

“Did they actually say, ‘done to death?’” Jael asked, amused.

“How did you guess?” Ninti countered.

“Sounds like the sort,” Jael remarked. “So the whole series will be shot in Florida?”

“No,” Ninti replied, “just the team competitions. Once we’re down to the final five we have other venues arranged. Enki is overseeing the construction we’ll need in those places and the network actually loves the fact we’re moving around. It’s a bit more expensive, but they’re planning a whole advertising campaign based on the fact that we might be coming to ‘Your home town!’ so to speak.”

“Not my home town,” Jael laughed. “I grew up in Azazelville. We don’t even get the Republican candidates there.”

“You know what I mean,” Ninti told her. “Anyway, we need to go one branch further down the tree. I have directions and figured it would save time if I could meet you part way. I wasn’t expecting the blizzard though.”

“It’s getting pretty bad, maybe we should hole up somewhere and wait it out,” Jael suggested. “Ratty, where are we?”

“Yggdrasil,” the squirrel replied instantly.

“Are you sure?” Jael asked after rolling her eyes. “Looks like Niflheim to me.”

“Shows what you know, hot stuff,” Ratatosk replied. “Niflheim is a place of frozen mists and ice. It’s not known for anything so pleasant as a blizzard.”

“Never mind that,” Jael shoved the matter away. “We need to get off of Yggdrasil before we freeze in midstep.”

“Oh,” Ratatosk nodded. “I have a friend nearby. Follow me.”

Ratatosk scampered a bit further down the branch and then abruptly stepped off to the left and vanished.

“Where’d he go?” Tomislav asked.

“Somewhere else,” Jael told him. “Let’s follow him.”

“I’m not jumping off the branch,” Tomislaw told her.

“Fine,” Jael shot back. “Stay here and freeze.” She took a step and then she too disappeared. Ninti and Evrona followed immediately and then after several seconds of indecision, so did Tomislaw.

Two

The world around them abruptly changed from the howling, icy gale into a serenely quiet pine forest. Evrona opened her heavy coat to let the warm and fragrant air in, taking deep breaths of it as well.

“Well, if we have to be stranded during a storm,” Jael remarked, looking about, “we could do a lot worse than this. Where are we, Ratty? Is this the Divine Plain or the Mortal?”

“Divine,” Ratatosk told her. “I think this is part of the Choctaw mythos, although the natives of the southeast United States don’t quite view this place and its inhabitants in quite the same way Europeans might.”

“Yes,” Jael nodded. “Most believe in a variant of the Great Spirit who created Mother Earth.”

“Each tribe is different, although there are some spirits they all venerate,” Ratatosk replied. “Sometimes by different names, and sometimes the names don’t change much at all from tribe to tribe. There are a lot of stories, but I’ll admit I don’t know most of them.”

“So who is this friend of yours?” Ninti asked.

“He’s Bohpoli,” Ratatosk replied. “He’s a sort of a troublemaker like me, so we get along well enough. I’m not even sure if he’s around here at the moment, but this is where I usually find him. We don’t really need to go looking, though. If he’s around he’ll find us and we really don’t want to go too far from where we left Yggdrasil.”

“True enough,” Jael agreed, “and I’ve already enjoyed the smell of a pine forest.”

“It’s rotting pine needles,” Ratatosk told her.

“Yes,” Jael agreed, “and I like the smell. Let’s have a seat and in a bit I’ll make something to eat.”

“Cornucopia spells now?” Ratatosk asked.

“I haven’t learn how to do those yet,” Jael replied, “but Rona can cook.”

“I’ve tried to teach you,” Rona told her.

“And done well. I don’t burn the water anymore,” Jael remarked, “but that won’t be necessary this time. Ash packed us a picnic lunch. It’s not really much more than a snack, but it beats trying to hunt down the local game.”

“You wouldn’t want to do that,” Ratatosk laughed. “The local game is mostly minor spirits.”

“Taste like chicken?” Jael asked.

“You don’t want to get caught eating them, no matter what they taste like. It would make a really bad impression with the higher ups,” Ratatosk advised.

“Well, I wasn’t planning to anyway,” Jael shrugged. “Here, let me just grab a seat for a bit and warm back up.”

She leaned back against the trunk of a tree, relaxed a bit, closed her eyes and let her mind wander. It was Jael’s equivalent of sleep, except it wasn’t something she had the luxury of enjoying very often. She had just completely relaxed, letting her concerns drift away for the moment when something hard and heavy hit the tree just above her.

Jael’s eye’s snapped open in time to see a rock bouncing off the tree and falling just in front of her. There was a flash of movement a short distance into the wood and the sound of laughter followed by that of someone running through the trees.

“Oh no you don’t,” Jael grumbled and shot up from her sitting position and ran after whoever it was that had thrown the rock at her. She soon caught up to a very short little man dressed in bark cloth and skins. He was only two feet tall with long white hair and while he was able to duck under branches to get away, Jael had experience chasing down people and things in tight places and soon caught up and tackled the little man. “You think that’s funny?” Jael demanded angrily.

The little man grinned and nodded. “Yes, yes, good fun!”

“You nearly hit me you little...” Jael paused and started over again. “What are you anyway?”

“Bohpoli,” he replied.

“Hey! Don’t hurt him,” Ratatosk told her, coming up from behind. “That’s my friend.”

“I should have known,” Jael grumbled.

“Oh let him go, Jael,” Ratatosk urged. “He only hits what he aims at, and you have to admit no harm was done.”

“What’s with you, Ratty?” Jael asked, still holding the little man pinned to the ground. “Normally, you’d be cheering me on.”

"I told ya, this is my friend," Ratatosk reminded her. Evrona arrived just behind Ratatosk.

"I suppose you did," Jael admitted.

"And he's kind of cute," Evrona added.

"Your tastes are definitely suspect, kid," Jael shook her head. "Okay, Bonaparte, or whatever you said your name was, let's go back to the others. Time to eat anyway."

"Jael, this is Kwanokasha," Ratatosk introduced, "the watcher. He is also Bohpoli, the 'Thrower.'"

"I can see where you get that name," Jael admitted.

"Also Kowi anukasha," Bohpoli told her. "I am he who stays in the woods."

"Somehow I don't see you skate boarding down a city street," Jael told him. "So, what is it? You collect a lot of names to make up for your lack of size?"

"I'm just very well-known," Bohpoli told her.

"Somehow I never heard of you," Jael told him.

"Then you just don't hang out with the right people," Bohpoli shot back.

"You seem to be picking up modern idioms even faster than I do," Jael remarked.

"I watch," Bohpoli told her. "I also listen. It has been a long time since the Choctaws truly believed in me, but I am still here. Still waiting, watching. Sometimes I even go to the movies."

"I thought you stayed in the woods?" Evrona asked.

"I used to," Bohpoli replied, "but there's not much to do in the woods these days, and a lot fewer woods. Not a lot of Choctaw children running around in them for me to steal."

"You steal children?" Evrona asked, revulsed.

"Yes, yes!" Bohpoli told her enthusiastically. "I take them to a cave where three spirits teach them how to be doctors."

"Huh?" Evrona asked.

"It's an old folk belief," Ratatosk told her. "Occasionally the little people would steal children away and teach them things. A lot of peoples have that sort of belief. In this case the children are taught the art of medicine."

"Well, I hope you like peanut butter and jelly," Jael remarked, handing Bohpoli a sandwich.

"It's good," Bohpoli remarked, eating the sandwich enthusiastically as Jael passed out more to the others.

"I think we have some pasta salad and some cans of soda," Jael told them all.

“I thought it was called ‘pop,’” Ratatosk remarked.

“In Hattamessett they don’t even call their fathers, ‘Pop,’” Jael told him. “It’s soda, unless you’re talking to one of the old timers in which case it’s tonic. And it’s only ‘coke’ if that’s the name brand. Come to think of it, Eddy still calls it tonic from time to time, Of course he’s originally from Boston.”

“But it’s all pop to me,” Rona added.

“Girl, you’re from Shaker Heights,” Jael laughed. “I expect that from you.”

“It’s all sweet fizzy water, though,” Bohpoli observed.

“Hey!” Ratatosk exclaimed a few minutes later. “Maybe we could find something for Bohpoli to do on the show.”

“What?” Ninti asked. “Throw rocks at the contestants?”

“Sticks too,” Bohpoli told her.

“He creates great distractions,” Ratatosk told them.

“That could be useful,” Jael admitted. “What do you think, Ninti?”

“The mind boggles at the thought of him and Enki trading recipes,” Ninti remarked. “But we are still looking for others to help out. Most of us are still doing double duty.”

“Then it’s settled,” Ratatosk decided. “Bo, we got a job for you!”

“Job? What sort of job?” Bohpoli asked interestedly.

“Where did Tomislaw go?” Evrona asked suddenly.

“Demon child?” Ratatosk asked. “He was just over there a few minutes ago.”

“He wandered off?” Jale asked. “I have half a mind to leave him here. Evie, go find him, please.”

“I don’t want to find him anymore than you do,” Evrona remarked.

“I’ll go with you,” Bohpoli offered. “I’m a good tracker.”

Evrone nodded and started following Bohpoli through the trees. At first she worried he might try to lead her under some of the lower branches, but soon realized that since they were following Tomislaw, he would have only traveled where the young demon could fit. She found herself impressed by the way Bohpoli could spot a light footprint in the needles that carpeted the forest floor, or spot a recently snapped twig, but it took nearly half an hour before they found Tomislaw by the side of a wide blue pond.

The young demon was throwing fireballs at several glowing white beings who stood hip-deep in the water and were fighting back with harpoons and arrows although neither the demon nor the white water people appeared to be scoring on their target.

“What are you doing?” Evrona demanded of Tomislaw.

“They attacked first!” Tomislaw told her.

“Then just go away and the Okwa Naholo will stop,” Bohpoli advised.

“Bohpoli,” one of the Okwa Naholo called to him. “Take this outsider away. He doesn’t belong here.”

“See?” Evrona told Tomislaw. “They’re just trying to chase you away.”

“I have a right to be here,” Tomislaw told her.

“No, you do not,” she replied. “This is their place, not yours. “Now come back this instant.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Tomislaw told her moodily.

“No, but Jael is,” Evrona told him. “and if you don’t come back this instant, she’ll let Rona have you.”

A worried look crossed Tomislaw’s face and Evrona saw she had struck paydirt. Rona was nice, she knew, but something about the human soul who very much possessed Jael bothered Tomislaw and obviously had from the start.

By the time they had returned to where the others were, Ratatosk had reported that the storm on Yggdrasil had passed and they could at last move on.

Three

“What took you all so long?” Enki asked when they finally arrived in the Florida state park they would be using for the next few weeks.

“Weather got in the way,” Jael remarked.

Enki looked at the others and asked, “Have you been picking up stragglers again, Jael?”

“Apparently,” Jael sighed and introduced Tomislaw and Bohpoli.

“Well, the more the merrier,” Enki decided, “and we really can use the extra hands. Maybe Tomislaw can learn how to use a camera?”

“A distinct possibility,” Jael allowed. “What about Bohpoli?”

“I doubt he could reach the controls,” Enki replied.

“That’s not what I meant,” Jael told him. “He appears to be fairly mischievous and is very good at causing distractions.”

“Yes, that should come in handy,” Enki agreed. “Well, the tents are already up. Why don’t you share that one with Evrona and Ninti and I’ll put this Tomislaw and Bohpoli in the one right next to it.”

“When Ninti told me you were setting up camp,” Jael remarked, “I didn’t think she meant literally. Where did you get all the tents?”

“They were left over from a film about the American Revolution,” Enki replied. “I picked them up for a song.”

“Yankee Doodle?” Jael guessed.

Enki frowned. “Why do I always end up playing the straight man when you’re around?”

“Talent, I guess,” Jael laughed. “Oh come on, you know a good straight man can make or break a comic routine.

“Anyway, I had to take about twice as many of these tents as we really needed, but that will come in handy when we start moving around. We’ll be able to have each location set up before we get there.”

“Handy,” Jael remarked. “So what are we up to first?”

“Don’t you want to settle in?” Enki asked.

“I can toss my bag in the tent and unpack later,” Jael replied. “It’s not like I need to sleep. Rona does, but she can do that without me. She’s sleeping now in fact. Did you know she snores?”

“You know, that’s really very strange,” Enki told her.

“Coming from a guy who claims to have seen and invented nearly everything, that’s quite a remark,” Jael laughed.

“I’m quite a fellow,” Enki matched her tone.

“And modest too!” Jael got in the last word. “So spill. What are we up to first?”

“The network wants to start the show with something spectacular,” Enki told her, “so we decided to move the third scenario to first.”

“That would be the Gauntlet of Challenges?” Jael asked.

“Yes,” Enki nodded. “The one with the maze.”

“Well, we knew there would have to be a maze in there somewhere,” Jael sighed. “Between *Labyrinth* and *Harry Potter* the public would expect it.”

“You never really liked the maze idea, did you?” Enki asked.

“It seems so unimaginative to me,” Jael replied. “I like the actual challenges, I’m just not sure why we need to put them in a maze.”

“Our test runs showed that while different teams handled the challenges differently,” Enki replied, “the average time to complete them was very close. We hoped to make the difference a bit more definitive by adding the problem solving issue of the maze.”

“Have it your way,” Jael shrugged. “My job is to make it work. Have you selected your teams yet?”

“Ina and Ninti are working on it,” Enki replied. “We’re still going with five teams of five although we expected to have to assemble the teams ourselves. Two of the teams actually entered as a group. We argued over whether that would give any of them an unfair advantage but after watching the auditions, I think you’ll agree the synergy of the other teams will make up for previous familiarity among the first two. If you like, you can help choose the final members.”

“Thanks, I think I will,” Jael replied. “Did we ever decide what to call the teams or are they being allowed to choose their own names?”

“Oh, that would have been a good idea,” Enki admitted, “but we went to the network with a list of color names so they’ll be Red, Green, Blue, Gold and Silver. We’ve also decided to make all the team guides women.”

“Why?” Jael asked.

“It was Ninhursag’s idea,” Enki explained. “She felt that it would make it seem like the advice and counsel you give was all about the same and we have more women on the staff who are suited to being guides than we have men. You’ll be guiding the Red team, in fact, and Evrona will guide the Silver.”

“I will?” Evrona asked, poking her head out of the tent.

“Evie, have you been eavesdropping?” Jael asked. “It’s not a very becoming habit, you know.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Evrona explained. “Canvas walls don’t exactly block out a conversation and neither of you is whispering. Who are the other guides?”

“Don’t we get to choose?” Jael asked at almost the same time.

“We drew random lots for the jobs,” Enki explained. “Ninti will have the Blue team, Ina the Green and Dee will guide the Gold team.”

“Seems to me Dee should have gotten the Greens,” Jael remarked, “what with her being Mother Nature and all.”

“In a perfect world, perhaps she would have,” Enki replied, “but like I said, it was a random draw, otherwise you might have gotten the Blue team. It does seem to be your favorite color and if not Dee,

maybe I'd have give the Green to Evrona. She seems to wear that color more than any other lately."

"At least now that I have my tearing a bit more under control," Evrona added. "There was a while I was tempted to go back to black."

"I doubt Ninti would have allowed it," Enki laughed. "She can be quite insistent in her quiet little way, but you aren't required to wear the same colors all the time, you know. You look good in green and brown, but there are other combinations that would suit you as well. No need to get into a rut."

"So when can we meet our teams" Evrona asked.

"Next week at the earliest, on Friday at the latest," Enki told her, but since you're a guide you may as well join Jael with Ina and Ninti on the selection committee. We need to finish our choices tonight, along with reserve players in case someone gets hurt or is unable to come after all."

"Where are they working?" Jael asked.

"The command tent," Enki replied, pointing toward one that was about three times the size of the others.

"Not much of a color scheme," Jael noted, seeing all the tents were the same natural canvas hue.

"It's the way they came," Enki replied as they started walking toward the big tent. "They aren't part of the show so I didn't think it would matter. Why?"

"Maybe we should paint some sort of emblem on the tents the teams will be living in," Jael suggested. "It wouldn't take long to dab a bit on the tent flaps and then if you wanted we can introduce the team members on camera as they come through those flaps."

"We could paint the whole tents if you think it would make it look better," Enki agreed.

"No, better not do that," Jael decided. "Natural canvas breathes a bit and the light color must also keep it a bit cooler when the sun is on it than it would be if darker. The tents will be more comfortable if you don't paint them, especially the roofs. Just do the doors, I think."

"Fine," Enki agreed, "I'll put someone on it this afternoon. We're using a stylized dragon as part of the logo for "Living Legend." We can paint that on each tent flap in the appropriate colors. Staff tents will get the same logo with multiple colors."

"It will make the place a bit more interesting to look at," Jael allowed. "I think I'll take Evie with me to help in the final selection process."

"I was hoping to put her to work sketching some more," Enki replied. "We still have the later scenarios to block out and her sketches on the early stuff have been invaluable."

"You can keep her up all night drawing her heart out if you want," Jael told him, winking at Evrona, "but she's going to be a guide as well, so let's put all the guides on the selection process."

"Ninmah isn't here yet," Enki pointed out.

"Dee's a big girl and can play catch up," Jael remarked, with a covert gesture toward Evrona that

only Enki could see, “but the rest of us will benefit from getting to know the contestants early on.”

“I, uh, see what you mean,” Enki went along. “All right, Evrona. Go with Jael for now, but report to me directly after your meeting.”

“I will,” Evrona promised.

“And I’ll send Ninhursag along as soon as she arrives,” Enki added.

“You really want me to help select contestants, Jael?” Evrona asked.

“Absolutely,” Jael nodded. “You’ve been showing some very good judgment so far. We can use you in this.”

“Thank you, Jael,” Evrona started then thought she saw through Jael’s ploy. “You’re just doing this to keep an eye on me, aren’t you?”

“No,” Jael shook her head. “Actually I meant what I said about your judgment, but I also wanted you to have as much previous knowledge of the Silver team as we can give you. No offense, kid, but you’re still young and, more importantly you’re younger than the contestants you’re going to be guiding.”

“Then why didn’t you just tell Enki to use someone else?” Evrona asked, sounding hurt.

“Because we think you can do it,” Jael told her in concert with Rona.

“Really dear,” Rona continued, “but we also want you to be as prepared as possible. You do realize you’re the youngest guide by a millennium, don’t you?”

“I am, aren’t I?” Evrona noticed.

“But you’re smart too,” Jael told her. “You almost figured out what I was doing just now. What you don’t have is experience, but so long as you have all the facts and you keep your eyes open you’re going to do well. And to tell you the truth as the second youngest guide, I know I want to know as much about my team as I can know.”

They entered the big tent and saw Ninti and Inanna sitting together over a pile of photographs and résumés. “Oh good, you’re here,” Ninti remarked. “I was just about to come and find you. Evie, are you working with us? Good. Ina, why don’t you bring them up to date while I look for that extension cord.”

“Extension cord?” Evrona asked.

“For the DVD player and the VCR,” Ina explained. “We got a lot of entries on disc and tape. I think we got the Red and Blue teams filled, however, but we want to see their recorded entries as well. But here, I’ll show you what we have for the Red team. That’s yours isn’t it, Jael?”

“So Enki tells me,” Jael remarked. “Tell me about them.”

“Well, first up we have Sandra,” Ina told her.

“A one-name celebrity?” Jael asked.

“We decided to not use surnames on the program,” Ina replied. “Saundra is a teacher from Mark Twain Junior High School in Modesto, California. She runs annually in the Las Vegas Marathon and also ran in Boston just this past April.”

“She’ll certainly have the necessary stamina,” Jael remarked.

“I thought so,” Ina agreed. “Next up is Katsumi, an Olympic track and field athlete from Japan. He has also competed several times on a popular sports entertainment show called Sasuke and once reached the third stage out of four.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen that one,” Jael told her.

“Neither have I,” Ina admitted, “but we looked it up and it appears to be a legitimate credit. Then there’s Lachlan, a Scottish weight lifter, Abril, a figure skater and Charles.”

“What sort of athlete is he?” Jael asked.

“No sort I can figure out,” Ina replied. “He does stand-up comedy on a circuit of bars in the Northwest.”

“He and Lizzie can compare notes,” Jael commented dryly.

“I hope not,” Ina sighed. “Where did she ever get the notion to try telling jokes?”

“It might be my fault,” Jael admitted.

“Jael! What did you do?” Ina asked.

“She didn’t,” Evrona cut in. “The Sphinx said she had been working on it on her own.”

“But I made sure she was invited to Eddy’s party,” Jael replied.

“You got her on the stage,” Ina confirmed, “but she wrote her own act. Sorry Jael, you don’t get the credit for this one.”

“Where did this Charles get the notion he could compete in a show like this?” Jael asked.

“He may not normally be considered an athlete or a warrior like some of the other contestants, but he walks over five miles a day and works out several times a week,” Ina reported. “He’s convinced us he can pull his own weight on the team.”

“Okay,” Jael nodded. “You say you’ve put the Blue team together too?”

“Yes,” Ina told her. “Gavriel, a fencer from Queens and Vidor, from Budapest. He’s a decathlete. Mateo from Spain is a dancer as is Paloma from New Mexico although Mateo does Flamenco and Paloma is a ballerina. Rounding off the team is Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn?” Jael asked.

“She’s from North Dakota,” Ina replied, “and I don’t imagine it’s a common name out there. But she also has a degree in nuclear physics from MIT and is another marathon runner.”

Ninti returned just then with the extension cord and Dee arrived before they could get the DVD player going. They spent the next three days watching videos and reading the resumes and managed to finalize the teams.

Four

“Hello, I’m Evrona,” she introduced herself to the Silver team the next week, “and I will be your guide.”

“Great,” Daz rumbled. He was a brute of a man from Wales, who according to his resume was a construction worker. He stood six and a half feet tall with sandy-colored hair and seemed to have an almost mournful expression on his face, even though his voice spoke volumes of arrogance. Evrona quickly decided he probably built towers, single handedly, by just throwing them into place. “Where’s the mess tent?”

“Um, it’s the one with the gold and blue doors,” Evrona replied, “but that’s not really the sort of guide I meant.”

“Good enough for me,” Daz replied and walked off to the large tent she had indicated.

“Don’t mind him, dearie,” an Egyptian woman named Secmis advised. She too had an arrogant note in her voice. She didn’t look powerful, but according to what Evrona had read, she was an Olympic swimmer. “He just hasn’t been fed yet this week.”

“Um, okay,” Evrona replied uncertainly. Jael and the others had assured her she was up to this job, but now that she was on her own, Evrona wasn’t anywhere so self-assured. “Anyway, I’m here to answer questions about the up-coming challenges, although I must warn you that many of them are puzzles or meant to be surprises, so I won’t be able to answer some questions, like how to solve them or what is waiting for you around the next corner.”

“Then what good are you?” a sullen woman from the Czech Republic, named Magda asked moodily.

Evrona was taken aback by the question, but took a deep breath and replied, “Well, there are

certain mythological aspects to the various contests the producers felt you might have questions about.”

“I need no coaching about mythology,” a short, but well-built man from Mexico told her. Evrona reminded herself that this would be Julio. He was a professional wrestler.

“And I can answer questions about the nature of a challenge when such is not readily apparent,” Evrona went on, ignoring the haughtiness she was encountering. The only member of the team who had not yet spoken was Lani, a tall Hawaiian native who was slouching in his chair, reading a magazine. He looked up and shrugged at Evrona.

“Very good, dear,” Secmis told her patronizingly. “If we have any questions, we’ll know who to come to.”

“Oh, but while you can ask as many questions as you like before and after a contest,” Evrona added, “you will lose a point each time you ask one during a contest.”

“Okay, we’ve got that,” Secmis told her. “No questions during the contests.”

“Well, sometimes spending a point or two can be worth it,” Evrona argued.

“I’m sure,” Secmis dismissed the subject.

An hour later Evrona told Jael of the encounter. “Really?” Jael asked. “That’s odd. The Red team had all sorts of questions for me. Most of them I wasn’t allowed to answer, but they had a lot of questions. I might rather have had your team to deal with.”

“You may have done better than I did,” Evrona sighed.

“It’s not your fault they didn’t care to listen, dear,” Rona replied. “The Silver team was one of the two that came together, though, so maybe they saw you as an outsider.”

“Or maybe they really do think they know it all,” Jael remarked. “Having put their own team together, I suppose they already think of themselves as something special, though. I wonder how the Green team reacted.”

“To what?” Ninti asked as she joined them in their tent.

“Evie tells us the Silver team didn’t feel the need for an orientation lecture,” Jael replied, “and Rona and I were thinking that maybe because they already knew each other, they figured they could answer their own questions. The Greens were the other team who had already put themselves together.”

“Well,” Ninti replied. “Uma and Janika seemed nice enough and they asked most of the questions. The men on the team mostly sat there and absorbed everything I had to say.”

“None of them walked out to get something to eat?” Evrona asked.

“Your team did that?” Ninti asked.

“One of them did,” Evrona sighed. “Eventually Secmis and Magda started talking to each other and ignoring me, Julio went off to join Daz in the mess tent and Lani just read his magazine the whole time.”

“That lot won’t get too far then,” Jael laughed. “If they can’t work together they’ll be eliminated in the first round tomorrow. Hey cheer up! You’ll have the easiest job on the set.”

“But I can’t help feel I’m not really doing my job,” Evrona complained.

“You can’t force them to listen to you, Evrona,” Ninti told her. “And if your team is eliminated, you’ll be able to go back to helping Enki plan the later stages.”

“There is that,” Evrona nodded. “So we start the challenges tomorrow?”

“The day after,” Jael told her. “Tomorrow we need to take each contestant in front of the camera and have them tell the audience about themselves. That’s going to be the norm, by the way, and if any of them refuses, remind them it’s in the contract. They must submit to an interview or make a statement on camera, our choice, not theirs, before and after each round. Half the appeal of all these reality shows is the unbelievable tension that builds up between members of a team.”

“Is the tension likely to get very high?” Evrona asked.

“It might, but I actually meant that literally,” Jael laughed. “It’s often hard to believe that there is any tension at all. Some of these shows work the contestants so hard you would think they didn’t have the energy to bicker and the ones where they just force people to live together, you would think there would be a bit of tolerance until the second show at least. Here I expect to hear various team members blame the others for their defeats and we’re likely to catch them bickering on tape.”

“That’s not nice,” Evrona remarked.

“No, but it’s likely to happen at one point or another,” Jael warned her. “These are all people who are motivated to win. When they slip up, some will willingly blame themselves and others will claim the others got in their way. The best I think we can hope for is that the winner will be a team whose members support each other at every level. Of course, once we’ve winnowed out four of the teams, the remaining team will be pitted against each other.”

“It’s a classic scenario and there can be only one winner,” Ninti added.

“You’ve been watching too many Highlander films again,” Jael laughed. “You’re right, though, there will be a winner. I argued against that.”

“You wanted everyone to fail?” Evrona asked.

“Not the way you put it,” Jael replied. “I just didn’t think it was necessary to have a winner. If the challenges at the end were beyond the contestants, why should any of them win? For that matter why not have two or more winners if they all succeeded?”

“I don’t think Enki was ready for that sort of show,” Ninti remarked. “The network probably wasn’t either. Besides, if we had two winners, we would need to pay out two grand prizes. No one would have liked to do that.”

“Do we have a shortage of money?” Jael asked.

“Not a shortage,” Ninti replied, “but Enki’s spent more than he expected. TV shows are expensive you know.”

“I don’t know, but I have suspected,” Jael replied.

“Knock, knock in there!” someone called from outside the tent.

Jael looked around and saw everyone was in guise although Evrona quickly reached for her dark glasses. At night they left her close to blind, but she had to be careful when contestants were around. “We’re dressed,” Jael called a moment later.

Ina poked her head in and told them, “Enki’s calling a staff meeting in the big tent in an hour.”

“Is there a problem?” Ninti asked.

“I don’t think so,” Ina replied, “but he wanted to make sure the contestants were asleep before bringing some of the more exotic members of our cast out of hiding.”

“Kind of hard to mistake the Sphinx for something else,” Ninti nodded.

“And no one would mistake Ratty for a dog once they see him move,” Jael added. “Okay. We’ll be there.”

Five

“Thank you all for coming,” Enki told his staff as they settled down in the large staff tent in the middle of the encampment. “I wanted this opportunity to brief you all on the final form of the Maze Contest and at a time when our contestants would not accidentally or even intentionally overhear us.”

“Are you so sure they can’t?” Ratatosk asked. “This is a tent, not a sound-proof booth.”

“I’ve borrowed the services of some of the local spirits this evening,” Enki replied. “Any little breeze you hear outside will actually be our guards. Now let’s go over the maze step by step.” He reached behind him and pulled down a large map on a spring-loaded roller. “As you already know, this is a maze. We originally planned to use it for the third-round contest, but our priorities changed.”

“Got changed for us is more like it,” Jael remarked.

“Something like that,” Enki replied. “That doesn’t matter. We have two weeks until air time and while that might sound like a lot, we have a fair amount of production and post-production ahead of us. For starters, I figure it will take most of tomorrow just to get everyone’s opening statements, and then we have three days blocked off for the running of the Maze.”

“Three days?” the Sphinx asked. “Why so long?”

“We’re giving each team up to four hours to complete the maze and all its challenges,” Enki replied. “Since we can only run one team through at a time, it’s going to take a while. Also it will take a while to reset the challenges and repair any damage before we can send in the next team. I’m just hoping we can cycle two teams in each day. We have a lot of cameramen and women in the Maze and some of you will be fitted with little mini-cams as well. We won’t know what footage we’re going to use until we see what we get, but if you get a mini cam, try to keep camera angles in mind.”

“Who is getting these mini-cameras?” Bohpoli asked.

“You are for one,” Enki replied. “Your main job will be to distract parties from the correct path through the maze.”

“Good, good!” Bohpoli laughed. “Fun!”

“Why do you talk like that?” Ratatosk asked. “I know you can speak with grammatical perfection.”

“Oh, look at you and your ten dollar words!” Bohpoli laughed.

“Marked down to \$4.99 this weekend only,” Ratatosk bantered.

“If you must know,” Bohpoli sighed, “it’s sort of expected of me, at least in my trickster guise. I rarely do that when teaching young doctors, you know.”

“I didn’t think you did or the entire Choctaw Tribe would have embraced holistic medicine centuries before anyone ever heard of a chiropractor,” Ratatosk replied.

“Gentlemen!” Enki admonished them.

“Where?” Bohpoli asked, looking around comically.

“Watch your tongue!” Ratatosk replied at the same time.

Enki snapped his fingers and both Bohpoli and Ratatosk stiffened into a fully erect position as though suddenly shocked and they threw themselves involuntarily two feet into the air. A moment later they both fell back to the ground groaning and shaking a bit from singed hairs. “Amateurs,” Enki chuckled. “Let’s move on. The Sphinx will also be equipped with a camera. Uh, Lizzie you’re calling yourself these days?”

“Jael calls me that,” the Sphinx replied. “Several others have started to as well. The name suits as well as any.”

“So long as you don’t mind,” Enki decided. “You won’t actually be one of the major challenges. But I want you to walk along the tops of the maze’s walls. Yes, the Maze doesn’t have a roof. We’re in the middle of a subtropical forest, people, and being very careful to not harm the local flora. Fortunately we have Mother Nature on our side. She’ll be able to restore the site to its previous condition when we’re

done here, but I'd like to make her job easier.

"Lizzie," he continued, "You'll be a bit of a distraction like Bohpoli is and will also have a camera on you. Do you mind wearing a collar?"

"That depends on the collar," the Sphinx replied casually. "A flash, a sparkle much sharper than glass," she began.

"Yes, yes, I suppose I can have a few gemstones set in it," Enki replied.

"Diamonds," Jael informed him, seeing where the riddle had been going. "And they'll help to disguise the camera. And don't try to substitute rhinestones, Lizzie knows the difference."

"What sort of budget do you think we have?" Enki protested.

"Do you really have to buy the stones?" Dee asked. "We do have certain alternatives, you know. Lizzie, do you like these?" She held out her hand to the Sphinx to display fifteen perfect gemstones.

"Pretty!" the Sphinx replied.

"I'll take that as a yes," Enki nodded, "and have them set on the camera's collar. Anyway, for the most part I'll want you taking pictures, but should anyone want directions you may give them a clue for any correctly answered riddle. I understand you're good at that."

"I've been trying jokes lately," the Sphinx replied.

"Ahem," Jael cleared her throat, as Enki went on to describe how points would be lost for not correctly solving a riddle. "I need to talk to you about that, Lizzie." She led the Sphinx toward the back of the tent. "Look, I know you're looking for something new and interesting and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but..."

"What is it, Jael?" the Sphinx asked concernedly as Jael fished for the right words.

The demoness took a deep breath, sighed and took another deep breath. "I, uh, don't think the jokes are quite working for you."

"I've noticed the laughter was a bit strained," the Sphinx admitted. "I thought maybe my timing was off or that folks were just a bit nervous around me. I do have a bit of a reputation, you know."

"I know, dear," Jael agreed, "but maybe another creative outlet?"

"I don't have the hands to paint or sculpt with," the Sphinx pointed out.

"I realize that, and you have always used words as both tools and weapons. You're good at that. But there are other arts that don't require the use of hands," Jael suggested. "Think about it and we'll discuss it again whenever you like."

"Okay," the Sphinx agreed thoughtfully. "Jael?"

"Yes, Lizzie?" Jael asked.

“Were the jokes really that bad?”

Jael threw her arms affectionately around the Sphinx’s neck. “Abysmal,” she laughed, “but you told them well.”

“Oh,” the Sphinx replied, returning the hug by placing a paw on Jael’s back, “as long as I told them well.”

“We should get back to the meeting,” Jael suggested and they went back to listen to Enki’s briefing. He was just starting to describe the main challenges of the Maze.

“First of all, they have to get into the Maze,” Enki informed his staff. “There’s a massive gate at the entrance and it is locked. The locking mechanism is both mechanical and electronic, although it can be picked, sort of.”

“Sort of?” Inanna asked.

“We have it rigged so that it will open if they try to manipulate it just right,” Enki replied. “It won’t be easy, but it can be done. They don’t have to pick the lock, however, that’s just one option. All you can tell them without having it cost points is that they are supposed to enter the Maze. Try not to guide them toward one solution or another, just answer questions if they ask at this point. I sort of doubt anyone will ask this early on.”

“They might ask how they’re supposed to do that,” Dee pointed out. “It’s practically an automatic reaction in a lot of folks.”

“It may be a good idea to ask, ‘Is that an official question?’ before answering,” Enki replied, “especially when the question gets blurted out automatically. I don’t want you to try to cost them points, just be there to guide when needed.”

“So what other ways do they have to enter the Maze?” Evrona asked.

“It’s pretty much anything goes,” Enki laughed. “They can climb over the door. It’s some forty feet tall but it’s not impossible. They can dig under it. They can chew through it if their teeth hold out. The object is to get to the other side. How they do it is entirely their choice.”

“And if they ask us?” Ninti asked.

“Tell them,” Enki shrugged. “It’s going to cost them a point, but each successfully passed challenge gains them five points so it’s not that big a deal. I just don’t think they’ll seriously need to ask at this point. Mind you, I expect the oversized and complicated looking lock is going to tempt most of them to at least try working on it.

“Inside the Maze they can do anything they like,” Enki continued. “However, any wall they smash through will cost them another point. No charge for reminding them of that, by the way. I’ll be telling them myself during their briefing tomorrow night. Guides, I’m sorry but you’ll have to sit through that one too.”

“That’s why we get paid the big bucks,” Ina laughed.

“You’re getting paid?” Enki asked.

“Just an expression, Grandfather,” Ina replied.

“Uh, I think we had all better cut back on the kinship titles for the duration,” Enki decided. “Most of us look to be about the same age and I’m not sure what the contestants might think if they thought we were all related.”

“But we aren’t,” Ninti pointed out. “Not all of us.”

“Enough of us,” Enki replied. “Inanna is my granddaughter, Ninhursag, Dee, is my ex-wife, you’re my daughter by her. Some of the other staff members have family members among us as well. It would be a distraction of the wrong kind.

“Okay, the second challenge is a wide trench in the Maze,” Enki went on. “After several chances at wrong turns that will eventually force the contestant to go back and try again, they’re going to come across a thirty-foot wide trench. It is also sixty feet deep with sharpened stakes at the bottom.”

“It doesn’t sound very safe,” Evrona noted. “Didn’t someone point out the networks would cancel the show if someone died?”

“I’ve taken care of that,” Enki told her. “Under no circumstance must the contestants be told this, but I have had a net cleverly hidden among the stakes. If someone falls in, the net will pop up and catch whoever falls in, but the challenge will count as unfulfilled. Just tell them that everyone must cross safely to earn the points. The distance across is slightly longer than any human has ever successfully jumped. I suppose someone might get lucky and grab enough of the other side to pull themselves up, but there are various objects placed in the Maze, on both sides of the trench, that can be used to cross it. Once again, you may tell them without charge that the object is to cross the trench without falling in. Any details after that will cost them

“The third challenge is a test of either intelligence or patience,” Enki told them. “We’re calling it the ‘Heart of the Maze’ and it’s fairly clever if I must say so myself.”

“You probably must,” Nergal, the Sumerian King of the Dead, remarked dryly. “It was your idea, after all.”

“It was,” Enki admitted, “although I did have help from quite a few of you and Vulcan actually built the mechanism that makes it work. Anyway, the contestants will encounter a door they must move to continue on. It’s not a big deal. They won’t even find it hard to move. But as that wall moves several others in the Heart of the Maze will as well and the pattern is very complex.”

“What do we tell them the goal is?” Jael asked.

“The same as that of the proverbial chicken,” Enki chuckled, “to get to the other side. No busting down walls in this section, by the way. They must solve this part of the Maze without cheating. Now the fourth challenge; they are going to face the Minotaur, armed with only their own wits.”

“And what spell will bring up a magic net to save them here?” Ina asked. “I’ve faced the Minotaur and had trouble. Remember?”

“It won’t really be the Minotaur,” Enki informed her. “Actually it’s going to be Marduk and Hercules taking turns and assuming the guise of the Minotaur. As the Minotaur, they’ll mostly just toss the

contestants around, rather than actually try to kill them. It's the job of the contestants to get past the Minotaur. They can try to overwhelm him; our Minotaurs will allow themselves to be overpowered after a while. They can also try to bait him, taking turns at attracting his attention while the others try to slip around to the other side. There will be enough room to do that sort of thing there. Pretty much all is fair on this one and our boys should be able to take the punishment. The Minotaur will not chase them beyond the immediate area.

"Finally," Enki began to wind down, "we come to the Great Egress."

"You're sending them to Hell and back?" Jael asked.

"Not until the third show," Enki replied, "although we did borrow the name. This is the longest but simplest part of the Maze. The trick is they must traverse the Maze without any wrong turns. The walls don't move but the door does and if they travel down any of the many side passages, all they will find at the end is a thick brick wall where an open arch should be. If that happens, they will have to go back to the beginning of that section and walk the path correctly to open the door."

"Do they all have to go all the way back?" Evrona asked.

"Clever lady!" Enki approved. "No, as a matter of fact they do not. Any one of them may do it while the others wait. As an added help there will be a clipboard with paper and a pencil which they may use to map the final section of the Maze should they desire to do so. That clipboard will be at the start of the final section too. Failure to solve that part of the Maze not only loses a team the points, but also penalizes them an additional five for running out of time. Any other questions?"

"Where's the Maze?" Jael asked.

"About seven miles away from here," Enki replied. "We built it on an empty lot on the far end of the park."

"It's not actually in the park?" Dee asked.

"Technically it is," Enki replied. "The Park annexed the land a few years ago but until a few months ago had not yet demolished the buildings that were on it. It was perfect for us by the time we found it and we can pretty much rebuild it as we like without worrying about damaging the natural wonders of the rest of the park."

"Lucky that," Dee remarked.

"Well, I was hoping you would give it your loving touch before we left," Enki added.

"Of course," Dee sighed tiredly.

"Will the contestants get to see it in advance?" Jael asked, "by flying over it, or something like that?"

"No," Enki shook his head. "Until tomorrow night they won't even know what's coming, and we'll be keeping a close eye on them to be sure they don't see how the others do. Any other questions? No? Then relax tonight because starting tomorrow everything will be on camera."

Six

“Hi, I didn’t see you yesterday,” Jael greeted Ninti. Jael had decided to watch the other teams compete on the monitor in the large staff-only tent.

“I had to rush back to Dilmun directly after the Blue team finished,” Ninti told her. “How did the Red team do?”

“Not too badly,” Jael admitted. “It turned out Katsumi had worked for a locksmith once and he managed to get that big lock open in about ten minutes. Even Enki had to admit that was better than he expected.”

“That’s much better than the Blue team did,” Ninti remarked. “They had a really bad day and I started to feel sorry for them.”

“How did they handle the first challenge?” Jael asked.

“They finally gave up on the lock after about forty minutes,” Ninti replied, “and asked me if they were allowed to jump the gate. Once I said they could, they were over it like a shot.”

“Dee’s team did the same thing this morning, only without even trying the lock,” Jael remarked. “They just ran up, and climbed up and over. I guess they thought that was what all the ornate carving was for.”

“Maybe it was,” Ninti nodded. “Anyway the Blues didn’t have much trouble finding the trench. But while they found a long pole, they didn’t find the rope your team found.”

“My team never saw the pole, so it’s fair,” Jael told her. “They got pretty lucky, I thought. They tied a big knot in one end and somehow managed to snag one end in one of those scrubby bushes that used to pass for landscaping on the far side of the trench. Then Sandra, the really skinny one, managed to get safely across and attached it a bit more firmly and the others followed.”

“One of the Blue women, Gavriel, vaulted across the trench, but lost the pole in the trench itself,” Ninti replied. “But she found that big log on the far side and using a rock as a fulcrum managed to get it to bridge the gap.”

“That was clever,” Jael remarked. “I saw the log, but the Reds never had a need to use it. The Gold team found both the rope and the pole, by the way, and then spent a long time arguing over how to use them. They seem to like linear thinking, though and eventually used the pole to vault the trench like your

Gavriel did, but they tied the rope to the pole and pulled it back out of the trench so they could each use it in turn.

“Anyway,” Jael continued, “the Reds got really lucky in the Heart of the Maze. You know, no matter how complex a puzzle might be, it was always possible someone would luck out and get it on the first try or nearly so. I don’t think they were in the Heart for more than fifteen minutes. Of course they used up two points asking me about the Heart.”

“The Blues only had to ask one question about the heart, but they waited until they had been through the section and moved everything around before asking. Once they did, however, they got through it fairly easily,” Ninti commented.

“The Golds didn’t have that sort of luck,” Jael told her. “They refused to ask questions and fumbled around the heart for over an hour and a half, but to their credit they got the Minotaur pinned to the ground fairly quickly. They surrounded him and I thought they were going to try baiting, but then they just jumped him all at once. It was really quite impressive and better than the Reds did on that challenge.”

“What happened?” Ninti asked.

“Katsumi twisted his ankle when the Minotaur picked him up and threw him to the right. I thought they were going to end up losing the challenge, but his teammates came through and dragged him out of there. It slowed them down a bit and I don’t know if he’ll be able to compete next week yet,” Jael reported.

“The Blues took a big chance and Mateo tried using Bullfighting moves against the Minotaur.”

“That might have worked against the real one,” Jael commented.

“It wasn’t bad thinking,” Ninti agreed, “but with Marduk pretending to be the bull, the flapping piece of cloth was less effective than it might have been. The others got past, but not Mateo, so they had to come back and distract the bull in pretty much the same way the Gold team did. They nearly ran out of time in the last section of the Maze, between being distracted by Bohpoli – he’s very good isn’t he?”

“He is, yes,” Jael laughed.

“And refusing to ask questions to conserve points,” Ninti went on, “they didn’t figure out what was going on there. Finally they risked an encounter with the Sphinx and answered the riddle correctly. I think even Lizzie was feeling generous by then. Her answers are more complete than ours are in any case.”

“They ought to be,” Jael remarked. “Otherwise, why take the risk?”

“The chance of a free question is probably worth it,” Ninti shrugged. “Did you know she was going to sing her riddles?”

“No that was a surprise to me as well,” Jael admitted. “It could be due to a little conversation I had with her the other day. I pointed out the jokes weren’t working.”

“She has a nice voice,” Ninti remarked.

“She does,” Jael agreed. “It put me in mind of Maddy Prior. She sang some classic riddles on one of the Steeleye Span albums as I recall. Anyway, the Red team stumbled through the last section and then

used up a question at the brick wall,” Jael told Ninti. “But then they methodically mapped out the Maze in reverse and got it on the next try.”

“Good for them,” Ninti commented. “What about Dee’s team?”

“They didn’t see the point of mapping the Maze and it took them five tries to get it right even when they knew what they were supposed to do,” Jael reported. “Still, they finished the whole Maze with half an hour to spare, putting your team currently in last place.”

“So they’ll probably be eliminated,” Ninti sighed.

“Don’t get too attached to them,” Jael advised. “We’re not supposed to be partial, you know. Besides there are two teams left. Let’s watch what Evie’s Silver team does.”

They turned toward the screen where the starting whistle had just been blown. Evrona followed the Silvers to the entrance gate and paused to watch them work. The large Hawaiian, Lani, just looked at the lock and laughed, “It’s a distraction. Ignore the lock.”

“He’s right,” Daz added. “Let’s look around for another way.”

A minute later it was Secmis who called, “Over here! It looks like a long pole.”

The rest of the Silver team rushed over and found a partially buried section of an old wooden flag pole. It was broken, but still almost twenty feet long. “Did you know that was there?” Jael asked Ninti as the Silver team uncovered it.

“It wasn’t in the plans that I saw,” Ninti admitted. “It must have been there without anyone noticing while the Maze was built. Well, nothing in the rules against using it. What are they planning though?”

They didn’t have long to wait as the five members of the Silver team picked up the stump of the whitewashed pole and used it as a battering ram against the tall doorway into the Maze. “Ouch!” Jael shivered. “Enki isn’t going to like having to replace that door.”

“He isn’t going to have much choice,” Ninti remarked. “The lock is shattered and the right door isn’t much better off.”

“Good thing they’re double doors,” Rona decided.

“Oh? When did you wake up?” Jael asked her.

“A few minutes ago,” Rona admitted. “I didn’t want to interrupt. Hi, Ninti.”

“Hello,” Ninti replied. “Well, the door isn’t in as bad shape as the lock, I suppose.”

“I’m sure Enki will get the repair crew to work as soon as the Silver team moves out of the area,” Jael replied. “Otherwise, Ina’s Green team will get held up and we might not be done in time for the New Year.”

“That’s still two weeks away,” Rona reminded her.

“We have a lot of things to do here between now and then, including getting ready for the next

challenge and after the first show we're only going to have a week between shows," Ninti reminded her.

"I'm just glad the network didn't want to have us on several times the first week," Jael remarked. "They do that a lot with reality shows to try to build up interest. Of course if they flop, the entire viewing public is watching someone else's network and likely getting interested in some other show."

"Can't we follow them through the Maze?" Ninti asked, seeing the camera was still pointed at the demolished door where, as Jael predicted, the repair crew was already at work.

"This is the raw footage as it comes in," Jael told her, picking up the remote control, "but I can change cameras. Let's see, oh, here's the Sphinxcam. It moves up and down a bit with her breathing and you can see a bit of her chin at the top of the picture. And there's the Silver team. Where is she?"

"She found a comfortable place about halfway to the trench when my team came through," Ninti remarked, "although she moves around a bit. That's why she was also in the final section of the Maze as well. Doesn't look like they're paying much attention to her."

On the screen, the Silver team was debating which way to turn next. So far they had ignored Evrona's presence and had only spared the Sphinx a brief glance. "Sure of themselves, aren't they?" the Sphinx asked Evrona softly.

"Self-assured and arrogant," Evrona whispered, although her words were picked up by the small microphone in the camera.

"A terrible combination," the Sphinx nodded as the picture became half eclipsed by her chin.

"Maybe we should have given Lizzie a tiara instead of a collar," Rona suggested.

"I don't know," Jael replied. "She moves her head a lot."

The Silver team suddenly moved on at a run, forcing Evrona to rush to keep up with them. By the time she found them at the trench, Jael and Ninti had switched to the next camera and watched as they found the pole and rope. Evrona was just arriving as Magda ran headlong toward the trench only to be picked up and thrown by Julio. She landed on the far side and rolled before springing back to her feet.

"Is that even possible?" Rona asked.

"Apparently," Ninti replied and Daz threw one end of the rope to Magda. She tied it off while Daz did the same and the entire team brachiated arm-over-arm across from under the rope, leaving Evrona on the wrong side of the trench.

"Oh, oh!" Jael remarked. "I don't think Evie is comfortable with the notion of crossing like that."

"The Silver team is too far ahead to see her," Ninti pointed out. "She could use her wings."

"That polo shirt isn't one of her specially tailored ones," Rona disagreed. "Oh! Lizzie to the rescue." They watched as Lizzie swooped down and picked Evrona up to deposit her lightly on the far side of the trench.

"Too bad we can't use that footage on the show," Jael laughed, "but no one would believe we made an actual flying model of the Sphinx, especially not one that could lift up a person and still fly."

Evrone had to sprint to catch up to the Silver team, but soon found them lost in the Heart of the Maze. “What the hell is going on in here?” Daz demanded of her.

“Are you sure you want to ask an official question?” Evrone asked in reply.

“Just answer,” he grumbled at her.

“The walls move in here,” she replied. “Each time you move one wall one or more others move at the same time.”

“Then how do we get out?” Lani asked.

“Another question?” Evrone inquired, having trouble believing the answer wasn’t obvious.

“Just answer it, girl!” Secmis told her coldly.

“By moving the walls in the correct pattern you can make your way through this part of the Maze and on to the next challenge,” Evrone replied.

“Can we climb over these walls?” Magda asked and quickly commanded, “Answer!”

“Okay, okay,” Evrone breathed. “No, you may not climb the walls in here. You should have been told that in your briefing.”

“Yeah, Waters said something about that,” Lani recalled. “Which walls should we move and in what pattern?”

“I can’t say,” Evrone told him.

“Is it against the rules?” Secmis demanded.

“Probably, but I don’t know the pattern,” Evrone admitted.

“Oh, you’re useless,” Secmis told her and stomped off with the others.

They spent almost three hours stumbling through the Maze as Jael chortled, “Things may be looking up for the Blue team, Ninti. This lot is having trouble thinking their way out of a paper bag.”

“The heart isn’t really all that hard,” Rona added. “They should have made it through by now by sheer random choice.”

“The problem is, they’re not really acting as a team,” Ninti pointed out, “so what one does, another often undoes. They may never get out of there on their own.”

Finally, however, the Silvers made their way out of the Heart and ran head-long into the Minotaur. “They made short work of him, though,” Rona commented.

“Ran right over him, in fact,” Jael laughed. “It doesn’t quite make up for their time in the Heart, but they still have half an hour to find the Egress.”

“They’ll never make it,” Ninti predicted. “They ignored the clipboard and I’ll bet they’ll follow Bohpoli through all the wrong turns.”

Ninti’s prediction came partially true. The Silver team was distracted by Bohpoli several times. Daz, in fact, ran after him with plain and simple murder in his eyes, but they ended up in front of the bricked-in archway with five minutes to spare.

“Oh, just push it over,” Secmis told the others.

“You’ll get no points for the challenge,” Evrona warned them.

“Who asked you?” Magda replied and together the Silver team shoved at the wall and knocked it over. It shattered as it hit the ground and they all walked through the archway to end the game.

“They demolished that brick wall barehanded,” Jael remarked. “Is that possible? I would have thought it was sturdier than that.”

“Evidently not,” Rona told her. “They knew they’d sacrifice the points for that challenge. Everyone was told so, but at least they didn’t lose points for timing out.”

“But what’s the point?” Jael argued. “I’ll wait for the official point tally to be certain, but I’m pretty certain this puts them in last place.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see how the Green team does,” Ninti told her.

Six

“What happened in there?” Jael asked Ina late that evening. It was quiet in the camp. Enki was meeting in his private tent with several staff members to tally up the points, leaving the guides to meet in the staff tent while most of the others were already hard at work rebuilding the set where the Maze had been.

“They timed out,” Ina reported, helping herself to a cup of coffee.

“Yeah,” Jael nodded. “We noticed.”

"I thought they were doing fairly well," Evrona remarked. "They moved slowly, but steadily through the course."

"They took almost twenty minutes picking that lock," Ninti remarked, "but I heard Enki say they'd get a bonus point for safest crossing of the trench."

"But it was also the slowest," Jael pointed out. "Two of them vaulted over, then used the rope to bind two long logs together as a makeshift bridge. It was clever, but they may as well have all vaulted and moved on."

"They also lost over an hour and a half in the Heart," Dee added. "They had a bit of trouble with the logic, I guess."

"They figured it out without having to use up points on questions, though," Ina told them, "but what really killed their chances was what happened with the Minotaur. Kent broke his leg, Abban was also badly bruised and shaken and Uma was knocked out altogether. That they got their teammates out of the Minotaur's area is amazing, but they had no way to splint Kent's leg and had to abandon him."

"Points would have been lost for that, but since none of them made it out before the time was up, it doesn't matter," Rona remarked. "What was their plan?"

"They were hoping to find something to make a splint or a stretcher out of and go back for him once the way was open," Ina replied. "Given the circumstances, it could have been a good plan, but only if they had more time."

"I liked their solution to Bohpoli, though," Jael laughed

"I didn't," Bohpoli argued. "They threw the sticks and stones back at me and never tried to follow."

"They didn't have the luxury of following you," Jael told him.

"They threw stones at me too," the Sphinx added. "In the wild, I would have eaten them. I did not like having to retreat and they would have been a good meal."

"Never mind that," Jael laughed. "We have Eddy's New Year's party coming up. The food will be much better there."

"You may visit early if you like," Dee offered. "Tanise says the Tree likes you."

"He is a good Tree," the Sphinx replied, "although he was too young to be able to answer my riddles."

"You can talk to trees?" Jael asked, surprised.

"Some," the Sphinx replied. "Some do not like to talk, some do not like me. I have spoken to Yggdrasil a few times. He is very wise, but the new Tree is still young and likes to chat. I will visit and stay with the Tree for a while. Young Tanise could stand a few lessons in basic logic as well."

"No one could teach the subject better," Dee remarked.

"You could, I think, Gaea," the Sphinx replied.

“Maybe, but she knows me too well by now and knows how to get around me as well,” Dee laughed. “Sometimes the teacher has to possess a bit of the unknown for the student. I’m going back later tonight. Why don’t you come with me?”

“I will,” the Sphinx agreed.

The next day Enki announced, in an elaborate ceremony, that the Green team had been eliminated from further competition and thanked them for entering. The only consolation prize was that the show covered all medical bills. Then the rest of the contestants were dismissed and told to return on January second to begin the next challenge.

“And what will that be?” Daz asked from the crowd of contestants.

“Come back and find out,” Enki advised him.

The Show staff continued working on post-production and on building the next set for the next week and a half until Enki was satisfied that everything was as good as they were likely to get.

Evrone ran into Tomislav as she was headed back to her tent to pack for Eddy’s party. “I haven’t seen you in a while,” she remarked noncommittally.

“I’ve been busy with the cameras and helping Dionysus with the editing,” Tomislav replied, in an equally neutral tone. Evrone noticed, however, that he seemed to have lost a certain nasty edge to his voice and body language. He didn’t seem about to do or say something to intentionally upset her.

“So have you enjoyed that?” she asked conversationally.

“Yeah,” Tomislav nodded with a broad smile. “The camera work is fun and Dionysus is the perfect editor. He knows so much about illusions that half the time he doesn’t need the mortal devices Enki arranged for him.”

“And he is also a god of the theater,” Evrone added, “so he understands entertainment values.” Tomislav nodded enthusiastically. “Are you coming to Eddy’s party?” she asked in spite of herself.

“Is that all right with you?” Tomislav asked.

“You don’t need my permission,” Evrone told him. “You’ve never needed it in the past. You might want to ask Tanise, though.”

“I don’t want to come if you don’t want me to,” Tomislav told her softly.

Evrone thought about it. He might just be setting her up for another practical joke. He had done that several times while they were in school together, but she meant it when she had said he didn’t need her permission. “You may come with us,” she told him at last. “Better hurry and pack. We’re leaving in a half hour or less.”

“Right!” Tomislav nodded and raced off.

“A little forgiveness and reconciliation going on there?” Jael teased Evrone gently as she entered the tent.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Evrona told her stiffly. A moment later, however she relaxed a bit and admitted, "He seemed to be making an effort to be polite. It only seemed right for me to do the same."

"Right," Jael nodded with an odd tone in her voice. "Well, Sparrow, let's get packing, don't want to keep your boyfriend waiting, do we?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Evrona protested. Jael just chuckled and went back to shoving things into her bag. From the look on her face, however, Evrona guessed she was having a private conversation with Rona.

They found Tomislaw waiting for them outside the tent. "Which way to the Tree?" he asked.

"It's all around us, kid," Jael told him, "but we're not going by way of the Tree this time. Yggdrasil tolerates our kind when it's necessary, but for the most part netherspawns aren't welcome on his limbs. I think it has something to do with what the denizens of the netherworld do to the Tree in most myths. Actually, a demon on the branches normally should have set off a major alarm, but I guess the old boy thought you were with me and I get a special pass. However, I don't abuse it because the time could come when I really need to travel that way and won't be allowed."

"I don't think the Tree would refuse you, Jael," Evrona told her.

"I'm not so sure," Jael replied. "I like Yggdrasil. I should say I love him. There's a branch from which I can see Heaven, Earth and Hell all at once. I should take you both there someday. The view is impressive, but also a real ego-crusher."

"What's an ego-crusher?" Evrona asked.

"Heh," Jael chuckled. "Been a while since you asked me one of those questions. I was beginning to think I'd taught you everything I knew."

"Hardly," Evrona laughed.

"That laugh is new too," Jael noted. "I like it. What I meant is that when you can see all of Creation at once you realize two very important things. First of all each individual is an insignificant speck compared to the whole and, second, that without you, Creation is not quite complete. It's both humbling and elevating in the same instant. I don't mind admitting that I've spent quite a few hours there meditating and working things out from time to time. Anyway, we aren't going to strain Yggdrasil's hospitality this time around. Dee and Ina both brought their cars here."

"I've seen Ina's car," Evrona remarked. "It's small and bright red and it only has two seats."

"It's a Ferrari," Jael laughed. "It's fun to drive or even just ride in, but I would have to fold you two up and stow you away in the glove compartment. Besides, I saw Ina loading her stuff. She'll be lucky to find room for herself. Dee's car is somewhat more sensible although rather ironic."

"Ironic?" Evrona asked. "Why?"

"It's an SUV," Jael laughed. "A real gas guzzler, or it would be if it actually burned gas. I'm not sure what it burns, for all I know it runs on love."

“That would be more appropriate for Ina’s car,” Rona disagreed, “and you know you could just ask Dee about it, you know.”

“It’s more fun to guess,” Jael replied. Maybe it moves just because she’s able to convince it that it needs to.”

“Ha!” Rona laughed harshly.

“Anyway, when Dee went home the other night, she took Lizzie with her so they went through Yggdrasil and left the car here, Dee asked me to drive it back to Hattamesett,” Jael explained. “Normally that would be a two or three day drive from here, but we’re going to take a shortcut. Tommy, you get in back. Sparrow, ride shotgun.”

“Shotgun?” Evrona asked.

“Sparrow?” Tomislaw asked at the same time.

Evrona glared at him. “You want to make something of it?” Tomislaw shook his head and held his hands up in surrender.

They tossed the bags in behind the rear seat and climbed in. Jael turned the key and the engine growled to life and then settled back into a purr. She backed out of the parking space and pulled out of the parking lot. At the end of the road, she turned left and left reality behind as the foliage turned bright red and the road started to sparkle.

“What just happened?” Evrona asked uncertainly.

“This is the way most supernatural beings travel,” Jael explained. “It’s not quite as direct as tiptoeing through the Treetops, but in many ways it’s easier and for some of us, safer. We are in a sort of gap between the Divine Plain and the Mortal Realm. It’s made of ‘such stuff as dreams are made on’, kids. I mean that in a very real way. We travel though this place partially by our own locomotion but also by our thoughts. You have to move, that’s kind of necessary, but by concentrating we can change the nature of this place or maybe it’s a non-place, because we’re actually not anywhere at all.”

“Jael, I don’t understand,” Evrona admitted.

“I never could explain it very well,” Jael admitted and the road turned transparent yellow and was suddenly surrounded by boiling green water. “We’re in the gap between the worlds and, basically we’re making our own reality.” The water around them turned bright purple and started sloshing over the road. “Whoa! Who’s doing that?” Jael asked angrily, taking her foot off the car’s accelerator.

“Uh, sorry,” Tomislaw apologized. “I just wanted to see if I could.”

“Yes, you can,” Jael told him bluntly. “Don’t! If you do something that makes the road disappear we’re going to be in a heap of trouble and swimming in boiling water is the least of it. First rule of traveling between the worlds is there can only be one leader. If we were walking I’d let you wander off into the sunset, although without guidance it’s likely you would never get back. Driving together like this, we could all get stuck or worse.”

“Worse?” Tomislaw asked, watching the water around them turn green and become calm again.

“We could end up in some pocket of reality from which there is no exit,” Jael told him. “Just don’t play here. In a century or two you’ll be ready to try this for yourself, but there’s a lot you need to learn first. From what I hear, that little tantrum you threw in Tanise’s world is just such an example.”

“I didn’t know I was hurting anything,” Tomislaw protested.

“We demons have a very bad reputation because of ignorance like that, Tommy,” Jael scolded. “Even in Hell we don’t let anyone try warping reality without training and to do it in a still-forming world is irresponsible.”

“I know,” Tomislaw nodded. “Enki made me do extra work because of what I did there.”

“He did?” Evrona asked.

“And lectured me all night when we first showed up in Florida,” Tomislaw added. “I thought I’d learned my lesson, but... Sorry, Jael.”

“No harm done this time,” Jael replied. “But learn to be a bit more careful when in unfamiliar territory, and believe me, no matter how often you come here in the future, it’s always going to be unfamiliar even when you’re as old as Mother Nature.”

“Don’t tell Dee, Jael just said that,” Rona warned them, manifesting in Jael’s place.

“Is she sensitive about her age?” Evrona asked.

“I don’t really know,” Rona admitted. “It just never seemed safe territory to travel on,”

“Rona, you want to let me drive?” Jael complained. “I don’t normally mind it when you push your way in, but I can’t guide us through the primordial chaos if you’re going to make me sit at the back of the bus.”

“Oops!” Rona replied through Jael’s mouth. “Sorry.”

“Rona can’t manipulate the chaos,” Jael explained and when she took over we were almost out of control. We would have been had she stuck around. It’s kind of like trying to drive this car from the back seat. You can see where you’re going, but you can’t reach the wheel. Okay, hang tight, I’m going to do something exotic.”

She didn’t give them any time to react and a moment later the road they were on flipped over and they were suddenly driving upside down above the still green water. The water became bright gold and then suddenly they were in a dark tunnel, following a blue, glowing path. After a while, Evrona felt herself being pressed back into her seat as through Jael was accelerating at an incredible rate. Then they were out of the tunnel and seeming to follow the blue line straight upward into the sky. The car went into a barrel roll and when it straightened out they were miles above the ground, still following the blue line which was growing gradually thinner. Finally, Jael, pushed two buttons in sequence and took her hands off the wheel. “Cruise control,” she told them.

They continued that way for the next hour until the blue line became wider once more and then turned black. Jael put her hands back on the wheel and a few minutes later they were back at ground level and the road beneath them looked more like a conventional highway even though the grass on either side was

bright pink and the trees were incandescent green. Then they were back in the right hand lane on a normal road in the real world surrounded by traffic.

“Smooth, huh, kids?” Jael laughed. “I don’t think the other cars even noticed we just suddenly appeared. And here comes our exit.”

Evrna looked out and saw a large green sign that said, “Hattamesett – One Mile,” and one minute later Jael turned off Route I-195 and on to Water Street in the small town that unbeknownst to the inhabitants was the gateway to a whole new universe.

Seven

Even though they were only there for a few days Evrona settled back in as though she had never left. She and Amy stayed up all night making plans for the next day, all of which were squashed when Asherah told them they were going into town with her to buy food for the party.

When they returned a few hours later, Tanise was deep in conversation with the Sphinx at the base of the young World Tree. It had snowed since Evrona had been out there last and a thick blanket of white covered the ground. The ponds near the tree were frozen, although the waterfall between them still flowed, indicating the ice was not all that thick just yet. The patio had been cleared away with a shovel, but there was a thin track where footsteps had beaten a path through the snow leading to the Tree. “Better leave them alone for a while,” Rona suggested. “This is school time for Tanise. Besides, these decorations aren’t going to put themselves up, are they?”

Dee and Eddy’s daughter, Maggie, sat in the kitchen and discussed last minute changes to their guest list. “It’s really a shame I can’t bring in friends from work to these things,” Maggie sighed.

“You know why we can’t do that,” Dee reminded her,

“It would be impossible to explain the back yard,” Maggie agreed. “But it’s also embarrassing to have to beg off because there’s not enough room in the house. Even without the universe outside our back door, there’s plenty of room in the house.”

“I know, but why do you continue to work?” Dee asked. “You don’t have to, you know.”

“It’s something to do,” Maggie explained. “I like oceanography and this is really a good job. I’d get

bored just sitting around the house all day.”

“There’s an ocean just twenty miles away outside your back door, you know,” Dee pointed out.

“Yes, and it’s in a state unlike any studied on Earth, I know,” Maggie admitted. “But where could I publish my findings?”

“Who says you need to publish them?” Dee asked. “It seems to me you can learn a lot about Earth’s oceans by studying this one.”

“Or I could just ask you,” Maggie pointed out. “As Mother Nature, there isn’t a lot you don’t know about such things.”

“True, but even I can be surprised at times,” Dee told her. “Look, I personally don’t mind if you find a friend of two who can keep his or her mouth shut about this place...”

“No, there’s no one I think could manage not to want to tell someone else,” Maggie admitted. “This isn’t some television show where there is always some best friend who is in on the secret.”

“Then find someone who already knows,” Dee suggested. “Eddy tells me some of Thor’s friends were asking after you when they were here.”

“Were they?” Maggie asked, thoughtfully. “I do have a weakness for the tall blond Nordic type. Well, that’s neither here nor there.”

“What’s that?” Evrona asked, spotting a large barn-like structure behind the house. “It wasn’t here a month ago.” The building was twice the size of Eddy’s house in foot print and three stories tall. The huge A-frame roof looked like it should have been thatched, but instead had been covered with solar energy panels, at least on the south-facing sides. The exposed beams had been ornately carved. Each pair crossed at the top and ended in the heads of dragons and a wide pair of doors stood at the front, partially open.

“That’s Granddad’s mead hall,” Amy told her. “Thor talked him into it, I think. Dee insisted they use solar power to run the modern conveniences inside when possible, but we did extend a power line in. It has an all-electric heating system, although the fireplaces and barbecue pit do a fair job of keeping it warm when they’re all going.”

“It’s so tall!” Evrona remarked.

“Can’t be helped,” Amy shrugged. “To use that shape with that footprint it’s going to be a large building.”

“What made your grandfather choose that shape, though?” Evrona asked.

“He didn’t,” Amy laughed. “Thor did. He just showed up one day with all the lumber and a gang of minor gods and went to work. Dee added the solar panels to the design. I don’t think Thor completely approved of that, but even he wouldn’t argue with Dee when she puts her foot down. And Granddad insisted it be painted the same dune gray as the house. I thought it should have been left natural. Also he decided not to use a traditional internal design which also bothered Thor at first. He thought the host should sit at the head of the hall, but that’s where we put the kitchen.”

“Kitchen?” Evrona asked.

“Well, mostly the barbecue pit,” Amy admitted, “but we have a walk-in refrigerator and freezer – should be nice on a hot summer day, huh? – and a fair sized grill and a large modern oven because we wanted to be prepared for almost everything. The barbecue pit is tremendous! I think we could roast two whole cows in it at once if it suited our purpose.”

“I thought you used cows for milk,” Evrona asked.

“That too, but I guess we use the steers for meat,” Amy corrected herself. “Same critter. Look, I’m a city girl. To me the meat comes out of plastic-wrapped packages on Styrofoam plates and I’m quite happy to have it that way. If I really thought where it really comes from for long, I’d go back to being a vegetarian.”

“You were vegetarian?” Evrona asked.

“Briefly,” Amy admitted. “It worked out well for a while, but when all your friends go out for burgers and you’re left eating the fries because even the salads have chicken in them, it’s hard not to cave. Well, it was hard for me not to cave, anyway. Others make it a lifestyle, I just eat less meat than I used to.”

“Come on, girls,” Jael urged them. “No one relaxes before a party around here. Let’s go work in the mead hall. Decorations, remember?”

“I thought Ash was doing that,” Amy remarked, following Jael out on to the patio. “Cold out here.”

“It’s warm in the hall,” Jael told her, setting a pace as brisk as the weather. “And Ash is cooking now. She asked me to finish with the bunting and stuff.”

“Bunting?” Amy asked.

“You know, draped cloth,” Jael told her.

“I know what it is,” Amy retorted. “Why are we using it?”

“This is the inauguration of Eddy’s mead hall,” Jael explained. “It’s traditional to use bunting at inaugurations, and from what I’ve heard we have a lot of area to cover.”

That turned out to be an understatement. The interior of the hall was entirely open to the kitchen although with circular fire places dotting the way down the middle of the hall. There were also a pair of wide balconies along the sides of the hall that like the kitchen were open to the main hall, but to Evrona’s surprise the ceiling was flat instead of pointed like the roof.

“We have a huge attic up there,” Amy told her. “Part of it is set aside for storage, but the rest will be for company to stay in once we find enough beds and other furniture to fill it. So far it’s just bare wood, but we’ll eventually finish the rooms up there.

They found Eddy working on the barbecue fire with Tomislaw under Asherah’s supervision. “We need to keep the bed of coals as even as possible,” Asherah was telling them, “and I hope to get that ox spitted and in place in an hour.”

“The fire looks pretty good to me right now,” Eddy remarked.

“The coal bed needs to be deeper,” Ash told him. “It takes a long time to cook an entire ox, you know, or by now you should. Why did you wait so long to start?”

“You know as well as I do the kitchen wasn’t ready until this morning, Ash,” Eddy replied. “Besides I figured you or Dee could take a shortcut or two.”

“I’m going to have to,” Asherah sighed. “The party is tomorrow and this would take longer to cook than we have.”

“Especially since the meat is in the freezer,” Amy added as they approached.

“What?” Asherah asked. “Now I really will have to take shortcuts. Eddy, promise me next time, though, we won’t cook the beast whole.”

“Why not?” Eddy asked.

“Not every part is best served barbecued,” Asherah explained. “Some is more fit for stewing, some for broiling and so forth. So not only is this a slow method of cooking, but not beneficial for all of the meat. I’ve told you this before, I’m sure, but we really would do best by cutting up the meat and treating each portion in the manner it deserves. Well, I was the goddess of the hearth,” she sighed. “I suppose I can fake it, but it’s a lot of work just for a bit of showmanship.”

“I would have thought it was easier to handle it as a single piece, rather than going through half a dozen different preparations,” Eddy confessed.

“If I were just leaving the feast up to the whim of the fire, it probably would,” Asherah admitted, “and portions could be sliced off as they cooked too, but I like to do it the right way and that means taking those ‘shortcuts’ you mentioned. It’s much more work than just tossing a few steaks on the fire, you know.”

“All right,” Eddy shrugged. “Next time I’ll leave all the food planning up to you.”

“Thank you,” Asherah told him, “but I know you better than that and you do like to barbecue. I’ll settle for enough time to do the job right.”

“I promise,” Eddy told her.

By evening, everything had settled into a routine. Tomislaw was in charge of keeping the fires lit and tended although Evrona, Tanise and Amy helped bring in the firewood, stacked neat piles next to each fireplace and replenished the stack in the kitchen.

“Couldn’t we do all this by divine miracle or something?” Amy asked when they were finished. “You know, self-tending eternal fires or something?”

“I could bring in a propane tank and make them all run off of that,” Eddy told them, “but that’s not the point of a fireplace, to me. The electric heaters keep the hall nice and warm and the electric lights allow us to see where we’re going, but the fireplaces are for atmosphere and many people enjoy the act of putting another log on the fire. We’ll light all these tomorrow afternoon just as the guests start to arrive. You have the kindling all set?”

"All we need is a match, Granddad," Amy confirmed.

"A whole book of matches," Tanise giggled. "Will we need to bring in more wood for the kitchen?"

"Tomorrow," Eddy told her. "Ash has enough for now. Any more would just get in her way."

"And even if we're wrong," Evrona decided, "she and Tomislaw can borrow from one of the fireplaces." Then a thought came to her. "Where did this wood come from? There's only one tree on this world."

"I bought it," Eddy told her. "I had to pay extra to make sure it was all maple and hickory. Ash insisted on that. We got a bunch in that was mostly pine once and had to be careful which we used. I don't mind cooking a nice trout on a pine or cedar plank, but it doesn't make for great barbecue. I should probably see about stocking up on mesquite, cherry and various nut woods, though. It's never a bad idea to vary the smoke flavors from time to time. Well, let's go back into the house. I think you girls deserve a treat and I have some ginger ice cream in the freezer."

"Ice cream?" Evrona asked curiously.

Eddy's parties had become the favorite events for many of the denizens of the Divine Plain, especially those who had become allied with Enki and his Springtime Seed business front, and each year more and more gods and goddesses waited anxiously for their invitations to the New Year's Eve party.

It was snowing heavily on both sides of reality when the first guests, a party from the Greco-Roman Olympus, arrived but Evrona, Tanise and Amy greeted them cheerfully and Amy escorted them through the house and into the mead hall out back. A few minutes later a trio of Chinese gods, led by the Jade Emperor, arrived. Tanise introduced them to Evrona and then showed them the way out back.

By the time Thor, Heimdall and a dozen others from Asgard arrived, neither Amy nor Tanise had returned, but Thor shook off Evrona's offer to escort them, genially adding. "We built the hall, after all. We ought to know the way."

"What are all those barrels?" Evrona asked, seeing each god was carrying a large oaken cask.

"Mead, of course!" Thor laughed. "You can't have a mead hall without it."

Amy and Tanise both returned a minute later and for the next two hours took turns showing guests into the new hall. Finally Jael and Inanna came in to relieve them. "You ought to get some time in there," Jael told them.

"Why don't we set up a simulacrum to guide guests?" Ina suggested after the younger women had left.

"A talking statue?" Jael asked.

"Well, an illusion in this case," Ina replied. "It can be of us greeting guests and telling them to come out back. I think most of the list has arrived already anyway and I'd like to spend more time with Mike this evening. Poor thing has been so understanding while we've been stuck in Florida."

"I wouldn't call it stuck, exactly," Jael considered, "but he has been patient with you. I'll have to put a note on the door telling folks to come on in, but you'll have to show me how to do that sort of magic."

“I will, indeed,” Ina laughed, “since the simulacrum of you won’t act like you unless you cast it. You see part of this spell puts a copy of your thought processes into the illusion. We used to appear to mortals in this way all the time in the old days. It was safer on the odd occasion when a bit of a fright might cause them to attack instead of bow down.”

“Did that happen a lot?” Jael asked.

“Often enough,” Ina replied. “You don’t hear about it in the myths much, mostly because the mortal who attacked rarely lived to tell the tale, but it did save me from having to fend off a sword or spear every so often. A warrior can be very skittish and the sudden apparition of a supernatural being is always a bit of a surprise. We found this was a better way to get their attention. Believe me it takes a while to heal from a sword in the chest and a fatal wound is still a fatal wound, at least until the next cycle.”

Inside the mead hall, the attendees were making a lot of noise. The sounds of the kitchen could be heard mixed with dozens of conversations and even some singing in the back corner of one of the balconies. “What?” Amy asked as she stepped inside. “No music?”

“What do you call that?” Evrona asked, pointing up toward the balcony.

“I’m not sure,” Amy replied tartly, “but I think I’d rather listen to One Hundred Bottles of Beer, sung twice. I meant dance music, though. Something for background noise.”

“We’ve always had the stereo going in the house during a party,” Tanise admitted.

“Do we have something like that in here?” Evrona asked.

“I think so,” Amy told her. “I’ll go ask Dee.” Amy pushed her way through the crowd and soon disappeared.

“Hello, girls,” the Sphinx greeted them softly from the corner nearest the door.

“Hi, Lizzie,” Evrona replied. “What are you doing in the back here?”

“There are a lot of people here tonight, aren’t there?” the Sphinx replied.

“Lizzie gets a bit nervous in a crowd,” Tanise whispered to Evrona. The dryad wasn’t quite soft enough to keep the Sphinx from hearing her, however.

“That’s true,” the Sphinx agreed. “I’ve spent most of my life alone and usually when I’m among a crowd, they are trying to kill me. I’ve not always been on good terms with some of the people here tonight.”

“Maybe you ought to sing,” Evrona suggested. “I loved the way you sang the riddles during the show. You have a nice voice.”

“That was just for a few people,” the Sphinx told her, looking around nervously. “This is... this is more.” Just then a soft and gentle tune filled the hall. “What is that lovely music?”

“Amy went to turn on the stereo or something,” Tanise told her.

"It's a waltz," Amy told them, rushing back to rejoin her friends. "I'd prefer something a bit more modern, but Dee says the guests will prefer this sort of thing. She promised something a bit more lively in a while though. Right now she's dancing with Granddad."

"Let's see!" the Sphinx decided, suddenly overcoming her shyness. They pushed forward to where Eddy and Mother Nature were dancing in a stately manner. Around them various other couples had joined in and the Sphinx found her feet trying to move in step with the music. "Tanise, dance with me," she requested.

Tanise looked around, trying to absorb the steps as the Sphinx pushed her out into the dance floor. What they did wasn't a waltz, not exactly, but the Sphinx worked out a three-step pattern for her four feet, while Tanise struggled to trace the steps of the other dancers. Others joined in and soon the floor was filled with dancing gods and goddesses.

Evrone felt a soft tap on her shoulder and found Tomislav standing behind her. He didn't actually say anything, but he pointed at Evrone and then himself while nodding toward the other dancers. Evrone just stared at the young demon, trying to understand what he meant.

"Well, go ahead," Amy finally told her in exasperation. "Dance with him."

Evrone nodded shyly and allowed Tomislav to lead her out on to the dance floor. Neither of them were particularly skilled at this and they kept stepping on each other's feet and then jumping back mouthing apologies, but they managed to get through the dance before Tomislav excused himself two dances later to go back to tending the kitchen fire.

After a block of waltzes, however, the music changed quite abruptly and most of the dancers left the floor, leaving only Dee trying to lead Eddy through a dance that was passé before he was born. "What is this one?" the Sphinx asked delightedly, tapping two of her feet in time.

"It's called the Charleston," Amy told her. "No one really does it much anymore. Well, maybe some dance historians, and Dee, of course."

"I like it better than the waltz!" the Sphinx decided enthusiastically and started trying to step through the dance while watching Dee. Finally, the Sphinx stepped back out on to the floor and tried keeping up. She was doing a creditable job, but something, she knew, was missing and she reared up on her hind legs and, carefully extending her wings for balance used her forepaws to simulate the hand motions Dee was going through. So engrossed was the Sphinx in the dance that she failed to realize that everyone had stopped to watch her as she started adding variations of her own until the music stopped and the hall erupted in applause. She looked up and suddenly blushed, but took the compliments in good grace as slower music began.

No one went back to dance after the Sphinx's performance, so Dee turned the music down just enough to serve as a background to conversations. "That was wonderful!" Evrone told the Sphinx when she was finally able to get close to her again. "I wish I could dance like that."

"How do you know you cannot?" the Sphinx asked. "You were dancing with that boy."

"Not very well," Evrone told her.

"It is not the point to dance well," the Sphinx told her with the passion of a sudden revelation. "It is to have fun doing it. I'm hungry now. Shall we eat?"

Seven

They slept in late the next day, but after noon Dee hustled everyone who was going back to Florida into her car. The trip back was more sedate and less exotic than the way up and Evrona suspected it had something to do with Jael's driving skills, but when she asked about that, Jael just laughed and replied, "This way is all downhill."

"I also do not believe in taking the chances Jael thrives on," Dee commented. "What did you do, dear? Drive them through a volcano again?"

"I couldn't find one on the east coast," Jael admitted.

"It's a good thing I don't need auto insurance then," Dee sighed, "or the premiums involved with having you listed as a driver would even strain Croesus' credit limit."

"You're no fun," Jael replied.

"Fun?" Dee asked archly. "You want fun?"

Jael glanced at Dee, took in the uncharacteristically mischievous look on the nature goddess' face and decided, "Uh, no thanks. I think you've been hanging around Enki too much lately."

"Some things just come back naturally, you know," Dee told her with a chuckle.

"Now that's scary," Jael laughed.

"What is, dear?" Dee asked.

"You're usually so serious and sober," Jael commented. "It's strange to hear you kid around."

"I have a serious and important job, dear," Dee reminded her. "It's no reason I can't also have a good sense of humor. Besides, it seems to work for you."

"True," Jael agreed and let the matter drop.

The “Living Legend” tent city was abuzz with activity as they arrived two hours later. “Where have you been?” Enki asked worriedly. “Ninti and I have been calling for hours.”

“Nowhere in particular,” Jael replied. “You know phones don’t work off the Mortal Plain. Eddy or Ash must have told you we were on the way.”

“They didn’t answer their phones either,” Enki replied.

“Then they were probably out back cleaning up from last night,” Dee remarked. “Two hundred gods and goddesses do leave a fair amount of debris in their path and none of us felt like cleaning up by the time the last of the guests had left after breakfast.” She reached into her purse and pulled her cell phone out and started pushing buttons.

“Not the last of the guests,” Evrona remarked. “Lizzie is still there.”

“Lizzie is there tutoring Tanise in philosophy and logic,” Jael told her. “It’s safe to think of her as a resident for the time being.”

“Oh good,” Evrona replied. “I had hoped she might consent to teach me too when this is over. If that’s all right with you, that is.”

“Part of my responsibility is to see that you get an education, Sparrow,” Jael told her, “and part of that is finding the right teachers.”

“Sparrow?” Enki asked.

“It’s a long story,” Jael replied quickly. “What’s the big emergency that had you in such a panic?”

“Our dragon changed his mind,” Enki told her.

“Quetzalcoatl flew the coop, did he?” Jael translated. “Well that gives us all night to either change his mind or find another dragon. I suppose we could push the contest back a day if we have to and still have time to get it ready to air. Speaking of which, when does the first show go on the air?”

“Two hours,” Enki replied. “I assume you would like to wait until it’s over before going out to find a replacement?”

“That would waste four potentially critical hours,” Jael started, and then cut herself short. “Hey! What made you think I was volunteering?”

“I know you, Jael,” Enki remarked. “When was the last time you didn’t volunteer to help a friend in need without actually being asked?”

“Sometime last cycle,” she responded soberly. “Maybe not even then. I didn’t have a lot of friends at the time. Okay, you have me there. Maybe I can use the show as bait. Let’s see. I’ll need Ina and Ratty. They were both at the party last night. Are they here yet?”

“Ratatosk is,” Enki replied, “but Inanna isn’t. She should be back anytime, though.”

“What do you have in mind?” Dee asked, putting her phone back in the bag.

“I need someone whose knowledge of the old magic is better than mine,” Jael replied. “I thought of you first, but I’ve never seen you with wings. Dragons have more respect for fliers than they do pedestrians.”

“I have several forms that can fly,” Dee informed her, “but none I’ve used recently, at least not the ones with wings. But I think I hear Ina’s car now.”

“Good,” Jael nodded, “Evie, be a dear and tell her I need her, please. Tommy, find the tree rat and ask him to see me. Enki,” she continued after the teenaged demons had rushed off, “I may have a dragon for you, but it’s going to take a lot of fast talking on my part and a fair-sized treasure on yours.”

“Money isn’t a problem for any of us,” Enki shrugged.

“Maybe, but we’ll need it for gold and gems,” Jael replied. “Dragons don’t come cheap, you know and we can’t use the same trick that brought in Lizzie. Dragons can smell the difference.”

“Those diamonds were one hundred percent natural,” Dee objected.

“But they were also impossibly young,” Jael pointed out. “That’s how they tell the difference between the real gems and the fakes, but we can get the dragon on credit.”

“You know a dragon with a swipe machine?” Ina asked, rushing up with Evrona.

Jael thought about that, and then finally replied, “No, I’m dry. No smart remark that beats that concept. Anyway I just think I might be able to get one to accept an IOU. I know a dragon who may feel he owes me a favor.”

“That would be wonderful,” Enki told her.

“Or not,” Jael added.

“Wonderful,” Enki repeated in an entirely different tone.

“So, you finally came around, did you?” Ratatosk asked as he scampered up with Tomislaw.

Jael promptly ignored that remark and explained what she needed of Ratatosk and Ina. They both nodded. “Well, come on, Sparrow,” Jael told Evrona as she turned to leave with the others.

“Me?” Evrona asked

“Yes, you,” Jael told her. “You are my protégée, aren’t you? Wait a minute. Turn around. That’s what I thought, go put on one of your special blouses, make it that deep red one. I’ll go with you, in fact. I’ll borrow one as well.”

“Why?” Evrona asked.

“We’re going to need them,” Jael told her.

“What do you want me to do?” Tomislaw asked hopefully.

“Be good,” Rona told him.

“I’m a demon,” he protested.

“I never said it would be easy.”

Eight

Three winged figures flew in a circle over the mountainous terrain of Bannau Brycheiniog in Southeastern Wales. If any backpackers were up early enough, they would be bringing back wild stories of flying women. Jael lifted a hunting horn to her lips and blew a bubbling call on it and flew on with Evrona and Inanna behind her. Ina was almost entirely transformed into a bird and she shrieked a single call from her massive hooked beak.

“I hear you!” Jael told her, “but we can’t go rushing in.” Ina shrieked again. “Because we’ll be turned into a bucket of parts, extra crispy, that’s why!” She blew another call on the horn and then one more. Finally, from far below a strange noise sounding like a warped imitation of Jael’s horn, sounded and a sudden flash of flame could be seen on the dark land below. Jael blew three short blasts and led the way down.

There was a small porch that led to a cave about halfway down from the peak of one of the mountains and there were several torches burning along the edges of the small ledge. Jael glided in to a gentle landing followed by Inanna who quickly returned to her normal human appearance. Evrona tried hovering just above the ledge, but misjudged her height in the dark and fell to her knees when she tried to land. “We’ll have to get you some practice time if you’re going to fly, I guess,” Jael remarked.

“I’ve never had to land on such a small area,” Evrona explained as Jael helped her to her feet.

“We weren’t scoring points for grace,” Jael told her, “but any landing you can walk away from is a good one. You can walk away from that, can’t you?”

“Walk? Yes,” Evrona replied. “Sit? Maybe not.”

“She is young yet,” a deep voice rumbled from inside the cave. “She will learn, Jael.”

“And flying in the dark is neither safe nor easy,” Jael replied. “My little Sparrow here did well. Hello, Cadoc.”

"It has been a long time, Jael," Cadoc replied and stepped out of the cave to reveal himself to be a tremendous red dragon. "I see you are not who you were."

"Ah, yes," Jael replied. "My better half, Rona Steele." She allowed Rona to manifest long enough for Cadoc to get her scent and then returned to her demon form. "My companions are Inanna of Uruk who has also been called Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite, Venus and many other names as well."

"My friends currently know me as Ina Loveall," Ina added.

"I salute you," Cadoc replied politely. "You are as eternal as any of us can be."

"You exaggerate," Ina replied humbly.

"I think not," Cadoc replied. "And the young Erinys?"

"My protégée," Jael replied. "Evrana, this is Cadoc, more commonly known as Y Draig Goch. He is the Red Dragon of Wales."

"It's a title," Cadoc explained. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"It appears I need a dragon," Jael replied.

"It appears I am a dragon," Cadoc noted dryly. He crawled completely out of his cave and arranged himself along the side of the mountain. Even in the dark, Evrona could see he was over sixty feet from head to tail. "What do you want of me?"

Jael knew she should never present a request directly, so instead she told him about "Living Legend" and asked, "Would you like to see the first show?"

"I might find it interesting," Cadoc admitted.

At Jael's signal, Ina cast a spell that opened a window into a part of Yggdrasil that was thousands of miles away and from there Ratatosk arranged a view of the television monitor in the staff tent in Florida. There was no sound, but Jael and Evrona gave a running commentary as the show progressed.

"Well that was very entertaining," Cadoc admitted when it was over, "but what has this to do with me?"

"Well, the next show involves having the four remaining teams battle a dragon," Jael remarked.

"I see," Cadoc replied, and then laughed a deep roaring laugh accompanied by a blast of fire that lit up the night sky. "And tell me, my little friend, do you really think any of your teams have a chance of defeating me? I could hold them all down with my front paws."

"It would be fairly one-sided," Jael agreed easily, "but I wasn't really expecting you to fight them."

"What then?" Cadoc asked.

"You're the only dragon I know well enough to ask, but I was hoping you knew of another dragon," Jael replied, "a somewhat younger and smaller one who might be more appropriate to what we are

doing.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cadoc replied slowly. “A young dragon has a hard enough life already, trying to get established, trying to build a horde. It would be quite unfair to put such a youngster at risk without an equally worthwhile prize to be gained.”

“Name the price,” Jael told him quickly.

“That is not for me to do,” Cadoc replied. “You will have to negotiate with her.”

“Her?” Evrona asked.

“My great granddaughter,” Cadoc replied. “Her name is Nerys. Return to your entertainment in this land of Florida. I will send her to you and if she likes what you have to offer, well then, that is her business.”

Nine

“At least we didn’t have to fly back,” Ina remarked as they walked through the branches of Yggdrasil.

“It wasn’t snowing in Wales,” Rona pointed out.

“Hey, you’re only feeling it second-hand,” Jael pointed out.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Ratatosk told them. “This is just a gentle snowfall.”

“Oh yeah?” Jael retorted. “Easy words for someone unwilling to take the lead. I am so sick and tired of winter and don’t get me started on the color white.”

“Not exactly your signature hue, dear,” Ina remarked.

“I didn’t even wear it on my wedding day,” Jael confirmed.

“No, I wore it,” Rona put in.

“True enough,” Jael admitted. “Actually, I didn’t put in an appearance for the next two days.”

“I appreciated that,” Rona told her.

“It was the least I could do,” Jael replied. “Ratty, why aren’t you in the lead?”

“In this weather?” Ratatosk asked nastily.

“It’s not as bad as that last trip,” Jael told him.

“Then why are you complaining?” Ratatosk asked.

“Ina?” Jael asked. “May I turn him into a frog?”

“Do you think you’re up to it, Jael?” Ina chuckled.

“It may worth a try,” Jael commented.

“Do you have any idea what that could do to Creation?”

“Change a troublemaking squirrel into a troublemaking frog?” Jael considered. “Sounds like something from out of Grimm’s Fairytales only less interesting. Oh never mind, we’re here.” She stepped out of the blizzard and into a warm evening. “Feels downright hot in comparison.”

“You’re back,” Enki observed. “How did it go?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Jael pointed out.

“We’re still waiting for the preliminary ratings and reviews,” Enki replied.

“Has anyone checked the Web?” Jael asked. “Someone must have blogged it before the show was half over.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Enki admitted.

“I can’t blame you,” Jael laughed. “Who with a real life has time to read the blogs? Anyway, I may have a dragon for you. Her name is Nerys and she’s the great granddaughter of Y Draig Goch.”

“If you say so,” Enki allowed. “Why do you say we only may have her?”

“The big boy is sending her here, but we still have to make a deal with her,” Jael replied.

“When will she be here?” Enki asked, looking around.

“Soon,” Jael replied. There was a draconic shriek from overhead and Jael added, “Very soon, I’d say.”

There was the measured beat of wings and a moment later a small red dragon, only about fifteen feet long landed in a nearby clearing while Enki, Jael and the others raced to meet her. “Nerys?” Jael asked.

“Sorry about all the noise,” Nerys apologized. “Great Grandfather sent me here rather directly. It was a little scary.”

“Well, when you go home,” Enki assured her, “you’ll be free to take the scenic route. For now, however, I’m very glad you are here.”

“I was told this is about a human entertainment?” Nerys asked. Enki and Jael spent the next hour explaining and then they got down into the real negotiations. Finally Nerys decided, “Yes, if you can provide adequate protection, your offer is suitable.”

“Excellent,” Enki agreed. “Inanna, Jael, work with her, please.”

“Glad to, Enki,” Jael told him, “but perhaps you’ve forgotten, unlike Ina, I still have to guide my team. Admittedly, it’s not going to be the same job it was last time, but I’ll still have to answer questions. Can’t very well answer questions while maintaining the protective spells.”

“Ina and I will handle that when the time comes,” Enki told her, “but dragons are capable of magic all their own. Work with her and make sure she can protect herself as well.”

“We’d also better find you a place to stay away from the contestants,” Ina decided. “What part of the park are we using for this?”

A short time later, Jael and Ina were back on the site. The first round had been conducted where Gilgamesh and Marduk were busily setting up a large tent under Evrona’s supervision for Nerys to stay in.

“So, what magics do you know, dear,” Ina asked.

“None really,” Nerys replied. “Magic is out of style these days.”

“I’ve noticed,” Ina nodded. “It makes me feel rather old, sometimes. Still, it has its uses. So I guess we’ll have to start from the beginning.”

“We don’t have time for that, Ina,” Jael cut in. “You taught me theory before I could learn the spells, but that took a week. We only have a day. What can we teach Nerys in a day?”

“Illusions, perhaps,” Ina replied. “Yes, they should come naturally to her. Many of the famous dragons in the ancient world fought with illusions as much as they did with fire and strength.”

“And the best illusion will be to hide her presence by casting a projection of herself elsewhere,” Jael added. “It seems to me that while dragons fly fairly well once they are in the air, it does take them a while to get airborne, or are you an exception, Nerys?”

“I generally either need to jump off a cliff or get a running start,” Nerys replied. “It’s simple aerodynamics, really. Dragon wings aren’t built for a standing take-off, you know.”

“They’re a bit small compared to your body mass,” Jael agreed. “Some dragons get so large they cannot fly at all.”

“The trick is not to get fat,” Nerys told her primly. “A fat dragon is soon a fairytale dragon. Self

control is all-important to a dragon. Too many get lazy as they get older and prosperous and there is a certain satisfaction in being able to eat your fill, but I try to resist the temptation and eat what I need rather than what I want.”

“Speaking of which, are you hungry?” Jael asked.

“I could use a light meal, perhaps,” Nerys replied.

“What would you like?” Jael inquired. “A fat lamb, a cow or two, some Chinese take-out?”

“If I ate a whole lamb right now I’d sleep for days,” Nerys told her. “I can eat grasses or hay at need, but perhaps something with a bit of flavor. I so rarely get a chance to sample human food.”

“*To Serve Man*, huh?” Jael chuckled.

“I do not eat people!” Nerys replied disgustedly, obviously understanding the reference.

Jael made a mental note to ask later about where and when Nerys had watched television, or whether she had read the original story. “Evie!” she called her apprentice over.

“Yes, Jael?” Evrona asked, running over without hesitation.

“You think the boys can do without your help?” Jael asked.

“They wouldn’t even let me pound in a tent stake,” Evrona replied.

“I think they’re trying to be gentlemen this evening,” Jael remarked.

“Jael?” Evrona asked. “Why are you still in demon form?” Evrona had switched back to her mortal guise and cleaned up soon after their return.

“Oh, haven’t had the time to change back yet,” Jael replied.

“It doesn’t really take any time you know,” Evrona pointed out.

“Well, if you must know, I split the seat of my jeans when my tail reappeared,” Jael admitted. “It’s why I wear skirts more often. I don’t feel comfortable walking around with a hole back there.”

“I’ll get you a fresh skirt then,” Evrona offered.

“First see to arranging a late dinner,” Jael requested. “There are several late night places just outside the park. “Ask Enki to buy a large assortment and bring it here, please.”

“Right,” Evrona agreed.

Jael replied, “Thanks, Sparrow. Now fly.”

Evrona ran off into the darkness and Jael and Ina started working with Nerys. Illusory magic came as easily to the dragon as Ina had expected, but she resisted trying to take a mortal guise. “I do not wish to appear as a human,” Nerys told them an hour later. “I don’t care how easy it would make it for me to blend in. I am a dragon and very happy to be one, thank you.”

“Have it your way,” Jael shrugged. “Speaking of which, here comes Evie with the food. Whatcha got, kid?”

“The only place still open was the Chinese one,” Evrona reported, pushing a wheelbarrow in front of her.

“I don’t suppose you got chopsticks to eat it with, did you?” Jael asked.

“Enki made sure of that,” Evrona nodded. “I also have forks and spoons. He bought two of everything on the menu. This is just some of it. I guess everyone was hungry.”

“That’s too much for just me,” Nerys objected. “Same problem as eating a whole lamb, you know.”

“You don’t have to eat it all,” Ina told her. “Besides, we’re hungry too. What did we get, Jael?”

“Let’s see. None of these are marked, but here are some egg rolls. No mustard?” Jael complained.

“There it is,” Ina pointed at a small plastic cup, “and some duck sauce just below it.”

“Oh good,” Jael reached for the condiments and poured some of each on an egg roll. “Here, Nerys,” she offered tossing the egg roll at the young dragon. “What do you think?”

Nerys caught the small projectile in her mouth and tasted. “Not much flavor to the roll itself, but I like the sauce.”

“I always thought that was the point,” Jael told her. “Let’s see what else we have. I see Enki kept the soups in camp. Well, that probably makes it easier for us. What’s this?” She opened a box and dipped her chopsticks in. “Mmm, Sesame shrimp. Very good,” she added taking a second taste.

“May I?” both Ina and Nerys asked at once.

Jael handed the box to Ina who took a taste and dumped the rest of the box into Nerys’ mouth. Meanwhile Jael and Evrona continued to open boxes and taste before offering them to Nerys. It turned out Nerys preferred the hot and spicy dishes, but after eating eight large servings decided she had better stop and waited while the others settled down to their own favorites from the barrow.

“That’s enough for me,” Jael decided after polishing off a box of Kung Pao Beef. “Wasn’t there any rice in the order?”

“Maybe it’s still in camp,” Ina suggested.

“I can go get some for you,” Evrona offered.

“No thanks,” Jael replied. “I really have had enough. “I see what Nerys means about sleeping for a week, though. Why don’t you take the rest back and get it put away in the fridge, unless someone there is still hungry. We can always have this cold for breakfast.”

“Jael!” Ina objected. “You’d eat Chinese food for breakfast?”

“Billions of people in China do every morning,” Jael retorted.

“Not like this,” Rona pointed out. “Ooh! Couldn’t you have eaten something milder?”

“I like the spicy stuff,” Jael retorted.

“I know,” Rona sighed. “Oh God, how I know!”

“You want I should eat a few antacids too?” Jael asked.

“Oh, I’ll just sulk in the basement for a few hours,” Rona replied moodily.

“You get the next meal,” Jael offered, but Rona had nothing more to say.

“Do you often talk to yourself that way?” Nerys asked curiously.

“All the time, it seems,” Jael sighed. “At least I’m never alone.”

“I think we’ll need to talk about tactics and strategies,” Ina suggested. “Nerys, we want you to give our teams a tough fight, but they do need a chance.” They spent the rest of the night discussing that matter while Nerys continued to practice her illusions.

Ten

Once again, Jael met Ninti in the staff tent. “How did the Blues do this time?” Jael asked.

“Not well at all,” Ninti sighed. “Nerys wasn’t particularly gentle with them and they all got burns. Nerys demanded surrender when it became apparent they couldn’t go on and I called in the first aid squad.”

“How badly were they burned?” Jael asked.

“Not as badly as they should have been had Nerys been seriously attacking them,” Ninti admitted. “They had a few blisters, but it was mostly just first degree burns. We applied salve and some fairly subtle healing magic and they’ll be okay. We’re lucky to have Oriel on staff.”

“Then I’d say Nerys was very gentle with them,” Jael remarked, “but they should have realized she

would not use her fire if there was a chance of hitting her own feet. Still as you say, I'm glad Oriel is here. Rona and I are both very proud of her, she's the closest thing either of us has to a daughter."

"I noticed the Red team figured out staying in close works well in short order," Ninti remarked. "They did fairly well."

"Abril got her own legs burnt," Jael remarked, "but the others got her out of there and worked out a strategy."

"I was rather impressed the way they managed to take Nerys down with just a length of rope," Ninti remarked.

"Yeah, hog-tying a dragon," Jael laughed. "Who would have thought? Who's up next, by the way?"

"Evrona's Silver team," Ninti replied. "They drew third this time around. They're just about to start. These are going fairly fast, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Jael agreed. "I guess we overestimated the time we'd need for this round. The video editors will appreciate it, though."

A bell sounded on the monitor and a large wooden gate opened to reveal the members of the Silver team as they started out on their trek for the dragon. They found a rack of weapons and each one grabbed a sword and a spear and continued on, leaving the many other choices behind.

"Cocky lot, aren't they?" Jael remarked.

"They'll learn," Ninti agreed.

The Silvers walked for a few minutes and then, just like the other teams, found themselves face-to-face with Nerys, smoke issuing from her nostrils and enveloped in a haze of illusion that made her seem to fade in and out of existence. As one the Silver team roared a primal scream and charged the dragon before she had a chance to breathe flame.

Nerys screamed in pain and panic as the Silver team's weapons pierced her skin and then abruptly vanished in a puff of smoke. "The Hell?" Jael wondered, getting to her feet and sprinting for the door, Ninti close behind her. Jael's phone rang just then and she flipped it open even as she ran, pell-mell toward the contest area. "Hello? What happened? Yeah, no kidding! Where is she?" Jael listened for a moment and changed course. "Okay," she said finally. "Ninti and I are on our way, get Oriel there STAT! Enki teleported Nerys out of there," she told Ninti as they continued running.

"Where?" Ninti asked.

"Down by the river," Jael replied, "about two miles from here in that nice glade we found just after Thanksgiving. Follow me."

Just then, the woods disappeared and they found themselves in a desert of blue-green sand, following a dried riverbed. Ten seconds later the landscape reverted to subtropical forest and they were a few yards from Nerys. The young dragon was curled up in a tight ball of bright red scales and whimpering piteously. As Jael and Ninti appeared, however, Nerys' head came up with her mouth open to reveal two scores of needle sharp fangs.

“Whoa, lady!” Jael called across the short gap. “It’s us!”

“Jael?” Nerys whined. “It hurts, Jael. I can barely breathe.”

“How bad is it, kid?” Jael asked gently. “Let me have a look.”

Nerys whined some more and unrolled slowly to reveal a series of small wounds on her legs and flanks. “My side hurts bad,” she told them between gasps.

“Hmm,” Ninti murmured professionally. “I think those maniacs broke a rib. You’re in luck.”

“I am?” Nerys asked painfully.

“Yes,” Ninti smiled at her. “Ribs are my specialty.”

“You ought to see her at a barbecue” Jael added. Nerys tried to laugh, but groaned instead. “Oh, sorry,” Jael apologized. “I guess it really would hurt when you laugh.”

Dee appeared just then with a slightly shorter woman dressed in a white doctor’s lab coat and carrying a classic leather medical bag. “Nerys, this is my daughter, Oriel,” Dee introduced her. “She’s a healing goddess.”

“I fixed the worst of it,” Ninti told Oriel, “at least I think I did, but there are a lot of small wounds you’re better at than I am.”

“Thank you, Ninti,” Nerys told her softly. “At least I can breathe now. Hello, Oriel.”

“Hello, Nerys,” Oriel greeted her. “Now just hold still a bit while I check you out. Okay?” Nerys was lying on her side so Oriel started there, healing each wound as she went. “These aren’t too bad,” she told the dragon. “You have good healthy, thick skin. They didn’t really get past the surface except for this spear puncture and that was badly aimed. No internal injuries so all these probably feel much worse than they are. Do you have any wounds on your other side?”

“Bruises only, I think,” Nerys told her. “I feel much better now, thank you.”

“Well, why don’t you roll over and we’ll get the bruises too,” Oriel suggested. “At least you didn’t burn yourself like you did my other patients today.”

“I’m sorry,” Nerys told her.

“No need,” Oriel told her. “You were supposed to do that. You went easy on them.”

“I was supposed to do that too,” Nerys told her. “Was I too easy?”

“Not really,” Jael told her. “Then it wouldn’t be much of a challenge. Well, cheer up, kid. Just one more to go.” Evrona arrived just then on a dead run along side of Ina.

“Do I have to?” Nerys asked fearfully.

“It wouldn’t be fair to the others if you gave the gold team a free pass,” Jael told her.

“We’ll be there with you,” Ina assured her.

“I could have killed that Daz,” Evrona growled. “He was actually gloating after the contest, but, Nerys, I thought you were going to use illusions more.”

“I thought the fading in and out thing looked impressive,” Nerys admitted.

“It was actually,” Jael agreed, “but I guess the Silver team didn’t think you were real. They should have been more nervous about charging you like that. Try something else. You can make an illusion of yourself flying next time.”

“Um,” Nerys thought about it. “Okay, I will.”

“Yes, and don’t be afraid to dodge the weapons, dear,” Ina advised. “The point isn’t about fearlessness, you know. It’s about who wins the fight. If they’re good enough to drive you off that’s one thing. And if the next one attacks like the last, we’ll get you out of there and patch you up again.”

“Promise?” Nerys asked nervously.

“Girl Scouts’ honor,” Jael told her.

Eleven

The Gold team had some initial trouble with the concept of a flying dragon, but when a crossbow bolt flew unobstructed through the overhead image and disrupted the illusion, they saw Nerys on the far side of the clearing and ran toward her. This time, however, she had the chance to breathe fire at the approaching team. It was a long fight and none of the team members escaped without a few burns, but they were eventually able to close in and drive the dragon off.

Enki not only paid Nerys everything they had agreed on, but doubled the fee as well. “Hazard pay, my dear,” he told her. “I never realized how dangerous this was going to be. I hope you won’t hold it against me?”

“We’ll see what I come up with if I ever decide to produce a television show,” Nerys told him with a wicked chuckle before Ina escorted her back to Wales.

Construction on the third round set took longer than suspected, even though it had been started immediately after the first round and was only finished on the day before the air date of the third show. “We’re going to be practically live,” Enki warned his staff. “Fortunately we only have three teams left, but I fear we’re going to have to change the rules this time and send all the players in at the same time.”

“This is the ‘Descent into the Netherworld’ scenario,” Dee objected. “They’ll get in each other’s way.”

“It’s also a race,” Enki disagreed, “and always has been. We’ll establish penalties for avoidable interference and hide three different treasures in the vault.”

“Automatic disqualification for taking the wrong treasure,” Jael added.

“Good idea,” Enki agreed.

“And the passages crisscross all over the underground maze we built,” Ina added. “Let’s give them each a different course, at least to start with.”

“They’ll have to start together,” Enki considered the idea. “We only have one way in, but we can require each one to go down a different side passage, close off the way back to the main passage after they’ve gone through... Yes, I think that will work. Okay. Team leaders, meet with me in the so-called Underworld in an hour and we’ll figure out the details.”

“We had a few more last minute changes,” Enki told them as they made their way down into the imitation Netherworld.

“Many more changes and the challenge will be to sprout wings and fly to Heaven,” Jael remarked.

“You aren’t far off,” Enki sighed.

“What?” Jael asked.

“No not that,” Enki laughed, “but the network wants to viewers to vote on who wins.”

“Other shows do that,” Dee commented, “but that’s going to be difficult here. It’s a competition with points.”

“And tonight’s show is a race,” Evrona added.

“Well, I managed to talk them out of instituting that tonight and next week’s shows, but the final four shows will be entirely audience choice,” Enki told them. “I’m a bit worried about Erishkigal too.”

“Queen Wacko, you mean?” Jael asked. Dee had to work hard to suppress a snigger.

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” Enki denied.

“Excuse me?” Jael shot back. “Eighteen years ago she was having more conversations with herself per minute than Rona and I ever could no matter how fast we talked. She made the ‘Three Faces of Eve’ look like a monologue.”

“Nergal got her some modern psychiatric help,” Enki told her. “She’s much better now.”

"I don't recall seeing her at Eddy's and Nergal is a regular there," Jael told him.

"She isn't comfortable in a crowd just yet," Enki replied.

"She never mixed well with the rest of us in the old days," Dee added.

"That's just another reason to not use her," Jael protested. "Look, I'm really worried all this could snap her back to what she was like."

"Don't worry so," Enki assured her, "She will only be doing a walk-on appearance and I have arranged for a king of the Netherworld, so we'll have someone keeping a close eye on her."

"Oh?" Jael responded. "You got Nergal down here with her."

"Not quite, he's in his own realm at the moment," Enki told them, "so I put Tomislav on the job."

"Have you lost your mind?" Evrona asked suddenly. "He's my age. He doesn't have the experience to handle an elder goddess." She shot a quick glance at Dee and Jael. "I mean..."

"We know what you mean, Sparrow," Jael told her, "and I agree. Enki, what were you thinking?"

"You didn't see him working with her like I did in rehearsals," Enki told them. "Every time she started getting nervous and antsy, I had Tomislav offer her something to drink. Soon just having him nearby kept her calm. They'll both be fine."

"You'd had better have a backup plan if you're wrong, you know," Jael told him. "And don't tell me it's Ratatosk."

"No, he's too valuable as a messenger this time around," Enki shrugged. "Now I've had the boys fit the next three turn-offs with doors that you will close after your teams have gone through them."

"Aren't we going with them?" Evrona asked.

"No, once they go through their doors, they'll be on their own," Enki replied. "Those doors will also stay shut forcing them to find their ways back out by a different route than they used getting in. In a way, this whole re-plan of the round has made it better and more exciting. I almost wish we were running the program live."

"Really?" Jael asked.

"Almost."

An hour later, Dee, Evrona and Jael stood with their teams and raced forward with them as the starting bell sounded. First they came to the Silver team's turn off and Evrona took three steps down the tunnel with them before taking a step back and hitting a button on the wall that lowered the heavy door between her and the rest of the team. She rushed back into the main tunnel in time to see Dee headed down another tunnel with the Golds and Jael continue on with the Reds.

Dee joined Evrona as she sprinted down the hall and arrived at the Red Team's tunnel just in time to see Jael closing the door there as well. "Bye bye, boys and girls!" she chuckled, catching a look on the

surprised faces of the Red team. She turned to face Dee and Evrona, “Well, let’s get to the control room. We still need to monitor our teams even if they are incommunicado.”

“Nice touch, Jael!” Ina told her as they found the control room. “We got that ‘Bye bye’ on tape and the editors are already working it into a teaser commercial.”

“I always did have a flair for the dramatic,” Jael laughed.

“Some of us call it being a ham,” Rona chuckled as well.

“I never claimed to be subtle,” Jael told her.

“It looks like the Gold team is having trouble already,” Dee remarked, watching her monitor. “They set off an alarm and now are fighting off a pack of demons.”

“With their weapons?” Evrona asked. “Won’t someone get hurt?”

“Well, our demons aren’t really demons, you know,” Ina told her. “We’ve crafted some simulacra that look and act the parts. We have them enchanted to use non-lethal force, but to die when struck by a weapon with killing force. Actually they’ll disappear in a puff of smoke in much the same way Nerys did when she was hurt.”

“Why didn’t we use a simulacrum instead of putting Nerys at risk?” Evrona asked.

“We didn’t think of it,” Ina admitted. “In fact we weren’t planning to use them here, but a whole lot of the cast refused to get into a fight after what happened to Nerys. Well, this means we have an unlimited supply, so I guess that’s better.”

“Looks like Red team is managing to get in undetected,” Jael remarked. “Just as well since they’re still a bit sore from the last two games.”

“What’s with those guys?” Evrona asked suddenly.

“What’s up, Evie?” Ina asked.

“The Silver team,” Evrona replied. “To see them you would think they were scoring points for every demon killed. They couldn’t trip more alarms if they were trying to.”

“Maybe they are trying to,” Jael commented.

“That’s ridiculous,” Dee told her. “That only makes it harder on them.”

“They do seem to be enjoying themselves,” Jael pointed out.

“I don’t think these are normal people,” Evrona told them. “They’ve been too sure of themselves and have done too well ever since this started.”

“Oh come on, Sparrow,” Jael laughed. “Don’t you think you might be holding a grudge because they’ve snubbed all your assistance.”

“Well, maybe,” Evrona admitted, “and they were almost eliminated in the first round. Had the Green

team actually finished, their score would have been higher. I guess you're right. I'm still going to keep an eye on them."

"That's your job, kid," Jael told her.

Gold team made it to the treasure room, but tripped an alarm going in that brought not only more demons to fight but an encounter with Erishkigal and Tomislav. The two real characters didn't get directly involved in the fighting but were able to summon increasingly more guards who would stay on the Gold team's heels all the way to the exit.

The next team in was the Red. They managed to get their hands on the treasure before setting off their first alarm. They had to fight their way out of the room, but Charles, the comedian, was captured before they could make it.

"I wondered how long it would be before there were casualties," Rona sighed.

"Was he hurt?" Evrona asked.

"Just his pride," Jael laughed, "but he looks panicked. I'd better go calm him down."

"I'll come with you," Dee told her. "Two Gold members just went down as well."

They both left the room, leaving Evrona with Ina, Ninti and a handful of technicians working the controls. "Looks like your team finally got to the treasure," Ninti told Evrona. "I was starting to wonder if they would even find the right place."

"I doubt they did it on purpose," Evrona sighed. "They've just been stumbling into every room they could find. Makes me wonder about their exit strategy."

"They probably plan to fight their way out again," Ina smirked. "It's only going to get harder for them."

"Oh dear, they just attacked the king and queen," Ninti gasped.

On the screen they could see the Silver team leaping at Tomislav and Erishkigal. Erishkigal screamed something blood-curdling and the roof of the tunnel collapsed on the Silver team.

"We'd better get down there," Evrona told the others.

"It's too far away," Ina replied. "Let Enki handle this. See? He got Erishkigal and Tomislav out of there safely. And I guess our Queen of Hell didn't bring the house down all that badly, since the Silvers grabbed their treasure and are on the way out."

They continued to watch as the three teams fought their way out of the imitation Hell. The Red team got out first, although by the time they made it, another member had been captured by the demons, The Silver team came in second although with all their members along with the treasure, and the Gold team lost three members and the treasure before they could escape.

Twelve

Evrona continued to be suspicious of the Silver team, but with the conclusion of the third show, her term as guide had come to an end. From here on, all contests would be individual ones.

Enki gave the contestants two days off, half of which would be spent traveling westward to Arizona, where in another park he had commissioned an athletic field. They taped the next two shows as one, however, borrowing great contests from the pages of mythology. For each of the five contests, one member of each team was chosen. The eating contest and the weight lifting contest were borrowed from the story of Thor's and Loki's visit to Utgard, while a foot race involved picking up golden apples along the track as the contestants ran was inspired by the myth of Atalanta. To everyone's surprise the Silver team won every contest so handily that the viewing public voted only them into the final rounds.

"I would have thought the Red would get more sympathy votes," Enki remarked one evening. "They're certainly more likeable than the Silver team members."

"I guess that didn't count as much as winning," Jael told him.

"I still don't think they're normal people," Evrona announced.

"Of course not," Enki agreed, "All our contestants are exceptional."

"But the Silvers seem just a bit too good to be believed," Evrona protested.

"Well, I'll admit I expected the final five to come from both of the semifinal teams," Enki allowed, "but we're not supposed to influence the contest and the Silver team won fairly. Well, the good news is I got the networks to stop asking for audience voting. It turned out most people thought it was silly anyway, so we're back to the double elimination sets of contests using the 'Wheel of Competition' as we originally planned for this part. We'll be doing two shows a week now, but only two contests per show."

"What's the 'Wheel of Competition?'" Evrona asked. "I don't think I've heard of that before."

"We have a large wheel set up with the names of two dozen different sorts of contests painted on it. The contestants will spin the wheel and wherever a pointer is when it comes to a stop, that's what they'll do," Enki explained. "What? You don't like it?"

"It's no stranger than any of the rest of this has been," Evrona decided, "but then I find the whole mortal world strange sometimes."

The next day they taped a five-mile long race between Magda and Secmis. It was just a straight race, nothing fancy, but by the end both contestants crossed the finish line in a dead tie.

“That was odd,” Enki admitted when Evrona continued to remind him of the amazing skills the Silver team had shown. “I would have thought the tape could have shown us a clear winner even if it was too close to see unaided.”

“I would have said it was impossible,” Ina came to Evrona’s assistance. “This wasn’t some short race, there should have been a visible difference.”

“But there wasn’t,” Enki pointed out reasonably.

“This is even odder,” Jael told them, looking up from a television screen. “Poland has just severed diplomatic ties with Egypt.”

“Oh come on,” Enki told her. “What could that have to do with this?”

“Probably nothing,” Jael admitted. “Magda claims to be from the Czech Republic, but it is an odd coincidence there would be trouble between those two parts of the world.”

“I think you’re borrowing trouble, Jael” Enki told her.

“Could be,” Jael admitted. “I always did have a suspicious mind.” She paused as though waiting for something.

“A problem?” Dee asked.

“No,” Jael smiled. “It’s just that Rona usually agrees with me when I say things like that.”

“I’m too busy being suspicious on my own,” Rona admitted.

The next day the wheel chose a wrestling match between Daz and Lani. The rules stated they must wrestle until one opponent was pinned and it took nearly three hours before Lani managed to defeat Daz. While this was happening there was news about a drug bust in Hawaii where four Irish crewmen of a merchant ship were arrested for dealing drugs. Officials in Dublin protested immediately.

In the afternoon Julio squared off with Secmis in a slingshot competition. They spent the afternoon shooting at clay pigeons during which news came that Mexico had official chosen to side with Poland in their argument with Egypt and an Al Qaida cell had been found and arrested in Tijuana.

“Okay, I’ll admit all these occurrences look a bit odd,” Enki finally agreed with Evrona and the others. “Let’s watch our contestants a bit more closely tomorrow.”

The next day brought Magda and Daz against each other in a decathlon that ran so long, that Enki decided to have Lani and Secmis go on with their trivia contest before Magda and Daz were finished. However, even Enki got suspicious when it turned out that the Irish and Polish ambassadors to the United Nations got into a shouting match over a trade agreement at the same time the United States officially blamed Egyptian tolerance for the Al Qaida cell found in Tijuana. Evidence had been found indicating an attempt to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge was being planned. Egypt vehemently denied the charges arguing that they had arrested more Al Qaida members than most other nations.

The final straw came the next morning when Magda and Julio engaged in a chariot race and the brief alliance of Mexico and Poland came to an end. “Are you convinced now?” Evrona asked Enki.

“Something is up, I’ll grant you that,” he admitted. “We have enough tape for three shows and all five contestants have each won a contest. Let’s give them a week off and see what happens.”

“And I’m going to do some more background checks on those five,” Jael decided. “I may owe you an apology, Sparrow. You saw a problem early on, I ignored the signs and your warning. Enki, what do we have on them for documentation so far?”

“Documentation?” Enki asked.

“Don’t we at least have proof they’re in the country legally?” Jael asked. “That’s kind of essential.”

“Is it?” Enki asked.

“We could be in big trouble if they aren’t,” Jael told him. “Well, Evie and I will go track down their bona fides if they have any. Finding their birth certificates should be easy enough if they didn’t lie.”

Jael and Evrona returned four days later and broke the bad news, “We’ve been had. I don’t suppose this is particularly surprising, given what else we’ve seen, but not a single one of those people exists. When are they due back here?”

“They’re here now,” Dee told her.

“Sparrow,” Jael turned to Evrona, “Go get Tomislav to help you round up the Silvers and bring them here. We’re going to get to the bottom of this right now. Where’s Enki?”

“In South Carolina with Ninti,” Dee replied. “They still have Springtime Seed to keep running and they’re coming into their busy season. I just got back from there as well. I’ll call them back here if you think we need them.”

“Yes,” Jael decided. “Let’s play it safe.”

It was half an hour later before Evrona and Tomislav returned with the Silver team members, but by then Enki and Ninti were with them as well. “All right,” Jael demanded harshly. “Who the Hell are you really? Don’t give me that random surfer boy routine, Lani, or that poor Egyptian girl, Secmis. I already know you don’t exist and that goes for the rest of you too.”

The Silvers looked at one another and then with a nod they all transformed subtly but visibly until their true natures were manifest. “Oh, gods,” Jael moaned.

“Literally,” Enki added.

“Okay, I recognize Isis from Egypt and Lugh from Ireland,” Jael noted. “Who are the rest of you?”

“This is Lono,” Dee noted, pointing at the traditional Hawaiian god of stormy weather, and This one looks familiar, but I cannot place her.

“Marzanna,” Ina told Dee. “She’s one of those Slavic deities who have managed to survive into the Christian world. They burn or drown her every year in the Slavic countries to celebrate the coming of

Spring.”

“And isn’t that a major pain?” Marzanna commented dryly.

“Shut it, you,” Jael snapped at her. “And you?”

“Macuilxochitl,” the former Julio admitted, “The Flower Prince. I was a bit worried when I discovered I might have to battle Quetzalcoatl, but I managed to convince him to leave.”

“You did, did you?” Enki asked dangerously.

“That replacement dragon was a lot easier to deal with,” Lugh laughed. “How about bringing her back so we can rough her up some more.”

“What was that?” Evrona demanded of him. Suddenly, she was fully manifested as an Erinys. Her wings nearly touched the roof of the tall tent and her nails were once more several inch-long claws. She shook off her dark glasses and didn’t bother worrying about the blood dripping out of her eyes. “Nerys is my friend,” she told him, grabbing his throat in the claws of her right hand and lifting him off the floor. “You’ll get to her through me. Think you can handle it?” She squeezed a bit and added, “I don’t,” and contemptuously threw the Celtic god into the corner of the tent. And as for the rest of you...”

“Calm down, Sparrow,” Jael advised. “I think you got their attention. Well, I think we’ve just seen why even the gods fear tangling with the Furies, hmm?”

“She doesn’t frighten me,” Lugh retorted, getting back to his feet.

“Then you’re even more stupid than you look,” Jael told him. “You may not have heard of her, but I’m sure my name may have been bandied about the mead hall once or twice. My little zap gun is legend, you know. Now sit down and shut up. Do you lot have any idea of what’s been going on out there? Why did you even enter this contest?”

“We thought it would be fun,” Isis admitted.

“Fun?” Jael echoed. “Fun? You took the whole of this too seriously! Have you seen the chaos you’re causing in the world?”

“You can’t blame that on us,” Lugh told her defiantly.

“The Hell I can’t,” Jael shouted back. “You all know as well as I do that what gods do is usually reflected in some way in the Mortal Realm and right now your little games are bringing us all to the brink of another war. It’s only a matter of time before the rest of the Divine Plain starts picking sides, you know. This whole damned cycle is only eighteen years old and you’re already working on bringing it to an end.”

“It is too soon,” Dee told them tensely. “This would break the cycles and destroy the world and all of us permanently. Is that what you were trying to do?”

“Of course not,” Marzanna replied, the first to look at least slightly abashed. In turn the others started acting embarrassed as well.

“I have a good mind to shut the program down right now,” Enki told them, “but I have commitments

too. It would probably be best to disqualify the lot of you – charges of steroid use seem to be popular right now – and bring back the Red team.”

“We can’t do that,” Ninti pointed out. “The first of the finals gets aired in a little under two hours. We don’t have time to bring back the Reds and put them through two contests even if we show them live.”

“There is that,” Enki admitted. “Much as I don’t like it, we’re going to have to finish with you, but we’re all going to watch you closely. If you dare anything underhanded or if you start taking the contests too seriously again, I won’t hesitate to throw you off the show.”

“The network wants this stretched out, but I’m going to have to resist,” Enki went on, “Some rising young executive wants to bring back audience voting – I wish they’d make up their tiny little minds, so the next show we do will be a talent contest and we’ll tape it next week the afternoon before we go on the air.”

“In front of a live audience,” Jael added, “just to keep you honest.”

“Right,” Enki agreed. “I’ll have to find a venue.”

“New York,” Dee suggested. “Dionysus has a second home there and has some pull with some of the theaters. He can probably arrange to let us have an afternoon so long as we’re out of there in time for the evening show.”

“Or we can go in on a night there is no performance,” Jael pointed out. “In fact I believe that show would be on a Monday. Most shows don’t play on Mondays, you know.”

“They don’t?” Enki asked. “That’s convenient.”

“For us at least,” Jael agreed. “Okay, you all better start honing your entertaining skills.” She waited until the Silver team gods had all left the tent and chuckled, “That ought to keep them out of trouble for a while.”

Thirteen

The talent contest was the most highly rated show in the series so far. Each of the final five performed unique and, to the viewing public, unusual acts although to Jael’s eyes it reminded her forcibly of the

talent portion of any given beauty pageant, but borrowing a trick from other reality programs, Enki hired three celebrity judges. The combined scores from the judges would be weighed against the call-in votes of the viewers using a complex equation that had been thought up by Enki himself. Roughly, however, the three judges' score would be as important as the audience vote.

Elsewhere in the world, the political upheavals had quieted down although Enki had assigned Dee and Ina to keep an up on the "All News" channel just in case.

By random lot, Lugh, still performing under his assumed name, Daz, went on first. He sat on a stool with a small harp in his lap and chanted an original epic poem about the second Battle of Magh Tureadh. The judges were impressed in spite of themselves, but in an attempt to seem nonchalant, one of them commented, "Wow, that was... uh, long. Are we scoring you by the minute? Keep it short, keep it simple. Go on too long and you lose the audience."

"Actually that was really quite good," Jael whispered to Evrona. "It's the sort of bardic performance that would keep people awake all night on a cold winter's evening."

"I could have stood a bit more melody," Evrona replied.

"No, that was exactly the way that should have been performed, very traditional, though only the ethno-musicologists will know that," Jael argued.

"Who's up next?" Evrona asked.

"Lono," Jael replied. "Oh no. He's coming out on stage with a ukulele."

"Is that bad?"

"I just hope he doesn't play, 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips,'" Jael told her.

It turned out the uke was just a prop. Lono, dressed in traditional Hawaiian shirt, played a few chords, but then launched into a stand-up comedy routine that had the audience howling. "He's a lot better than Lizzie," Jael admitted. "I had a real fear he was going to do a Don Ho routine, though. I wonder if he got Maui to write his act for him."

Once again, however, one of the judges was not impressed and told Lono not to quit his day job and another judge was rather noncommittal, but the third told him, "That really wasn't too bad. I think perhaps you could work a bit on your timing but I've heard a lot worse in Vegas."

"Where's Vegas?" Evrona asked Jael.

"A whole other world, kid," Jael laughed. "We'll be there next week for the race semifinals."

"We've done races," Evrona replied.

"Not like this one," Jael laughed. "You'll see."

"Aw," Evrona voiced her disappointment mostly because she had learned Jael expected it.

Macuilxochitl took his turn next and danced an ancient and complex ceremonial dance with flowers and corn stalks. "Very good," Jael noted to Evrona, "but a ceremonial Aztec dance that hasn't been seen

since the Conquest is wasted on this crowd. Maybe if he was performing for other gods only..."

The Aztec god continued on in his amazingly athletic dance and managed to impress the audience, but not two of the judges, one of whom wisecracked. "This isn't American Idol, honey!"

"That was mean," Evrona told Jael.

"And not completely fair either," Jael agreed, "but I told you that performance would be lost on this lot. That wiseass in the judge's booth better watch himself, though. He's not making friends with the contestants. Normally that wouldn't matter, but gods have long memories and while I'm not sure of all of these, I know Isis holds a grudge and Lugh isn't the most patient boy on the block either."

"Isis is next, isn't she?" Evrona asked.

"She is," Jael confirmed. "According to the program she's planning to do a magic act."

"Isn't that cheating?" Evrona asked.

"That depends on what she means by a magic act," Jael replied. "I think we had better keep a close watch on her."

"What are we looking for?" Evrona asked.

"You've come so far, I keep forgetting you don't know how to do that sort of thing," Jael remarked. "I like the way the people of the Pacific basin conceptualize it. Mana. It's the stuff magic comes from. It's the strength of spirit. Others will tell you to look for certain changes in someone's aura, but that's not always a sure sign and sometimes the mana inhabits the object of a spell and not the caster." She gave Evrona some more quick pointers and they turned to watch Isis's performance.

"Amazing," Jael commented as Isis took her bows. "She used no real magic at all it was all illusion."

"Isn't illusion a form of magic?" Evrona asked.

"Uh uh," Jael replied as the applause went on. "What most humans refer to as professional magicians call themselves illusionists. To them illusion is what they do to make their acts look like magic. It's a real art form and not at all easy to accomplish. Isis is the goddess of magic so I really wouldn't have expected her to use this sort of illusion."

"So she was very good?" Evrona asked.

"Passable," Jael decided. "Like Lono's comedic stylings, she needs to work on her timing, but she's good enough to do private parties."

"The judges don't seem to agree with you," Evrona noticed.

"Really, Honey," the crabby judge was snarking, "A rabbit out of your hat? Why don't you just saw yourself in half." Some of the audience laughed at that and Isis glared at the judge. "Please," he went on, "stick to just standing there and pointing at letters."

A ball of flame appeared in Isis' hand and she was about to throw it when Lugh and Lono stepped in to hold her back until she had calmed down. "I don't get it," Evrona shook her head. "Why is he so

rude?”

“Well first of all, it’s a power trip on his part,” Jael tried to explain, “and he’s really full of himself. He doesn’t have a lot of reason to be that I can see, mind. I saw his act a few years ago and found it technically well done, but rather trite artistically. The nicer judge in the middle is actually a very talented actress. The third guy who doesn’t say much, I don’t know. Well, no need to guess who’s up last.”

Marzanna stepped out on stage with an odd-looking stringed instrument and sang an old Slavic folk song. It was a sweet, but modal melody that sounded alien to modern ears. It had Jael sighing for the old days when she was Evrona’s age. “Very nice,” Jael remarked.

“What was that?” the rude judge asked, wrinkling his nose. “Learn to sing on key.”

“That was on key you musical moron,” Jael tried to shout but it came out as a hoarse whisper when Rona held her back. “Let me go, Rona!” Jael rasped.

“I can’t do that, dear,” Rona told her gently. “Staff members are supposed to be neutral, remember?”

“Damn it,” Jael replied, but without any heat. “Okay, I’ll behave. What a shame though. She did it with such pure simplicity and most of the audience just won’t get it because they’ve never heard non-tonal music.”

“Someone has to be eliminated, Jael,” Evrona pointed out.

“I’d have voted against either Lono or Isis,” Jael told her.

“Voting doesn’t end for two hours, you know,” Evrona remarked as the monitors showed the credits rolling.

“You mark my words, Sparrow,” Jael told her. “Marzanna won’t get the votes to be able to stay in.”

Fourteen

The core staff of “Living Legend” was packed and ready to move on to Las Vegas even before the final vote tally confirmed Jael’s prediction. The task of breaking the news fell to Enki, but Jael took the

Slavic goddess aside to compliment her song. “The audience and judges just didn’t understand it,” Jael told her.

“If there’s ever a next time, I’ll try something a from the Pop music rack,” Marzanna replied with a shrug.”

“That’s the spirit,” Jael laughed, “but not here, I hope. If we ever do this again we’re going to check out the contestants a lot more closely.”

“Can’t say as I blame you,” Marzanna nodded. “Well, it’s high time I get back to Poland. They’ll be burning me next week.”

“Yeah, I heard about that, and in other places they drown you?” Jael asked.

“Indeed. Fortunately it’s only in effigy,” Marzanna explained and then sighed. “The things we do to keep remembered.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Jael told her. “I’m not ever likely to have an active cult. Even the Franciscans have never heard of me. Just as well, though. I’m too busy to put up with that sort of nonsense.”

“You are a very strange demoness, Jael,” Marzanna told her.

“Told you so,” Rona laughed.

“See what I have to put up with?” Jael sighed.

“It’s either her or a cult, I think,” Marzanna chuckled.

“My alter-ego,” Jael smiled. “I think I’ll keep her.”

“Jael?” Evrona interrupted, “Dee’s car is all packed up. Do you want to ride with her or go with Ratatosk by way of Yggdrasil?”

“Road trip!” Jael decided.

There was not a lot of set up work to do in Las Vegas and the largest problem to be solved was arranging with the city police to allow the contestants to run down the Strip for the finale of their races. Once they had that arranged, it was short work to arrange a few spectator stands and watering stops across some twenty-six miles and three hundred eighty-five yards across the desert.

“Do our runners really need the water?” Evrona asked Jael one day. “I mean these are gods, not mortals, who are running.”

“They’re going to be running through a desert,” Jael told her. “They’re going to be wearing fifty-five pounds of hoplite armor. You know, after that movie, *300*, people seem to think Greek warriors wore nothing but helmets, capes and posing pouches, but the fact is they wore some fairly heavy armor and that armor is going to sweat even a god down to a stick under the desert sun. More importantly we’ll have spectators out there near the water stops at least and they don’t realize who our contestants really are, so it has to look good. Besides, some people can be as stupid as some gods. There’s always someone out there who forgets that for all the amenities of Vegas, this really is a desert and all deserts are

deadly environments. The water and sports drinks are out there as much for them as it is for the runners.”

“I thought we were selling drinks and snacks out there,” Evrona commented.

“We’re selling souvenirs – caps, t-shirts and pennants, but there’s going to be a lot of drinks on the tables and only four runners,” Jael told her. “Anyone who wants water, soda or Gatorade gets it courtesy of Springtime Seed and our other sponsors.”

“For that matter,” Rona added, “we’ll be giving away small portions of popcorn, courtesy of another sponsor, to make sure folks keep their salt at healthy levels in case they don’t want to have sports drinks. It’s really advertizing, but it will also keep the paramedics from having to go into overload as well.”

“We’re broadcasting live this time,” Evrona noted, picking up her sketch pad and a pencil. Since their return from Hattamesett, Jael had rarely seen her without it when not otherwise occupied by assigned duties. “Is that wise?”

“Wise, Sparrow?” Jael laughed. “I’ll let you know after the show. We have a two and a half hour time slot and we’re going to have to do a lot of filling from previous shows as well as showing clips of how we prepared for the race and still more commentary by the contestants.”

“Good thing we found out who they really are,” Rona added. “Their statements were starting to get a bit inconsistent. Now at least, we can keep their cover stories the same from clip to clip.”

“That’s the least of our worries,” Jael scoffed. “They were mostly complaining about their teammates and competition anyway.”

“And bragging about how well they did or would do,” Rona added. “Lono and Isis kept trying to claim similar experiences and they weren’t adding up well.”

“I doubt anyone noticed,” Jael argued.

“Not at the beginning when we only had a small viewership,” Rona agreed. “But now there are dozens of fan websites, and people have clips from our shows all over YouTube and similar sites.”

“And we’re not getting any revenue from those,” Jael pointed out.

“Do we need it?” Rona asked.

“No, not really,” Jael admitted, “but we ought to at least act as though it matters. The producers and staff of other shows would.”

“Maybe in the second season,” Rona told her.

“Let’s just get through this one,” Jael retorted.

Finally the day of the big race arrived. Unlike on previous shows there were to be two eliminations. Jael and Dee had been in favor of sending all four contestants off at the same time and accepting the two fastest into the final round, but Enki, Ninti and Ina voted to keep them in pairs so as the race started, Lugh and Macuilxochitl started together and fifteen minutes later Lono and Isis got their starting signal.

“Jael,” Enki commended her once the runners were off and they were in a helicopter racing back into

the city, “having them carry those spears and shields was inspired.”

“Real hoplites would have had to,” Jael remarked, “and maybe I still haven’t forgiven them for trying to deceive us. It does up the difficulty level, doesn’t it?”

“They can handle it,” Enki laughed. “Where’s Evrona at the moment? I was starting to think you and she were glued together.”

“Evie’s back in town,” Jael told him. “She and Ina are speaking to the cameras after the second commercial break, one of those filler segments we’re doing. I just thought of something. This race is going to finish in the dark, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I imagine so,” Enki nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s going to get pretty cold when the sun goes down, isn’t it?”

“Only into the mid-forties,” Enki shrugged.

“But it was nearly eighty when they started,” Jael remarked. “That’s quite a drop.”

“It won’t drop all at once,” Enki replied. “It will probably still be in the low sixties at the end of the race. As comfortable as it’s likely to get for them.”

“Good thing it’s not the middle of the summer, though,” Jael laughed. “I doubt they’d get halfway in that rig then.”

“I’m just hoping they can finish the race while the show is still on,” Enki replied.

“The real trouble is going to be keeping them down to mere mortal speeds,” Jael told him. “They’ll finish and have time for interviews as well.”

The race went as quickly as Jael predicted and the runners had as much difficulty as she had hoped, given the arms and armor they had to carry. At one point a reporter asked if that was fair, but Jael gave her now familiar chuckle and told him, “If this was just a normal race it wouldn’t be a part of ‘Living Legend.’”

The crowds, however, surprised them all. Once the runners were on the Las Vegas Strip, spectators were so thick, the police had to adjust their lines to allow them on half the street as Lugh and Macuilxochitl came in. However, by then it was clear that Lugh was two seconds ahead of his Aztec opponent and he stumbled across the finish line clearly in front, although Macuilxochitl appeared to recover more quickly.

Twelve minutes later Isis and Lono finished in a dead heat and Lono immediately filed a protest against Isis.

“I think Isis cheated,” Evrona reported in private to Enki and his core staff while the show still had some fifteen minutes to go. “She was magically enhancing her performance. You can see it on the tape if you look carefully. It looks like she’s flying just a bit between each step, and I noticed some expenditure of mana while she was doing it. It’s fairly clear.”

“When did you learn about mana?” Ina asked curiously.

“Jael taught me,” Evrona replied.

“Fine,” Enki decided. “I’ll just disqualify her. Call it performance enhancing and most will assume drugs. Given how fast they came in nobody will doubt it.”

“Not so fast,” Dee stopped him. “Lono shouldn’t be so eager to cast the first stone. He was cheating too. Ina and I both caught him. It shows up on the tape in several spots too where the wind seems to be blowing considerably stronger in Isis’ face than his even though they are practically side by side.”

“There’s a similar expenditure of mana at those times as well,” Ina added. “Some of it might merely be Isis trying to compensate but a lot is still by Lono’s doing.”

“You know,” Jael pointed out, indicating a nearby monitor show the program as it was still running, “everyone saw them come across the line together. The instant replays show no winner between them. If we disqualify them both it’s going to look bad. Why not given them a new challenge as a tie breaker? It will give us another show and I have an idea that might keep those two in line for the rest of the cycle, if it doesn’t kill them now.”

“Another show?” Enki asked. “When?”

“Whenever the network wants it,” Jael told him, “but we’ll tape the tie breaker tomorrow afternoon.”

“Just what do you have in mind, Jael?” Dee asked interestedly, while Enki started calling the network.

They brought Isis and Lono, once more in hoplite armor, out the next day to the base of a five hundred foot-tall cliff. “What are we supposed to do here, Jael?” Isis asked, looking speculatively up at the cliff.

“Climb,” Jael told her. “First to the top goes on to the final round. Of course it’s not all that simple.”

“Of course,” Lono sighed.

“You brought this on yourselves,” Jael told him without mercy. “If either of you would like to withdraw we can all go back and have drinks by the pool. No, I didn’t think so. Well, obviously you’ll be climbing in armor and with those large shields strapped to your backs. We’ll find a way to attach the spears too, I should think. Oh, and I’ll be tying your legs together.”

“What?” Isis asked, astonished.

“I think you heard me,” Jael laughed. “We’ll tie your legs together to make this a contest worthy of gods. What did you expect after yesterday’s performance? A game of checkers? None of us are very happy with you at the moment and you’ve already used up your second chance. If yesterday’s show hadn’t been shown live, you’d both be out of here, but you got lucky. Now you will climb this cliff in full armor and with your legs tied and no magic.”

“Of course not,” Lono remarked a little too smoothly to suit Jael.

“Take a look at this cliff,” Jael suggested. “Take a really good look. Notice the enchantment? Want to know what it does?” She gestured negligently up at the cliff and a small explosion went off and a

fist-sized rock shot out and into the desert. “Hey! That got some distance, didn’t it?” Jael laughed. “Just imagine what might happen if you get in the way. Any use of magic will set it off. One more thing though. Just in case there’s a way around that spell we haven’t thought of, we’re going to be watching you. Lono, Inanna and Mother Nature are at the top of your rope. Isis, Evie and Ninti are at the top of yours. If they detect any foul play, they’ll cut your rope.”

“And where will you be?” Isis asked angrily.

“Right here,” Jael told her, “waiting to say, ‘I told you so!’ Don’t make me say it.”

Then Jael stepped back and let Enki give them their instructions with the cameras rolling. A few minutes later they were off.

Both contestants started off as well as might be expected pulling themselves up the rope using only their hands, but by the time Lono was halfway up, Isis was a good one hundred feet behind. Then Isis noticed that while her feet were bound, she could still use them against the cliff to give her a bit of support as she climbed. It took the next twenty minutes to catch up to Lono a mere twenty feet below the top of the cliff, but she got ahead before he could figure out what she was doing and Isis won the race.

“Unfair!” Lono complained almost at once. “She used her feet.”

“I noticed,” Ninti told him calmly. “Is that a problem?”

“That’s cheating!” he accused. “We weren’t supposed to use our feet.”

“Who told you that?” Ninti countered. “Jael told you your feet would be tied together. No one even said you couldn’t use them so long as they remained that way.”

Lono continued to complain and made an angry statement for the camera, but Enki decided not to show the storm god’s final statement on the air that night during the surprise one-hour special the network had allowed them. Instead they showed a gracious Isis commending Lono, nowhere on camera, on a well fought contest. Then they had Lugh and Isis shake hands for the camera before being taken separately to isolated locations, only mysteriously hinted at.

Fifteen

The show's public relations campaign hinted that the finalists were being kept somewhere in Southern California, but in actuality, they had been sent to Dilmun, the ancient Sumerian aspect of Heaven, where they were allowed to rest up and prepare in whatever manner they chose for the upcoming final competition.

As keepers, they had Ninti, Dee, Ina, Jael, Rona, Evrona and Tomislav to both ensure they weren't up to anything but legitimate preparations and to ensure they had whatever they required. "You really don't trust me do you?" Isis asked Evrona one morning when the young Erinys came by with breakfast.

"We caught you cheating, Isis," Evrona replied, "and you entered the contest on false pretenses. We don't entirely trust either of you. Would you if the situation were reversed?"

"I suppose not," Isis sighed. "Do I get to know in advance what the final contest is?" She looked deeply into Evrona's bloodshot eyes.

"No," Evrona laughed. "And don't try prying like that. Dee taught me how to block it and you'll only manage to invoke my natural form if you aren't careful. You do remember what nearly happened to Lugh, don't you?"

"I have always thought the Furies' reputations were somewhat exaggerated," Isis commented.

"This would not be a good time to test that, Queen of Magic," Evrona told her seriously. Secretly she wondered if she really had the power to prevail over the older and far more experienced goddess. She was not anywhere as confident as she made herself sound, but Jael had coached her to show no weakness when either Lugh or Isis tried to bully her and so far both had alternatively tried to bully and wheedle information from both Evrona and Tomislav.

Isis just shrugged at Evrona's pronouncement and started eating her breakfast.

Political tensions on the Mortal Plain which had been quiet for a while suddenly flared up again. The United Kingdom and the United States had joined with Ireland in their arguments with Egypt and in response, most of the Islamic world had fallen in behind Egypt.

Enki told his team to keep an extra careful watch on the finalists, but neither seemed to be doing anything that might have reflections in the Mortal Realm. But then Ratatosk arrived with Odin with a disturbing report.

"Did ya have to put the gateway to the rest of the Universe under water?" the squirrel complained in lieu of a polite greeting.

"Nice to see you too, Ratty," Enki laughed, "and yes, as a matter of fact I did have to. You've been here often enough to know that."

"Yeah, well, I still don't like it," Ratatosk told him.

"It can be a bit disconcerting, Water God," Odin added.

"My apologies, Lord Odin," Enki told him as they started to walk toward a nearby garden, "but I really didn't have too much choice in the matter at the time and once done, it couldn't be moved. It's somewhat less startling on the way out." Dilmun was nearly all gardens, save for the areas on which the tall ziggurats had been built.

“I know,” Odin nodded. “We’re here to see what we can do to help.”

“Help?” Enki asked, gesturing for them both to sit on one of the stone benches. He sat down as well, suddenly missing the padded leather chair in his office. “The show is almost over.”

“Not with the show, Wet One,” Ratatosk told him, “at least not directly. But while your contestants might be behaving themselves for a change, the rest of the Divine Plain is picking up sides.”

“Oh,” Enki remarked. “Is that where all the tension is coming from? Don’t those idiots ever learn?”

“Gods are conservative enough to make Ronald Reagan look like a flaming liberal in comparison,” Ratatosk replied. “When that bunch thinks of the ‘Good Old Days,’ they’re talking about two or three thousand years ago. You know that. And now absolutely everyone is taking an interest in your little game show. At least the ratings are good.”

“Terrific,” Enki retorted. “Did you have something in mind?”

“I’m here to see what I can do to keep the peace between the pantheons, Lord Enki,” Odin told him. “I have managed to keep my own in line for the most part. Some are already working with you so we have a start there.”

“I’m not prepared to be out there calming things down,” Enki admitted. “I’m getting ready for the grand finale next week.”

“Is that what we’re calling it this time?” Ratatosk asked. “We’ve had Armageddon, Ragnarok, the Apocalypse and now the Grand Finale?”

“It’s just the conclusion of a television show,” Enki protested.

“It could also be the untimely conclusion of the cycle, Water Lord,” Odin replied.

“But it’s only a game,” Enki told him. “Okay the winner gets one million dollars as a prize, but that’s meaningless to a god.”

“You really don’t know?” Odin asked.

“Know what?” Enki asked.

“We’re on the brink again,” Odin told him grimly.

“Over a game show?” Enki asked.

“Last time it was because of one over-ambitious demon,” Odin told him.

“Tiamat and Absu!” Enki swore, jumping top his feet. “It’s a game. Just a meaningless game that I started for my own amusement. I wanted to see if I could produce a successful TV show.”

“Why?” Odin asked.

“Haven’t you ever done something just to see if you could?” Enki asked. He suddenly realized he

had started to pace and quickly returned to his bench.

“I am not quite the inventor you are, Lord Enki,” Odin replied. “That which I have done has always had a purpose.”

“So did this,” Enki maintained, “Ever since the end of the last cycle I’ve been trying to understand this modern world. I’m getting a good grip on it too. And you tell me that we’re on the Eve of Destruction? I don’t believe it. Oh, hell. It sounds like I haven’t been paying enough attention to what’s been going on around me.”

“That’s why I’m here, chief,” Ratatosk told him. Enki shot him a skeptical look. “You didn’t keep me busy enough on the show, so I was able to keep going back to Yggdrasil and see what was going on in the world. I think the stuff that was going on a couple weeks back was just incidental stuff. It was the same sort of weirdness you get when Thor and Thialfi go counting coup against the Midgard Serpent. What’s happening now is more organized. Whole pantheons are picking sides in this Isis-Lugh battle and you know what cheaters gods can be.”

“Gee, thanks,” Enki told him sourly.

“You can’t argue the point, though, can you?” Ratatosk taunted him. “Anyway, all these gods are betting on the outcome of the contest.”

“That shouldn’t make such a big splash among the mortals,” Enki disagreed.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Ratatosk asked. “Gods cheat. Some are betting honestly, sure, but a lot are working to make the contest come out their way.”

“How do they even know what sort of contest the final battle will be?” Enki asked. “We haven’t announced that yet.”

“How did you know to hire Hawk Wilton for your Celestial League team manager?” Ratatosk countered.

“They wasted the effort of divination on that?” Enki asked. “What are they betting? The Rhinegold?”

“Gods also hate to lose,” Ratatosk told him. “You don’t enjoy it, do you?”

“It’s not high on my list,” Enki admitted.

“I’ve noticed,” Ratatosk chuckled. “So they’re all looking for ways to influence the outcome. Naturally you can’t have so many deities getting all partisan without seeing reflections on the Mortal Plain.”

“So various gods are trying to fix the contest,” Enki translated. “I can handle that.”

“Can you handle a nuclear war too, big guy?” Ratatosk asked him. “That’s how it’s all translating out. Every nuclear power is aiming their weapons at all the others and a few more besides. All it’s going to take is one lousy suicide bomber in the wrong place and we’re in for a long hot summer that’s going to make 1967 seem like a glacier, in both heat and speed.”

“I don’t like to admit it, but the squirrel is right,” Odin admitted. “Look, you’ve had your head down

and concentrated on this game of yours and it's important that you bring it to a safe conclusion. But we also need to calm the situation down. Can you keep your finale a fair contest?"

"I can if I have to send both Isis and Lugh into next Tuesday," Enki told him.

Odin thought about that, obviously having trouble with the expression. Finally he nodded and told Enki, "Then I'll see about holding the world together out there. I've been speaking to Zeus, Enlil and Io and we're doing what we can to mediate the damage."

"All four of you, huh?" Enki asked. "Couldn't get Yu Huang in on this?"

"The Jade Emperor?" Odin asked. "We've contacted him. He's with us personally, but his court is going both ways at once on this. He's promised to do what he can to keep his own people at bay."

"That's probably the best we're likely to get out of him," Enki decided. "Better keep a weather eye in that direction anyway. It was just last year he was trying to leverage a divine takeover."

"He has nothing to gain from this," Odin replied.

"Unless he doesn't believe we're in trouble," Enki pointed out.

"Hmm, maybe I'd better have another word with him as well," Odin decided.

Sixteen

"Sir?" Evrona asked Enki. "Are you all right?"

"Huh?" Enki asked. After Seeing Odin and Ratatosk off, Enki had gone for a walk to clear his mind and ended up back in the same garden he had talked to them in. Now, two hours later, he was still trying to come to grips with what he had learned.

"Up here, sir," Evrona told him and came to a graceful landing a few feet away. She pulled another of her black handkerchiefs, and wiped the blood off her cheeks.

"Don't you find that a bit inconvenient?" Enki asked.

“A bit,” she replied, “but sometimes I just have to fly.”

“I know what you mean,” Enki smiled at the young Erinys. She gave him her usual thin and hesitant smile in return and then sat down.

“Jael said I should report this to you,” she told him nervously.

“I do seem to be the go-to guy today,” Enki remarked. “Okay, Evrona, what do you have for me?”

“I saw someone meet with Isis,” Evrona reported. “She came to the house Isis is staying in and gave her something.”

“That’s not too unusual,” Enki remarked. “Are you sure it wasn’t one of the Anunnaki bringing Isis her dinner? We have quite a few, you know.”

“One of the local gods, sir?” Evrona asked in return. “I don’t think so. This one was dressed differently than the people who live here. Her chest...” she blushed and tried again, “She was nude from the waist up.”

“Really?” Enki asked with sudden interest. “A servant from her own pantheon then, perhaps? That’s very different. Both contestants are supposed to be in isolation this week. What’s wrong?”

Evrona was holding her arms nervously in front of her own chest. “How could she walk around like that?”

“Different lands, different cultures, dear,” Enki shrugged. “Don’t let it bother you. How did you happen to see this?”

“Jael set me to watching her,” Evrona replied, “Isis, I mean. She’s cheated before, you know.”

“All five of them did,” Enki replied. “That sort of behavior really is beneath them, but they don’t really have modern cults, not like they used to, so maybe this was an attempt to get belief in them again. Hmm, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“What, sir?” Evrona asked.

“Fame brings a form of worship albeit not the sort we all enjoyed in the old days,” Enki explained. “I wonder if that’s why they really did it. It explains so much. We thrive on mortal belief, you know. Many of us who have been major gods get addicted to it and have a hard time continuing on without it. It was silly of them, but we’re all silly sometimes.”

“Why silly?” Evrona asked.

“Television fame is fleeting at best,” Enki answered. “A modern artist, by the name of Warhol, predicted that in the future everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes. I think with modern television we have reached that future or something very close. Isis, Lugh, Lono and the others used the show to gain a bit of recognition, their fifteen minutes of fame. It’s possible they hoped to use it as a seed and let it grow into something more, I don’t know, but it makes a lot more sense than doing it out of boredom. It also explains why the whole world is close to falling apart.”

“What?” Evrona asked worriedly.

“Oh yes,” Enki told her. “Lord Odin of Asgard was just here telling me our little game show has all the gods contending with each other and that contention is affecting the entire Mortal Realm. What did this servant bring her, dear?”

“I don’t know,” Evrona admitted. “Jael is looking into it, but she thought you ought to know about this immediately.”

“Uneasy lies the head and all that,” Enki muttered. “Okay. I want you to do something for me. Go find Ninhursag, umm, you call her Dee, and Inanna, Ina that is, Ninti, and Jael and ask them to meet with me for dinner in my home.”

“Your home, sir?” Evrona asked. “Where is that?”

“Don’t worry, they know,” Enki told her. “Oh, I want you and your boyfriend there too.”

“Tomislaw? He’s not my boyfriend!” Evrona replied quickly.

“Really?” Enki asked curiously. “Sorry, I just assumed that’s why he’s been following you all over Creation. Well, he’s been acting as my assistant on the show a lot as well as working the cameras and playing the Devil in the Underworld contest. I haven’t seen him since we got here though.”

“Jael set him to watching Lugh,” Evrona told him.

“Ah, then I’ll definitely want a report,” Enki nodded. “Well go ahead, and I’ll see you in a few hours.” He got up and started walking away purposefully.

“Wait!” Evrona called. “Where is your home?”

“Jael knows,” Enki told her.

“Out there?” Evrona asked sometime later. “Under water?”

“Yeah,” Jael laughed. “Enki has a twisted sense of humor.”

“How will we breathe?” Evrona asked, unwilling to step into the water itself.

“The same way we did when we got here, kid,” Jael told her. “Remember how we materialized down below after leaving Yggdrasil? You didn’t have any trouble breathing then, did you?”

“Well actually,” Evrona started.

“That was all in your mind,” Jael assured her. “Oh come on, jump in. The water’s fine!”

Evrone took a hesitant step and remarked, “I can’t even feel it.”

“That’s really old magic,” Jael told her as they started walking downward. “Just stay on the path unless you care to go swimming and I don’t really recommend that at the depths we’re going. Evie! Breathe! In, out, you know?”

“But it’s water,” Evrona protested nervously.

“Not on the path,” Jael told her. “Claustrophobic, huh? I’m surprised you didn’t have any problems with that until now.”

“I don’t fear closed in spaces,” Evrona told her, “but I don’t want to drown!”

“Who does?” Jael asked.

“Jael, you’re not being fair,” Rona interrupted. “Evie, dear, if this really bothers you, you can go back and wait for us.”

“And how will we get her out of Dilmun?” Jael asked pointedly.

“Knock her out and carry her if we must,” Rona replied. “Go ahead, Evie. We’ll tell you all about it later.”

“No,” Evrona decided forcing herself to start walking forward again. She passed Rona and added, “Enki wants me there.”

“Good girl,” both Rona and Jael told her.

It was dark once they got deep enough underwater and with the sun setting over Dilmun above, soon the only available light was from the path itself. Once she could no longer see the ocean around them, Evrona relaxed.

Enki’s home was at the top of a large submarine replica of the Absu ziggurat and had so many stairs even Jael was winded by the time the reached the top. “Whew!” she told the others. I’m not getting any younger. How do you all manage?”

“There are other ways to get here, dear,” Dee told her.

“I’m not quite up to that sort of thing yet,” Jael replied.

“Soon,” Ina told her assuringly. “If you like though, you can ride home with me.”

“Beats walking,” Jael nodded. “So where is Mister Wizard?”

“Right here,” Enki said from behind her. “I brought Tomislaw with me. I assume everyone here knows of Isis’ recent visitor. Tomislaw, would you tell them what you saw this afternoon?”

“I was following Lugh like Jael told me to,” Tomislaw reported. “Mostly all he’s been doing is exercising and going for walks. But today as he was walking, he stopped and pulled a large spear out from behind some bushes. The spear was making noises of some sort, but he also found a small keg of something that he stuck the spear’s head in and it got quiet again. Then he picked up the keg and the spear started following him back to his house.”

“The spear followed him?” Ina asked.

“It floats in the air and seems to move of its own will,” Tomislaw replied. “It followed him back like a

puppy.”

“That would be his magic spear,” Dee remarked. “Yes, I know, a blinding glimpse of the obvious. It fights without his having to direct it and constantly thirsts for blood unless he puts it to sleep. That keg must be a sleeping draught of some sort.”

“Neither of them are playing fair then,” Jael noted. “I managed to sneak in and find out what Isis’ servant brought her. It was a wide belt of some sort, magical of course, and it bestows knowledge and wisdom.”

“Fairly selective wisdom if it advises she use it,” Ninti commented.

“It answers questions you put to it,” Jael replied. “I’m fairly sure the one question Isis is not asking is whether she should even use the belt.”

“It seems they know what I’m planning for the finale too,” Enki told them and then went on to describe what was going on in the rest of the world.

“But you have a cunning plan, do you?” Jael asked archly.

“I’d like to think so,” Enki replied.

“That’s nothing new,” Dee laughed.

“Okay, what’s this plan?” Ina asked.

“We’re going to strip them of all their divine powers,” Enki told them.

“Can we do that?” Jael asked.

“In a sense, yes,” Enki assured her.

“In what sense?” Jael pressed. But Enki just grinned for a long time before launching into his explanation.

Seventeen

Tomislaw and Evrona had to work together several times over the next few days during which they had to sneak into Isis' and Lugh's houses and look for still more magical items. Finding several, they only made note of what they were and then carefully left everything just as they had found it.

"That's quite an arsenal," Evrona remarked after leaving Lugh's place. "I'd think he was getting ready to fight World War Three all by himself."

"Heh," Tomislaw laughed a bit.

"What?" Evrona asked suspiciously.

"You almost sounded like Jael there," he explained.

"Is that bad?" Evrona asked archly.

"No," Tomislaw replied instantly. "It's good. I like it."

Evrona turned her face to hide a blush. "Come on. We have to let the others know what we found. The finale's tonight, you know."

"Looking forward to it," Tomislaw told her.

"Why?" Evrona asked.

"Cause when it's over we can go back to Hell," Tomislaw told her.

"I'm not going back," Evrona told him.

"What do you mean you're not going back?" Tomislaw demanded. "Where could you go? These gods tolerate us while we're part of their team but they won't want us getting in the way and making trouble for them later. They don't want our kind here."

"They like Jael," Evrona pointed. "She's out here all the time and has a lot of friends."

"She's different," Tomislaw told her. "She's got a human soul."

"Rona's nice," Evrona defended her friend, "and I think you're wrong. These people like us too."

"No one likes demons, Evie," Tomislaw told her, "not even other demons."

"Who said you could call me that!" Evrona exploded at him. "Don't. If you want to go back, you can go back right now, but I don't belong there and never did. Maybe I don't have a home, but no home is better than the Valley of Dis."

"I like the valley," Tomislaw told her. "It's home."

"Not to me," Evrona maintained.

"Your sisters live there," he pointed out.

“My sisters never understood me or accepted me,” Evrona retorted. “They told me to stop thinking and just torture damned souls. Well, there’s a better life. Jael and Rona have shown me that. Maybe I can’t follow them around forever, but I will until I find a place I do fit in.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Tomislaw told her.

“Why?” Evrona asked. “Because our teachers told you so? They lied or maybe they just don’t know any better themselves. Look you can go back at any time you want, but for now I’m assigned to Jael. You aren’t. You weren’t even supposed to get out. At least I had a pass.”

“Don’t need a pass,” Tomislaw told her.

“Tomislaw,” Evrona told him. “You do. You could have been in big trouble, but Jael sent word back keeping you in the clear. You should at least thank her for going out on a limb like that, you know. Oh, learn some common decency already.” He stared at her dumbly. “Never mind, we have a report to make,” she shook her head in frustration.

They met with the finalists two hours before the telecast. “We’re going live again tonight,” Enki told Lugh and Isis. “Now I have it on good authority that you both already know what the final round is going to be. Good going. I hadn’t decided for certain myself until yesterday. So now you know it’s going to be a no-holds-barred cage match. I was tempted to make it a Thunderdome. You know; two enter but only one leaves? Except the network didn’t like the idea. I thought they were afraid one of you might die, but it turns out they were afraid of copyright infringement. Go figure.”

“Are you trying to scare us?” Isis asked defiantly.

“Would it work?” Enki laughed. “I didn’t think so. No, I’m going to let you two go at it with everything you’ve got. One thing, though. You entered this contest as mortals and that’s just the way you’ll finish it.”

Enki gestured dramatically and started speaking words that had last been written down on clay tablets in the sort of hen tracks archaeologists referred to as cuneiform. As he did so, a dome of light formed over the assembled gods and nothing could be seen outside of it. He went on like that for another five minutes and finished by pointing at Isis and then Lugh and, as Enki did so, the light flashed and sparks rose from the two finalists.

“There!” he told them, sounding satisfied. “Now, until this time tomorrow you two are both mortal. No magic, no cheating. You’re going to have to play the game by the rules I set now.”

“I don’t feel any different,” Lugh told him.

“Does being mortal feel different from being divine?” Enki asked. “I honestly wouldn’t know. I guess you won’t until you feel your last breath escaping your lungs.”

“Fah!” Lugh spat at Enki’s feet.

“An offering to the god of water?” Enki asked wryly.

Isis closed her eyes and tried to do something, but nothing happened and her eyes snapped open in surprise. “You did it!” she exclaimed, putting her hands to her face. “How?”

“You saw me, Queen of Magic,” Enki told her.

“Osirus! I can feel the life slipping away by the second,” she told him. “Stop it. Please!”

“Can’t,” Enki replied. “It’s out of my hands now. One day of mortality. It shouldn’t kill you. Lugh here might, or you might kill him, or maybe you two will fight to a submission like you’re supposed to do. It’s your choice.”

“Arrrh!” Lugh roared primal scream. “My spear!”

“Just kind of sits there on the ground like an inanimate object, doesn’t it?” Enki laughed. “Are you convinced yet or would you like to frustrate yourself into insanity. It will probably make it easier on the lady here. No? It’s about time. Now we’re going directly from here to the Tree and then to the arena. Follow me.”

Without waiting for either of them to move, Enki caused a bubble to form around all of them and then willed it to fly up into the air. As they rose up into the air, the surrounding area came back into view and they were able to see the sea rising up at them alarmingly and then suddenly they were under water. Enki’s bubble continued rapidly downward until it reached the bottom and then they were suddenly flying over one of the limbs of Yggdrasil. After another five harrowing minutes as Enki made the bubble swoop around and between the branches at a speed that had Jael hanging on to Evrona’s arm for comfort, they suddenly arrived inside the San Diego Sports Arena.

In the center of the arena’s bowl was a platform about twice the size of a wrestling or boxing ring and the seats had been placed down to within ten feet of ring side. Suspended from a set of heavy steel cables was a large cage of steel bars with walls that were twenty feet height and a ceiling that made the ring escape-proof once the cage was lowered.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Enki asked.

“I’m impressed,” Jael admitted. “How long have we had this venue booked?”

“A week and a half,” Enki told her. “There were several places we looked at, but this was the best deal for what we needed.” He checked his watch. “Perfect timing, the production crew should be here any minute for the dry run-through. Everything is in place. “Ah! Gilgamesh!” Enki greeted the ancient hero as he entered the arena from the dressing rooms. “Who else is here?”

“Thor and Hercules came in with me,” Gilgamesh replied. “We’ve been opening the dressing and staff rooms.”

“Great!” Enki told him. “Why don’t you take Lugh here back to his dressing room and stay with him and help him get ready for the show.”

“I don’t need any help,” Lugh grumbled.

“Oh, nonsense!” Enki told him with forced joviality. “A few fellow heroes like yourself to swap lies with. It’s the least I can do to put you together.”

“Come on, Lugh,” Gilgamesh told him in the same tone. “Tell me about the Tuatha Dé Danann,” and led him into the back rooms, adding, “again.”

“Ninhursag, why don’t you and Ninti help Isis get ready?” Enki suggested.

After they had left Evrona quietly asked, “Can you really make a god mortal even for a few hours?”

“There are stories,” Enki laughed, “but that’s all they are. Stories.”

“You believed them yourself until Dee told you otherwise,” Ina commented.

“I did,” Enki confessed, “but the thing, Evrona, is that what we did was all blarney and flimflam, lights and mirrors, pure illusion.”

“But they both tried to do magic and couldn’t,” Evrona pointed out.

“Oh that!” Ina laughed. “The real trick is in knowing whom you’re dealing with. I’ve known Isis a very long time and the first thing she always does in a stress situation is manifest in her fully divine form. It’s pretty easy to block when you know it’s coming. We had to guess with Lugh, but he seemed to be having a bit too much fun with that magic spear of his, so we figured he’d try playing with that as a test and just leaned back so he couldn’t move it.”

“So we got lucky?” Evrona asked.

“Don’t knock it, Sparrow,” Jael told her. “It worked. Enki, I think Ina and I ought to go help keep an eye on Isis and I’ll take Evrona with me.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Enki agreed. “Tomislaw, why don’t you go see if Gilgamesh and the boys can use anything.”

“This is unfair!” Isis raged as Evrona entered her dressing room. “I’m not cut out to be a mortal woman.”

“It’s only for a day,” Ninti reminded her. “You’re strong. You can take it for one day.”

“But he’s going to win,” Isis almost cried.

“Lugh is only mortal too, you know,” Dee told her.

“But he’s a man and I’m just a woman,” Isis replied.

“And what the Hell kind of talk is that?” Jael rounded on her. “You’re just a woman? Yeah, so he’s a man. Big deal! He’s stronger, you’re faster. He’s taller, you’re smarter. You can nimbly dodge out of his way, he has to stand there and take it. Now suck it up! This is the Twenty-first Century and we’re all equal now. That’s the fashion.”

“The fashion?” Isis asked, then started to laugh. It was a little giggle at first but it soon turned hysterical.

“Oh, watch her,” Dee told the others. “Laughter is just a step from the tears she was crying earlier.”

“Great,” Jael muttered. “That’s really all we need; a manic-depressive goddess.”

“Jael?” Evrona asked. “You called someone else that once. Manic-depressive, I mean.”

“Did I?” Jael asked. “Who?”

“I was asking you?” Evrona pointed out. “It was the day we met.”

“Ah,” Jael nodded. “Let me see. Succubi! I was talking about succubi. Does that relate?”

“Not really,” Evrona shook her head, and gestured to Jael to walk to the other side of the room with her. “I was just wondering. I think you said they would hide away when they were depressed.”

“They kind of have to,” Jael told her. “They can’t really do their jobs when they feel that way. Eventually, they come through their depressive phase and get all hyper and oversexed again.”

“How long does that take?” Evrona asked, looking over at Isis.

Jael followed her glance. “I don’t know. I never hung out with the succubi. It’s a closed sorority and they don’t associate with the rest of us. As for her? Well I don’t know that either. I also don’t know her well enough to seriously say that’s her problem. It could be, but I sort of doubt it, given her reputation. Isis was a very popular goddess in her day. She went from being a local goddess to one of the most powerful in Egypt and then went on to become popular in the Greek and Roman world as well. Many of her attributes were borrowed into modern religion and, of course she even has several small active cults in various parts of the world today.”

“Then why is she falling apart like this?” Evrona asked.

“Because everything she knows is wrong,” Jael told her, “or we’ve managed to convince her of that. If it makes you feel any better, Lugh is probably going through the same rollercoaster ride.”

“Rollercoaster?” Evrona asked.

Jael laughed. “It’s good to have you back, Sparrow.”

Eighteen

All too soon it was time for the show to begin. Evrona and Tomislaw had spent the last hour running errands within the arena and back to the dressing rooms. Finally, Enki told them, “The show starts in ten

minutes. The first quarter of an hour will be all recap of the previous shows, turn the monitors on in the dressing rooms and bring them out to the head of the runway during the commercial break. We'll have a big introduction and parade them before the cameras in their armor of choice."

"Enki, sir?" Evrona asked. "Did you know Isis is going to pieces in there?"

"Lugh's been crying his eyes out since he got back there too," Tomislaw told him.

"They've both had a shock," Enki admitted. "We'll tell them the truth after the show."

"Can they go on like this, though?" Evrona worried.

"I'm sure they can," Enki told her. "When the time comes, you'll see. They'll put everything else behind them and go through with this in spite of their fears and worries."

"Are those weapons?" Tomislaw asked, looking into the ring.

"Yes," Enki replied. "They get to use them if they wish."

"It's going to get messy in there," Evrona warned him.

"They're too evenly matched," Enki told her. "They might believe we stripped them of their divinity, but it will come out as they fight even if they don't realize it."

Tomislaw and Evrona turned and went back to the dressing rooms. "It's almost over, isn't it?" Tomislaw reminded Evrona.

It was not a thought she wanted to consider. "Then Jael and I will go on to the next thing, whatever it is," she told him. "It's what we do. We'll take you back and get on to the next job."

"Stay with me," Tomislaw asked her.

"I told you," Evrona replied. "I'm not going back there. Not ever."

"Damn it!" Tomislaw swore. "You're just an Erinys. You can't settle down in the Mortal Realm."

"I wasn't planning to," she shook her head. "I'm apprenticed to Jael. Maybe I'll just go from place to place solving problems."

They reached the dressing rooms then and Tomislaw just scowled and went inside Lugh's room. Evrona sighed. She looked around and saw a few people at the end of the corridor. They were caught up in getting the show going and not paying attention to her, so she opened Isis' door and slipped in.

"Time to finish getting ready," Evrona announced, turning the monitor on. "Enki says to come out just after the commercial break fifteen minutes in."

"Are there a lot of people in the audience?" Isis asked her.

"I don't think there's an empty seat to be found out there," Evrona told her honestly.

"Good!" the Egyptian goddess decided. In Evrona's absence she had chosen to don a suit of

gleaming steel armor that was more Roman than Egyptian in style. "If I die tonight, let them see how well I did it."

"Better that they should see you live, dear," Dee told her. "Just keep in mind, you're allowed to concede the fight."

"No!" Isis told her defiantly. "Lugh will submit or I will die. I will never surrender."

"Oh great," Jael moaned, "just when I thought she was coming back down to Earth."

"Too late to do anything about that now," Ina whispered to her.

"Tomislaw tells me Lugh has been crying for hours," Evrona whispered.

"And by now he's probably bouncing off the walls psyching himself up for this fight too," Rona predicted. "You know this may really end badly. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Pray?" Jael suggested

"Who do gods pray to?" Rona asked pointedly.

"You know, that's the one down side of divinity," Ina told her.

They watched the monitor as the show began and showed clips from the earlier shows and then finally it was time to enter the arena. Both contestants met as their doors opened. They looked at each other, neither showing any signs of the turmoil that had consumed them for the last two hours and then walked side by side to the head of a long ramp that led down to the fight ring.

Enki met them there and spelled out the rules of the final. "Anything goes in there," he told them. "You can fight bare handed or use the weapons you'll find on the racks in opposite corners. Just keep in mind this fight is supposed to be to submission. If you die, there won't be another cycle to return in, so try not to actually kill each other."

Lugh and Isis both nodded, so Enki went on. "Stay here until you're announced. Then you'll walk down the ramp and enter the ring."

"It's a square," Lugh noticed. "Why do you call it a ring?"

"Human convention," Enki shrugged. "When you're inside, the cage will be lowered into place and when the bell rings start fighting. The bell will ring again when the fight is over."

Lugh and Isis nodded and once in the ring they examined the weapons available to them. Lugh chose to start the fight with a long spear and Isis chose a quarter staff. The cage came down and the bell rang. They lunged at each other and the fight began.

The two contestants fought for the next several hours, neither being able to do more than scratch or bruise the other and gradually becoming increasingly tired. When Isis' staff broke, she grabbed a sword and fought on. When Lugh, in frustration, threw the spear at her, it missed and went through a gap in the cage where it was caught by Hercules before it could harm someone in the audience. Then Lugh drew a sword from his own rack and fought on. They fought with such ferocity that the swords became nicked and bent, so they chose still other weapons to continue on with.

As the end of the allotted hour approached, Enki got a call from the network informing him they would stay on the air all night if that's what it took. "Thanks," Enki replied, taking a look over his shoulder at the fighters, "but I get a sneaking suspicion this is going to be a tie. What do you say to letting the viewers be the tie breakers? Good, I'll see to it."

Enki ran to the control booth and had his engineers put an announcement on the screen that viewers would be allowed to vote for the winner in the case of a tie.

Dee also got a call in the middle of the fight and she told Jael and Ina about it. "Eddy tells me there have been some strange things happening in the new world and tonight there have been earthquakes and some other odd occurrences. Tanise is beside herself in panic and it's all Asherah and Amy can do to calm her down."

"If you have to go now, we'll cover for you here and join you in Hattamessett as soon as we can," Jael told her. Ina nodded.

"Okay," Dee agreed. "Let Enki know where I went. Thank you!"

After the fight had gone on for two hours, both Isis and Lugh were showing signs of fatigue. Enki opened the phone lines for voting and the calls began to pour in.

That wasn't the end of it, however, and growing ever more tired, both Lugh and Isis continued to battle for another two and a half hours until, finally, Isis raised a heavy mace over her head as Lugh did likewise with a staff and both fell backwards and passed out.

Enki left the lines open during the commercial break and then declared them closed, answering only those callers left in the queue while the show's editors hastily showed clips of the more exciting moment of the fight. Finally the calls stopped and they were able to tally the votes. Even here it was close and by a margin of only one percent of the callers, Isis, or rather her human guise, Secmis, was declared the "Living Legend."

Displacing Anger

One

“Why are we going back there?” Tomislaw asked. They were racing through the late morning light on the limbs of Yggdrasil. Spring had come, even this far north, and the buds were swelling. However, it was also raining.

“I’m going back because my friends need me,” Jael told him. She slowed down to let him catch up. She knew he was capable of keeping up with her, but the teenaged demon was being difficult and dragging his feet. “You’re going because you can’t be trusted to find your way home. Frankly if Ratatosk were around I’d have him show you the way. Now come on, we have to hurry.”

Finally they came to the right branch and stepped off and on to Eddy’s front porch. Ina had obviously beaten them here as her car was parked in the driveway. The sun was just rising as they walked through the door to find Eddy’s daughter, Maggie, waiting for them. “It’s some sort of monster,” she told them. “Dee and my Dad are out trying to find it of all things and Tanise is hiding in her tree. The others are trying to coax her out.”

“Is there any coffee made?” Jael asked Maggie. She shook her head. “Well, why don’t you do me a favor and put on a big pot and then get a dozen or two cheese rolls from the bakery down the street?” Maggie nodded gratefully and rushed into the kitchen.

“You’re hungry now?” Evrona asked her.

“I wouldn’t mind a bite, but actually it looked like Maggie needed to feel like she was doing something. It’s sort of like asking the husband to go boil water while his wife is having a baby,” Jael explained as they rushed into the backyard. “What happened here?”

The new world outside Eddy’s back door had taken visible damage since their last visit. The Tree was safe enough, but there were huge gouges in the land. The upper lake beside the Tree was now draining rapidly into the lower one because half the cliff it was situated behind had collapsed. The tree was in first leaf now, but that part, at least, was normal for the middle of the spring.

Amy, Asherah, Ina and the Sphinx were seated at the base of the Tree, trying to talk Tanise out, but the dryad had instinctively taken refuge inside her woody partner. “What’s been going on?” Jael asked as she approached with Evrona and Tomislaw.

“It all happened last night, Jael,” Amy told her quickly. “There was this horrible rumbling and crashing going on out here and Tanise was running around in blind panic. We came out and felt the earth shaking all around us, but couldn’t actually see anything, so we waited until morning, although Tanise ran straight into the Tree, of course. Grandfather drove the thing off, at least I think he did. It’s hard to say since we never actually saw it.”

“I wanted to go looking with Dee and Eddy for whatever caused this,” Asherah told them, “but they asked me to stay here and take charge. Lizzie could have done that, I think.”

“Tanise has known you longer, and trusts you more deeply, I think,” the Sphinx told Asherah.

“That’s neither here nor there,” Jael decided. “There are more of us here now and Dee might need some help depending on what’s out there. Ash, can anyone use that flying carpet of yours?”

“It’s not hard,” Asherah told her. “Just direct it with your thoughts but don’t allow yourself to get distracted. It will go wherever you want it to. And, yes, you may borrow it.”

“I’ll go looking on my own,” Ina decided. “I’ll take the ATV. I know Tanise doesn’t like it, but I think it’s fair to say it will do less damage than whatever was here last night. Amy, why don’t you come with me?”

Tomislaw and Evrona joined Jael on the carpet and they rose up into the air and tried following the path of destruction to its source. “I hope we’re headed in the right direction,” Jael noted. “I mean these just sort of look like footprints, but really they’re more like impact craters and, without knowing what caused them, we could be going in the wrong direction.”

“Wouldn’t Dee and Eddy have come this way too?” Evrona asked.

“I would think so, yes,” Jael replied, “but I see Ina has chosen to follow this way as well.”

They continued on for two more hours before hearing the sounds of explosions from far ahead. “On the other side of those mountains,” Jael told them. “I wonder how Ina is managing to keep up. She should have run out of gas long ago. Oh, I see.”

“What?” Evrona asked.

“She’s using her magic to power the machine,” Jael explained. “Neat trick and it’s flying too, not very high, but enough to smooth out the trip. Well, here’s goes.”

They crested the line of mountains in front of them and saw an odd sight. Dee and Eddy were both fighting a great, black-scaled beast of monumental proportions. “What sort of beast is that?” Evrona asked as they landed beside Ina and Amy..

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it,” Jael told her.

“It looks sort of like a dinosaur,” Amy added, “but it has two large ram horns on its head, six legs and teeth... no, fangs as long as my legs. It’s got a club for a tail and wings, though those wings aren’t really large enough to fly. It seems to be using them as shields against Dee’s and Eddy’s attacks.”

“The only upside I can see is that Eddy is finally starting to accept his godhood and is fighting accordingly,” Jael noted.

“I think I might call it a dragon,” Ina remarked, “but it doesn’t seem to be breathing fire.”

“They’re at a stalemate,” Jael noted, “and both sides realize it. We should go down there and tip the balance, maybe. Hey, Tommy? What’s with you?”

Tomislaw was looking markedly uncomfortable. “Uh, nothing, maybe I’m just hungry.”

“If you say so,” Jael shrugged, willing to give the teen a shred of dignity.

“We think it may also be venomous,” Eddy added to their descriptive inventory about the monster, “although at that size I really doubt it matters.”

“So this world has its first monster,” Jael remarked, “whatever you want to call it.”

“I’d seriously like to know where it came from,” Dee told them. “Something like this shouldn’t have evolved for decades of our subjective time.”

“It is a bit out of place,” Ina agreed.

“That thing wouldn’t fit in anywhere,” Jael told her. “It’s so unnatural.”

“You have a point,” Dee agreed, “This looks more like the product of someone with an over-active imagination, but who would do something like this?”

“Uh,” Tomislaw looked uncomfortable again. “I think this might be my fault.”

“What?” the others all demanded at once.

“Well,” he continued, barely audibly and blushing with embarrassment, “you see while I was out here the first time, I thought it might be nice to have a steed of some sort.”

“You can already fly,” Jael told him tensely. “What the heck do you need to ride for?”

Tomislaw shot a look at Evrona. “Well, you know,” he tried again. “I wanted something to impress Evie with and...”

“Why can’t you imagine yourself in shining armor and on a big old white horse like everybody else?” Jael demanded of him. She sighed and shook her head then she caught Evrona using her hand to hide a smile. “Well it looks to me like Trigger is feeling his oats this morning.”

“It’s been a while since I was on a dragon hunt,” Ina pondered.

“I thought you tended to use dragons to attack your enemies,” Amy pointed out, remembering her mythology.

“Yes, I did at one time,” Ina admitted, “but first I had to find one.”

“I don’t think we’re going to have any trouble finding this one,” Eddy remarked looking across the valley to where the monster was standing warily regarding them. “What else don’t we know about it, Tomislaw?”

“What?” the young demon responded. “How should I know?”

“It’s your creation,” Dee retorted. “You said so yourself.”

“I just said I imagined something like this,” Tomislaw argued. “My imagination can’t create monsters.”

“This is a still-forming world, Tommy,” Jael told him. “It can here. That’s why you have to keep yourself under control and why we were so alarmed to find you. You had it right in the first place, kid. This is your fault. Now fess up and tell us what else you dreamed up about your excuse for a horsie, because it’s time to put it back in the stable before it eats the world.”

“Uh, it eats meat,” Tomislaw told them.

“We kinda guessed that,” Jael told him coolly. “What else?”

“We’re meat,” Tomislaw reminded her. Across the way the monster was growling ominously.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ina told him dismissively. “We’ve all heard that one before. It’s as old as we are. Now spill!”

“Well, uh,” Tomislaw tried again, “it, uh, may be able to make fire come out of its eyes.”

“It hasn’t so far,” Eddy remarked.

“Its eyes?” Amy asked incredulously. “Have you been reading comic books? No, never mind. I really do not want to know what sort of comic books get published in Hell. Hey! Where did it go?”

They all looked and the monster had disappeared. “Not it,” Tomislaw corrected her. “He.”

“Who cares?” Amy retorted. The sounds of giant footsteps could be heard through the valley and small craters formed rapidly trailing away from them.

“Invisible?” Jael demanded. “It can be invisible?”

“He,” Tomislaw corrected her too.

“He’ll be a gelding when I get done with him if he’s lucky,” Jael snapped.

Two

“Invisible it may be,” Dee remarked, “but it’s not all that hard to follow.”

“I’m a bit more concerned with not being able to see where those fire-shooting eyes are pointed,” Jael told her.

“Maybe he can’t shoot fire at us while he’s invisible?” Tomislaw offered.

“What is that thing, Tommy?” Jael asked, aggravated. “A monster or a Klingon Bird of Prey? What other special powers did you give it? Why invisibility?”

“I didn’t know he could do that,” Tomislaw protested.

“A wild imagination,” Ina sighed. “Kid, you’ve got to tame it fast or we’re all in big trouble.”

“She’s right, Tommy” Jael told him. “For all we know, you’re still giving new powers to that critter. Try thinking of him as something small and cuddly. Oy, no! We’d get a fifty-foot tall, carnivorous teddy bear. Don’t think of him at all.”

“I think he’s fully formed, Jael,” Dee told her.

“Are you sure?” Jael asked. “Really sure?”

“As sure as I can be, dear,” Dee replied. “It’s a matter of nature. Things do not come into the world unformed. They may change during the creation process, but once they emerge they’re pretty much set.”

“What about mutation?” Amy asked.

“What are they teaching you at Brown, dear?” Dee asked her.

“I’m not a biology major, Dee,” Amy explained.

“Even so, you should have learned this in high school,” Dee replied. “Individuals do not evolve, species do. Individuals pass on genetic traits to their offspring and the species changes gradually. Sometimes environmental pressures make certain traits more suitable for survival and a species will change a bit more rapidly. Sometimes those traits are caused by random mutations in the parents’ genes, but the parents don’t exhibit those mutated traits, only the succeeding generations do.”

“Let’s get back to emergent species on a still-forming world, Dee,” Jael suggested. “Just how sure are you that monster isn’t going to change on us? Maybe Clever Tommy imagined a monster that’s also a transformer.”

“What?” Amy asked, “You think he’s going to turn into a giant robot next?”

“Would you prefer I call it a shape changer or a face stealer or something like that?” Jael countered. “Look, we can’t just stand here and argue about what it may be. Tommy, did you imagine any other fancy powers for it?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied uncertainly.

Jael rolled her eyes, “Then I guess we ought do what we have to. Dee, Ina? Is there any way to make it visible again?”

“Not directly,” Dee replied, “but I can whip up a tornado and use it to sling a bit of mud at him. He might be impossible to see, but the mud will be visible enough.”

“I sure wish I knew more offensive magic,” Jael remarked.

“It wouldn’t do much good,” Tomislaw told her.

“Something you want to tell me?” Jael asked between clenched teeth.

“I just remembered he’s immune to magic,” Tomislav admitted.

“Is that possible?” Jael asked Dee and Ina.

“Not really,” Dee replied. “Magic isn’t a substance or type of energy. It’s a way of manipulating matter and energy. However, he may be fire resistant and extremely hard to hurt. In fact, I’m fairly sure he is. He could also be resistant to disease and have such resilient innards and strong bones that we can’t hurt him directly through various offensive spells, but if you throw a boulder at him and try to cut him with a sword, it’s probably going to hurt if you do it hard enough.”

“Anyone got a sword?” Rona asked. “I left mine in San Diego.”

“I wonder if my zap gun would have worked on him,” Jael mused.

“Whatever happened to that, by the way?” Ina asked curiously.

“I dropped it,” Jael admitted.

“I’m sure we could find a way to fix it,” Ina offered.

“In Mount Etna,” Jael added. “You didn’t think I was going to leave that thing lying around, did you? It was made specifically to protect Eddy and the Tree until it ascended. It would have been unconscionable to keep it after we were done.”

“It would have come in handy about now,” Ina pointed out.

“I promised not to keep it,” Jael told her.

“Come on,” Eddy told them. “We had better move on out before that thing decides to cross the whole continent.”

They made their way inland following the craters left by the monster’s feet and followed it for the next two days until they found it drinking from a large inland sea. “It drinks salt water?” Ina asked.

“It’s not impossible,” Dee told her, “and it probably needs the salt as well by now.”

“I’d like to relieve it of that need,” Jael commented.

“I don’t, dear,” Dee told her sadly. “We shouldn’t ever take pleasure in killing a living creature.”

“But this is evil,” Evrona pointed out.

“This is an animal, Evie,” Dee told her. “He’s mean tempered and destructive and we have to put him down, but he is just an animal. Animals aren’t evil. That takes intelligence.”

“I have a plan,” Eddy decided.

“Is it a cunning plan?” Jael asked teasingly.

“What?” Eddy asked.

“Not a fan, I see,” Jael chuckled. “Go ahead, boss. What do you want us to do?”

“Well, according to my high school history lessons men in the Middle Ages used to do something called bear baiting.”

“I remember that all too well,” Jael sighed. “It was cruel and inhuman.”

“It was very human,” Ina disagreed, “but it was also very inhumane.”

“I stand corrected,” Jael nodded. “Of course they would chain the bear to a post and let the dogs harass it to death.”

“Eww!” Amy exclaimed distastefully.

“That’s terrible!” Evrona remarked at the same time.

“It was worse to watch,” Jael told them, “but the point is that if we could chain this big boy we wouldn’t be talking about killing him.”

“True enough,” Eddy told her, “but what I had in mind was surrounding that thing and attacking it in turn. As one of us gets its attention someone else should move in and attack. You’ll only get one shot, I should think before you have to get back out of there, but then someone else should be able to get in before it can harm you and we’ll just keep going until... well, you know. If it makes you feel better, the beast has more of a chance than those poor bears.”

“I’m a big girl and I don’t need my conscience salved, Eddy,” Jael told him. “Let’s just do it.” She shrugged and assumed her demonic form, ripping the back out of yet another blouse. “Oh, heck,” she sighed. “I’m going to have to get some tops like Evie’s.”

Enki arrived in one of his bubbles just then. “Sorry I’m late,” he told them. “Ash called and told me what had happened and then it took a while to find you all.”

“You’re in time for the main party,” Jael told him and let Eddy explain his plan again.

“I hate this,” Ina remarked when Eddy was done. She transformed herself into her warrior bird form. She was still somewhat anthropomorphic in shape, but had very large, eagle-like wings, clawed hands and feet and a sharp eagle’s beak. She shrieked and flew up into the sky.

“C’mon, Sparrow,” Jael told Evrona, “time to take flight. We need to fly around to the other side. And attack from there. Tommy, why don’t you go with Enki? You’ve been working together for a few weeks now.” Jael and Evrona shot up into the air with Enki and Tomislaw close behind them.

“Eddy, dear, you should work from here,” Dee decided. “Amy, come with me on the carpet.”

“You bet!” Amy replied, quickly climbing on board the carpet.

They lifted in the air and then Dee told Amy, “I need you to stay up here away from that creature.”

“Aw!” Amy complained.

“You aren’t old enough yet and you don’t have the training,” Dee told her.

“I’m older than Evie,” Amy pointed out.

“Evrna has certain natural talents,” Dee replied patiently. “Besides we need you to keep an eye on all of us. If anyone gets hurt, it’s going to be up to you to get them out of here. The rest of us will be too busy to be able to keep an eye on everyone else.”

“You have a good point,” Amy conceded. “I hate it when you’re right, you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, dear,” Dee smiled and then jumped off the carpet. She didn’t so much fly as float on the air currents. Amy couldn’t see how she did it, but decided that was a question for another time.

“We need to spread out,” Enki advised Jael and the teenagers as they circled around to the far side of the monster.

Jael nodded and beckoned to Evrona. They flew on, leaving Enki and Tomislaw to work out their relative positions. “Sparrow, stay here, more or less, and I’ll move over a bit more. Wait for the signal to attack.”

“What signal is that?” Evrona asked.

“Oh, heck,” Jael sighed. “We never worked out a signal to start, did we?”

“I’ll wait until someone else attacks,” Evrona decided.

“Better yet,” Jael told her, swooping away, “wait until that thing isn’t coming at us!”

Evrna looked and saw the monster was, indeed, headed toward her and Jael, so when Jael flew one way, Evrona went the other. A moment later, Inanna swooped down and attacked the monster from the rear, raking two sets of three parallel lines each across the back of its neck, and then she flew off as it turned on her.

Jael took the next turn, dropping a boulder on its head, followed by an earthquake, that trapped the creature hip deep in liquefied sand. Jael looked around, wondering who had done that and realized it had been Eddy. “He’s learning fast!” she commented to herself, looking for another way to attack, while Dee caused a tornado to form, blasting the surrounding sand in its face.

Each attack by itself was a mere annoyance to the gigantic creature that was surely larger than any land-based life should have been. Amy, watching the others taking their turns, tried to calculate whether a creature that size should even have been capable of lifting itself up and kept coming up with numbers that spelled impossible. The creature did not need to be possible, however. It was supernatural and stuff other than normal skin and bones held it together.

They fought with the beast for many hours, taking turns and waiting for openings. At the end of the first day, with the sun setting, the creature was covered with wounds from head to toe and yet it still stood and fought back. Dee created a vast artificial fire in the sky to give them light to see by and they fought on through the night. Each of them needed a break from time to time, but supernatural beings heal

fast and an hour off was like a full night's sleep, so they started taking staggered hour-long breaks until they all had some rest, so by the time the sun rose again they were all relatively fresh while the monster was starting to wear down.

As the sun came up, however, Evrona got unlucky. She was flying toward the creature's left flank, when the first rays of sunlight struck her squarely in the eyes and without even the benefit of her now signature sunglasses, she was temporarily blinded. The monster, standing on its hind leg and using all its others like weapons, struck Evrona on the side, sending her tumbling.

She felt pain like nothing she had ever experienced and was barely conscious as someone swooped in and shouted "Gotcha!" That was the last thing she knew for a while.

Three

When Evrona woke up, she was lying on the ground at the top of a sand dune overlooking the inland sea. She was still in pain but she struggled to sit up anyway. "Easy, Sparrow, just lie back and try to relax. We nearly lost you."

"You did?" Evrona asked. Her voice sounded odd to her – so weak and distant.

"It was close, Evie," Rona told her, "But Tomislav caught you and brought you here."

"He did?" Evrona asked. "Where are we?"

"Still near the inland sea," Rona replied. "Dee, is she going to be all right?"

"I should think so," Dee remarked. "She broke an arm and two ribs and about half her body is one big bruise, but this is one tough little lady. I'm not going to ask you how you're feeling, Evrona, I can see for myself. This may help, though." She did something and the pain seemed to take several steps to the left. Evrona could still feel it, but it didn't seem quite as immediate anymore."

"Thank you," Evrona told her. "Where's everyone else?"

"Just a few yards away," Jael told her. "We didn't think it would be fair to crowd in on you all at once. Here they come now."

“Hey, Evie! How’re you feeling?” Amy asked with the sort of false cheerfulness one often puts on for a sick friend or relative.

Evrna considered her possible answers and decided to emulate Jael. “Great!” she replied. “Let’s do that again!”

“Um, no thanks,” Amy told her, unable to keep the smile from her face. How bad could it be if the usually-so-serious Erinys could make a joke? “Hey, you ought to see the sea now. It’s all red. You know? From the monster’s blood. Dee? I didn’t think it was big enough to turn the whole sea red.”

“I think we’re dealing with a supernatural reaction here, dear,” Dee told her.

“Oh,” Amy nodded. “Anyway when we finally killed the monster its flesh turned to stone and it became a mountain, sort of. It still looks a bit like itself, but all curled up. Know what I mean?”

“I guess I’ll see it when they let me get up,” Evrona told her.

“That’s going to make for one interesting mythology,” Jael remarked, looking back over the sea.

“But is that really it?” Amy asked. “Just red water?”

“We’ll need to keep an eye on the region,” Eddy told her after seeing to Evrona.

“Yeah,” Jael added. “You’ve heard what happens when you plant dragon’s teeth or spill the blood of a god. I suspect this world just got a whole lot more interesting now that it has a destroyer figure.”

“Destroyer?” Amy asked. “Who?”

In answer Jael just pointed at Tomislaw. He was kneeling solicitously by Evrona’s side. “Well, his name does mean ‘Torment.’”

“It does?” Amy asked.

“Yeah, the things some parents name their kids. Mine means, ‘Mountain Goat’ and I used to get a lot of teasing about it,” Jael added.

Within one of Enki’s bubbles, they returned to Eddy’s home by late afternoon to find the others waiting anxiously.

“Evie!” Tanise wept tears of sympathy at her friend’s pain when she saw her. “Dee’s calling Oriel. You’ll feel better when she gets here.”

“I’m a little better now,” Evrona lied. She might be feeling the pain at a distance, but she was still feeling it and Enki had hit a few air pockets on the way back which had done nothing for her comfort. Now, however most of the older people were sitting together on the patio while Evrona was kept horizontal on a couch and the other teens were seated around her in the living room. Jael was just walking through to the kitchen when Evrona looked at Tomislaw. “They say you saved my life?” Jael paused to listen in.

“Well, uh,” Tomislaw stammered a bit. “I sort of, well, like you. I always have. Couldn’t you tell?”

Evrone frowned. "You teased me mercilessly, made fun of me in front of the whole class, tortured me."

"I, uh, thought you would like it," Tomislav told her perplexedly. "Most demon girls do, or so I was told."

"Well, I'm not like most demon girls, then," Evrone told him.

"Oh," Tomislav replied simply and sat there quietly for a long moment. "Well, what do you like then?"

"Try flowers and chocolates, sport," Jael suggested from the doorway.

"Poetry and long walks on the beach," Rona added. The doorbell rang and Eddy came in to answer it. The other adults followed in as well.

"Try being sensitive and gentle," Amy put her own opinion in.

Evrone waved all those suggestions aside with her good arm and told him, "See if you can make me laugh. I never used to do that much until recently and I like it."

"How do I make you laugh?" Tomislav asked, struggling with the concept.

"I'll give you a few pointers," Enki promised.

Eddy came back with Oriel and, to everyone's surprise, Isis. "That was a nasty trick you played on us," Isis told Enki as Oriel began to treat Evrone.

"You should have known it was all hooey," Enki replied.

"I should have," Isis admitted. "I took that whole thing far too seriously. You were right, by the way. It was just a game and it was a game I should have left to the mortals." She paused and then added, "I'm sorry. Next time I'd rather be on your team."

"Oh there won't be a next time," Enki laughed. "I'm selling the show. Some human promoters think they can do it better and made a very handsome offer. Frankly I'd have let them have it for a song."

"That won't be your last foray into mortal activities, Inventor," Isis told him. "I know you far too well to believe that."

"Probably not," Enki sighed.

"Then why not give me a job with your Springtime Seed business for now?" Isis suggested. "I have some experience with growing things, you know, and we'll see how that works out."

Enki considered that and nodded. "Why not? There's always more to do there than we can handle. Maybe a couple extra hands will help."

Dee was explaining to the teens in detail what they thought had happened out in the new world. "We've told you before this world is still developing. When people visit they make a mark that, to one extent or another affects everything else in the world and because the world itself is still growing, it only

takes a small change to set things like that monster off.

“Some of us are really just visitors,” Dee continued. “Isis here for example. She hasn’t had much to do with the new world so her influence has been unnoticeable. Others are fully a part of this world because the world accepts them. Eddy and his family, including Tanise, are the new principle gods in this world. Some of us are welcome and have made our mark but our roles are not clearly defined yet. Jael, Ina, Ash, and I fall into this category. We are obviously welcome guests in this world and may be much more, but we don’t know yet.

“And then,” Dee concluded, “there are those who have obviously become a vital part of the new world as well. You two,” she told Evrona and Tomislaw.

“Us?” Evrona asked.

“Sure,” Jael cut in. “Tommy here is a destroyer. ‘And the Destroyer sent forth a great beast to harrow the land’ and all that. A devil, maybe the Devil of this world. It’s never had one before so he was an obvious choice.”

“Why would the world need a devil?” Amy asked.

“I can’t really say,” Jael told her.

“It is a necessary cosmic balancing mechanism,” Ina told them. “To Light there is Dark. To Good there is Evil. To Order there is Chaos. How can we know and fully appreciate one without experiencing the other?”

“That’s very deep, Ina,” Amy told her admiringly.

“Sophomore philosophy,” Ina laughed, “but while we personally might want a world that is pristine and unsullied by Evil, the world itself knows better. Evidently it feels the need for a devil figure. I suppose in a way, Tomislaw here helps to complete it. He helps to make it a more mature and complex world.”

“But, then what am I?” Evrona asked, sitting up now that Oriel had healed the worst of her wounds. “The Head Fury?”

“That’s not really you,” Jael chuckled, “It never was. That’s why you’re here in the first place. If you were a good little Erinys, you’d still be tearing souls to shreds down in the Valley of Dis. No. Here, I think you are maybe just the opposite. You are the one who can counter the Destroyer; the calming influence. Yes, you are the one who becalms the Destroyer with ... hmmm, love? Friendship?”

“Possibly,” Ina remarked. Dee nodded.

“That’s all there is to being a goddess?” Evrona asked incredulously. “Just be there and keep someone else from screwing up?”

“Well, you’re young yet,” Ina told her, “and, if you’ll forgive me, a little shallow. Take that from someone who was a bit shallow for thousands of years. I imagine you’ll become more complex as you get older.”

“And I can stay and live here?” Evrona asked.

“Where else?” Tanise countered.

“Well, I think you should remain with Jael and Rona for sometime to come,” Dee considered. “You need a wide range of experience and merely following her around will give it to you.”

“I’ve noticed,” Evrona replied wryly.

“Sparrow,” Jael laughed, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

“We’re going to need a mentor for Tomislaw too,” she decided. “Enki?”

“Me?” Enki asked, surprised.

“You already offered to teach him what you know about women, may all the gods save him,” Dee replied. “That will be a big part of it. Also in a way you’re his opposite. You’re the god of Invention and Wisdom and Magic.”

“And fresh water,” Enki replied. “Don’t forget the fresh water.”

“In spite of the fact the ancient Mesopotamians were impressed by that,” Dee replied, “you know that was really just a side effect of the other three.”

“True, but along with beer, aqueducts were my favorite invention,” Enki replied. “They do both still need training, though. You’re right about that. They’re still children really.”

“Maybe we should send them to college?” Amy suggested.

“In time we should,” Jael agreed. “That’s a good idea, but Hell doesn’t really encourage its demons to get mature. I ought to know and education down there is even less than it was in my day. With careful mentoring, though, and some fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, judiciously applied, I think they could be ready in a year or so. After that a few years in an appropriate college or university, tuition, room and board paid for by a Springtime Seed scholarship...”

“Hey!” Enki protested. “Do you have any idea how much money you’re talking about?”

“Probably a better idea than you do,” Jael told him. “Besides, do you have a better use for it? It’s just stacking up in your various bank accounts. Let’s put it to use.”

“Using it for education isn’t the worst idea I’ve heard,” Ina remarked.

“I might as well start my own school if you feel that way,” Enki told her sarcastically, and then an enthusiastic gleam appeared in his eyes and he got a special far away look.”

“Oh no!” Jael slapped her forehead. “Better snap him out of it or we’ll all be wearing academic robes this time in a couple of years.”

“Too late, I think,” Ina remarked. “Mike might be interested in teaching there.”

“Marcus just got tenure,” Rona added, “but he may...”

“What are you two saying?” Jael asked exasperatedly. “Do you have any idea what you’re leaping

into?”

“How much worse can it be than a reality program?” Ina asked.

“The mind boggles,” Jael moaned. “Anyway, after these two have an academic degree or two under their belts, I think they’ll be ready to play their parts full time in this world.”

“Don’t I get a say about it?” Evrona asked.

“Sparrow,” Jael replied, “You already made that choice when you first came here. You wanted a new home and the Tree accepted you from the start.”

“He did?” Evrona asked.

“Oh yes!” Tanise told her warmly and clasped the young Erinys’ hands in her own. “Welcome to the family!”

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